chapter one

THE LAWSUIT *and the* NARRATIVE *of the* FOURTH GOSPEL

On reading the Fourth Gospel, one encounters again and again the two notions of testimony (or witness) and judgment. Their dominance and the distinctiveness they contribute to John's narrative can be highlighted by a statistical observation. The noun *witness* or *testimony* (μαρτυρία) occurs fourteen times in this Gospel in comparison with four times in the three Synoptics together, and the verb *to witness* or *to testify* (μαρτυρεῖν) thirty-three times in comparison with twice in the three Synoptics. Again, in connection with judgment, the verb *to judge* (κρίνειν) is employed nineteen times in the Fourth Gospel as compared with six times in Matthew and six times in Luke. Although the noun *judgment* (κρίσις) occurs eleven times in John as compared with four in Luke, its use is not as striking, since it is also a characteristic term in Matthew, where it appears twelve times.

It is not, however, just a matter of vocabulary. Both these concepts, which have, of course, strong juridical or legal connotations, form part of a larger motif, that of the lawsuit or trial, which shapes much of the narrative of the Fourth Gospel. The themes of this Gospel are intricately interwoven, and to isolate one carries the danger of the whole becoming unraveled; nevertheless, this major metaphor is arguably the most distinctive, pervasive, and comprehensive motif. It is from this motif that the issue of truth highlighted in the introduction takes its most distinctive features. Again the vocabulary statistics are striking. The noun ἀλήθεια occurs twenty-five times in this Gospel as compared with

seven times in the three Synoptics together. The adjective ἀληθής, *true,* is found fourteen times in John as compared with once in Mark and once in Matthew. The related adjective ἀληθινός is featured nine times in John in comparison with once in Luke, and even the adverb ἀληθῶς, *truly,* occurs more frequently in this Gospel—seven times, as compared with three times each in Matthew and Luke and twice in Mark.

Under the umbrella of this lawsuit motif can be brought not only the concepts of witness, judgment, and truth but also, as we shall see, such obvious features as the Gospel's depiction of the public ministry of Jesus as a controversy with "the Jews"; its distinctive account of his trial before Pilate, which is the most extensive of all four Gospels; its treatment of the law; its use of Scripture and in particular its predominant relation to Isa 40–55; its view of the mission of the disciples; and its portrayal of the Spirit as Paraclete. To this motif are related also such significant themes as life, glory, the world, and belief; the Gospel's depiction of Christ as the one who is sent as God's agent and as employing "I am" sayings; and its perspective on eschatology, revelation, and monotheism. It is important not to get carried away and reduce the Gospel to this one dimension. Clearly our motif is related but subservient to the Fourth Gospel's message about Christ with its ascent-and-descent pattern and its emphasis on the oneness of the Son with the Father. But perhaps, second only to the narrative's unique Christology, this metaphor of a lawsuit on a cosmic scale is the most distinctive characteristic holding many of the elements of its plot and discourse together. Can this claim be maintained, and how exactly does the motif function?

The answer to these questions will unfold in three main stages. First, this chapter will set out the case in broad, general terms. Next, chapters 2 and 3 will attempt to support this by providing a discussion of this text's links with the Jewish Scriptures and then a more detailed sequential reading of the text in the light of this motif. Finally, chapter 4 will return to some of the broader literary issues that have been raised.

A. Orientation to the Narrative

Before we focus on our motif, this section describes some of the most significant features of the Gospel's narrative in order to provide the general reader with the necessary background and context.[1]

---

[1] For a fuller treatment of many of these points, including discussion of such categories as implied author, implied reader, and point of view, see the excellent discussion in Culpepper, *Anatomy.*

1. Overall Shape of the Narrative Discourse

It is widely recognized that the discourse shaping the final form of John's story has clear major sections. A prologue (1:1–18) and an epilogue (21:1–25) surround the main story, which itself has two main parts. The first of these (1:19–12:50) deals with Jesus' public ministry, the second (13:1–20:31) with his departure from this world. The second part itself has two clear subsections—13:1–17:26, in which the departure is interpreted by Jesus for "his own," the disciples, and 18:1–20:31, in which the departure takes place as the story line culminates in the passion and resurrection.

The prologue, which provides an extended introduction to the main character, Jesus, makes clear the implied author's point of view. The identity of the central figure is disclosed as that of the divine Logos (1:1, 14), and the implied reader is given clues about the significance of this figure's mission: it involves his glory (1:14), contrasts with Moses and the law (1:17), and entails making God known (1:18). There is also a preview of the outcome of this mission in 1:11–12: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."

Not surprisingly, the public ministry is dominated by Jesus' deeds and words, both of which help to move the plot along. Jesus' deeds are predominantly depicted as signs, and there are seven of these (cf. 2:1–11; 4:46–54; 5:1–18; 6:1–15; 6:16–21; 9:1–41; 11:1–53). Some scholars have been so impressed by this feature that they have called this section of the Gospel "the Book of Signs."[2] But this is to make the signs more dominant than they in fact are, and not to do enough justice to the speech material. Nevertheless, their explicit association with the important concept of glory (cf. 2:11; 11:4) should be noted, since this certainly provides one major element of continuity with the second half of the Gospel's story. The words through which Jesus makes God known are primarily extended discourses.[3] These discourses do not necessarily

---

[2] Cf., e.g., C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 290, 297; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1966–1970), 1:cxxxviii.

[3] This study uses the term *discourse* in two ways. The more general sense of the term, referring here to speech material, should not be confused with literary criticism's more technical use of the term for the rhetoric of the narrative as a whole, cf. S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*

comprise a complete monologue from Jesus, and where extended speech material on the lips of Jesus is interrupted more than usual by debate or questions, dispute/discourse might be a better categorization. Given this, and granted some uncertainty because the discourses are far less clearly demarcated than the signs, it could be argued that there are seven major discourses in the public ministry as well as seven signs (cf. 3:1–21; 4:1–26; 5:19–47; 6:22–59; 7:14–39; 8:12–59; 10:1–18, with the fourth, fifth, and sixth of these passages being disputes/discourses).

