

**ZETEO –  
AS AN OVERARCHING THEME  
IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL**

**Martin MICALLEF**

*Faculty of Theology – University of Malta  
martin.f.micallef@um.edu.mt*

**Abstract:** Mark W.G. Stibbe defines ‘themes’ as “the basic ideas of narratives, and their function is to give internal shape and completeness to a sequence of episodes. In other words, themes are organizing narrative concepts”<sup>1</sup>. Zeteo – ‘seeking’ seems to be one of these Johannine themes that deserve to be studied on separately as it seems to be particularly connected with the theology of the Fourth Gospel. The aim of this article is to establish the importance of zeteo in the Fourth Gospel. In return, this task will hopefully provide a home and a platform for further examination of the Fourth Gospel’s theology. We will place the present investigation under a rigid set of aspects, such as frequency of occurrence and statistical checks between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics. We will raise the problem of the unity of the Fourth Gospel’s narrative by examining how the repetition of zeteo serves to bind this gospel to a central plot. The question of what is a plot will be discussed in terms of ancient literary genres.

**Keywords:** *zeteo, the fourth Gospel, biblical tradition, synoptics.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark W.G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller, Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel*, Society of the New Testament Studies Monography, Series 73 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 27.

### **The Frequency of Occurrence Principle**

One of the most striking features of the Fourth Gospel's vocabulary is its apparent simplicity which is exceptionally limited to 1,011 different words with only 112 of these words occurring once in the New Testament<sup>2</sup>. The choice of these words is undoubtedly distinctive to this gospel, and even though it is very limited, "the reader never receives the impression of an ill-equipped writer at a loss for the right word". The impression is rather "that of a teacher who is confident that his message can be summed up in a few fundamental prepositions which he has learnt to express with studied economy of diction"<sup>3</sup>. Since our immediate task is to establish that *zeteo* is a key theme in the Fourth Gospel's mindset and not just an incidental thought, the problem immediately arises as to which themes are truly pertinent to the theology of the Fourth Gospel and in what manner one should detect them objectively.

In order to answer this question, it is appropriate to start from one of the most sustained treatments of Johannine vocabulary written by Edwin A. Abbott in 1905<sup>4</sup> to be followed by his second volume published in the following year<sup>5</sup>. Abbott carefully maintains that there is a problem in the Fourth Gospel's vocabulary, namely the "obscurity of

---

<sup>2</sup> James H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek, IV/Style* by Nigel Turner (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 76.

<sup>3</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1978), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Vocabulary. A Comparison of the Words of the Fourth Gospel with those of the Three* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1905).

<sup>5</sup> Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1906).

style in an inflected language”<sup>6</sup>. The outcome of Abbott’s works is extremely important as it brings together the seminal thought of a leading pioneer in the field of Johannine vocabulary. Yet, a certain caution needs to be exercised especially concerning the way Abbott deals with what he calls Johannine ‘key-terms’. Surprisingly, Abbott reduces these ‘key-words’ only to two: *believing* and *authority*, accompanying them with a list of synonyms found in the Fourth Gospel. He justifies his choice of these Johannine ‘key-words’ by the principle of the frequency of usage.

If this is the case, then Abbot neglects a number of other ‘key-words’ that also predominate in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel. *Zeteo*, for example, is used thirty four times, that is, 3.37 percent of the 1,1011 different words of the Fourth Gospel, and thus it may be considered as a theme of great importance for the Fourth Evangelist.

In his Appendix I: ‘Johannine Vocabulary’, accompanying his much quoted commentary on the Fourth Gospel, Raymond E. Brown provides another scholarly attempt at analysing Johannine vocabulary<sup>7</sup>. Brown acknowledges that his discussion on the subject does not “cover all the words important for Johannine thought”<sup>8</sup>. Using Abbott’s frequency of occurrence principle, Brown rigorously selects eleven terms “whose peculiar Johannine import must be understood if one is to understand John”<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> Abbott deals with this problem caused “by ambiguity (1) in words, (2) in inflections of words, (3) in combination of words”.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 497-518.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, *The Gospel...*, 497.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, *The Gospel...*, 497.

*Zeteo*, however, is excluded from Brown's provocative selection of the most crucial words in the Fourth Gospel.

Another masterly presentation of this issue comes from an acknowledged expert on the Fourth Gospel. In the general introduction to his commentary on this gospel, C.K. Barrett includes a list of twenty different words that he regards to be the most important for the Fourth Gospel's thought<sup>10</sup>. He claims that these words occur quite often in the Fourth Gospel but comparatively rarely in the Synoptic Gospels<sup>11</sup>. Barrett clarifies his result by conversely listing sixteen other common Synoptic terms which are rarely used in the Fourth Gospel, or absent altogether<sup>12</sup>. In a footnote, Barrett reveals that these two lists, based on those of Maurice Goguel<sup>13</sup>, are only a selection of the most significant words used in the Fourth Gospel. Yet, again, *zeteo* does not feature in both lists.

### Statistical Checks

These three scholarly attempts may be regarded as representatives of a larger number of leading Johannine scholars who have published extensively in this particular area. They provide initial access to the peculiar nature of the Fourth Gospel's theology. The frequency of the occurrence principle employed in these works has proved provoking as it identifies what perceives as the most challenging approach to this question. Statistical statements about word-occurrences, however, may often be misleading guidelines.

---

<sup>10</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel...*, 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel...*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel...*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Goguel, *Le Quatrième Évangile. Introduction au Nouveau Testament*, II (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1924).

The Christological title “the Son of God”, for example, is used only nine times in this gospel<sup>14</sup>, but its restricted use does not mean that it is unimportant for the theology of the gospel<sup>15</sup>.

A proper examination of the Fourth Gospel’s vocabulary, therefore, may lead us to quite a different conclusion. Although the approach based on statistical checks is helpful, it seems to lack both completeness and soundness. Any conclusion regarding the importance of certain Johannine key-words should not be drawn only on the basis of the principle of frequency of occurrence.

