

Christ of the Sacred Stories

edited by

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Mohr Siebeck

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Is Jesus a Prophet according to the Witness of the Fourth Gospel?

A Narrative-Critical Perspective

CHRISTOS KARAKOLIS

Among the various titles that are attributed to Jesus throughout the Johannine narrative is “the” or “a” prophet. It is a convention in Johannine research that the prophetic title is not a sufficient description or characterisation of the Johannine Jesus in its own right.¹ However, some exegetes understand the prophetic title as being parallel to the other Christological titles of the gospel, and therefore complementary to them as to the identity of the Johannine Jesus, especially fulfilling or even surpassing the prophecy of Deut 18:15.18,² which in New Testament times was interpreted in an eschatological way as a reference to the Mosaic Prophet.³

On the basis of the above-mentioned issue surrounding Jesus’s Johannine Christological titles, the question I raise in the present paper is whether, according to Johannine Christology, the prophetic title is an appropriate characterisation of Jesus or whether it should be rejected as such. Of course, I will also attempt to explore possible nuances that may exist between these two extreme alternatives.

Apart from the few explicit references to the prophetic title in the Fourth Gospel,⁴ there is also a use of material that alludes implicitly to the Elijah-Elisha narrative cycle, and to Old Testament narrative Mosaic traditions. The seven so-called *semeia*-narratives⁵ in particular include some interesting references and

¹ Cf. for instance W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King. Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, Leiden 1967, 319.

² Cf. John 1:21.23.25; 6:14; 7:40.

³ Cf. among others C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge 1953, 266–267. M.-É. Boismard, *Moses or Jesus? An Essay in Johannine Christology*, BETL 84-A, Leuven 1993, 127–130. G. Mlakuzhyil, *Christocentric Literary-Dramatic Structure of John’s Gospel*, Roma ²2011, 585. A. J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples. With Implications for the Fourth Gospel’s Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church*, Grand Rapids 1998, 83–84. Meeks, *Prophet-King* (n. 1), 285–319. P. N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel. An Introduction to John*, Minneapolis 2011, 213.

⁴ 1:21.23.25; 1:45; 4:19.44; 6:14.45; 7:40.52; 8:52–53; 9:17; 12:38. Cf. also the references to Moses in 1:17.45; 3:14; 5:45–46; 6:32; 7:19.22–23; 8:5; 9:28–29, as well as to Elijah in 1:21.25.

⁵ 2:1–11; 4:46–54; 5:1–18; 6:1–15.16–21; 9; 11:1–46.

possible allusions in this direction.⁶ At the same time, they are also instrumental in revealing the true identity of Jesus as a person and the real character of his activity (cf. John 2:11; 20:30). The conclusion of the first sign in Cana should suffice to make this clear: “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11). However, such information is not limited to the *semeia*-narratives but is also scattered throughout the whole of the Johannine narrative. Therefore, I will also examine other relevant references that I consider important in this regard. In the final part, I will draw some conclusions in the light of the analysis of the gospel’s overall relevant material.

I will base my analysis mainly on Robert Alter’s “scale of means.”⁷ According to Alter,

“in reliable third-person narrations, such as in the Bible, there is a scale of means in ascending order of explicitness and certainty, for conveying information about the motives, the attitudes, the moral nature of characters.⁸ ... The lower end of this scale – character revealed through actions or appearance – leaves us substantially in the realm of inference.”⁹

In the gospel of John, the most impressive and revealing of Jesus’ works (ἔργα) are undoubtedly his miraculous acts, or his signs.¹⁰ As is implied by the very term σημεῖα, Jesus’ miraculous acts have to be deciphered to be understood correctly. As such, however, they are ambivalent and can lead to a variety of interpretations of Jesus’ identity and the character of his actions.¹¹ On the other hand, Jesus himself refers to his ἔργα, namely the σημεῖα,¹² but from his own particular perspective, as a legitimate witness for the correct interpretation of his activity. Moreover, Jesus’ signs are not limited to the seven miracle-narratives of the Fourth Gospel but include every act of Jesus that bears a supernatural character, such as all his sayings that manifest his omniscience or even his post-Easter appearances (cf. 20:30).¹³ Therefore, in the first epilogue of the Gospel (20:30–31) all of his public

⁶ See the relevant analysis in my doctoral dissertation Ch.K. Karakolis, *Ἡ θεολογικὴ σημασία τῶν θαυμάτων στὸ κατὰ Ἰωάννην Εὐαγγέλιο* (Thessaloniki 1997), 313–342.

⁷ R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York 1981, 116–117.

⁸ Alter, *Art* (n. 7), 116.

⁹ Alter, *Art* (n. 7), 117.

¹⁰ The term is used in the following verses: 2:11,18,23; 3:2; 4:48,54; 6:2,14,26,30; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41; 11:47; 12:18,37. On the relationship between signs and works in the gospel of John see C. Karakolis, *Semeia Conveying Ethics in the Gospel of John*, in: J. G. van der Watt / R. Zimmermann (ed.), *Rethinking the Ethics of John: “Implicit Ethics” in the Johannine Writings. Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik* [3], WUNT 291, Tübingen 2012, 196–200.

¹¹ C. R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Tübingen ⁹1984, 396–398.

¹² The discussion about the semantic relationship between σημεῖα and ἔργα in John’s gospel does not belong to the content of this paper. I have argued extensively elsewhere that both of these lexemes refer to Jesus’ miraculous acts but from different perspectives. On the meaning of ἔργον and the semantic difference between its singular and its plural usage, see Karakolis, *Semeia Conveying Ethics* (n. 10), 200–202.

¹³ Karakolis, *Semeia Conveying Ethics* (n. 10), 194.

activity is included in the word σημεῖα in 20:31.¹⁴ In summary: Jesus' signs are his most representative and therefore most symbolically and theologically significant actions. However, they need to be correctly understood to reveal his real identity and the deeper meaning of his actions. Since they are often not understood correctly, they are ambiguous and would seem to belong to the lower end of Alter's scale of means.

Again, according to Alter,

“the middle categories, involving direct speech either by a character himself or by others about him, lead us from inference to the weighing of claims. Although a character's own statements might seem a straightforward enough revelation of who he is and what he makes of things, in fact ... that speech may reflect the occasion more than the speaker, may be more a drawn shutter than an open window.”¹⁵

In the Fourth Gospel, the speech of Jesus and the speech of all other characters cannot be positioned on the same level of Alter's scale of means for obvious reasons. Therefore, I will next address what people say about Jesus and move from there to the speech of Jesus himself according to the next level of reliability. The problem here is that not even all figures who speak about Jesus are equally reliable. Therefore, I propose a fundamental distinction of four categories of narrative characters in this regard:¹⁶ (a) *the opposing*, namely those who definitely deny Jesus, such as the Jewish authorities consisting of the Pharisees, and the chief priests; (b) *the doubting*, namely the Jewish crowd, which is ambivalent about Jesus' real identity, fluctuating between faith and doubt or even enmity; (c) *the trusting and believing*, namely those who come to trust Jesus although at first they do not understand his real identity and the meaning of his works, such as Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and, of course, Jesus' disciples. These characters eventually reach a deeper and likely stable level of faith, as opposed to the second category; (d) *the knowing*, namely those who know in advance who actually Jesus is, i.e. John the Baptist, and also, from a particular point of view, Jesus' mother.¹⁷

¹⁴ Cf. W. J. Bittner, *Jesu Zeichen im Johannesevangelium. Die Messias-Erkenntnis im Johannesevangelium vor ihrem jüdischen Hintergrund*, WUNT 2/26, Tübingen 1987, 285. Contra H.-C. Kammler, *Die ‚Zeichen‘ des Auferstandenen: Überlegungen zur Exegese von Joh 20:30+31*, in: O. Hofius/H.-Ch. Kammler, *Johannesstudien. Untersuchungen zur Theologie des vierten Evangeliums*, WUNT 88, Tübingen 1996, 193–201.

