

The Role of Misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel

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It has long been recognized that John uses a variety of literary devices in the Fourth Gospel to communicate his theology of Jesus to his readers. Some of these devices are more widely recognized than others. John's ethical dualism, for example, has been a frequent topic of scholarly discussion. His extensive use of irony is another commonly regarded feature.

One literary device which has not been as broadly noted is John's use of a technique in which Jesus is misunderstood by His hearers, frequently through the use of words or phrases which can be understood in more than one way, or on more than one level.¹ Jesus speaks at a spiritual level, while His hearers hear Him on a literal or natural level, resulting in misunderstanding. What is the exact role or function of this literary device in the Fourth Gospel? A variety of solutions have been proposed. This paper will re-examine the evidence and attempt to discover how these misunderstandings function in John's Gospel.

Before considering the role of this literary device, we should consider a number of concrete examples from the text. The total number of examples is debated, depending on the criteria used for determining them. Peter Ellis cites seventeen examples.² R. Alan Culpepper lists eighteen examples in which a clear misunderstanding is based on words or phrases with a dual meaning, and three more examples in which there is an apparent misunderstanding based on

¹ E. Richard, "Expressions of Double Meaning and Their Function in the Gospel of John," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 96: "This topic has attracted surprisingly little attention, while the function these expressions serve within the Gospel has gone virtually unexplored." He notes seven such studies (*ibid.*, 96-97), and several others have been done since that time, not all of which were available to consult for this study.

² Peter F. Ellis, *The Genius of John: A Composition-Critical Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1984), 7-8.

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other factors, plus a few other debatable examples that may not really qualify.³ D. A. Carson refers to a "group of about thirty misunderstandings," though he does not list them in his commentary.⁴ I have identified twenty-five clear cases of misunderstandings, plus at least three others that may also qualify, depending on what constitutes a misunderstanding.⁵ At any rate, there are too many to deal with in detail in this paper, so I have selected a number of representative examples.

The first clear case of misunderstanding is found in John 2:19-22. There Jesus is misunderstood when He refers to His body as "this temple" and speaks of raising it in three days after the Jews have destroyed it. While He is speaking of spiritual realities, apparently understanding His physical body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:19-20), His hearers think He is speaking of Herod's temple, which at that time had already been forty-six years in the process of reconstruction. They cannot imagine how He can claim to raise it up from destruction in only three days. In this case, unlike the majority of such cases, it is the narrator rather than Jesus who explains the misunderstanding for the benefit of the reader. The narrator also gives a clue to the function of the misunderstanding when he declares in v. 22 that it was only after the resurrection that the disciples recalled this saying and "believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken." This subtly tells the reader that the Scripture had foretold these things, and they should have been recognized and believed, especially when Jesus corroborated the Scripture by His words. Even the disciples did not believe until after the Resurrection, but all should have, for the Scripture had revealed it.⁶

The second misunderstanding is well known, but very important. This time Jesus was not talking to His adversaries, "the Jews," but to Nicodemus, a Pharisee and Jewish ruler who was curious about Jesus but not yet a believer.

³ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, Foundations and Facets: New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 160-62. Culpepper also cites a study by Herbert Leroy (*Rätsel und Missverständnis: Ein Beitrag zur Formgeschichte des Johannesevangeliums*, Bonner biblische Beiträge, no. 30 [Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1968], 1-6), who uses form-critical analysis to find eleven examples which qualify as concealed riddles, but fails to deal with other examples that do not fit his pattern. Culpepper further cites another study by François Vouga (*Le cadre historique et l'intention théologique de Jean* [Paris: Beauchesne, 1977], 154), who criticizes Leroy for his narrow definition and resulting limitation of examples, but still lists only fifteen examples of misunderstanding in the Gospel.

⁴ D[onald] A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1991; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 183. Carson had previously published an article on the topic, which I was unfortunately unable to obtain for this study: idem, "Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel," *Tyndale Bulletin* 33 (1982): 59-91.

⁵ The twenty-five I would identify as follows: 2:19-22; 3:3-7; 4:10-15; 4:32-34; 6:32-36; 6:41-51; 6:51-58; 7:33-36; 8:16-19; 8:21-24; 8:24-25; 8:26-29; 8:31-36; 8:37-44; 8:51-55; 8:56-58; 11:11-15; 11:23-27; 12:32-36; 13:33-14:3; 14:4-6; 14:7-12; 14:21-23; 16:16-22; 21:22-23.