Another way of emphasising the linguistic peculiarity of *zeteo* in the Fourth Gospel is to compare its use with that of the Synoptic Gospels. A glance at a good Concordance reveals that when compared to the Synoptic Gospels, *zeteo* is much more frequent in the Fourth Gospel. *Zeteo* occurs thirty four times in the Fourth Gospel, fourteen times in Matthew, ten times in Mark, and twenty five times in Luke<sup>16</sup>. This statistical survey, therefore, seems to enhance the value and force of this term in the Fourth Gospel.

George Mlakuzhyil, however, voices his objection to the statistical approach that pretends to establish thematic

---

<sup>14</sup> George Mlakuzhyil, “The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel”, *Analecta Biblica* 117 (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1987), 256.

<sup>15</sup> Many Johannine scholars assert and have shown the central importance of this Christological title to the theology of the Fourth Gospel. See, for example, Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels. A Biblical Christology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 247-269.

<sup>16</sup> John R. Kohlenberger III, Edward W. Goodrick, James A. Swanson, *The Exhaustive Concordance to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 395-396.

trends through the use of vocabulary statistics<sup>17</sup>. He enlightens his argument remarking that “such reasoning is based on the presupposition that the Johannine and Synoptic authors could not have stressed some common themes”<sup>18</sup>. As a result, one cannot deny the importance of this very peculiar aspect through its comparative frequency in the Fourth Gospel, compared with that of the Synoptic Gospels. The importance of any term or theme in the Fourth Gospel may be properly assessed if one pays close attention to the narrative form of this gospel.

### **The Unity of the Fourth Gospel’s Narrative**

Any investigation of the narrative or the literary form of the Fourth Gospel must be preceded by an investigation of its literary unity which has gained increased momentum in the final decades of the twentieth century. Stibbe’s *John as Storyteller* provides a clear guide to this question as he outlines sixteen literary strategies employed by the Fourth Evangelist to claim narrative and stylistic unity of his gospel<sup>19</sup>. He concludes that this literary evidence is more compelling than the one against adduced by those scholars

---

<sup>17</sup> “The relatively high frequency of a term is not always a sure criterion to decide whether it is Johannine or not”, Mlakuzhyil, *The Christocentric...*, 244.

<sup>18</sup> Mlakuzhyil, *The Christocentric...*, 244.

<sup>19</sup> In this list, Stibbe includes: Christology, number patterns, narrative and dialogue, themes, narrative progression, irony and dualism, double entendre, symbolism, the trial motif, ring composition (inclusion), chiasmus (inverted parallelism), narrator’s asides, narrator’s point of view, suggestion, negative response and positive action, the elusive Christ and style. Stibbe, *John...*, 16-22.

who bow to various theories of earlier sources that are presumed to lie behind the present text of this gospel<sup>20</sup>.

An earlier sustained and insightful critique of the internal coherence of the Fourth Gospel's narrative comes from Alan Culpepper who reconstructs the arguments deployed by those scholars who deny the unity of the Fourth Gospel's narrative. He engages with a wide range of new literary approaches to demonstrate how the unity of the Fourth Gospel's narrative can be recognized in the way the Fourth Evangelist "selected, shaped, and arranged material so that its sequence established a certain progression and causality"<sup>21</sup>. Culpepper's insights organise new perspectives on how some of the Johannine themes recur, expand in meaning so that their allusion becomes more clearly defined. Among these themes, we shall include that of *zeteo* whose significance within this gospel stands out when one studies how its repetitive use in the plot of the gospel, serves to highlight the basic structural framework of this narrative. This involves listening to the whole gospel from its parts, and to the parts of this gospel from the whole, which has to do with a strategy of sequence<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>20</sup> See also Hans Windish, "John's Narrative Style", *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives*, ed. Mark W.G. Stibbe (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 26, who defends the plausibility of the Fourth Gospel as an organic whole. He posits the idea that although the narrative of this gospel "does not completely resemble the seamless garment of his Christ, in comparison to the Synoptics it presents a much more unified composition".

<sup>21</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 85.

<sup>22</sup> On this point, see J.A. Du Rand, "Plot and Point of View in the Gospel of John", *A South African Perspective on the New Testament. Essays by South*

### **The Fourth Gospel's Structure and Genre**

No general consensus emerges concerning the details of the Fourth Gospel's narrative structure which is closely related to the question of the gospel plot<sup>23</sup>. What seems rather certain is the Johannine literary integrity which lies in the unfolding of the plot according to the ideological or theological point of view<sup>24</sup>. Narration, themes, characterizations, ironies, and symbolism are developed with a great deal of internal consistency manifesting an authorial plot. It is important here to delineate the difference between 'structure' and 'plot'. While structure accentuates 'blocks' and divisions within the narrative, plots are concerned with events that occur in sequence that eventually constitute a unity of action.

Stibbe focuses his attention on this subject by addressing the question of genre criticism in the Fourth Gospel's narrative which might seem superfluous since we have been referring to this work as a 'gospel'. In early Christianity, the term 'gospel' carried a twofold function.

---

*African New Testament Scholars Presented to Bruce Manning Metzger during his Visit to South Africa in 1985*, eds. J.H. Petzer and P.J. Hartin (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 152; J.A. Du Rand, "A Story and a Community: Reading the First Farewell Discourse (John 13:31-14:31) from Narratological and Sociological Perspectives", *Neotestamentica* 26 (1992), 38.

<sup>23</sup> In pursuit of this question, Mlakuzhyil, *The Christocentric Literary*, 17-83, embarks on a critical comprehensive survey, evaluating about two dozen kinds of presumed literary structures of the Fourth Gospel's narrative.

<sup>24</sup> On this point, see J.A. Du Rand, *Johannine Perspectives*, Part I: *Introduction to the Johannine Writings* (Midrand: Orion, 1991), 16.