Although much more remains to be said about how the encounter and the increasing conflict with significant features of Israel's religion and its representatives unfold during Jesus' public ministry, here attention will simply be drawn to episodes near the beginning and the end. The first major deed—changing water into wine at Cana (2:1–11)—both rounds off the initial response of the disciples to Jesus (cf. 2:11) and anticipates the significance of Jesus' mission, as the water of the Jewish rites of purification gives way to the wine and joy of the new life that Jesus provides. The next incident, in the temple in Jerusalem (2:13–22), further sets the tone for what is to follow. Its setting in this narrative shows Jesus confronting the Jewish authorities at the heart of their religious system, and the dialogue that follows and the narrator's comments make clear that the resurrected Christ is in fact to replace the old religious order represented by the temple. The last sign—the raising of Lazarus—precipitates the move towards Jesus' hour of death and glory (cf. esp. 11: 4, 8, 16, 49–53; 12:7, 23–36a). John 12:36b–50 forms the clear and appropriate conclusion to the public ministry; it deals with the response both to Jesus' signs and glory (12:36b–43) and to his words (12:44–50).

Brown, who calls the public ministry material "the Book of Signs," entitles the second half of the Gospel "the Book of Glory."[4] This does not sufficiently recognize that the signs themselves are signs of glory and that, for the Fourth Gospel, the whole of Jesus' life is a manifestation of his glory (cf. 1:14). It does highlight, however, that there is a sense in which the death and exaltation of Jesus are the particular moment of his glorification, his departure as glory. The section composed of John 13–17 begins, "Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that

---

(Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 15–42. In the latter sense, it is employed in distinction to *story:* the story is what the narrative is about (its events, characters, and setting), while the discourse of a narrative is how the story is told (its shape, sequence, juxtapositions, and persuasive strategy).

[4] Brown, *Gospel according to John,* 1:cxxxviii–cxxxix.

his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father," and the nature of the hour is made unmistakably clear when, after Judas has gone out in order to arrange for Jesus' arrest, Jesus asserts, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once" (13: 31–32). In this section Jesus talks not only about his departure but also about what will happen after it. He will prepare a place for his disciples, return to remain with them, and send them the Paraclete. They will face both exclusion from the synagogue and persecution but will also experience joy and peace. Jesus' concluding prayer for himself and his followers again strikes the note of the hour of departure and its glory for both Jesus and God: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you. . . . I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed" (17:1, 4–5; cf. also 22, 24).

The events for which Jesus has been preparing his disciples unfold quickly in John 18 and 19. The Jewish authorities seize Jesus and hand him over to Pilate, and Pilate, after eventually coming to a verdict, hands Jesus over to be crucified. Yet even during his arrest, trial, and death, Jesus is portrayed as in control. While soldiers cast lots for his clothes, Jesus continues to care for his own from the cross by uniting his mother and the beloved disciple. Finally, he cries out in triumph, "It is finished," before he gives up his spirit (lit. "he handed over the spirit"—19:30). There follows in John 20 the episode of the discovery of the empty tomb, with the beloved disciple seeing and believing and Mary Magdalene meeting, but at first not recognizing, Jesus. The risen Jesus then authorizes and empowers the disciples for mission, and Thomas utters the climactic confession "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). The story comes to its first conclusion with a statement about why it has been written, highlighting the need for the response of belief in Jesus as the Christ and as the sort of Christ who is Son of God.

In the epilogue of John 21, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples in Galilee, enabling them to make an extraordinary catch of fish. The episode leads into a dialogue and comments from the narrator that tie up some loose ends from the preceding narrative about the relationship between Jesus and Peter and about that between Peter and the beloved disciple. Peter is to feed Jesus' sheep and to die a martyr's death, and the beloved disciple will also bear faithful witness through his involvement in the writing of the Gospel. In this way the epilogue helps to bridge the gap between the time of the story and the time of its Christian readers.

2. Discerning the Plot and the Characterization

Having selectively sketched some of the features of the narrative's overall discourse in order to enable us to appreciate something of its structure, we are now in a position to see the essential elements of its plot, which is, according to two widely quoted definitions, "the dynamic sequential element"[5] or "the structure of its actions, as these are ordered and rendered toward achieving particular emotional and artistic effects."[6] A further definition of plot as "the dynamic shaping force of the narrative discourse"[7] combines the emphases on movement and persuasion in the first two through its use of the terms *dynamic* and *discourse*.

One common way of setting out the basic aspects of a plot is according to the three-stage movement of setting or commission, complication or conflict, and then resolution. In the first stage the main character is given a commission or task. So Jesus in this Gospel is given a commission by God; there are a number of ways in which this is described—for example, to reveal or make God known (cf. 1:18; 17:6, 26), to display his glory (cf. 13:31, 32), to be lifted up (3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34), and thereby to give life (e.g., 3:16; 10:10). This is not the imposition of some alien schema on the text. The narrative discourse positively encourages this kind of reading. All the way through, Jesus makes clear that he has been commissioned. He repeatedly describes the Father as "the one who sent me," and in this connection the verb πέμπειν is used twenty-four times and ἀποστέλλειν seventeen times. In addition, Jesus talks of his mission as the task or work God has given him to do (e.g., 4:34; 9:4; 17:4). In the second stage, the complication, the protagonist faces obstacles and opposition that have to be overcome if the commission is to be carried out. Again in the Fourth Gospel, obvious opposition to Jesus' mission—in the shape of the chief priests and Pharisees (e.g., 7:32–52; 11:46–57), "the Jews,"[8] the world (e.g., 1:10c; 15:18), Judas (6:71; 13:2, 30; 18:2, 3), the devil or ruler of this world (e.g., 12:31; 13:2; 16:11), and Pilate—produces the conflict that runs through the story. The opposition is in fact involved in a counterplot within the plot, one that parodies the main

---

[5] R. Scholes and R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 207.

[6] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (4th ed.; New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1981), 127.

[7] P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 13.