¹⁵ Alter, *Art* (n. 7), 117.

¹⁶ Cf. M. de Jonge, *Jesus as Prophet and King in the Fourth Gospel*, *ETL* 49, 1973, 163, who works with only two basic categories, namely believers and non-believers, although he also hints at a third group of those who are “just beginning to believe,” but need further guidance on their way towards real faith.

¹⁷ I will abstain from analysing the narrative and theological role of Jesus' mother in this article because her witness about Jesus (2:3–5) is indirect and ambivalent. It is, however, clear that she indeed possesses a superior Christological knowledge compared to the other narrative characters of the Fourth Gospel, perhaps even to John the Baptist, cf. C. M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel. Gender and Johannine Characterization*, Atlanta 1997, 71 n. 8.

According to Alter, on the third level of the scale of means we find the “report of inward speech,” by which “we enter the realm of relative certainty about character: there is certainty, in any case, about the character’s conscious intentions, though we may still feel free to question the motive behind the intention.”¹⁸

The Johannine Jesus never speaks to himself. Speaking to his heavenly Father (11:41–42; 12:27–28; 17) is as near as he comes to doing so. However, these instances also occur in public, which means that the words of Jesus are intended to be heard by his narrative audience and do not necessarily reveal his inner monologue in its completeness (cf. 3:12). Therefore, in reality, all sayings of Jesus are outward and not inward speech. On the other hand, his outward speech should be considered equally as reliable as his inward speech, had the latter existed in the Fourth Gospel, since everything the Johannine Jesus says, he has heard from his Father (8:28.38; 12:49–50) and his only aim is to fulfil the will of his Father (4:34; 6:38). On this basis, the text does not allow for dissonance between Jesus’ inward and outward speech. Consequently, since there is no inward speech of the Johannine Jesus and since his outward speech is as reliable as his inward speech, had it been included, I am positioning, for now, everything Jesus says on the third level of the scale of means. However, the sayings of Jesus require interpretation to be understood correctly.

Finally, Alter notes,

“at the top of the ascending scale, we have the narrator’s comments on the motives, feelings, intentions, and desires of characters. If the narrator is unreliable, as may happen in modern literature, we question the reliable narrator’s explicit statement of what the characters feel, intend, desire; here we are accorded certainty, though biblical narrative . . . may choose for its own good purposes either to explain the ascription of attitude or to state it baldly and thus leave its cause as an enigma for us to ponder.”¹⁹

In the case of the Fourth Gospel, the narrator is absolutely and unquestionably reliable within the boundaries of the Johannine narrative. He identifies himself with the beloved disciple (John 19:35; cf. also 21:24) and claims for himself the trustworthiness of an eye-witness. On the other hand, his reliability is, at least theoretically, not superior to that of his main protagonist, namely Jesus, because in the world of the narrative the latter is not only human but also divine, and thus even more omniscient than the narrator. This means that his knowledge is infinitely greater than the narrator’s, not only in the narrative but also in the world outside of the narrative. However, although the narrator is not more reliable than Jesus, his comments are often clearer than Jesus’ words *per se*.²⁰ Therefore, his explanations and statements are in a certain sense more important for the understanding of the narrative as a whole than some of Jesus’ individual sayings,

¹⁸ Alter, *Art* (n. 7), 117.

¹⁹ Alter, *Art*, 117.

²⁰ Cf. for instance 2:19–22; 6:5–6; 7:37–43; 11:11–13 etc.

because they explain such sayings for the readers of the gospel to perceive their deeper meaning. On this basis, I position the narrator's comments at the top of Alter's scale of means.

After this preliminary application of Alter's scale of means to the Fourth Gospel it would seem that some modification and adjustment are needed due to the particularity of the Johannine narrative. For example, in 5:31–47 Jesus himself names the reliable witnesses to his actual identity and real nature of his works. In a certain sense, he offers his own scale of the narrative means with regard to their significance for the Johannine narrative and theology. At the bottom of Jesus' scale are the sayings of John the Baptist (5:32–35). Then follow Jesus' works, which represent the witness of the Father (5:36–37) and to which the witness of Scripture refers (5:39–47). The witness of any other human being apart from John the Baptist is not mentioned at all. Even the importance of John the Baptist's witness is relativised in relation to Jesus – while the people must believe John's witness, Jesus does not need or accept the witness of John the Baptist, but only that of his Father, which is revealed through Jesus' own signs.

On the basis of these particularities of the Fourth Gospel, I propose the following modification to the scale of means: (a) at the lowest end of the scale, I position the opinions of narrative characters about Jesus. Here, I keep the above distinction of four categories of characters according to their stance toward Jesus, which is a clear signifier of their reliability within the Johannine narrative; (b) I transfer Jesus' signs and/or works to the second level up the scale because Jesus himself values the witness of his own works more than the witness of John the Baptist, whose words represent the most trustworthy Christological witness among the narrative characters other than Jesus²¹. This means that according to the Johannine understanding the witness of the signs should be clearer than the witness of John the Baptist (cf. 15:24); (c) I keep the sayings of Jesus on the third level; and (d) the narrator's comments remain on the fourth and highest level of the scale.

²¹ Apart perhaps from the even more important witness of Thomas in 20:28. However, Thomas' confession is not addressed to the other narrative characters, but only to the readers of the gospel. Therefore, it is a key for understanding the Johannine narrative as a whole, but it does not contribute to the unfolding of the gospel's plot, contrary to the witness of John the Baptist that practically introduces the Johannine narrative.