First, it was used in reference to certain salvific actions achieved by Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Rom 1, 16-17; Gal 1, 6-7; Ephes. 1, 13; 2 Tim 2, 8-9). Secondly, at the very beginning of Mark's Gospel, the term 'gospel' is used to denote the entire written story about Jesus Christ: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mk 1, 1).

John Ashton defines a gospel as "a narrative of the public career of Jesus, his passion and death, told in order to affirm or confirm the faith of Christian believers in the Risen Lord"<sup>25</sup>. Notwithstanding the historical information about Jesus within the narrative, most Johannine scholars conclude that the Fourth Gospel is not primarily concerned with passing on information about Jesus for its own sake. This gospel is much more concerned in announcing the significance of Jesus and to evoke belief in him (Jn 20, 30-31). For such reasons, a number of scholars have argued that the gospels are a kind of their own<sup>26</sup>.

The understanding that the gospels are *sui generis*, conforming to no established genre has pointed to evidence that the gospels fit within the general category of ancient biography, *Bioi (Vitae* in Latin)<sup>27</sup>, defined by Bruce Malina as

---

<sup>25</sup> John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 409.

<sup>26</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "The Gospels (Form)", *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making* 1 (London: Collins, 1969), 86-92.

<sup>27</sup> Clyde W. Votaw, "The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies", *American Journal of Theology* 19 (1915), 45-73 and 217-249; reprinted as *The Gospel and Contemporary Biographies in the Graeco-Roman World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); Philip L. Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels: The Biographical Character of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); David E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 46-76.

“a description of a prominent or deviant status, with no particular attention paid to psychological developmental stages apart from raw psychological growth periods”<sup>28</sup>.

By the late first century, this genre which may be considered quite complex, was well-established<sup>29</sup>, and it often focused on the life or around the particular virtues of important political, military, or philosophical persons<sup>30</sup>. In his meticulous work, Burrige discusses ten ancient biographies<sup>31</sup> and identifies major characteristics of ancient *Bioi*<sup>32</sup>. He argues in favour of a relationship between the

---

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Malina, “Dealing with Biblical (Mediterranean) Characters: A Guide for U.S. Consumers”, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (1989), 129. Similarly, Charles H. Talbert, “Once Again: Gospel Genre”, *Semeia* 43 (1988), 55, identifies as “constitutive ancient biography that the subject be a distinguished or notorious figure” and that the aim be “to expose the essence of the person”.

<sup>29</sup> Richard A. Burrige, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Society of the New Testament Studies Monograph Series 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 70-81, presents evidence to show that the earliest Greek *bios* originated in the fifth century BC and became more know and used in the fourth century BC.

<sup>30</sup> David E. Aune, “Biography”, *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 78-81.

<sup>31</sup> Burrige, *What are...*, 128-190.

<sup>32</sup> Burrige, *What are...*, 80-81, presents the following statements in his study of ancient biographies: (1) “biography is a type of writing which occurs naturally among groups of people who have formed around a certain charismatic teacher or leader, seeking to follow after him”. (2) “A major purpose and function of *bioi* is in a context of didactic or philosophical polemic and conflict”. (3) “*Bios* is a genre capable of flexibility, adaptation and growth”. (4) “Therefore, it is eminently sensible to begin a search for the genre of the Gospels within the sphere

generic features of Graeco-Roman *Bioi* and those of the Synoptic Gospels. With regards to the Fourth Gospel, BurrIDGE presents several internal and external features and compares them to those of an ancient biography<sup>33</sup>. He arrives at the conclusion that there is enough evidence suggesting that the Fourth Gospel qualifies to the family resemblance of biography: The Fourth Gospel is best understood as a *bios Iesou*<sup>34</sup>.

Identifying the genre of the Fourth Gospel accurately ensures that we notice its features as clues on how to read it appropriately. Getting the genre wrong will eventually mean a literary malfunction, in which one has little chance of making satisfactory sense of what he or she is reading. This conclusion will guide us in our examination of the importance of *zeteo* in the Fourth Gospel. *Zeteo* will be analysed in the perspective that the Fourth Gospel was somehow influenced or perhaps using ancient Greco-Roman *bioi*.

### **Four Archetypes of Storyteller**

Having established that the genre of the Fourth Gospel is a *bios Iesou*, we can now proceed with our investigation of

---

of *bios*, but such an attempt to consider the Gospels as *bioi* must always take account of this wider picture of its flexible and developing nature”.

<sup>33</sup> BurrIDGE, *What are...*, 225-231.

<sup>34</sup> BurrIDGE, *What are...*, 238. This judgement complements that of Segovia who had already boldly stated that: “The Fourth Gospel does represent an example of ancient biography and, as such, follows the basic conventions of ancient biographical writings”. Fernando F. Segovia, “The Journey(s) of the Word of God: A Reading of the Plot of the Fourth Gospel”, *The Fourth Gospel from a Literary Perspective*. *Semeia* 53, eds. R. Alan Culpepper and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta, 1991), 32.

the structure of the Fourth Gospel which is closely related to the question of the Fourth Gospel's plot. Burrige recognizes that it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to isolate this genre from other types of literature, since very often one genre overlaps with other related genres<sup>35</sup>. Authors can and do combine features from different genres. Such combinations enrich the reading experience with uncertainty, creativity, surprise, and so forth. Determining the Fourth Gospel's genre, then, involves recognizing the various literary conventions that are employed. In return, this will guide the readers in his or her efforts to make appropriate sense of what one is reading.

Stibbe analyses Northrop Frye's work which refers to the gospel's structure as one that resonates with archetypes of storytelling. Frye describes four essential *mythoi* in world literature, each corresponding to one of the four seasons: romance (summer), tragedy (autumn), anti-romance (winter), and comedy (spring)<sup>36</sup>. Stibbe calls for a greater understanding of Frye's presentation, probing into each *mythos* by the aid of other ancient Roman-Graeco literary works, such as the Euripedes' story of Dionysius in the *Bacchae*.