⁶ The question Jesus was answering was, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" His sign was the sign of Jonah (cf. Matt 12:39-40).

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When Jesus told him he needed to be conceived *anōthen* (from above, or again), he either understood or pretended to understand Jesus on the literal-natural level as saying that he needed to be conceived again in his mother's womb. Either this did not make sense to him, or he chose to act as if it didn't, so he asked for clarification, which Jesus was always willing to give to any who asked. Jesus explained that the conception Nicodemus needed was of water and of the Spirit, signifying that Jesus was not speaking on a natural level but on a spiritual level (cf. 1:13,30). Again Nicodemus took the stance of misunderstanding, asking, "How can this be?" To this Jesus expressed surprise. Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel; how could he fail to understand these things? They were in the Scriptures!

The key to the function of this interchange is Jesus' question in 3:12: "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" The purpose of Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus was to lead him to believe. If speaking of spiritual things in terms of earthly analogies proved unable to lead him to belief, how could Jesus ever communicate with him in terms of heavenly analogies and expect him to believe? To believe in what? Jesus makes this clear in vs. 15-16. The hearer of Jesus' words is to believe in Him, resulting in life eternal. This is, in fact, the explicit purpose of John's Gospel, found in 20:31: "But these [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name." John never loses sight of this purpose in his selection and wording of events in his Gospel, and neither should the reader. This is a safe guide in determining general function, though the local context is always the final determining factor. Normally the context will yield explicit or implicit clues to the local function of the misunderstanding.

A misunderstanding may be seen from two perspectives: from that of the original participants in the dialogue, and from that of John's readers. The first perspective seems to function similarly to the use of parables by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, to discriminate between those who are willing to learn from Jesus and those who are not (cf. Matt 13:10-16). The second is bound up with John's purpose. In trying to bring the reader to belief or to confirm the reader's belief, John leads the reader to see what the original participants did not see, and thus to reject their lack of insight, to understand what they did not understand, and to believe what they did not believe.

The third misunderstanding takes place with a woman in Samaria in 4:10-15. Jesus offers to give this woman "living water." Because of the common use of this expression to signify running or flowing water, fresh spring water, or water from a well that bubbled up, indicating its source from an underground river or spring, thus its vital freshness, the woman was able to misunderstand Jesus on a literal-temporal level, though she was puzzled by His lack of resources for obtaining such water. Jesus explained that the water from Jacob's well could not provide a permanent satisfaction of (spiritual) thirst, but the water

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He was offering would become in the recipient "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (v. 14). The woman, still understanding Jesus on a literal-temporal level, replied, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and keep coming here to draw water" (v. 15). Jesus would later explain this truth more fully (6:35; 7:38), but for now He would turn the conversation to other things she could understand. Her continued interest and questions kept Jesus persistent in His efforts to bring her to belief. When, in response to her declaration that she knew Messiah was coming, He finally announced, "I who speak to you am he," she left her water jar and ran back to the town, declaring, "Come see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"

The function of this interchange was to gently break down the woman's prejudices in order to lead her and her fellow townspeople to belief. This is strongly suggested by vs. 39-42. At first many believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony, but after, at their urging, He had stayed with them for two days, many more became believers because of his own words, observing, "Now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world."

Nested inside this story of Jesus and the Samaritans is another misunderstanding. When Jesus' disciples return from the town with food, they urge Him to eat something, but He replies, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about" (v. 32). The disciples, not realizing that His mind is on spiritual realities, wonder if someone has brought Him something to eat while they were away. But Jesus readily explains, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (v. 34; cf. 6:38-40). Then He goes on to put this in the context of the immediate situation with a metaphor about the harvest, which is promptly shown to be spiritual in its analogy, for He points to the people flocking to Him from town and says, "I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (v. 35). Jesus' work was to plant the seed in order to provide a harvest of believers, and He was calling His disciples to assist Him in reaping that harvest.