1. Lowest Level of the Scale: What People Say about Jesus

1.1 *The Opposing*

Typically, Jesus' opponents, namely most of the Pharisees and the chief priests,²² do not make any positive comments about him but oppose him from the start.²³ In 5:16–18 the Jewish authorities are persecuting Jesus and intend to kill him for breaking the Sabbath and being blasphemous.²⁴ Even when they seem to be momentarily in doubt about the nature of Jesus' works (9:16b), they rapidly return to their initial opinion about Jesus being a sinner. In 7:52 they ironically deny that Jesus may be a prophet because, according to their obviously erroneous statement, "no prophet originates from Galilee."²⁵ Later in the narrative, they refuse to accept the former blind man's claim that Jesus is a prophet (9:17). They attribute the healing directly to God and claim that Jesus is a sinner because he does not observe the Sabbath (9:24). Finally, they close their eyes to Jesus' unquestionable signs (11:43–45) and decide to find a way to kill him (11:47–53). It is a notable pattern that they stay on this track throughout the passion narrative until the very end without showing any remorse. It is also notable that, at least according to my reading, in the gospel of John the Jewish people as a whole are absent from Jesus' trial and crucifixion. In these last incidents of Jesus' life, his persecutors are none other than the Jewish authorities.²⁶

It is noteworthy that right at the beginning of the narrative the later opponents of Jesus, namely the Jewish authorities, question John the Baptist by asking him whether he is the Messiah, Elijah or the Prophet. John the Baptist denies all these titles (1:19–27). Thus the stage is set for them to be applied to Jesus. However,

²² Cf. 7:48. This generalisation, although not accurate, presents the majority of the Jewish leaders as not believing in Jesus. Obviously, the narrative presupposes that some of the leaders (ἄρχοντες) do not oppose Jesus, such as Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, as well as those who believe in Jesus but do not have the courage to proclaim their faith in him and suffer the consequences (12:42–43).

²³ Even their first inquiry after the cleansing of the temple has a distinctly hostile undertone. This is evident by the fact that the Jewish authorities ask Jesus for a sign right after the cleansing of the temple although this is a great sign all by itself (cf. H. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, Tübingen 2005, 177), since one man alone acts in a radical way against the interests of dozens or even hundreds of people, and none of them is able or willing to resist him.

²⁴ I will not enter here the discussion about the meaning of Ἰουδαῖοι in John. Suffice it to say that the word "Jews" can refer either to mixed groups of Jewish people or more specifically to the Jewish authorities. Each time, the actual meaning can only be decided by the close examination of the immediate context of each relevant reference, cf. J. Frey, *Das Bild der Juden im Johannesevangelium und die Geschichte der johanneischen Gemeinde*, in: M. Labahn (ed.), *Israel und seine Heilstraditionen im Johannesevangelium. Festgabe für Johannes Beutler SJ zum 70. Geburtstag*, Paderborn 2004, 37.

²⁵ Cf. C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary* [1], Grand Rapids 2003, 734–735.

²⁶ In 18:12 it is clear that the servants of the Jews are actually the servants of the Jewish authorities (cf. 7:32.45–49). Since Jesus' Jewish trial takes place in the night, the Jewish people are of course not present, and the whole process takes place behind closed doors.

never in the Fourth Gospel do the Jewish authorities indeed attribute any of these titles to Jesus, not even temporarily.²⁷ That the Jewish authorities do not question Jesus in the same manner as they questioned John is suggestive of their disregard, and perhaps even prejudice, against Jesus. Thus they cannot narratively be trusted as reliable witnesses about Jesus' true identity.

1.2 The Doubting

There are two instances in the Fourth Gospel in which the Jewish people explicitly consider Jesus "the Prophet." The first such occurrence is at the end of the story of the multiplication of the loaves (6:14). There, the recipients of the sign understand Jesus as the Prophet who is to come to the world in fulfillment of the prophecy of Deut 18:15.18.²⁸ There are, however, some indications in the narrative that the interpretation of Jesus in prophetic terms is inconsistent with Johannine Christology.

For example, the description of Jesus as the Prophet to come into the world is combined with the attempt by the Jews to make him their king in the following verse (6:15). However, Jesus leaves the scene, thus denying this role. Had the interpretation that Jesus was the Prophet been correct, he should have accepted the role as king.²⁹ On the next day, Jesus accuses the same Jews that they are following him not because they saw and understood the sign he performed, but because they simply ate their fill (6:26). Apparently, this means that their idea of Jesus' identity is wrong since not understanding Jesus' works means not understanding the reality of his existence as well (cf. 5:36; 14:11–12; 15:24). The same Jewish people ask Jesus to perform a sign, implicitly comparing him to Moses,³⁰ so that they might believe in him (6:30–31). Their request indicates that they have forgotten the mighty sign that Jesus had performed on the previous day and therefore betrays their doubt about whether Jesus is indeed the awaited Prophet.

Furthermore, in 7:40 some of the Jews acknowledge Jesus as the Prophet. Some others, however, are of the opinion that he is the Messiah (7:41a). The former do not accept this interpretation of Jesus' person because they believe the Messiah cannot possibly come from Galilee (7:41b–42). As a result, there is a division in the Jewish crowd (7:43), and some even want to seize Jesus (7:44). In other words,

²⁷ As already mentioned even in 9:16b some of them just wonder whether perhaps Jesus comes from God, but right after that their unbelief prevails.

²⁸ Cf. 4:19, where the Samaritan woman considers Jesus as being a prophet, he, however, refrains from commenting on that altogether. On the contrary, when at the end of their dialogue the Samaritan woman expresses her messianic expectation (4:25), Jesus reveals to her that he is the awaited Messiah (4:26).

²⁹ Cf. for instance 1:49–50; 4:25–26; 9:36–38; 11:26–27; 20:28–29. In all these cases Jesus accepts the titles attributed to him; cf. also the analysis of de Jonge, *Jesus* (n. 16), 167–168.

³⁰ Cf. Keener, *Gospel of John* (n. 25), 677–678.

they doubt Jesus' identity. Just as in the previously mentioned case of 6:14³¹ they do not actually understand Jesus. In 8:52 the Jews challenge Jesus to reveal to them what he thinks of himself, having already refused that he could be a prophet because "the prophets have died out." Moreover, although the narrator explicitly says that some of the Jews believe in Jesus (8:30; cf. 11:45; 12:11), the same Jews deny Jesus' claim about his preexistence before Abraham (8:56–58). This means that their faith is not stable but in a fluctuating state. At the end of the scene, all of them appear to be unanimous opponents of Jesus and they attempt to murder him (8:59; cf. 10:31–33), although they have previously denied having such an intention (7:25). However, it is the same Jewish crowd that receives Jesus as the Messiah in 12:12–18. In chapter 12 Jesus' interaction with the Jewish crowd comes to its narrative close. In John, the Jews' understanding of Jesus' messianic identity is inconsistent; however, their response to his entry into Jerusalem in chapter 12 shows progress in their understanding of Jesus compared to 6:14–15, in which they confess him as the Prophet to come and want to make him a king. In 12:13, they explicitly acknowledge him as the "King of Israel" without reference to him being the Prophet.

Finally, as already mentioned, the Jewish crowd is completely absent from the Johannine Passion narrative. Though space does not permit a more detailed exposition suffice it to say that Jesus is purposely and secretly arrested late at night and long after dinner in the absence of the Jewish crowd. His Jewish trial takes place during that night and he is brought to Pilate by the members of the Sanhedrin and their servants in the morning (18:28). In the following exchange between the Sanhedrin and Pilate, there is no mention whatsoever of the presence of the Jewish crowd. In the context of the passion narrative, the same people who are mentioned as Jews (18:31.33.38; 19:7.14.31; cf. 18:12.14) are specified as chief priests and servants (19:6; cf. 19:15.21).³² In the same context, the Jewish crowd is mentioned in 18:20 as a witness to Jesus' public teaching and in 19:20 as a witness to his crucifixion. The faith of the Jews, according to John's gospel, remains uncertain and thus also an open question in the world outside of the narrative.