Frye argues that *romance* as a mode of storytelling rests upon a successful quest in three stages: a journey and some initial minor adventures, a struggle in which the main character and/or his opponent die, and the exaltation of the

---

<sup>35</sup> Burrige, *What are...*, 55-69.

<sup>36</sup> Mark W.G. Stibbe, *John's Gospel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 62-72; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 131-239.

main character<sup>37</sup>. Stibbe takes the lead from this first archetype of storytelling proposed by Frye and declares that the Fourth Gospel carries the same three elements of conflict: death, and recognition. Jesus, who is sent from God, comes into conflict with 'the Jews'. This conflict leads to his death, though it is Jesus who gives himself to die. Recognition comes from his disciples after his resurrection and ascension to God.

Stibbe also traces the presence of *tragedy* in the Fourth Gospel by the aid of insights taken from Frye's work. For Frye, the main character of the story who appears divine is very human and conducts himself in ways that provoke reprisal which eventually leads to sacrificial suffering<sup>38</sup>. In a similar fashion, the Johannine Jesus, the Logos who came from God became man to reveal God. This task, however, led to his sacrificial death on the cross.

Stibbe then passes on to what Frye considers as the third mode of storytelling, namely, *anti-romance* or *satire* and *irony*<sup>39</sup>, which features prominently in the Fourth Gospel. One may refer here to the dramatic episode in Jn 9 which narrates how Jesus gives sight to a man born blind and who was then interrogated by 'the Jews'. The way the story is narrated manifests how ironically those who claim to have sight, namely 'the Jews', are themselves blind to Jesus' identity as they refused to acknowledge not only the miracle, but also the one who performed the miracle.

---

<sup>37</sup> Frye, *Anatomy...*, 187.

<sup>38</sup> Frye, *Anatomy...*, 206-223.

<sup>39</sup> Frye, *Anatomy...*, 223-239.

Finally, Stibbe employs Frye's notion of *comedy*<sup>40</sup> as another mode of storytelling present in the Fourth Gospel<sup>41</sup>. Comedy here does not essentially entail laughter. It rather expresses a success in one's action in spite of the various obstacles which he has to endure. In the case of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus who came down from heaven had to face various obstacles because of those who did not accept his credentials as the one sent by God, the Son of God. Even some of his disciples left him and manifested unbelief (Jn 6, 60-66) or denied him (Jn 18, 15-18, 25-27). God, however, vindicated his Son by his resurrection, the means by which Jesus returns to God's glory. This comedic-like ending, however, lacks any note of reconciliation with the opponents as found in some of these modes of storytelling.

Stibbe acknowledges that the Fourth Gospel "makes creative use of all four of these generic modes at different points"<sup>42</sup>. Yet, he is also ready to admit that one cannot compare totally the Fourth Gospel with one of these modes of storytelling. Scholars like Margaret Davies<sup>43</sup>, attempt to ensure that there is no strong reason to think that the Fourth Evangelist was following any other literature than the Old Testament genres. Stibbe, however, takes pains to show that Hellenistic and Jewish demarcations are indivisible in the study of *Religionsgeschichte*. The Fourth Gospel is "both

---

<sup>40</sup> Frye, *Anatomy...*, 163-186.

<sup>41</sup> Craig R. Koester, "Comedy, Humor, and the Gospel of John", *Word, Theology, and Community in John*, eds. John Painter, R. Alan Culpepper, Fernando F. Segovia (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 123-141.

<sup>42</sup> Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 66.

<sup>43</sup> Margaret Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 88.

Jewish and Hellenistic in many of its features”<sup>44</sup>. While the Fourth Gospel may have drawn together elements taken from ancient Graeco-Roman literature, in the light of the above arguments one may conclude that its overarching genre is that of ancient *bios*.

### **The Plot of the Fourth Gospel**

If the Fourth Gospel was following the genre of ancient *bios*, what elements does the story of Jesus include and how does *zeteo* fit into the sequence of these elements? Such questions are somehow linked to the issue of the Fourth Gospel’s plot which can be viewed from various perspectives. Kieren Egan describes a plot as a casual completion, that is the way how the story leads from one event to another. This settles the sense of unity and becomes the source of movement from beginning in which anything can happen, through middle where things become probable, to ends where everything is necessary<sup>45</sup>.

Culpepper writes that the Fourth Gospel not only has a plot, but “the plot, is in a sense, the evangelist’s interpretation of the story”<sup>46</sup>. He argues that the plot of the Fourth Gospel “is constructed around a series of recognition (or non-recognition) scenes. Belief and unbelief, recognition or non-recognition of Jesus as the Revealer is the fundamental opposition on which the plot is developed”<sup>47</sup>. He, therefore, strongly defends the position that the Fourth

---

<sup>44</sup> Stibbe, *John’s Gospel*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> Kieren Egan, “What is Plot?”, *New Literary History* 9 (1978), 455.

<sup>46</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy...*, 86.

<sup>47</sup> Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, *Interpreting Biblical Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 71.

Gospel's plot revolves around the various responses of characters who strive to recognize Jesus' identity as God's Revealer. It is here that the theme of *zeteo* comes into the narrative. Will those who 'seek' Jesus, eventually manage to find him or recognize his true identity? Why does Jesus hide himself from others who are also trying to 'seek' him?