The function of this little misunderstanding in its original setting seems to have been to direct the disciples' minds away from the temporal to the spiritual and eternal priorities on which Jesus kept focused. His priorities were to become their own. They needed to learn to do the will and work of God as He did. John appears to use it to let the reader know that even Jesus' disciples were not attuned to the spiritual nature of Jesus' mission at this point in their experience. It was only later, after the Resurrection, that they began to understand the true nature of His mission and to grasp the important spiritual truths He had been attempting to communicate. The reader is thus led to identify at a very early stage with the truths which even the first disciples missed.

There are several misunderstandings in John 6, putting a new and different spin on the concept of eating food. After teaching the multitudes by a sign that He was capable of feeding all and still having plenty to spare, He taught the

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theological truth that He is the true bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (6:32-33). Again, the multitude miss the spiritual truth He offers and understand Him in terms of the temporal bread they have recently eaten. If this is superior bread, they want it henceforth (v. 34). Jesus then explains what He is talking about: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (v. 35).

Jesus' purpose is to invite and encourage people to come to Him and to believe so that they can find spiritual nourishment, resulting in spiritual (eternal) life. He explains, "For my Father's will is that every one who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (v. 40).

This is followed by continued misunderstandings. First, Jesus claims to have come down from heaven, whereas they believe that they know His origin, including His father Joseph and His mother (vs. 41-42). Then, when He tells them that the bread that they are to eat is His flesh, which He will give for the life of the world, they begin to debate about how He can give them His flesh to eat (vs. 51-52). Finally, when He attempts to explain further to them the spiritual implications of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, they become offended and refuse to follow Him any longer (vs. 60, 66), even though Jesus tries to make clear that He has been speaking spiritually: "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (v. 63).

These misunderstandings in the original setting seem to have functioned to separate those disciples who were genuine from those who were false (vs. 67-69), though John points out that Jesus knew that the separation was not yet complete at that point, because Judas still remained with the loyal disciples, as Jesus' words made clear (vs. 70-71). John records these major misunderstandings to reveal to his readers the shallowness of the understanding of even those who claimed to be Jesus' disciples. Many, perhaps, among John's readers might have been in the same camp, ready to give up following Jesus if something should offend them. John tries to show the foolhardiness of such a shallow approach to Jesus and the truths He taught. His readers should reject being similarly offended.

There are many more misunderstandings in the Gospel of John. Chapter 8, aside from the *Pericope Adulterae* in vs. 1-11, is one long, unbroken series of misunderstandings. Due to the constraints of this paper, however, it is not possible to review them all. The above examples will have to suffice as a sampling of John's use of this literary device, though not fully representative of all the variety that appears in the Gospel.

We need to consider now the question of the role of these misunderstandings as a deliberate literary device used by John. Is there a single function that this device fulfills in the Gospel? A number of scholars have offered various

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suggestions as to the function of the misunderstandings in John. We shall consider some of these in light of the evidence before arriving at a conclusion.

C. H. Dodd holds that the misunderstandings are merely a device, following the style of the Hermetic dialogues, to provide opportunity to explain the thought or develop the theme further.⁷ As for following the style of the Hermetic dialogues, Culpepper responds that John has integrated the device into his Gospel "more artistically than in any comparable revelatory discourses" and that "the parallels adduced are not really of comparable quality."⁸ As for providing opportunity to explain the thought or develop the theme further, one cannot argue that this is not done; however, it is not *always* done, at least not immediately. In 4:10-15, for example, Jesus does not explain to the Samaritan woman in full what He means by "living water," though He does tell her that it will become "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (v. 14). When she continues to misunderstand, however, Jesus changes the subject rather than giving a further explanation (vs. 15-16). John does, nevertheless, provide the reader with an explanation when the topic comes up again later (7:38-39). Likewise, in 8:51-55 there is no explanation given for Jesus' statement that if anyone will keep His word he or she will never see death, perhaps since He has already explained this in chap. 6. Yet it comes up again in chap. 11, where it receives further elaboration.

Herbert Leroy uses form-critical analysis to define the misunderstandings as concealed riddles, all of which were developed from concepts with twofold meanings that belonged to the peculiar vocabulary of the Johannine community. Only those within the community could understand them; their special meaning was impenetrable to outsiders. Thus they functioned to demonstrate that the Jews did not and could not understand Jesus or receive His revelation.⁹ Leroy's definition is too narrow, excluding many of the misunderstandings in the Gospel from consideration because they do not derive from a concept with a twofold meaning; therefore, his conclusion is skewed by his presuppositions and cannot be valid for all misunderstandings. Further, his assumptions about a Johannine community and its special vocabulary are too speculative to be taken seriously.