1.3 *The Trusting and Believing*

Contrary to the above examples of doubtful narrative characters, there are others whose understanding of Jesus develops in a clearly positive way. Two such characteristic examples are the Samaritan woman and the man born blind. At the beginning of their respective narratives both of these characters do not have any

³¹ The formula of Jesus' recognition as a prophet in 7:40 is almost identical with the one in 6:14.

³² Therefore, we should understand the *καί* in the expression used by Pilate when talking to Jesus τὸ ἔθνος τὸ σὸν καὶ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς παρέδωκάν σε ἐμοί (18:35) as having an explicative and not an additive meaning and function.

idea whatsoever about who Jesus actually is (4:9–10; 9:11).³³ After Jesus demonstrates his supernatural power, however – in the case of the Samaritan woman by exhibiting knowledge of her personal life (4:17–18) and in the case of the man born blind by healing him (9:6–7) – both of them conclude that he is a prophet (4:19; 9:17). Neither story ends with the pronouncement of Jesus’ prophetic identity, however. The Samaritan woman acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah (4:25–29) clearly implying that the messianic title is superior to the prophetic one. Furthermore, the man born blind calls Jesus “Lord” and worships him as the “Son of Man” (9:35–38) as a result of his interaction with Jesus.³⁴ While the faith of both characters is clearly developing, they lack clarity about whether Jesus’ role is fundamentally as prophet or messiah and therefore they cannot be counted as reliable witnesses to the true identity of Jesus.

It is important to note that not all confessions bear the same weight or are equally reliable, even if their content is almost identical. While for instance in the aforementioned cases of 6:14 and 7:40 the crowd seems to believe in Jesus and to make authentic statements of faith, the wider narrative context displays a superficial and unstable faith. In John, faith should not only be understood as content but also as trust.³⁵ Trust is explicitly mentioned in the *summarium* 2:23–25. According to this text, the Jews in Jerusalem believed in Jesus because they saw the signs that he performed and he did not trust them because he knew their inner selves. The development of the narrative shows that while individual Jews can believe in Jesus and trust him in a profound way, the Johannine Jews collectively do not believe in Jesus trustfully and are therefore not trusted by him. For this reason they are repeatedly scandalised by Jesus’ words.³⁶ On the other hand the Twelve, as opposed to all other disciples (6:60–66) and with the exception of Judas (6:64), are not scandalised by Jesus, but continue to believe in him in the sense of trusting him to “have words of eternal life” (6:68).³⁷ To trust Jesus does not necessarily mean to understand what he actually says, but to remain faithful to him, to follow him, and to recognise his unique and unprecedented significance.

Nicodemus is a further interesting case representing the Jews who have witnessed Jesus’ signs and have developed a certain degree of faith in him (cf. 2:23–

³³ The use of the word ἄνθρωπος in 9:11 shows that the blind man has no idea about Jesus’ divine origin or messiahship; cf. the Johannine use of the word ἄνθρωπος in 1:6; 3:1; 5:5; 7:46; 9:1.16; 10:33; 11:47; 18:17.29; 19:5.

³⁴ Cf. L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, NICNT, Grand Rapids 1971, 486. On the significance of the Christological title “Son of Man” in John’s gospel see among others F. J. Moloney, *The Johannine Son of Man*, BScRe 14, Roma ²1978, 208–247.

³⁵ In Greek both faith and trust are expressed by the same word, namely πίστις, while also in biblical thought faith and trust are inextricably linked, cf. BDAG, “πίστις,” 818–820.

³⁶ Cf. for instance 6:28–66; 8:21–59; 10:22–39.

³⁷ In this confession, Peter represents all of the remaining disciples apart of course from Judas, cf. 6:70–71.

3:2). However, unlike most of these Jews, he actively seeks Jesus to learn more from him (3:2) and not just to profit from his miracles (cf. 6:26). In a very crucial moment of the plot, he even defends Jesus against the accusations of his colleagues in the Sanhedrin (7:50–51). After Jesus' death, Nicodemus demonstrates his faith in Jesus by honouring him with an enormous amount of costly myrrh (19:39).³⁸ However, at the beginning of his relationship with Jesus, Nicodemus is also an unreliable Christological witness. He thinks that Jesus is a teacher coming from God because only such a person would be able to perform the signs that Jesus performs. His assumption implies his recognition of Jesus as a prophet, as prophets are sent by God and occasionally perform signs with God's power that demonstrate their genuine prophetic legitimacy.³⁹ However, in the continuation of his dialogue with Jesus, it proves to be impossible for Nicodemus to grasp the real meaning of Jesus' words. From a narrative-critical point of view, Nicodemus is a dynamic character⁴⁰: he will develop in the narrative but in ch. 3 he remains unreliable as a witness to Jesus' true identity.⁴¹

At this point, we can formulate a general rule about the reliability of narrative characters in the Johannine narrative concerning their statements about Jesus. Collective narrative characters are almost always unreliable, with the notable exception of the Samaritans in 4:40–2. Normally, only individual characters can be relatively reliable,⁴² but their reliability is clear only at the end of their respective storylines.⁴³

Jesus' disciples belong to a particular category of characters who believe in Jesus from the beginning of their interaction with him, not in the sense of complete understanding, but in that they trust and follow him faithfully throughout

³⁸ Cf. C. Karakolis, 'Across the Kidron Brook, Where There Was a Garden' (John 18,1). Two Old Testament Allusions and the Theme of the Heavenly King in the Johannine Passion Narrative, in: G. van Belle (ed.), *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, BETL 200, Leuven 2007, 757–758.

³⁹ Cf. the reaction of the crowd after the multiplication of the loaves in 6:14.

⁴⁰ See on the distinction between static and dynamic characters J. L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament. An Introduction*, Grand Rapids 2005, 125–126.

⁴¹ Nicodemus never expresses his belief in Jesus through a confession of faith. However, his contribution to Jesus' burial is a highly symbolic act that implies such a confession. A similar action by a believing character who does not speak a Christological confession is Jesus' anointing by Mariam in 12:3–8.

⁴² Interestingly, Martha confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who is expected to come to the world (11:27). At this point, it is important to note that Martha's confession includes the formulation *ὁ ἐρχόμενος εἰς τὸν κόσμον*, just like the confession of the Galileans who experience the multiplication of the loaves (6:14). However, while Martha connects this formulation with the messianic titles "Christ" and "Son of God," the Galileans connect it with the prophetic title. From a narrative-critical point of view, it is needless to say that the confession of Martha is much more reliable than the opinion of the Galilean crowd, as can be deduced by the development of the respective stories.