The Fourth Gospel has also been interpreted as drama in recent discussions of its plot. In the first decades of the twentieth century F.R.M. Hitchcock was among the first to suggest that the Fourth Gospel appears to be case in dramatic form<sup>48</sup>. Hitchcock praises the Fourth Gospel as one that has many of the highest stylistic qualities derived from Greek tragedy<sup>49</sup>. Such a position has not gone unchallenged. Bultmann is among those scholars who claim that there are no analogies between the gospels and the Greek tradition<sup>50</sup>. The Fourth Evangelist may not have been aware of all the components of narrative literature available during his time. Nevertheless, a proper analysis of this gospel's plot places it comfortably within the parameters of ancient Graeco-Roman literary genres. We will highlight this conclusion by an

---

<sup>48</sup> F.R.M. Hitchcock, "Is the Fourth Gospel a Drama", *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives*, ed. Mark W.G. Stibbe (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 15-24. This concept was pursued later by other scholars. C. Milo Connick, "The Dramatic Character of the Fourth Gospel", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 67 (1948), 160, for example argues that although the Fourth Gospel is dramatic, it is not a drama designed for the theatre.

<sup>49</sup> Hitchcock, "Is the Fourth Gospel...", 24. On this point see also Clayton Bowen, "The Fourth Gospel as Dramatic Material", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 49 (1930), 293; W.R. Domeris, "The Johannine Drama", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 42 (1983), 29.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Stibbe, *John as...*, 30.



examination of the five stages of the Greek drama with the hope of establishing the importance of *zeteo* in the Fourth Gospel's plot.

### **The Five Stages of the Greek Drama**

Hitchcock's significant research helpfully compares Aristotle's canons with those of the Fourth Gospel. Hitchcock recognizes that like a Greek tragedy, the Fourth Gospel has a complete and unified plot. Using Aristotle's definition, Hitchcock refers to a "unified" or "complete" plot as "that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end ... Those who would construct their plots properly must not begin or end where they choose, but must conform to these principles"<sup>51</sup>. In order to corroborate this assertion, Hitchcock employs Horace's framework according to which there must be no more and no less than five acts in a tragedy<sup>52</sup>. There is the beginning, the development towards the central point, the central point, the development towards the end, the end"<sup>53</sup>.

Hitchcock applies this framework to the Fourth Gospel's plot. Like a Greek drama, he contends that "the gospel has five divisions with prologue and epilogue"<sup>54</sup>. Hitchcock presents the first scene or act as one that covers Jn 1-4, the second act starts with Jn 5 leading to Jn 6, the third act starts at Jn 7 and ends in Jn 11, the fourth act starts in Jn

---

<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, 40-45, *apud* Hitchcock, *Is the Fourth Gospel...*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Hitchcock, *Is the Fourth Gospel...*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Hitchcock, *Is the Fourth Gospel...*, 16.

<sup>54</sup> Hitchcock, *Is the Fourth Gospel...*, 16.

12 to Jn 19, and the fifth act covers Jn 20, with Jn 21 considered as an epilogue<sup>55</sup>.

Like Hitchcock, Stibbe also discusses the Fourth Gospel's plot in the light of the five successive acts or stages in a Greek tragedy. Yet, his delineation of these five acts does not always agree with those proposed by Hitchcock<sup>56</sup>. Stibbe starts his investigation by pointing out that "after the dramatic prologue and introduction (John 1), the gospel story is established in 'the beginning'"<sup>57</sup>. Stibbe reckons the first act as one that includes Jn 2 to 4. He parts company from Hitchcock's description of the second act as the former extends his description to include another four chapters, namely, Jn 5-10. As a consequence of this change, Stibbe's description of the third act also varies from the one proposed by Hitchcock. Stibbe calls this act the central point in the story made up of Jn 11-12. Stibbe describes Jn 13-19 as the fourth act of the plot and like Hitchcock, Stibbe considers Jn 20 as the fifth and final act of the plot. "This is the 'end' of the story, with John 21 functioning as an epilogue"<sup>58</sup>.

Although one cannot be totally sure whether the Fourth Gospel really meant to adopt this literary form of ancient literature, or that the Fourth Gospel was purposefully following these kinds of ancient genre, the resemblance can hardly be accidental. The Fourth Gospel conforms to many of Aristotle's dictates for the structure of a tragic plot with a clear beginning, middle, and end. In what follows, therefore, we will try to analyse the use of *zeteo* in the beginning,

---

<sup>55</sup> Hitchcock, *Is the Fourth Gospel...*, 18-24.

<sup>56</sup> Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 35-36.

<sup>57</sup> Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 35.

middle and end of this gospel's plot. We will carry out this task by attempting to show that *zeteo* features in all the five stages proposed by Stibbe and thus its use constitutes a coherent unity of this gospel.

### ***Zeteo* in the First Act of the Gospel's Plot**

Following Hitchcock, Stibbe agrees on the parameters of the first act of the Fourth Gospel's plot. Jn 1:19-4:54 describes the first scene of this plot, establishing Jesus' character and ministry. The first use of *zeteo* in 1:38 forms part of this first act. The Fourth Evangelist makes use of *zeteo* as part of the very first words of Jesus addressed to the first two disciples. The import of this choice becomes more visible when one considers how the exegesis of any text must take account of its position and role in the document of which it is a part. Many scholars pause to note the theological significance of Jesus' first words presented in the form of a question to the first disciples in 1:38<sup>59</sup>. Nevertheless, the importance of the word *zeteo* here does not emerge only because it constitutes part of Jesus' first words that are pregnant with meaning. The importance of *zeteo* in 1:38 is illustrated also by the fact that its usage is integrated in the first part of the Fourth Gospel's structure.

Jn 1:38 however, is not the only reference to *zeteo* in this first act. The Fourth Evangelist employs two other references

---

<sup>59</sup> See for example, Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 100; Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John. A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 82; G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 26; Yves Simeons, *Secondo Giovanni. Una traduzione e un'interpretazione* (Bologna: EDB, 2000), 188.

to *zeteo* in his unique episode of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. Jesus tells the woman: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father *seeks* (*zetei*) to worship him" (Jn 4:23). Later, in the same episode, we read: "Just then his disciples came. They marvelled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, 'What do you *want?*' (*zeteis*) or 'Why are you talking with her?'" (Jn 4:27).