François Vouga argues, against Leroy, that John does not use misunderstanding as a "technique" which is applied in the same manner in every instance. John's method is supple and variable. The misunderstandings arise from his

⁷ C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963; paper, 1976), 318. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, ed. R. W. N. Hoare and J. K. Riches (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 127, n. 1.

⁸ Culpepper, 152.

⁹ Herbert Leroy, *Rätsel und Missverständnis: Ein Beitrag zur Formgeschichte des Johannesevangeliums*, Bonner biblische Beiträge, no. 30 (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1968), 146,157-60, 167, 183-93, cited in Culpepper, 153-54.

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concept of revelation: inevitably those who did not accept Jesus misunderstood Him.¹⁰

It is true that John's method is supple and variable. It is also true that those who did not accept Jesus inevitably misunderstood Him. But the former should provide a constraint on the latter. There are a variety of situations in which the misunderstandings appear, and not all of them pertain to those who did not accept Jesus, rendering Vouga's judgment invalid as a general statement of the function of the device.

C. K. Barrett states that the misunderstandings "represent in miniature the total reaction of Judaism to Christ; the Jews perceived only what was superficially visible in Jesus and naturally rejected the absurd suggestion that he should be the Son of God."¹¹ This is no doubt true as it pertains to those misunderstandings, as in chaps. 5 and 8, that represent the reaction of "the Jews" to the claims of Jesus, but this can hardly explain all of the misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel. A number of them do not represent a reaction by Judaism to the claims of Jesus Christ—those in chap. 4, for example.

Culpepper has a variety of explanations for the function of the misunderstandings recorded by John. He states first in general that various textual features, including the misunderstandings, "constantly lead the reader to view the story from a higher vantage point and share the judgments which the 'whispering wizard' conveys by means of various nods, winks, and gestures."¹² Later he gets more specific:

Their most obvious function is to enforce a marked distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders," between those who understand Jesus and those who do not. Explanations of the misunderstandings draw the reader farther into the circle of "insiders." . . . The misunderstandings, therefore, lead readers to feel a judgmental distance between themselves as "insiders" who understand the elusive implication of Jesus' revelatory discourses and those who have rejected Jesus. The "outsiders," one is led to believe, must be exceedingly dense or willfully and perversely blind to the truth to have missed it. The distance between the believers and the world, exemplified by the Jews in the Gospel, is therefore maintained and even exaggerated.¹³

¹⁰ François Vouga, *Le cadre historique et l'intention théologique de Jean* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977), 32-33, cited in Culpepper, 154.

¹¹ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978; London: SPCK, 1978), 200.

¹² Culpepper, 151. Cf. Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 17-18.

¹³ Culpepper, 164. Cf. D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 113-14.

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Beyond this most obvious function he adds two more. First, he mentions that the misunderstandings serve "to remove any doubt or misperception about key points in John's theology."¹⁴

The most significant function of the misunderstandings, however, is to teach readers how to read the Gospel. The misunderstandings call attention to the Gospel's metaphors, double-entendres, and plurisignations. They also guide the reader by interpreting some of these and ruling out the literal, material, worldly, or general meanings of such references. Readers are therefore oriented to the level on which the Gospel's language is to be understood and warned that failure to understand identifies them with the characterization of the Jews and the others who cannot interpret the Gospel's language correctly.¹⁵

Culpepper is very perceptive in this assessment of the function of the misunderstandings in John's Gospel. He recognizes that there is not a simple answer or a single function that accounts for all of the evidence, and he recognizes the practical nature of the literary device in assisting the reader in making judgments about Jesus Christ and His mission and message. Still, he focuses too exclusively on the interaction between John and the reader and not enough on the interaction between Jesus and His original hearers. His attention to the literary aspects of the narratives causes him to tend to overlook the theological thrust of the original historical setting. He attributes all of the eighteen instances of misunderstanding which he treats in his section on the topic to "an ambiguous statement, metaphor, or double-entendre in Jesus' conversations," though admitting that "several other passages involve misunderstandings in one way or another but depart from this pattern sufficiently to be treated as variations of it."¹⁶ This seems from a careful analysis of the passages to be an oversimplification, though generally true for the eighteen passages he has selected. His selection is too limited, however, for there are at least twenty-five clear examples of misunderstanding in the Gospel.