⁴³ Perhaps the faith of the Samaritans shows that according to the experience of the Johannine community the mission to non-Jews has a collective success while the mission to Jews is only successful in individual cases.

the narrative.⁴⁴ Therefore, their Christological confessions are on a higher level of reliability, along with other characters who believe, such as the Samaritan woman and the man born blind. While the disciples indeed recognise Jesus as the Messiah (1:41), the one whom Moses and the prophets wrote about (1:45), the Son of God and the King of Israel (1:49), as well as the Holy one of God who has the words of eternal life (6:69), they never acknowledge him as a prophetic figure, unlike the Samaritan woman and the blind man who on their way toward real faith consider Jesus temporarily a prophet (4:19; 9:17).⁴⁵ Finally, Jesus' disciples reach the highest level of faith at the end of the narrative right before the first epilogue of the Gospel, when through Thomas they apply the Shema to Jesus, confessing him as their God and Lord (20:28).

1.4 The Knowing

The most characteristic example in this category of narrative characters is John the Baptist, the only character of the gospel who is presented as deriving his knowledge about Jesus directly from God.⁴⁶ John the Baptist fulfils the established criteria for being a prophet, although this is never acknowledged in the Johannine narrative.⁴⁷ He is sent (1:6) and is given knowledge directly by God (1:33) to transfer to the Jewish people (1:7.15) that no one else in the narrative possesses. He does not perform any signs (10:41), so he cannot be associated in this respect either with Elijah or with the Mosaic prophet, as he himself clearly states (1:21). However, not all Old Testament prophets perform miraculous signs. As already mentioned, John the Baptist is also the only character in the Johannine narrative whose testimony about Jesus is relevant according to Jesus himself (5:33–36). This means that his testimony is reliable beyond any doubt, although not necessarily clear to its narrative and/or real-world recipients. John the Baptist calls Jesus the “Lamb of God that carries the sin of the world” (1:29.36), a rather enigmatic, and at best ambiguous characterization.⁴⁸ He also calls him the Son of God (3:35–36), the Christ (3:28), the bridegroom (3:29), the one who comes from heaven (3:31), the one who gives the Spirit and baptises in the Holy

⁴⁴ At this point, I do not examine Jesus' disciples as a collective character, but as a sum of individual characters who are aligned with each other in their faith towards Jesus, while at the same time also keeping their specific traits.

⁴⁵ Cf. for instance J. Zumstein, *Das Johannesevangelium*, KEK 4/2, Göttingen 2016, 185–186.

⁴⁶ Cf. 1:6–7.33; 3:33; 5:33; 10:41.

⁴⁷ Probably the fourth evangelist does not attribute the prophetic title to John the Baptist due to his overall apologetic strategy in view of John the Baptist's followers of his time, cf. on the overall problem W. Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, SNTSMS 7, Cambridge 1968, 98–106.

⁴⁸ See on the complexity of the issue J. T. Nielsen, *The Blended Lamb. The Cognitive Grounding of the Johannine Lamb of God*, in: J. Frey (ed.), *Imagery in the Gospel of John. Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language*, WUNT 200, Tübingen 2006, 217–256.

Spirit (1:33; 3:34), and the Son of God the Father who was sent and given power by the Father and through whom believers will have eternal life (3:34–36). It is noteworthy that in no instance does John call Jesus a prophet or “the Prophet”, or even imply that Jesus has any prophetic traits. In fact, because John himself fulfills the prophetic criteria on the one hand but on the other hand minimizes his role so drastically in relation to Jesus, it becomes difficult to imagine how Jesus can exceed the Baptist in his prophetic role. If John the Baptist, as a prophet, is even more inferior to Jesus than a slave is to his master (1:27),⁴⁹ then Jesus must be incomparably more than just a prophetic figure.

In summary, the more reliable a character is, the less inclined he or she is to call Jesus a prophet, with the exception of Jesus’ opponents who do not speak positively about his identity. The Jewish crowd occasionally considers Jesus as a prophetic figure. The Samaritan woman and the blind man believe Jesus to be a prophet only before they name him as messiah or Lord, respectively. The disciples never call Jesus a prophet. John the Baptist also refrains from ever characterising Jesus directly or indirectly as a prophetic figure. The above information, although important, is not yet decisive about whether the Johannine Jesus is indeed understood as a prophet or not. Even non-reliable narrative characters could be right about certain matters without being conscious of it.⁵⁰ However, at this point, we must acknowledge the evangelist’s apparent tendency against characterising Jesus as a prophet through the perception and pronouncements of faith by his reliable narrative characters.

2. Second Level: The Witness of the Semeia

In this section, I will attempt a short reading of the *semeia*-narratives in the light of possible, probable or even evident allusions to relevant Old Testament prophetic traditions. In this regard, even the use of the distinctly Johannine term σημεῖα may be an allusion to the *othoth* of Exodus.⁵¹

2.1 *The Transformation of Water into Wine (2:1–11)*

Jesus’ miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana may recall the stories of multiplication of flour and oil by Elijah and Elisha (3Kgdms⁵² 17:7–16;

⁴⁹ This would be the meaning of John’s self-admitted unworthiness even to unbind Jesus’ shoes, cf. F. D. Bruner, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary*, Grand Rapids 2012, 78.

⁵⁰ This would be a case of dramatic irony, cf. the definition of dramatic irony in M. Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, Cambridge 1988, 55–57.

⁵¹ On the term σημεῖον and its history of tradition see Bittner, *Jesu Zeichen* (n. 14), 22–87.

⁵² On the use of LXX by the fourth evangelist see N. F. Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context. Introduction to the Greek Version of the Bible*, Leiden 2000, 326–327.

4Kgdms 4:1–7). However, Jesus' miracle is much greater from the ones of the two prophets concerning its quantity, quality, and immediacy. The amount of wine is enormous, probably about 600 litres (2:6).⁵³ On the other hand, although in Elijah's miracle the added total of flour and oil produced is probably more than the quantity of wine in Cana's miracle,⁵⁴ it is provided little by little within a timeframe of two to three years (3 Kgdms 17:1.7; 18:1), while Jesus provides the whole quantity of wine immediately (2:7–8), resulting in a much more impressive miracle. In the case of Elisha, oil is also produced instantaneously (4Kgdms 4:4–6), but in a much lower quantity, since in this case transportable and therefore relatively small vessels are used for it (4Kgdms 4:3), as opposed to the huge stone water-jars used for ritual cleansing in Cana (2:6). Furthermore, the quality of Jesus' wine is superior even to the wine that the groom had served at the start of the feast according to the so-called golden rule of wine-drinking that the steward cites (2:10).⁵⁵ In the parallel Old Testament stories, there is no reference to the quality of the flour and/or oil. Finally, the wine in Jesus' miracle is instantaneously produced from water (2:7–8). Transformation of water into wine or any material transformation for that matter is not at all witnessed in the Old Testament and therefore surpasses anything that could be expected from a prophet on the basis of the biblical witness.