### ***Zeteo* in the Second Act of the Gospel's Plot**

The presence of *zeteo* is also found in act two of the Fourth Gospel's plot. As we already noticed, Hitchcock delineates Jn 5-6 as the only chapters which constitute this act. It is noteworthy that *zeteo* features five times in these two chapters; three times in Jn 5, and twice in Jn 6 (Jn 5, 18, 30, 44; Jn 6, 24,26). We also mentioned that Stibbe parts company with Hitchcock at act two as he widens this act to include those chapters leading up to Jn 10. He argues that Jn 5 to 10 are emblematic of the opposition towards Jesus and the various attempts by 'the Jews' to stone or to kill Jesus<sup>60</sup>. These attempts force the story towards the central point.

In fact, among the twenty-two references to *zeteo* in these five chapters, nine of them explicitly refer to an attempt to arrest or to kill Jesus (Jn 5, 18; 7, 1, 19, 20, 25, 30; 8, 37, 40; 10, 39). There are another ten references to *zeteo* that occur in a context of conflict or polemic (Jn 5, 30, 44; 7, 11, 18, 34, 36; 8, 21, 50). The other three references (Jn 6, 24, 26; 7, 4) to this theme are not categorically related to this conflict. A careful

---

<sup>60</sup> Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 35.

reading of these verses, however, reveal that the meaning of *zeteo* here is closely related to this polemic against Jesus.

### ***Zeteo* in the Third Act of the Gospel's Plot**

Hitchcock delineates the third act of the gospel as one which stretches from Jn 7 till Jn 11. *Zeteo* is also present in these chapters a total of nineteen times (Jn 7, 1, 4, 11, 18, 19, 20, 25, 30, 34, 36; 8, 21, 37, 40, 50; 10, 39; 11, 8, 56). Stibbe refers to the third act as "the central point in the story"<sup>61</sup>, covering Jn 11-12. Due attention is given here to the episode of the raising of Lazarus from the death that leads to Jesus' arrest, and eventually to his death. *Zeteo* is not absent from this central stage of the Fourth Gospel's plot. Two particular references to this Johannine theme form part of this Johannine story.

First, we read: "The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were but now *seeking* (*ezetoun*) to stone you, and are you going there again?'" (Jn 11, 8). Later, the Fourth Evangelist informs the reader: "They were *seeking* (*ezetoun*) for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the Temple, 'What do you think? That he will not come to the feast?'" (Jn 11, 56). Like many of the references of *zeteo* in act two, those in act three also carry a polemical tone.

### ***Zeteo* in the Fourth Act of the Gospel's Plot**

Attention should now focus on the fourth act of this plot. Hitchcock starts this act by the episode of the anointing of Jesus' feet by Mary of Bethany at Jn 12. He then finishes this act in Jn 19 with the passion narrative. Six explicit

---

<sup>61</sup> Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 35.

references to *zeteo* are found in these eight chapters (Jn 13, 33; 16, 19; 18, 4, 7, 8; 19, 12). Stibbe's description of act four also differs from Hitchcoch's. Stibbe marks this act by Jn 13 to 19 which eventually leads to the end of the story. Here we find six references to *zeteo*.

The first two references form part of the episode of Jesus' last supper with his disciples. Here, Jesus tells the disciples: "Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You *will seek me (zetesete)* and as I said to the Jews, so now I say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come'" (Jn 13, 33). Later, the Fourth Evangelist informs the reader: "Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him; so he said to them, 'Is this what *you are asking (zeteite)* yourselves'" (Jn 16, 19).

The next three references form part of Jesus' arrest. In this episode Jesus directly asks those who came to arrest him: "Whom do you seek?" (*tina zeteite*) (Jn 18, 4, 7). Then, Jesus identifies himself: "I told you that I am he, so, if *you seek (zeteite)* me, let these men go" (Jn 18, 8). Later, in the trial of Jesus before Pilate, once again the Fourth Evangelist employs this theme of *zeteo*. Here, we are informed that "Pilate *sought (ezetei)* to release him" (Jn 19, 12).

### ***Zeteo in the Fifth Act of the Gospel's Plot***

Both Hitchcoch and Stibbe agree in their respective description of this final act of the Fourth Gospel's plot. They specify Jn 20 as the fifth act of the plot. "It is here that the disciples meet the risen Jesus"<sup>62</sup>. The discovery or recognition scene which is frequently employed in the Greek drama is used with great effect in this scene. It is significant to note the

---

<sup>62</sup> Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 36.

presence of *zeteo* in 20, 15. This is the last reference to this theme in the Fourth Gospel, which forms an inclusion with 1, 38.

### **An overarching Theme**

The very first words of Jesus to the two disciples in Jn 1, 18 “what do you seek?” remind the reader of the Risen Christ who appears at the empty tomb asking Mary Magdalene a similar question in 20, 15: “Whom do you seek?”. Not all Johannine commentaries pause long enough in their discussion to state this important literary link between 1, 38 and 20, 15. A close scrutiny of the well-known commentaries on the Fourth Gospel reveals the degree to which Johannine scholarship on 20, 15 is more preoccupied with the issue of the ‘gardener’ rather than with this literary link.

Thus, for example, in his theological commentary on the Fourth Gospel, Thomas L. Brodie observes the presence of *zeteo* in 20, 15. At the same time, he misunderstands it as a statement made by the author rather than a strategy employed by him to lead the reader to a deeper experience. In his own words: “His inquiry about why she is crying repeats exactly the words of the angels; but with much irony, it adds a development: ‘Whom do you seek?’ She does not ever hear it”<sup>63</sup>.