[8] Throughout this study the designation *the Jews* is to be understood as a reference to a corporate character within the narrative.

plot, since "the Jews" have as their task the destruction of Jesus and the originator of this commission can be seen to be the devil (cf. 8:44 in relation to "the Jews" and 13:2, 27 in relation to Judas). The irony of the opposition's counterplot is that, in its success in putting Jesus to death, it brings about the resolution of the main plot. This final stage—resolution—is the goal toward which the plot has been moving throughout. One indication of this is the constant reference to Jesus' hour, the decisive hour of glory (cf., e.g., 2:4; 7:6, 8; 12:23, 27; 13:1, 31, 32; 17:1). In the resolution the opposition is overcome and the commission completed. Again the language of the Fourth Gospel corresponds to such an analysis. Jesus can say to the disciples, "I have conquered the world!" (16:33), and the completion of his task is anticipated in his prayer "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do" (17:4). The key reference for the resolution is Jesus' cry from the cross in 19:30: "It is finished" (τετέλεσται, i.e., "the task is completed"). Jesus' mission culminates on the cross. Clearly, from the point of view of the implied author, against all appearances, in this "lifting up" God is most truly known. The death of the crucified Messiah is the supreme moment of his glorification and of God's glory.

The implied reader learns about the various characters in the Fourth Gospel primarily, though by no means exclusively, through discovering their role in the plot. Characterization emerges in the web of events and relationships that make up the plot. If the implied author reveals character by showing, on the one hand, and telling, on the other, then how the characters act and interact is the showing aspect. The telling aspect occurs in a number of ways. One is the comments of one character about another, including, in the Fourth Gospel, the titles for Jesus employed by other characters. Another is a person's direct speech, and in this Gospel the main character, Jesus, has much to say about himself, especially as the Son who is totally at one with the Father. A third way is the narrator's statements about a person. They are sometimes called "inside views" when the narrator tells what is going on inside a character's mind.[9] Those concerning Jesus nearly all underline Jesus' foreknowledge or, indeed, omniscience and are part of the characterization of him as sovereign and in control of events.

There is no real change or development in the character of the protagonist, Jesus, in the course of accomplishing his mission. Although the reader discovers more of what his identity entails, Jesus' identity basi-

---

[9] Culpepper, *Anatomy,* 22–25, provides a list of these in the Fourth Gospel.

cally remains the same as its portrayal in the prologue. What moves the plot along is how he achieves his goal and the responses to him as he does so. The other characters function as foils to his identity and as illustrations of the two contrasting types of response—belief or unbelief. The human opponents, whom we have already mentioned, are representatives of unbelief. This is particularly important to recognize when it comes to the Gospel's use of the term *the Jews*. Much has been written about this, but what needs to be made clear here is that the term is not purely an ethnic one. Sometimes it refers to the religious authorities, sometimes more generally to the crowds, but predominantly "the Jews" are the representatives of the unbelieving world; they are unbelieving Jews as opposed to believing Jews. This representative and not simply ethnic function can be seen on the surface of the narrative, as the following three examples demonstrate. In 9:22 the parents of the blind man, obviously Jews themselves, are said to fear "the Jews." This is as striking and strange as speaking of natives of London fearing the English. A similarly strange usage occurs in 13:33 when Jesus, a Jew, says to his disciples, themselves Jews, "as I said to the Jews so now I say to you." Then in 18:35 Pilate, the Roman governor, asks the ironic question "I am not a Jew, am I?"; he expects a negative answer, but the answer the implied readers are expected to supply is affirmative. In his response to Jesus, Pilate proves himself to be a Jew in the special sense of this narrative's discourse, namely, one who belongs to the unbelieving world. In a similar fashion, as the implied readers are introduced to the different characters who encounter Jesus in the narrative, they become conditioned to ask which group these characters represent. Will the characters recognize Jesus' true identity or not? Will they respond in belief and receive life, thereby becoming his followers who help his mission along? Or will they respond in unbelief, thereby becoming part of the opposition, the hostile world?

3. Irony and a Two-Storey Story

There is irony as the readers watch the characters' responses and frequent misunderstandings, because they have already been taken into the confidence of the implied author and know who Jesus is from the prologue.[10] This way of structuring the narrative coaxes its readers into sharing the implied author's point of view about Jesus as the incarnate Logos, the Son of God. Only if they are willing to accept this perspective,

---

[10] See esp. P. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985).

at least temporarily as they read the narrative, can they appreciate fully its ironies and double entendres. One example of this phenomenon is the questions that are posed by some of the characters out of ignorance or from a false assumption but that suggest the truth without their consciousness of it: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (1:46); "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob . . . ?" (4:12); "Surely we are not blind, are we?" (9:40); "I am not a Jew, am I?" (18:35). In each case the characters assume an answer the readers have been led to see as false in the light of the prologue and its development; for the readers, not to accept the implied author's view would be to surrender their superior understanding and privileged position vis-à-vis the characters in the narrative. This sort of irony—as also the dramatic irony, already noted, whereby the apparent success of the opposition in fact results in the resolution of the plot—works, as always, through the contrast of appearance and reality.

> Below is the appearance or apparent meaning. Above there is a meaning, perspective or belief that is contradictory, incongruous, or incompatible with the lower level. The victim, where there is one, is unaware of the higher level or blindly hostile to it. The reader is invited by the irony to leap to the higher level and share the perspective of the implied author.[11]

This two-storey phenomenon of irony reflects the two-storey nature of the ideological point of view of the narrative as a whole. Again and again its discourse conveys a vertical dimension in which the spatial categories "above" or "heaven" and "below" or "earth" are employed and in which Jesus and his followers are those who are from above (cf., e.g., 3:3, 31; 8:23). Not surprisingly, then, descent and ascent are key categories for interpreting the central character and his mission (cf., e.g., 3:13; 6:33, 62; 20:17); equivalent language is that of coming from the Father and going to the Father (cf., e.g., 8:42; 13:1; 14:12, 28; 16:28). For the implied author, implied readers can begin to appreciate the central character's full significance only when they are able to conceive of the central character and his task, which culminates in his death, in terms of the vertical dimension of the two-storey story.