2.2 The Healing of the Royal Official's Son (4:46–54)

For such a short narrative there is notably frequent use of the verbs ἀποθνήσκειν (4:47.49) and ζῆν (4:50.51.53). Through these words, the evangelist presents Jesus' healing of the official's son as a life-giving act.⁵⁶ Thus, this terminology may recall the two resurrections performed by Elijah and Elisha (3 Kgdms 17:17–24; 4Kgdms 4:18–37). The similarity of Jesus' phrase ὁ υἱός σου ζῆ (4:50) is likely intended by the evangelist to bring to mind Elijah's phrase ζῆ ὁ υἱός σου (3 Kgdms 17:23).⁵⁷ However, contrary to the two Old Testament stories, Jesus performs the healing without first praying to God. Moreover, he does not even have any visual contact with the person that is to be healed, but performs the miracle from a great distance with only his word (4:50; cf. 3 Kgdms 17:21; 4Kgdms 4:34–35). Elisha, on the other hand, who attempts to resurrect the deceased child of the Shunam-

⁵³ Cf. Str-B 2:406–407.

⁵⁴ The quantity of oil and flour is supposed to have covered the needs of three individuals for probably two to three years, cf. 3 Kgdms 17:1.7 and 18:1.

⁵⁵ Cf. H. Windisch, "Die johanneische Weinregel (Joh 2,10)", ZNW 14 (1913), 248–257.

⁵⁶ This is based on the ancient conception of the situation of facing death as already belonging to its realm, cf. X. Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de l'Évangile selon Jean I (chapitres 1–4)*, Paris 1988, 405–406.

⁵⁷ Cf. J.L. Martyn, *We Have Found Elijah*, in: R. Hamerton-Kelly/R. Scroggs (ed.), *Jews, Greeks and Christian Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honor of W.D. Davies*, S/JLA 21, Leiden 1976, 192.

mite woman from a distance through his assistant and fails (4Kgdms 4:31), then must intervene personally to bring the child back to life (4Kgdms 4:32–35). Furthermore, while Jesus knows from a distance that the royal official's son has indeed been healed, Elisha ignores the failure of his first attempt to resurrect the child until his assistant tells him what happened (4Kgdms 4:31).

2.3 *The Healing of the Lame Man (5:1–18)*

This miracle too has a life-giving character concerning a man who had been practically bound to his bed for a total of 38 years (5:5).⁵⁸ In this case, as well, Jesus acts without first asking for God's help or intervention, but with absolute power and authority and exclusively through his word (5:11). Moreover, according to the Johannine Jews, no prophet whatsoever would have ever defied the Sabbath rest as Jesus does (cf. 9:16–29), which results in their persecution of him (5:16).

2.4 *The Multiplication of the Loaves (6:1–15)*

A piece of information that explicitly links this narrative with the Elisha narrative cycle is that the loaves multiplied by Jesus were barley (6:9) – an apparently unnecessary detail at first, with no synoptic parallels.⁵⁹ Elisha multiplies barley loaves in the only Old Testament narrative parallel (4Kgdms 4:42–44). Furthermore, the question of Andrew: ἀλλὰ ταῦτα τί ἐστὶν εἰς τοσούτους; sounds very similar to the question of Gehazi in 4Kgdms 4:43: τί δῶ τοῦτο ἐνώπιον ἑκατὸν ἀνδρῶν; Gehazi is called a παιδάριον just before the multiplication of the loaves by Elisha in 4Kgdms 4:38.41. The same word is also used in John 6:9. Notwithstanding these similarities, there are also crucial differences between the two narratives: Jesus multiplies five loaves and two fish to feed 5,000 men (6:10), while Elisha multiplies 20 loaves and no fish to feed 100 men (4:43–44). The remaining pieces of bread and fish in the Johannine narrative are a great amount (6:13), while no information is given about the quantity of the remnants in the parallel Old Testament narrative.

In the Johannine narrative, there are also significant Mosaic allusions, which remind the reader of the events in Exodus. Jesus goes up to the mountain (6:3) followed by an enormous crowd (6:2) while the Jewish Passover festival is approaching (6:4). The seemingly unnecessary information about the existence of a lot of grass where the people sat to be fed (6:10) creates a striking contrast to

⁵⁸ Cf. E. Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium. Ein Kommentar*, Tübingen 1980, 270. U. Schnelle, *Antidoketische Christologie im Johannesevangelium. Eine Untersuchung zur Stellung des vierten Evangeliums in der johanneischen Schule*, FRLANT 144, Göttingen 1987, 113.

⁵⁹ Cf. the synoptic parallels of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves Matt 14:13–21; 15:32–39; Mark 6:32–44; 8:1–10; Luke 9:10–17.

Israel's wandering in the desert.⁶⁰ Moreover, while God himself, and not Moses, provides the manna directly from heaven to feed the starving Israelites (cf. 6:32), Jesus distributes the loaves and fish that he multiplies himself. Thus, on a symbolic level, he demonstrates that he is not the mediator but the sovereign subject of Israel's salvation, as God was in the Exodus narrative.⁶¹

2.5 The Walking upon the Sea (6:16–21)

Contrary to Moses, Elijah and Elisha (cf. Exod 14:21–22; 4Kgdms 2:8.14), Jesus does not need to part the waters to be able to cross the sea. He walks upon the stormy waves (6:19) demonstrating his absolute power over nature – a power that only God himself possesses.⁶² Although it is completely dark (6:17) Jesus finds his way to his disciples while they can see him from a distance (6:19). These details confirm that, for the Johannine evangelist, Jesus is both omniscient (cf. 2:25 etc.), and indeed the light of the world (cf. 8:12 etc.) – traits that do not apply to any human being, not even to prophets. Finally, the account of Jesus walking on the water is followed by the immediate transfer of the disciples' ship from the middle of the lake to the seashore (6:21), also an unprecedented sign that reveals Jesus' divine powers.

2.6 The Healing of the Man Born Blind (9:1–41)

Through the motif of washing as a means for healing, this narrative may be implicitly connected to the healing of the Syrian Naaman by Elisha (4Kgdms 5:1–27). The similarity between Jesus' ὑπάγε, νίψαι (John 9:7) and Elisha's ὑπάγε, λουσαι (4Kgdms 5:10) is striking.⁶³ Both miracles are unprecedented (John 9:32; 4Kgdms 5:7). However, while Naaman has to wash himself seven times in order to finally be healed (4Kgdms 5:10.14), the blind man washes only once (9:7). The pool that the blind man washes in bears the name of the Johannine Jesus' main trait, namely ἀπεσταλμένος (9:7), which means that Jesus is not just God's instrument, as is the case with Elisha, but is himself the actual subject of the healing.⁶⁴ The miracle itself lacks any parallels in the Old Testament, as the blind

⁶⁰ Cf. R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium II. Kommentar zu Kap. 5–12*, HThKNT 4.2, Freiburg 1971, 21.

⁶¹ See a short history of research on the overall use of Mosaic traditions and their Christological significance in the Johannine narrative in S. Harstine, *Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel. A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques*, JSNTSup 229, Sheffield 2002, 3–11.

⁶² Cf. Job 9:8, and the relevant analysis of G. Theißen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten. Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien*, SNT 8, Gütersloh 1990, 102–111.

⁶³ Cf. X. Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de l'Évangile selon Jean II (chapitres 5–12)*, Paris 1990, 338.