Because Culpepper has focused so strongly on the literary aspects, he barely notes the major feature of most of the passages in which misunderstanding takes place, namely, the key role of belief in Jesus' person and mission.

John Painter has also given close attention to John's use of misunderstanding as a literary device. He takes a redaction-critical approach to the issue, arguing that the misunderstanding motif has its roots in history, that the situation that called forth the Gospel and determined its pattern was the division that existed between Judaism and the "Sect of the Way" after the "Test [Eighteenth] Benediction" was published about A.D. 85 to exclude heretics from the synagogue. The Evangelist—not John, but a later disciple of the beloved witness—wrote the Fourth Gospel to promote a reinterpretation of Messiah and the

¹⁴ Culpepper, 164.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

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Son of God, since even those who believed Jesus understood Him in terms of expectations within Judaism. The misunderstandings provided the Evangelist with the opportunity to clarify the person and mission of Jesus in new terms.¹⁷ He holds that authentic understanding was not possible in the days before Jesus' glorification, but that in the days when the Evangelist wrote, it had become possible, so it was necessary that these misunderstandings should be cleared up.

This reconstruction based on redaction-critical principles is not only rather speculative but is at odds with the facts of the Gospel itself, which reveals that there were in fact some who were willing and able to understand Jesus' claims and did believe in Him, though their early understanding was not necessarily complete (e.g., 1:48-50; 4:39-42,48-50; 6:67-69; 7:31; 8:28-30; 9:35-38; 10:41-42; 11:23-27; 17:6-8).¹⁸ To argue that authentic understanding was not possible before Jesus' death and resurrection seems to assume more than is warranted by the text.

What, then, is the function or role of misunderstanding in John's Gospel that takes account of all of the evidence? In order to answer this, we need to consider the evidence of the variety of John's use of this literary device. "The Jews" and unbelievers are not the only ones who misunderstand Jesus. He is also misunderstood by His disciples (repeatedly), by Martha (11:23-27), and by the early believers (21:22-23). Not all misunderstandings are based on words or phrases with double meanings. Not all are explained within the context. Not all have to do with believing the claims of Jesus. Not all are prior to the Resurrection. It would seem, therefore, that it is not possible to lump all of the misunderstandings into one classification and offer a general statement that will apply to all of them. There is simply too much diversity.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of the misunderstandings—twenty out of twenty-five—do fall into one category, and that is Jesus' claims about Himself which call for a response of belief. These seem to be the most important of the misunderstandings in the Gospel. The others may simply be, in some cases at least, like 21:22-23, for example, a reflection of the historical reality that misunderstandings frequently take place in any communication, or they may be an outgrowth of John's fondness for picking up on such devices and working them into his story to enhance the contrasts which his ethical dualism highlights or to clarify a historical or theological point, as in 3:3-7 and 11:11-15.

The misunderstandings seem to function to highlight the two levels of understanding that take place in the Gospel. On the one hand is the spiritual or heavenly level that Jesus came bringing, to teach the true way to eternal life. On the other hand is the temporal or earthly level that most people operate at, including most of Christ's professed disciples, which leads to darkness and loss

¹⁷ John Painter, *John: Witness and Theologian*, 3d ed. (Victoria, Australia: Beacon Hill, 1986), 12-13.

¹⁸ The misunderstanding in 21:22-23 is a prime example of a post-Resurrection incident which does not fit Painter's theory.

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of eternal life. John wants to show that one must cross over from the earthly to the heavenly, from darkness into light, from death into life. By his careful construction of the narratives, John leads his readers to see and understand what the original participants could or did not, and thus to believe the claims of Jesus and avoid the ignorance displayed by the original characters in the drama.

John includes selected passages in his Gospel which explain the relationship between willingness to believe and understanding (e.g., 3:18-21; 5:44-47; 7:16-17; 10:24-28; 12:35-40,44-46). John's readers need to be willing to believe. Then they will be able to walk in the light of spiritual truth taught by Jesus, rather than continuing to walk in the darkness of unbelief as so many others before them.