There is a further and related sense in which this Gospel is a two-storey story. Its perspective from above is, from the temporal point of view, retrospective. The narrator is telling the story of Jesus from the vantage point of the group of followers who believe Jesus was indeed from above, and in both the prologue and the epilogue he uses "we" lan-

---

[11] Culpepper, *Anatomy,* 167.

guage in a confessional context (cf. 1:14, 16; 21:24). So within the narrative time there are the time of the story of Jesus and the time of the narrator and the implied readers. The relation of these two temporal perspectives is an interesting phenomenon that not only contributes to the implied readers' ability to recognize ironies but also sheds light on the nature of the narrative. Sometimes the two perspectives are clearly distinguished, and sometimes they are compressed. For instance, in 16:1–4 Jesus tells his disciples that there will come a time when they will be put out of the synagogue. Yet a situation that is here seen as distinct from the time of Jesus himself is elsewhere treated as integral to the time of Jesus' own story (cf. 9:22; 12:42). This juxtaposition of perspectives is one of a number of clues in the narrative itself that this story of Jesus is also, in large part, being narrated as the story of the implied readers' struggle and debate with the synagogue about their belief in Jesus. The literary analysis of the two-storey story thus dovetails with Martyn's discussion of the Gospel as a "two-level drama."[12]

B. The Trial Motif in the Narrative

Now that we have the bare bones of a narrative analysis that has carefully avoided any explicit discussion of our theme, the time has come to put flesh on it by demonstrating, in an initial way, just how far the extended metaphor of the trial or lawsuit is integral to and enhances such an analysis.

1. The Lawsuit and the Overall Shape of the Narrative Discourse

Not only does the motif occur in each of the five main sections of the narrative discussed above; it does so in highly significant ways. As often pointed out, but without its full force being appreciated, the poetic nature of the prologue's reflections on the Logos and his glory is disturbed primarily by the references to John the Baptist in 1:6–8, 15. What distinguishes these references to John is the totally dominating portrayal of his role as a witness. This also provides the link between the prologue and the public ministry. The very first words of the section on public ministry, in 1:19, are "This is the testimony given by John"; 1:19–28 contains John's testimony about himself, while 1:29–34 contains his testimony about Jesus. At the end of the public-ministry section, after the trial motif has been mentioned in 12:17, 31, the final pericope—

[12] Martyn, *History and Theology,* 60.

12:44–50—in its discussion of judgment highlights Jesus' word as judge. So there is an *inclusio* using our motif, and it provides an interpretative frame for the public ministry.

The trial motif is also explicit at the heart of the controversy with "the Jews" in the third discourse in 5:19–47 (cf. vv. 22, 24, 27, 29–39, 45) and the sixth discourse/dispute in 8:12–59 (cf. vv. 13–18, 26, 50). It has featured previously in 2:25; 3:11, 17–19, 26–28, 32, 33; and 4:39, 44 and occurs again in 7:7, and so it is now dominant enough to color the way in which the reader interprets the dispute and its aftermath in 7:14–52 (cf. v. 51) and the interrogation of the blind man in John 9 (cf. 9:39).

Central to the section constituted by John 13–17 are the two Farewell Discourses. In the first (13:31–14:31) the motif occurs in the references to the Paraclete, or Advocate, in 14:16, 26 and then again at the heart of the second (15:1–16:33) with reference to both the Paraclete and the disciples in 15:26, 27 and 16:7–11. In the fourth section the Roman trial of Jesus in 18:28–19:16a is in fact the central feature of the passion narrative, standing in the middle of three equal blocks of material, with the arrest and interrogation on one side (18:1–27) and the crucifixion and burial on the other (19:16b–42). While the trial before Pilate is central to the narrative of the passion, the death of Jesus is still its climax, and the theme is not absent from that climax. When the narrator inserts his own comments immediately after Jesus' death has been established, it is in terms of testimony in 19:35.

Finally, the epilogue itself closes on this note, with a twofold reference to the testimony of the beloved disciple in 21:24 as the narrator links his work to this testimony. In this way, not only does our theme provide the *inclusio* for the public ministry; with the references in the epilogue and the prologue, it also provides an overall *inclusio* for the complete narrative. In regard to actions within history, the Gospel begins with the witness of John the Baptist and concludes with the witness of the beloved disciple.

Both the pervasiveness and the positioning of the motif encourage readers to view the narrative, as a whole, from the perspective of a trial. In addition to introducing the theme of witness, the prologue provides both a cosmic backdrop for the trial and the implied author's point of view on its participants. Jesus is the unique representative of God, the incarnate Logos (1:1, 14), indeed the only God (μονογενὴς θεός), who is in the bosom of the Father (v. 18). His own people who did not receive him (v. 11) are representatives of the world that did not know him (v. 10). So ultimately the issues in the trial that follows are to be seen as not simply between Jesus and Israel but as between God and the world.

The notion of truth that is at stake also begins to be intimated through the references to the Logos as the true light (v. 9) and the one through whom grace and truth come into being (vv. 14, 17).

This narrative, unlike that of the Synoptics, has no account of a Jewish trial before the Sanhedrin. Instead, throughout his public ministry, Jesus can be viewed as on trial before Israel and its leaders. At one point he appeals to the law of evidence with its requirement of two witnesses: "In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid" (8:17, 18). Deuteronomy 17:6 in fact talks of two or three witnesses being necessary before the death penalty can be carried out. But not surprisingly, in the narrative of the public ministry as a whole, which arguably has seven signs and seven discourses, the narrator explicitly designates seven witnesses. The first witness to be called is John the Baptist, who, as we have seen, has been introduced in this role in the prologue (cf. 1:7, 8, 15) and who now continues it in the public ministry (cf. 1:19, 32, 34; 3:26, 28). In 5:33 Jesus calls on John's witness with his claim "You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth." Then there is Jesus' own witness, of which he can say, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going" (8:14; cf. also 3:11, 32, 33; 7:7; 8:18). Jesus' works provide a further witness. "The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me" (5:36; cf. also 10:25). God has not only sent Jesus as the divine representative in the trial; God, too, is a witness: "the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf" (8:18; cf. also 5:32, 37). The fifth of the witnesses are the Scriptures. In a formulation that effectively sums up the use of the Scriptures in the narrative as a whole (cf., e.g., 2:17; 3:14; 6:31–33; 7:39), it is said that "they testify on my behalf" (5:39). The remaining witnesses in the public ministry are the Samaritan woman, on the basis of whose testimony many other Samaritans believed in Jesus (4:39), and the crowd who testify about Jesus' raising of Lazarus (12:17).