⁶⁴ Cf. R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel. A Study in Literary Design*, FF, Philadelphia 1983, 195. J. L. Resseguie, *John 9: A Literary Analysis*, in: M. W. G. Stibbe (ed.), *The*

man clearly points out (9:32). Moreover, it is actually presented as being an act of creation, since Jesus in a way recreates the “dead” eyes of the blind man by using clay made from the ground (9:6).⁶⁵

2.7 *The Resurrection of Lazarus*

The resurrection of Lazarus is in every respect a much greater miracle than the aforementioned resurrections performed by Elijah and Elisha (3 Kgdms 17:17–24; 4Kgdms 4:18–37). Lazarus is already four days in the grave (11:17), and has therefore started to disintegrate (cf. 11:39), while in the respective Old Testament narratives the two dead children have only been dead for a very short time (3 Kgdms 17:17–18; 4Kgdms 4:20–22). The resurrection of Lazarus takes place in public with numerous objective witnesses (11:31.35.45), while the two Old Testament resurrections take place in private (3 Kgdms 17:19; 4Kgdms 4:33). Jesus does not ask God to resurrect Lazarus, but only thanks him for the miracle that he is about to perform emphasizing that the Father always listens to him (11:41–42). On the contrary, the two prophets ask God in advance to bring the dead children back to life, thus signifying that God is free to ignore their requests (3 Kgdms 17:20–21; 4Kgdms 4:33). Therefore, the two prophets are not certain that their attempts to resurrect the dead children will be successful until the moment that the children indeed come back to life (3 Kgdms 17:22; 4Kgdms 4:36).

2.8 *The Other Signs*

As already mentioned, the signs of Jesus are not just limited to the seven *semeia*-narratives, but include every single one of his supernatural actions. While some of these actions may remind the readers of similar prophetic ones, no Old Testament prophet is omniscient,⁶⁶ can escape his enemies at will,⁶⁷ or, most importantly, can come back to life after having been executed and entombed for three days.

In summary, Jesus’ signs indeed contain material that draws upon Old Testament prophetic traditions. On this basis, Jesus can justifiably be interpreted by the eye-witnesses of the signs as being a prophetic figure, even an eschatological one according to the expectation of the Elijah *redividus*⁶⁸ or the Mosaic

Gospel of John as Literature. An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives, NTTSD 17, Leiden 1993, 116–117. Schnelle, *Antidoketische Christologie* (n. 58), 133.

⁶⁵ Cf. Gen 2:7; Job 4:19; 10:9; cf. also B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, NCB, London 1972, 343. Th.L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Oxford 1993, 347.

⁶⁶ Cf. John 1:42,48; 2:24; 4:17 f. etc.

⁶⁷ Cf. John 7:30.44; 8:20; 10:39; 18:4–8.

⁶⁸ Cf. Mal 3:1.22–23.

Prophet⁶⁹. On the other hand, the quantity, the quality and the greatness of his signs surpass everything that any prophet ever did or would be expected to be capable of doing according to the Old Testament witness.⁷⁰ Since God is the subject of all prophetic signs, due to their unsurpassed greatness, the signs of the Johannine Jesus could also be interpreted not simply as signs performed by a prophet sent by God, but as direct divine interventions of God himself who is ever present in the incarnate Logos. The signs should be enough to make people believe in Jesus in the way the disciples, the Samaritan woman and the man born blind, among others, do, and not according to the temporary, superficial and unstable faith of the Jewish crowds. Nevertheless, the signs are not a clear enough witness in revealing the real identity of Jesus and the genuine character of his works in an unambiguous way. Even those who do believe due to Jesus' signs still have to trust and believe in his word as well (cf. 4:41–42) to finally be able to perceive the full reality of his person and work.

3. Third Level: Jesus' Words

This is the reason for positioning the absolutely reliable words of Jesus about his identity on the third level of the scale of means. Jesus always tells the truth, and can never be mistaken in anything because he only speaks the words that he has already heard from his heavenly Father, namely God. Therefore, he not only tells the truth, but he is the truth. There can be nothing more reliable than that. However, Jesus' words are not always as crystal clear and unambiguous as they are reliable.

In the Johannine narrative, Jesus explicitly refers to himself as the Messiah,⁷¹ the Son of God,⁷² and the Son of Man.⁷³ While some of Jesus' self-claimed titles are textually explicit, others are implicit. However, the overall Johannine context provides clarifying information about the latter even as early as the gospel's prologue.⁷⁴ Jesus never refers to himself as a prophet with the possible exception of

⁶⁹ Cf. Deut 18:15.18.

⁷⁰ Cf. E. Käsemann, *Jesu letzter Wille nach Johannes 17*, Tübingen ³1971, 26–28.

⁷¹ In 1:17.41; 3:28; 4:25–26.29; 7:31.41; 9:22; 10:24–25; 11:27; 17:3; 20:31.

⁷² Explicitly in 1:34.49; 3:18; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4.27; 19:7; 20:31, and implicitly in 1:14.18; 3,16–17.35–36; 5:19–23.26; 6:40; 8:35–36; 14:13; 17:1.

⁷³ In 1:51; 3:13–14; 5:27; 6:27.52.62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23.34; 13:31.

⁷⁴ Without entirely covering the semantic width of the three most important Christological titles used by Jesus about himself the prologue provides an adequate minimum of explicit or implicit information about Jesus' divine sonship ("Son of God," see 1:14.18), human existence ("Son of Man," see 1:11.14), and kingly status ("Messiah," see 1:17). See my understanding of these three titles in *Johannine Christology in Karakolis*, *Ἡ θεολογικὴ σημασία* (n. 6), 397–414.427–431.

John 4:44, which is typically considered a proverb by commentators⁷⁵ and it is well-known that proverbs should generally not be taken literally but rather in a general, and often metaphorical sense.⁷⁶ Even on this basis, however, we would still have to decide whether in this particular case Jesus means the proverb literally or not. We must consider more than one possibility: Jesus could mean that the proverb applies both to Old Testament prophets as well as to the Messiah and incarnate Logos who is superior to all prophets (*a minore ad maius*). However, he could also mean that he is indeed a prophet,⁷⁷ though of a different kind than the Old Testament prophets, just like he is a different kind of Messiah from the Old Testament kings or the awaited eschatological Messiah. He could even be referring to the prophetic traits of his work.

Even the motif of rejection in one's own hometown is not decisive for extracting the exact meaning of the proverb. The most plausible explanation for the use of this motif within the Johannine context is its connection to the rejection of the Logos according to the gospel's prologue (1:11–12).⁷⁸

Thus, at this point, we cannot give a definitive answer to the question about the precise meaning of the proverb cited in 4:44, whether literal or metaphorical and to what degree.

In summary, Jesus' saying in 4:44 is indeed entirely reliable because he always knows and tells the truth, but not unequivocal, as it probably has a general meaning and application not limited to prophets.⁷⁹ While it is utterly significant that Jesus never calls himself a prophet, at least not directly, Jesus does reveal himself by other titles such as the Son of God, the Son of Man, the one sent by the Father, and the Christ-Messiah, together with figurative characterisations about himself – the so-called *ego-eimi* sayings.⁸⁰ The only possible self-description of Jesus as a prophet is in 4:44, which, while ambiguous, cannot be ignored.