Schnackenburg aligns himself more with this position when he comments on 20, 15. “The second question: ‘Whom do you seek?’ ... also has its function in this type of story-

---

<sup>63</sup> Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 566.

telling. It concentrates the conversation on the person of the one who then makes himself known"<sup>64</sup>. A critical survey to the well-known Johannine commentary written by Bultmann reveals that there is no specific rubric on the link between 1, 38 and 20, 15 in spite of his insights on 1, 38. In his comment on 20, 15 he simply writes: "Jesus addresses her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?' (v. 15). But still the ban lies on her, and in her foolishness, she thinks he is the gardener"<sup>65</sup>.

D.A. Carson tries to explain the logic of the two questions addressed to Mary Magdalene but he offers no real explanation why perhaps the Fourth Gospel relates 1, 38 with 20, 15<sup>66</sup>. Beasley-Murray's analysis of 20, 15 also fails to indicate any literary relationship between 1, 38 and 20, 15<sup>67</sup>. An equally respected commentary on the Fourth Gospel is the one by John H. Bernard, whose comments on 20, 15 follow the same path<sup>68</sup>. Leon Morris' comment on 20, 15 also fails short in noticing the relationship between these two texts, while it rather focuses on the specific emphasis on the gardener<sup>69</sup>. Although this survey is not exhaustive, it is

---

<sup>64</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John 3* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 316-317.

<sup>65</sup> Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 686.

<sup>66</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 641.

<sup>67</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 375.

<sup>68</sup> John H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St John*, International Critical Commentary 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 666.

<sup>69</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, New Testament Commentary on the New Testament (London: Eerdmans, 1971), 838. On the same lines see also, Edwyn C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber &



significant to note that all these well-known commentaries on the Fourth Gospel have not offered any real explanation as to the manner in which the Fourth Gospel relates 1, 38 with 20, 15 by the use of the verb *zeteo*.

Fresh appreciation for the Fourth Gospel's artistry comes from another group of Johannine scholars who put their comments on 1, 38 and 20, 15 on a completely new footing. Scholars like Léon-Dufour call for a greater understanding of 20, 15. His comments help us to discover that the literary link between 1, 38 and 20, 15 is not a chance occurrence but the result of careful Johannine structural planning<sup>70</sup>.

Similar comments come from Simeons who devotes considerable attention to the analysis of 1, 38. His analysis has much to comment on as it establishes a link with the Fourth Gospel's resurrection narratives, more specifically with Jesus' question to Mary Magdalene in 20, 15. Simeons asserts that Jesus' question to the first two disciples "what do you seek?" anticipates a similar question which Jesus utters to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning<sup>71</sup>.

These insights on the two verses under scrutiny recall Salvatore A. Panimolli's guide on 1, 38 who argues that the aim of the Johannine narrative is the quest for the divine, as suggested by the analogous expression found at the very end

---

Faber, 1947), 542; Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 636; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Mullins, 1972), 605; Michael Mullins, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2003), 405.

<sup>70</sup> X. Léon-Dufour, *Lettura dell'Evangelo secondo Giovanni IV* (capitoli 18-21), trans. F. Moscatelli (Milano: San Paolo, 1998), 281.

<sup>71</sup> Simeons, *Secondo Giovanni*, 188.

of the gospel in 20, 15, which resounds what we read at the very beginning in 1, 38<sup>72</sup>.

Also noteworthy in this regard is the work of Rodney A. Whitacre. Commenting on 20, 15 Whitacre is but one of many voices who calls for a more comprehensive view as he introduces the reader to this important insight: "He asks the same question asked by the angels, 'Woman ... why are you crying?' but immediately he focuses on it further: 'Who is it you are looking for?' This question, the first thing the Risen Jesus says, echoes the very first thing he said at the beginning of this gospel (1, 38)"<sup>73</sup>.

Of special interest in this discussion is Brown's comments on 20, 15. He writes that: "The vocabulary in this episode is strangely reminiscent of the scene in 1, 38 where Jesus asks the disciples of the Baptist: 'What are you looking for?' and they address him as 'Rabbi.' So here too Mary addresses him as Rabbi after he has asked her, 'Who is it you are looking for?' (20, 15)"<sup>74</sup>.

By paying attention to this narrative feature all these scholars gain a fresh appreciation for the Fourth Gospel's artistry. Their comments remind us that the repletion of *zeteo*

---

<sup>72</sup> Salvatore A. Panimolle, *Lettura Pastorale del Vangelo di Giovanni 1* (Bologna: EDB, 1978), 172-173. See also, Salvatore A. Panimolle, *Lettura Pastorale del Vangelo di Giovanni 3* (Bologna: EDB, 1985), 445.

<sup>73</sup> A. Rodney Whitacre, *John*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Illinois-Leicester: IVP Academic, 1999), 475.

<sup>74</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible 29B (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1010. On the same lines see also, Enrico Ghezzi, *Come abbiamo ascoltato Giovanni. Studio esegetico-pastorale sul Quarto Vangelo* (Pontecchio Marconi: Edizioni Digigraf, 2006), 185; Santi Grasso, *Il Vangelo di Giovanni. Commento esegetico e teologico* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2008), 88.

as Jesus' first words, echoing his very first words after his resurrection, as one that forms an *inclusion* or a bracket that frames the Johannine narrative. The use of *inclusion* as a literary technique in literature is an accepted fact. It not only denotes a literary unit but somehow marks the 'enveloped' material<sup>75</sup>. Stibbe starts his *John's Gospel*, marking *inclusion* as one of the literary devices frequently used in this gospel. "This is a technique whereby the author ends a text in a manner reminiscent of its beginning. It is a device which gives the impression of circularity, of a narrative coming full circle"<sup>76</sup>. He illustrates this definition by the specific *inclusion* of Jn 1, 38 and 20, 15.