The various characters in the narrative, most notably the leaders of the Jewish people, have to decide whether they will believe Jesus' witness or the witness about him. It is noticeable that the deliberations provoked in the crowds by Jesus' mission revolve around the question of whether he is the true prophet, the Messiah, or whether he is a false prophet who deceives or leads the people astray (cf. 6:14; 7:12, 26, 27, 40–42). This takes up the issues and formulations of Deut 13:1–5 and 18:15–22, according to which a prophet who does signs and wonders but who leads the people astray is to be put to death. After the divisions within the crowd have been reported, the chief priests and the Pharisees

rebuke the temple police and Nicodemus and reinforce the point made by some of the crowd by attempting to use the law or Scripture to show that Jesus is a false prophet. "Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? . . . Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee" (7:47–52). "The Jews" have three other main charges against Jesus, arising from their understanding of the law. He is a violator of the Sabbath laws and therefore a sinner (cf. 5:16; 7:23; 9:16, 24). He is a blasphemer, attempting to make himself equal to God (cf. 5:17, 18; 10:30–39; cf. also 8:58, 59). And finally, he is an enemy of the Jewish nation. Belief in him will lead to the destruction of the nation by the Romans, and so, in accord with the law, the sinner or evildoer must be cut off, so that the nation as a whole will be saved (cf. 11:46–53).[13]

Because of his unique relationship to God, Jesus can function not only as the chief witness in the trial but also as judge. He can claim, "The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son. . . . I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (5:22, 30; cf. also 5:27–29; 9:39; 12:47, 48). Judgment has two aspects. Its positive aspect is the giving of life, while its negative connotation is condemnation. Receiving Jesus' witness is the equivalent of believing, and the result of both is eternal life. Not to receive his witness, that is, not to believe, is to pass judgment on oneself and to be condemned already.

> Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. (3:17–19; cf. also 3:33; 5:24)

So Jesus' mission inevitably involves judgment—both by people and on people. Those who see his signs and hear his words face a crisis (cf. κρίσις); they must decide who he is and whether to receive his witness. On this decision hangs life or death, although the narrative emphasizes that Jesus, in coming, is to bring the positive verdict of life (cf., e.g., 10:10). This present crisis, it is implied, is an anticipation of the final judgment (cf. 5:24–29) and its critical moment is when Jesus is lifted up from the earth (12:31, 32). In this light, it is not so much Jesus who is on trial as those to whom he has been sent, those who are acting as his judges. Since response to Jesus' witness entails making a judgment that

---

[13] For detailed discussion of these charges, see Pancaro, *The Law,* 9–125.

could be self-condemnation, it is incumbent on them to make the correct judgment, and so Jesus tells the crowd, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (7:24). Those who judge falsely by attempting to use the law and Moses against Jesus will discover that Moses will in fact function not as their advocate but as their accuser: "Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (5:45–46).

By the end of the public ministry, and independently of each other, the Sanhedrin has already reached its verdict about Jesus (11:47–53) and Jesus has already accepted this verdict of death (12:27–33). In terms of story time, the next significant episodes for our motif are the bringing together of prosecutors and witness in Jesus' interrogation and trial. In the interrogation before Annas, the issue of witness is again raised. In response to being struck on the face for his reply to the high priest, Jesus says, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong" (18:23). In effect, he calls for a fair and proper trial. But the episode concludes with no testimony being produced. The climax of the motif is reached, however, in the formal trial before Pilate and its judgment of crucifixion (18:28–19:42). Only one or two of the key features of this Roman trial can be highlighted here in anticipation of the more detailed treatment in the next chapter. The stage settings, which for most of the trial have Jesus inside the praetorium and "the Jews" outside and Pilate scuttling back and forth between the two, contribute to the portrayal of Jesus as the central figure. He is on trial as king of the Jews, a royal Messiah (cf. 18:33ff.), and Son of God (cf.19:7ff.). Significantly, these are the two aspects of his identity that feature in the Gospel's statement of purpose in 20:31: "These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, [and the sort of Messiah who is] the Son of God." It is in the course of this trial that Jesus sums up his whole mission in terms of witness and truth: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (18:37).

But the narrative is also interested in the would-be judges of Jesus—Pilate and "the Jews"—in order to show that they are the ones who turn out to be on trial. Pilate is portrayed initially as attempting to stay detached from this case and as using it to humiliate the Jewish leadership. In the end, despite his threefold avowal that he finds no case against Jesus (18:38; 19:4, 6), when faced with a choice between this alleged king of the Jews and the favor of Caesar, he decides against Jesus and proves himself culpable, even if this culpability is held not to be as great as that of the Jewish leaders, who have been clear from the start about

the judgment they desire (cf. 19:11). The narrative allows three possible ways of reading the depiction of the actual moment of Pilate's verdict. Having made his final plea to have Jesus released but to no avail, Pilate brings Jesus out and then either sits himself or seats Jesus on the seat of judgment (ἤγαγεν ἔξω τὸν Ἰησοῦν, καὶ ἐκάθισεν ἐπὶ βήματος—19:13). Is ἐκάθισεν, "he sat," to be taken as intransitive or transitive or as involving deliberate ambiguity? The next chapter will give reasons for opting for the transitive sense with its blatant irony. But even noting the issue underlines for readers the latent irony of the whole episode. The verdict is being pronounced on the one who is the real judge.

