

Hebrew characters creates some technical problems. In our days, the latter could hardly be the case, and it is obvious that the book can be of a little help for those who do not know Hebrew at all. Furthermore, the author does not mention which system of transliteration he uses. It makes the reading of the book difficult.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the author successfully accomplished the task of his research. His analysis and classification of different types of Hebrew oath formulas could be of great help for those who want to understand better the Hebrew Bible and the world of ancient Israelites.

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Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John, by Susan E. Hylen. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

Imperfect Believers by Susan Hylen is a recent addition to the growing corpus of literary studies on the Fourth Gospel. Hylen's special interest is in the characterization in John's book. In the introduction she compares the Gospel to other ancient works of literature, including the Old Testament, and argues that characters in these works are not "'flat,' 'static,' and . . . 'opaque,'" (3) as some scholars had suggested. The author discusses such aspects of John's language as dualism, symbol and metaphor that are important for evaluation of the characters. She also argues that the plot of the Fourth Gospel is broader than just revelation and belief, and that the characters' relation to it is more complex than usually understood. Hylen also describes the principles of literary characterization she employed in her book.

The book itself is divided into two parts. The first part deals with some ambiguous characters of the Gospel of John such as Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the disciples, Martha and Mary, and the Beloved Disciple. The second part, being "less exegetical and more conceptual" (16), analyzes 'special' characters such as the Jews and Jesus.

Nicodemus is "one of the Gospel's most ambiguous characters" (23), because he demonstrates both understanding and misunderstanding of Jesus (the latter being understood by Hylen as an example of Johannine irony). The story of Nicodemus in the Gospel is open-ended: he remains ambiguous, and it shows that "there is more to discipleship than belief in Jesus" (37).

The Samaritan woman is presented as sinful and not completely understanding Jesus; yet, this is only one side of the coin. The woman seems to follow Jesus' metaphor of the living water and her understanding, however imperfect, seems to be better than that of the disciples. In addition, she acts as a witness to Jesus and, "even without a full belief . . . becomes a well that brings living water to others" (55).

Jesus' disciples, seen as a group, demonstrate both belief and unbelief; they abide with their Master and, at a certain moment, they are scattered. Their faith is in progress: although now they may be "confused and unbelieving. . . . John nevertheless views the disciples from a standpoint of hope" (74).

Martha and Mary, who are often understood as the most faithful characters in the Gospel, also have their problems. Martha, as it seems, does not fully comprehend her own confession to Jesus, as she demonstrates at Lazarus' tomb. As for Mary, since John never says directly that she believes or comprehends she is ambiguous too, and this ambiguity remains even after she anoints Jesus in Bethany.

The Beloved Disciple, as Hylén admits, receives a highly positive characteristic in the Fourth Gospel; yet, she still sees him as ambiguous for several reasons. He is an anonymous character; "it is not clear what the Beloved Disciple believes or understands" (92); his role at the last supper, the crucifixion, the empty tomb, and the resurrection is not completely obvious. Therefore he can be viewed as "exemplary but not perfect" (106).

The Jews in the Fourth Gospel are usually seen as negative characters, but the author prefers to view them as a "conflicted" (119) one, as they both believe and disbelieve. John uses irony to show "the incongruity between the Jews' understanding and misunderstanding" (125). Hylén warns against separating John from Judaism and against supersessionist readings of the Gospel.

Although Jesus is "the least ambiguous of all John's characters" (135), He is not completely unambiguous. The Gospel presents the person of Jesus in various metaphors, which can be interpreted differently, and, therefore, makes Jesus' character complex and ambiguous. It is impossible to narrow this character to a single doctrinal point, but makes it vivid and living.

Hylén's study is an excellent contribution to the field. Her points are well argued and supported by the text of the Gospel. She pays much attention to the details of the narrative, which are often being ignored or underestimated. The easily readable and inviting language of the book does not diminish its great scholarly value but makes it accessible for a large audience of biblical students. Comprehensive bibliography at the end of each chapter shows acquaintance with the literature on the topic

and provides a great tool for further studies. *Imperfect Believers* appreciates the Gospel of John as a bright work of literature, at the same time upholding its historical reliability by arguing that John does not flatten or simplify the description of his characters in order to subordinate them to the plot of his book.

A few things need to be mentioned in conclusion. While it may be true that there is more to discipleship than belief in Jesus, it is also true that belief is one of the most important or even the most important components of discipleship. Therefore, its effect on the characters of the Gospel should not be underestimated. Sometimes the extent of the ambiguity of a character can be debated, as in the case of the Beloved Disciple, where the arguments seem a bit strained though it does not really affect the conclusion. Finally, Hylan is selective in her choice of characters that she discusses. There is a point in treating the disciples as a group, but a discussion of Peter who is an excellent example of an ambiguous character would not have harmed the study. Peter is referred to only in relation to the Beloved Disciple, but taking the importance of his character for John, a separate chapter would be appropriate. Another interesting character of the Gospel, which is worthy of more attention, is John the Baptist.

Imperfect Believers by Susan Hylan is a book to read for every student of the Forth Gospel who wishes to look deeper in its text, to search between the lines, and to appreciate the richness of its characters.

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