### **Cyclical Repetition**

In this alternative interpretation scheme, Culpepper carefully distinguishes repetition of themes as an important stylistic characteristic of the Fourth Gospel's unified narrative. He writes that "action and dialogue were used to establish various themes or motifs which recur throughout the gospels"<sup>77</sup>. The influence of this type of analysis upon a whole range of scholars may be seen in the work of J. Terence Forestell which makes a similar remark: "Properly Johannine vocabulary is not extensive, but peculiarly Johannine ideas are developed in a distinctive manner throughout the gospel. A few relatively simple ideas unfold, not by way of a logical progression of thought, but by way of repetition and

---

<sup>75</sup> On this point see Mlakuzhyil, *The Christocentric Literary...*, 117.

<sup>76</sup> Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 1.

<sup>77</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy...*, 85. See also Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 34-35.

expansion in which much use is made of paradoxical utterances, irony, misunderstanding, and word-play"<sup>78</sup>.

Repetition of words and themes ensures that the readers are aware and can understand important emphases. In the words of Du Rand: "If all these repetitions were to be analysed, we would find in the Gospel of John unifying lines which bind it to a central plot"<sup>79</sup>. C.H. Dodd makes a good case when he compares the Fourth Gospel to a musical fugue in which different themes are presented in an "intricate pattern" and in "an artistic and imaginative whole"<sup>80</sup>.

The interest in repetition as an important Johannine literary device is richly enhanced by the expertise of Robert Kysar's endeavours. He explains how the Fourth Gospel's thought is not linear; it rather "seems to move in circles (more optimistically, spirals), doubling back upon itself"<sup>81</sup>. In other words, the Fourth Gospel's narrative takes the form of what came to be known as *cyclical* or *spiral* repetition. Sandra M. Schneiders refers to this cyclical repetition as "a spiral staircase that takes the reader up higher, down deeper, passing again and again the same familiar points ... One

---

<sup>78</sup> J. Terence Forestell, *The Word of the Cross. Salvation as Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1974), 14.

<sup>79</sup> Du Rand, *Plot and Point of View...*, 160.

<sup>80</sup> C.H. Dodd, *About the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 36-37. See also, Du Rand, "Reading the Fourth Gospel like a Literary Symphony", *What is John. Vol.2 Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 7, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: GA Scholars, 1998), 11-12.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and his Gospel. An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975), 176.

moves, but does not really move, as one is repeatedly brought back to the place of encounter”<sup>82</sup>.

Such is the case with *zeteo*. This theme is introduced early in the narrative in 1, 38. It is repeated so many times throughout the narrative, and it finally gains a richer meaning in its last occurrence in 20, 15 when the ‘what’ which accompanies *zeteo* in 1, 38 becomes ‘whom’ in 20, 15. As a matter of fact, Jesus’ first words, “what do you seek” in 1, 38 may be reckoned as one of the Fourth Gospel’s double entendre, a literary device used throughout the entire narrative. The very first words of Jesus can have two meanings: “(1) the surface meaning: what do you want? (2) the deeper meaning: what are you searching/longing for? It is necessary to listen to the Fourth Evangelist with both ears: one for the literal and the other for the symbolic sense”<sup>83</sup>.

The inclusion of *zeteo* in Jesus’ first words suggests that the focus of the call narratives in this gospel is unwaveringly Christological. Jesus’ question *ti zeteite*; in 1,38 builds on what has come before, namely the declaration of John the Baptist that among the people is one they do not know (Jn 1, 26). At the same time, *ti zeteite*; anticipates what is to come. *Zeteo* is employed in the Fourth Gospel to speak of people’s attitude to Jesus and their deepest commitments. Sometimes it manifests the negative motivations of those who were seeking Jesus to arrest or to kill Jesus. In other times, its use is positive as it reveals how other people were seeking Jesus to

---

<sup>82</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written that you may Believe. Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 29.

<sup>83</sup> Rekha M. Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 29.

become his disciples or because they were already his disciples.

Moreover, the use of *zeteo* in 1, 38 only points to embryonic discipleship. The ‘what’ in Jesus’ words to the two disciples must become a person. The change from ‘what’ to ‘whom’ is illustrated at the end of the gospel narrative. This happens by means of Mary Magdalene who is introduced into the Easter narratives seeking Jesus, an ultimately positive endeavour in the Fourth Gospel. By means of Mary Magdalene, the Fourth Evangelist guides the readers to search for Jesus. Jesus is alive and those who want to become his disciples must seek him until they find him to abide with him. The Fourth Evangelist then shows that the “search” for Jesus is one of the most important aspects of the Fourth Gospel’s plot as it is responsible for its suspense.

### **Conclusion**

The intention of this article has been to isolate *zeteo* as an important Johannine theme. We started our investigation applying the principle of frequency usage to ascertain the linguistic peculiarity of *zeteo* in the Fourth Gospel, and by a statistical check between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics. Here, we have attested that the relatively high frequency of a term in the gospel is not always a sure criterion to decide whether it belongs to the Fourth Gospel or not.

The distinctiveness of *zeteo* in this gospel is rather highlighted by the significant instances of repetition of this theme. The Fourth Evangelist uses *zeteo* as the first words of Jn 1, 38 and as the first words of the Risen Jesus in 20, 15 in a way that this theme forms an inclusion which brackets the

whole narrative of the Fourth Gospel. *Zeteo* therefore occupies an important strategic position in the plot of the Fourth Gospel. Following the suggestion that the Fourth Gospel's plot resonates with the archetypes of storytelling, we focused on the relationship that exists between the Fourth Gospel and the Greek drama. The classical framework of a plot, based on five different scenes, was applied to the Fourth Gospel's plot.

Our investigation revealed that *zeteo* is present in all the five stages and spread all over the plot of this gospel. Its importance may be therefore established not by its frequent use in this gospel but rather by the fact that it gives unity to the narrative. *Zeteo* is an overarching theme that binds the Fourth Gospel together. Its inclusion in the very first words of Jesus and in the first words of the Risen Lord, and its presence in the main acts of the Fourth Gospel's plot marks *zeteo* as a hallmark theme in the Fourth Gospel's overall theology.