The trial exposes Pilate but also unmasks the Jewish leaders. Insisting on Jesus' death, they steadfastly resist Pilate's offer to have Jesus released, and in the process their comments become more and more revealing and incriminating. First, they choose Barabbas to be released instead of Jesus, and the narrator simply adds the comment "Now Barabbas was a bandit" (18:40). This comment recalls the narrative discourse both from the immediately preceding episode in the trial and from the public ministry. They choose a bandit rather than the good shepherd and thereby show that they do not belong to the flock that hears the shepherd's voice (cf. 18:37; 10:1–18). The last response of the Jewish leaders in 19:15 is particularly significant. "Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.'" At the time of Passover, when in particular the Jewish religious leaders would be expected to acknowledge their complete dependence on God and their hope for God's deliverance, they are portrayed as confessing their sole allegiance to Caesar. The full implications of the narrative's trial become apparent. In rejecting Jesus, the religious leaders reject their God. They, not Jesus, are the ones who are judged and condemned—and out of their own mouths.

It is only when the true witness and judge submits to the sentence of death that has been passed on him that he completes his task (cf. 19:30) and becomes the source of the positive verdict of life, as out of his pierced side come both blood and water (cf. 19:34). This picks up on the earlier water symbolism of the narrative's discourse, not least the scriptural citation in 7:38: "Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." The trial of Jesus has, after all, had a successful outcome. It is precisely at this point, however, that the narrator includes a reference to a witness to the outcome: "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth" (19:35). Why formulate the beloved disciple's confession in terms of witness when the trial of Jesus is over?

Readers know the answer to this question: there is another trial in progress that is in fact an extension of the same trial. And they know this because the announcement of the continuation of the trial into their own time has formed a significant part of the preparation Jesus has given his followers in John 13–17. Particularly in 15:18–16:15, Jesus tells the disciples that after he has returned to the Father, they will face the hatred of the world and expulsion from the synagogue but his cause must still be argued. This time there will be exactly the double witness required by the law to which Jesus referred in the public ministry (cf. 8:17). The disciples themselves are now to be witnesses: "You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning" (15:27). But they are not alone as they play their role in the lawsuit of history: "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf" (15:26). An advocate supports defendants at their trial. This Advocate will be with the disciples (14:16, 17). He will aid them in their witness to the truth because, as the Spirit of truth, he will guide them into all truth (16:13, 14; cf. also 14:26). But he will also have a prosecuting role, acting to convict the world that it has been wrong in its response to Jesus, wrong in its basic assumptions about sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:7–11). The role of the disciples and their relationship to the Spirit are underlined in the later commissioning of 20:21–22, which is to be read in the light of this earlier and fuller discussion: " 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' " Just as Jesus has been the Father's authorized agent as witness in the trial, so now the disciples are to be Jesus' authorized agents as they bear witness in the trial of truth that is still taking place: "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (17:18; cf. also 13:20). Dahl has summarized this stage of the lawsuit well:

> The high court has already spoken its verdict, but its decision has still to be applied to individual cases. Trials are still going on; those who do not fulfill the conditions for acquittal are already judged by the sentence passed. Before local courts, who do not recognize the supremacy of the high court, the case must still be pleaded, but the final outcome is only the consequence of the legal victory already won.[14]

---

[14] N. A. Dahl, "The Johannine Church and History," in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder; London: SCM, 1962), 140.

Although I have discussed the last two sections in their chronological sequence in the Gospel's story, in their narrative sequence they are in reverse order. The preparation of the disciples for witness comes before the Roman trial of Jesus. This narrative sequence has its own effects. One of these is to reinforce readers' privileged knowledge. Not only do they know through the prologue who Jesus is and where he has come from; now they are reminded of this, told where Jesus is going, and given his own perspective on his departure and its consequences. In this way the implied author ensures that the implied readers share his point of view on the remaining narrative action and appreciate in particular the significance and the ironies of the trial and crucifixion. What is of special importance is that this narrative sequence enables readers to see Jesus under interrogation and on trial as a paradigm for believers in similar situations. They are encouraged to link Jesus' role with their own by the fact that in his interrogation Jesus is questioned both about his disciples and about his teaching (18:19). Indeed, the juxtaposition of episodes, whereby Peter's failure under interrogation from a servant woman (18:15–18) is followed by Jesus' steadfastness under interrogation by the high priest (18:19–24), which in turn is followed by two further denials on the part of Peter (18:25–27) before Jesus' faithful witness in the trial before Pilate (18:28–19:16a) and in death (19:16b–30), poses starkly the issues of witnessing with its two contrasting role models.

The epilogue of John 21 elaborates on our motif in two ways. The beloved disciple is not only a model believer but, as we have seen, a special witness whose testimony in written form constitutes the narrative of the Gospel and a call to a continued right response to Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, and who provides the bridge between the time of Jesus and the time of the readers (21:24; cf. also 19:35; 20:31). Yet before the narrative concludes with its reference to this witness, who apparently dies a natural death (cf. 21:22, 23), it relates the rehabilitation of Peter with his threefold affirmation of love and consequent commissioning, corresponding to the earlier threefold denial. Earlier, too, Jesus had told Peter, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward" (13:36). That time has now arrived, for not only is Peter to feed Jesus' sheep; he is to follow him (21:19), to follow him all the way by being the sort of witness (μάρτυς) who glorifies God in a martyr's death (21:18, 19). What happened to the good shepherd in the laying down of his life will also happen to his undershepherd. Peter's earlier aspiration to martyrdom, for which he proved himself totally unready, can now be fulfilled (13:37, 38). For readers all too conscious of their own frailties and inadequacies as witnesses and perhaps inclined to

think the models of Jesus or the beloved disciple beyond them, there is also the case of Peter on which to ponder—the failed witness who nevertheless is enabled to become a true witness.