⁷⁵ Cf. for instance T. Thatcher, *The Rejected Prophet and the Royal Official* (John 4,43–54). A Case Study in the Relationship between John and the Synoptics, in: J. Verheyden (ed.), *Studies in the Gospel of John and Its Christology*. Festschrift G. van Belle, BETL 265, Leuven 2014, 129–130.

⁷⁶ On the ambiguity of proverbs in general, as well as a relevant bibliography, see W. Mieder, *Proverbs. A Handbook*, Westport 2004, 131–137.

⁷⁷ Cf. Mlakuzhyil, *Structure* (n. 3), 401.

⁷⁸ Cf. J. R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT, Grand Rapids 2010, 65–67.

⁷⁹ Therefore, its occasional interpretation in research as proof of Jesus' prophetic identity on either the historical or the narrative level of the Fourth Gospel's witness is misguided.

⁸⁰ John 6:35.41.48.58; 8:12; 10:7.9.11.14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1.5; See also D. M. Ball, 'I Am' in John's Gospel. Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications, JSNTSup 124, Sheffield 1996, 255–261.

4. Upper level: The Narrator's Comments

Therefore, the readers of John's Gospel also need the fourth level of the scale of means, namely the narrator's comments about Jesus. Because of the narrator's identification with the beloved disciple (19:35; 21:24) he is not only the gospel's author, but an eye-witness of the earthly ministry of Jesus and among the closest to Jesus of all the disciples, which makes him a trustworthy witness about Jesus' life and teaching. In the narrative universe of the Fourth Gospel, the narrator claims the position of Jesus' ultimate interpreter.

Just like Jesus himself, the narrator also never calls him a prophet. He may mention the proverb of 4:44 about prophets not being honoured in their own homeland, but this is in reference to a saying of Jesus, and not the narrator's own comment. The viewpoint of the narrator follows in the next verse (4:45) regarding Jesus' reception by the Galileans who welcomed him after having witnessed the signs he performed in Jerusalem. This comment helps explain the prophetic proverb of 4:44 in the broader context of the Johannine narrative: Jesus' reception by the Galileans does not mean that he was really honoured by them.⁸¹ The Galileans apparently received Jesus as a miracle-worker or even as a prophet, based on the miraculous signs they witnessed.⁸²

Such a misguided interpretation of Jesus' signs and person corresponds to the faith of the Jews in Jerusalem after witnessing Jesus' signs (2:23–25).⁸³ Likewise, Nicodemus is an example of the superficial and temporary belief of the crowd (cf. 3:1–2) and the royal official is a representative example of the Galileans who may have received Jesus, but only as a miracle-worker (cf. 4:47–49). It would seem then that the evangelist does not here address the question about whether or not Jesus is a prophet, but rather criticises the faith of the Galileans indirectly by comparing it to the faith of the Samaritans (4:40–42) and of the Jews in Jerusalem (2:23–25).⁸⁴

While we can still only hypothesise with regard to the meaning of 4:44–45 as to the Johannine Jesus' possible prophetic identity, we can be fairly certain about the content and meaning of the gospel's first epilogue (20:30–31), which is the first instance in which the narrator himself speaks directly to the readers of his narrative in the second person plural. At this point, the narrator explains the *raison d'être* of the Fourth Gospel as a whole, which he characterises as

⁸¹ Cf. Morris, *Gospel* (n. 34), 287. P.J. Judge, *The Royal Official and the Historical Jesus*, in: P.N. Anderson, *John, Jesus, and History. Volume 2: Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel* [2], Atlanta 2009, 87–88.

⁸² Cf. M. Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12*, RNT 4, Regensburg 2009, 347.

⁸³ Cf. L. Schenke, *Johanneskommentar*, Mainz 2014, 77.

⁸⁴ Cf. de Jonge, "Jesus as Prophet" (n. 16), 172–173.

“signs.”⁸⁵ He says that the book was written for its recipients to believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, and thus to have eternal life in his name. At this highly significant point of the narrative, Jesus is presented as the Messiah and the Son of God, while in the preceding story Thomas confesses him as “his Lord and his God” (20:28). Nowhere in this context is there any hint of a prophetic understanding of Jesus. As a general rule, the endings of narrative texts are supposed to explain their content, and give answers to their aporias. In our case, it would seem that the aporia of 4:44 is satisfactorily resolved at this point. Whoever believes in Jesus as a prophet does not actually understand the book of Jesus’ signs. Only the readers who understand, accept, and confess Jesus as the life-giving Messiah and Son of God applying to him the Shema, will profit from reading this book in that they attain eternal life.

Conclusions

On the basis of Robert Alter’s theory about the “narrative scale of means” we have been able to observe throughout this study that the higher we move up the scale of reliable testimony about Jesus’ identity, the fewer references we find to an understanding of his person and work in prophetic terms.

In spite of their proximity to parallel Old Testament prophetic traditions, from a narrative-critical point of view, Jesus’ signs should not lead their recipients or eye-witnesses to believe in Jesus as a prophetic figure, but as the Messiah and the Son of God.⁸⁶

However, throughout John’s gospel, first seeing Jesus as a prophetic figure on the basis of the signs he performed is presented as a step toward real faith. A character’s view of Jesus as a prophet, then, may be incomplete faith, but should not be considered an utter lack of faith. Faith in Jesus as a prophet remains, however, temporary and unsustainable. Therefore a character’s faith in Jesus as a prophet must progress into faith in his messianic and divine identity.

It is interesting that in 20:30–31 the narrator brings the recipients of the gospel to a position equivalent to that of those eye-witnesses of the signs within the gospel narrative, who would have to see in order to be able to believe (cf. 4:48; 20:29). Of course, the Gospel’s recipients do not have the opportunity to witness Jesus perform signs in person. However, they do have access to a trustworthy account of the signs that Jesus performed during his earthly ministry.

⁸⁵ Cf. J. F. O’Grady, *The Prologue and Chapter 17 of the Gospel of John*, in: T. Thatcher (ed.), *What We Have Heard from the Beginning. The Past, Present and Future of Johannine Studies*, Waco 2007, 219.

⁸⁶ While the author has to reinterpret the messianic title to apply it to Jesus, he does not implement the prophetic title to Jesus at all, cf. de Jonge, “Jesus as Prophet” (n. 16), 177, who does not make this distinction between the two titles.

The recipients are thus called to have faith not by seeing, but by reading. After having read the epilogue of the Gospel, those implied readers who do not yet (fully) believe are indirectly urged to re-read the book of the signs of Jesus to finally reach true faith (in case this did not happen during their first reading). They are, in essence, given the key to the gospel text – Jesus’ signs, which reveal his messianic and divine identity. If they still consider Jesus a prophetic figure they are urged through the gospel’s epilogue to grow out of this idea by correctly evaluating the witness of Jesus’ signs along with all other narrative witnesses, according to their respective degree of reliability.

At the textual level, then, there is no ground for understanding Jesus as a prophetic figure according to the Johannine evangelist. However, for some narrative characters and implied readers, understanding Jesus as a prophet may be considered a stepping stone on their journey toward complete faith.