2. The Lawsuit, Plot, and Characterization

A return to the earlier discussion of the plot will now indicate how illuminating the motif of the lawsuit between God and the world proves to be. In terms of the commission, Jesus' task can be seen to be that of witness and judge in the lawsuit. As we have seen, this is expressed in its clearest and most striking form in Jesus' assertion in the trial before Pilate. There is a double underlining of this saying's mission significance with the twofold introduction: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (18:37). No other mission statement in the narrative receives this emphasis (cf., e.g., 6:38; 10:10; 12:46–47). This final mission statement comes in the context of the climax of the lawsuit motif, in the extended account of the trial before Pilate. It is not surprising, then, that this formulation is not simply one to set alongside the other depictions of Jesus' tasks, of making God known, displaying God's glory, being lifted up and thereby giving life, but can be seen as encompassing these other aspects. Witnessing to the truth about God entails making God known and manifesting God's glory. Witnessing faithfully to the end entails being lifted up so that the positive verdict of life becomes possible. Add to the description of Jesus' commission the element of judging, and the case becomes even more convincing. As we have observed, Jesus is to be the sort of witness who can also function as judge. Again there is a clear mission statement to this effect: "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" (9:39; cf. also 5:22, 27, 30). Jesus' task of judging has both positive and negative consequences. The two elements—witnessing and judging—are spoken of together in key contexts (cf. 5:20–39; 8:13–18), are clearly part of a commission from God, and are linked to Jesus' being God's agent in the lawsuit.[15] The one who is sent is the authorized representative of the one who sends (cf. also 5:23; 12:44–45; 13:20). In regard to witness, Jesus claims, "the very works I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father

---

[15] Cf. P. Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," in *Religions in Antiquity* (ed. J. Neusner; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 140–41, who states that the "Johannine idea of the mission of Christ as God's agent is seen within the context of a lawsuit."

has sent me" (5:36; cf. also 3:32–34; 8:18). In regard to judgment, his claim is, "As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (5:30; cf. also 8:16; 12:48–49).

If this is the commission, the complication can now be seen as follows. Jesus has come as the chief witness and judge in God's lawsuit with the world, but this results in conflict with the world, which will not receive his testimony. The opposition takes the form of countertrials, in which, both in the context of the Jewish trial of the public ministry and the Roman trial of the passion, accusations and charges are brought against Jesus and judgment is passed on him. The chief opponents, mentioned in the earlier discussion of plot, all function in the context of the countertrials. This is clear enough in the case of Pilate, of Judas, whose betrayal of Jesus leads to the interrogation before the high priest and the trial before Pilate, and of the chief priests and Pharisees and "the Jews," who have a role in both major trials. But it is worth pointing out that both the world and the devil, as opponents, are also explicitly linked to the judgment motif (12:31; 16:11).

Again the resolution is achieved by the counterplot being taken up into the main plot or, in terms of our motif, by the countertrials unwittingly achieving the purpose of the overall lawsuit. The world's verdict on Jesus is what enables him to complete his commission as witness and judge (19:30). For the implied author, witness to the truth about God and the world is most fully borne and finds its focus in the death of Jesus. His death is also the paradigm for faithful witness in the hostile world. At the same time, completion of Jesus' commission on the cross becomes the supreme moment of judgment (cf. the anticipatory "Now is the judgment of this world" in 12:31), the vehicle for the positive verdict of life for those who accept his testimony (symbolized in the water from his side) but also for the negative verdict of condemnation for those who do not.

The lawsuit motif plays its part in the characterization. To the prologue's portrayal of Jesus' identity are added these roles of witness and judge. In the role of witness, Jesus has a certainty about his origin and destiny that makes his testimony self-authenticating (8:14), and in his role as judge, he has a special authority (5:27). What is the relation between the two roles? Jesus appears as one among a number of witnesses in God's lawsuit, but he is the one whose witness is not only true but also self-authenticating, the one whose complete reliability as a witness and the solemnity of whose testimony are underlined by the double Amen formula ("Amen, amen" [NRSV "Very truly"]). This occurs

twenty-five times as an introduction to his words, serves as a swearing ritual in this juridical context, and is unique to this Gospel.[16] This one, who in his witness speaks the words of God (3:32–34), cannot simply remain one voice among others. The truth of *this* witness becomes the standard by which to judge. This witness to the truth about God, by the very nature of his witness, must also become the judge.

We have already said that Jesus' identity basically remains the same, in the narrative as a whole, as its portrayal in the prologue. The characterization of him as both witness and judge reinforces this observation. The issues it raises throw us back to the issues of identity already raised in the prologue. On the one hand, Jesus' role as witness appears to support the human side of his identity, as he takes his place among other witnesses in the unfolding of the lawsuit in history and becomes a paradigm for his followers in their role as witnesses. On the other hand, the uniqueness associated with his witness, because of his origin and destiny and because of its self-authenticating character, makes it an attribute of the "stranger from heaven"[17] and places it on the side of the divine. One would think that his role as judge puts the emphasis even more clearly on this side. But this is not quite as straightforward as one might have anticipated. It is true that ultimate judgment and the ability to enact the positive verdict in giving life are divine prerogatives that are assigned to Jesus. Yet, whatever one makes of the specific force of the notion of forgiving and retaining sins in 20:23, it is inescapable that there Jesus also assigns an element of judgment to the mission of his followers. Just as Jesus' mission constituted a realized judgment of either salvation or condemnation, so the disciples' mission entails a realized judgment of either the forgiveness or the retention of sins, and this reflects God's judgment.[18] The Spirit's work of convicting that is carried out through the witness of the disciples also contains an element of judging (cf. 16:8–11). So Jesus' role as judge is not unique. But there does remain a significant distinction between Jesus and his followers in this respect. His judging activity shares the same qualities as his self-authenticating witness and has been delegated by God to him because of who he is: "For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in

---

[16] Cf. Trites, *Concept of Witness,* 22, 89–90.

[17] Cf. M. de Jonge, *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977).

[18] The passive forms of the verbs ἀφέωνται ("they have been forgiven") and κεκράτηνται ("they have been retained") in the two main clauses of 20:23 are to be taken as divine passives (my translations).

himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man" (5:26–27; cf. also 5:22–23). His followers' activity of judging is the result of a further delegation from Jesus and involves the declaration of a judgment that in principle has already been carried out in Jesus' own mission.

We can see, then, that as Jesus' character as witness and judge is elaborated through his narrative roles, there is the same tension between the human and the divine, the flesh and the glory, as in 1:14; the implied author holds the two together (although stressing the latter). This provokes a further question, which leads readers back to the prologue: if this witness and judge, participating as a human in the lawsuit of history, is on the divine side, what is the nature of his relationship to the divine? There is a oneness with God in the self-authenticating quality of his witness to truth and in his exercise of the role of judge, yet he remains the divine agent, the Son who has been sent by the Father to bear witness, the Son of Man to whom authority to judge has been delegated. Again this reflects the paradox of the identity of the main character set out at the very start of the prologue—the Logos who is one with God yet distinct from God (1:1).

The lawsuit helps in the characterization of the other figures in the narrative, for it highlights their roles in interaction with the protagonist. In discussing the shape of the narrative, we have already noted the positive roles of those who are witnesses to Jesus—John the Baptist, the Samaritan woman, the disciples, Peter, and the beloved disciple. "The crowd" is frequently portrayed as divided (cf., e.g., 7:43), although at one point it can be characterized more positively as witnessing to Jesus' works (12:17) and at others appears to be aligned with the unbelieving opposition as those who are unwilling to receive Jesus' testimony (cf., e.g., 6:24, 41, 52). Our earlier discussion has brought out the characterization of the chief opponents through their roles in the lawsuit. There is, however, an added dimension to the lawsuit's function in characterization. Up until now our emphasis has been on characterization occurring principally through the roles in the narrative. But through the extended discourses/disputes and the dialogue of the Roman trial, the framework of the lawsuit also enables the characters to be presented in a little more depth and portrayed with some shades and variations. Jesus' identity is elaborated as his convictions and certainties about his role and about the outcome and consequences of the lawsuit are repeated like variations on a theme. As we have observed, the shift in the characterization of Pilate as he comes to his verdict is also effectively conveyed. In this way, although the discourses/disputes prolong the action, at the

same time they intensify the conflict by making the views of both sides clearer. The trial settings thereby become the vehicle for the exposure of the participants' motives and ultimate allegiances—those of Jesus and "the Jews" in both the public ministry and the Roman trial and those of Pilate in the latter. The encounter of other characters with Jesus, the witness and judge, is mutually revealing. This feature also reflects the cosmic dimension of the lawsuit motif as participating in the ongoing shining of the light into the darkness and in the light's exposure of those in darkness (cf. 3:20).

3. The Lawsuit, Irony, and a Two-Storey Story

Much of the narrative's irony is attached to the lawsuit motif, and one or two of the more prominent elements have already emerged, particularly in our discussion of the Roman trial with its dramatic ironies and the ironies on the lips of both Pilate and "the Jews." Again there is the overall irony of the plot resolution: the one who is on trial is at the same time the real judge, and the sentence of death passed on him is in fact both the moment the true verdict is pronounced and the vindication of his mission as witness. Inherent in this perspective is the further irony that the ruler of this world, who apparently pressed his case successfully against Jesus, has turned out not only to have lost this case but to have undergone judgment himself, forfeiting his hold over the world.

Our basic definition of the phenomenon of irony—as working with the contrast of appearance and reality—is itself reflected in the narrative discourse in terms of the lawsuit motif. "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (7:24). Sharing the implied author's privileged point of view, which can distinguish between appearance and reality, also entails sharing the evaluative point of view of the main character, who judges not by human but by divine standards (8:15, 16). To receive the testimony of the true witness, to acknowledge the verdict of the real judge, then, is also to comply with the implied author's norms and to share his evaluation of the verdicts of the various characters in the narrative.

The levels of appearance and reality, of human standards and divine standards, are the "above" and "below," the two storeys of the narrative. These are explicitly linked to the trial motif: "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony" (3:31–32; cf. also 8:14; 19:11). Knowing that Jesus is part of the lawsuit from above, God's lawsuit with the world, is what enables readers

to see the trials of Jesus before Israel and before Pilate in their true light and to appreciate their ironies. Knowing the procedures and decision of the high court puts those of lesser earthly courts in perspective.

The two-storey story is also one in which the trial of Jesus and the trials of his followers can both remain distinct and yet merge, and the juxtaposition of temporal perspectives adds to the appreciation of the ironies. The two trials are held apart in 15:26–16:4, where Jesus talks about the future time in which the witness of the Advocate and of the disciples will be necessary and will have as possible consequences expulsion from the synagogue and death. But there are also clear signs of the linking of the two trials. The Spirit is called another Advocate whose work has significant continuities with Jesus' own task, and as we have seen, the witness of the beloved disciple provides the bridge between the time of Jesus' trial and that of believers. The links, however, are so close that they also lead to a compression of the two trials. It is highly significant, for instance, that the very first depiction of Jesus as a witness in 3:11 has him speak in the first person plural: "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony." The narrator and the readers who share his point of view are thus in solidarity with Jesus the witness par excellence. It is in this context of John 3 that a well-known phenomenon of the Fourth Gospel is particularly prominent, namely, that it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish between what is the witness of Jesus himself and what is the witness of the narrator. This colors the reading of the trials that follow. The issues about Jesus' identity and its implications are formulated in the light of what his witnessing followers have had to face in their own trials, and as is widely recognized, the narrative of the interrogation of the blind man in John 9 resonates particularly effectively with the experience of many of the readers. The perspectives can merge because, for the implied author, both the trial of Jesus and that of his followers are part of the overall lawsuit of God with the world.

What begins to emerge from this reading of the two-storey narrative is that Jesus' followers have faced a situation in which the synagogue holds that Jesus' condemnation by the law as a false prophet and his ignominious death by crucifixion give the lie to any claims that he was Messiah, Son of God. The narrative strategy of the Fourth Gospel with its lawsuit motif is to reverse this perspective. It tells the story of Jesus in such a way that it is precisely in his death that Jesus' witness is vindicated, it is precisely in the apparent ignominy of his crucifixion that the supreme manifestation of the truth of his cause is to be seen. The Gospel's point of view is that the truth of God's cause appears in and

through what seems most ungodlike and that the crucified Jesus is in fact the embodiment of the truth about existence. And it tells this story in such a way that, by involving its implied readers in the narrative, it reinforces for them the right verdict they have made and, if they are experiencing the costs of such a verdict, gives them the resources of the perspective of the ongoing cosmic lawsuit so that they can continue their own witness.