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Healing of the royal official's son in John 4:46-54

ABSTRACT

The healing of the royal official's son (4:46-54) is one of the neglected sections in John's Gospel. Although it is considered in commentaries and it is often used in sermons it is rarely the subject of wider discussion. This article considers the narratological, social and historical aspects of this brief miracle narrative. The complex structure of the narrative is considered, its relation to parallels in the Synoptics and possible shared sources are investigated, and possibilities for understanding the narrative are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The healing of the royal official's son (4:46-54) is one of the neglected sections in John's Gospel. It normally receives due attention in commentaries, but as far as I could establish the academic *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this passage is negligible; this is evident from the minute number of independent journal articles written on this passage (see Lindars 1992 and Nicklas 2008) although the passage records nearly 3 million hits on the internet (search: John 4:46-54). These are mostly links to sermons and Bible studies on the requirement of faith or the power of Jesus relating to the impact of this passage from the pulpit. The main themes in this passage are dealt with in more spectacular ways elsewhere in John's Gospel and are consequently normally discussed in relation to those sections: for instance, true faith is presented more spectacularly in Ch. 9 with the healing of the blind man, and healing or giving life in Ch. 11 with the raising of Lazarus. This passage therefore never received the attention the other sections did. In presentations of this event in, for instance, films (see the Jesus film, *Jesus of Nazareth* by Franco Zeffereilli based on the Gospel of John) the information from parallel passages in Matthew and Luke is mixed with those of Jn 4:46-54.

2. ON THE GRAMMAR AND STRUCTURE OF 4:46-54

The narrative in 4:46-54 is marked as a unit by a ring composition or *inclusio*: in both verses 46 and 54 it is mentioned that Jesus enters into Cana in Galilee where he performed miracles. The references in these two verses to the first miracle at Cana (see 4:46: εἰς τὴν Κανὰ τῆς Γαλιλαίας; see 2,1-10) as well as the entrance into Galilee from Judea (4:47 and 4:54: ἐκ τῆς Ἰουδαίας εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν; see 2:1; 4:43-45;) embed the narrative firmly in the preceding context: it should be read in relation to the first miracle at Cana; this being the second miracle (4:54 – see nevertheless 2:2 3; 4:45 that suggest that there were other miracles too) while the reader should relate the message to the Galileans, especially since the phrase 'from Judea to Galilee' occurs twice in this short narrative (4:47 and 54; Keener 2005, 630). The Galileans welcomed him (2:1; 4:45) in contrast to the Judeans from Jerusalem where the house of his father stands (who are most probably the referents of 'his own country' in 4:44 – see Nicklas 2008, 94-95 and his references, against Van Belle 1998, 27-44). Themes such as life and faith link this narrative to both the preceding discussions with Nicodemus (3:15, 16ff.) and the Samaritan woman (4:10,

14, 39-41), and also serve as thematic link to the following healing in Ch. 5 (21, 25-28) and the rest of the Gospel.

The narrative of the miracle events is rather straight forward: When hearing that Jesus is in Galilee a “royal official” travelled from Capernaum where his son was ill to meet with Jesus beseeching him to heal his terminally ill son. After a surprising rebuke from Jesus, declaring that people will not believe without seeing signs and wonders, Jesus sends the official home with the assurance that his son in Capernaum is healed. On his way home, the official’s slaves meet him with the message that his son is healed. The official makes some enquiries and realizes that his son got better at the exact moment when Jesus spoke to him. Consequently, he and his household believed.

Certain features point to a more complex narrative structure. Jesus’ remark in 4:48 that ἐὰν μὴ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα ἴδῃτε, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε (‘unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe’) comes as a bit of a surprise, since the royal official came all the way from Capernaum to ask Jesus to heal his son. The official does not react directly to Jesus’ rebuke. Rather, he repeats his request seemingly with a little more urgency (see the use of πρῖν in 4:49). The function of Jesus’ remark highlights one of the major issues in this narrative. At the first glance verses 48-49 do not seem to fit here and could just as well have been left out. Scholars like Schnackenburg (1968, 468-469), Haenchen (1980, ad loc.), and others think that the rebuke in 4:48-49 with the second petition of the royal official are editorial additions. They reason that the rebuke and second petition break the logic of the narrative (i.e. the official seemingly does not seek a sign or wonder in order to believe) and it is not clear why Jesus goes ahead with the healing. Moreover the rebuke is unduly harsh. In any case, 4:48-49 seems redundant to the flow of the narrative thus making no difference if it were removed. Schnackenburg (1968, 468-469) explains the editorial addition as an effort by the editor to encourage true faith by expressing criticism of superficial faith. However, because of this insertion, the official is required to repeat his request (4:49).

Nevertheless, these words are part of the text and should be considered as such. The problem is not that Jesus rebukes somebody; he also does that elsewhere (see 2:4; 11:4; Mk 7:27). The question is why Jesus would rebuke a man who came so far to ask for his help. Surely he had not gone to all that trouble simply to see a sign so that he may believe?

In 4:48 the issue of the dependence of faith on signs and wonders is addressed and is most probably related to the suspicion of ‘signs-faith’ already expressed in 2:23-24. There is also a subtle grammatical change in this verse which further clarifies the picture. Jesus addresses the man (πρὸς αὐτόν – to him) but in his next sentence switches to the second person plural when making his statement: Unless *they* see (ἴδῃτε – you see)... Knowing who *they* in this remark are would help the reader to understand the words of Jesus more clearly. *They* could be the surrounding Galileans of whom the context speaks (Schnackenburg 1968, 466; Köstenberger 2004, 170) or it could be a more general rhetorical statement, addressing the intended readers too, warning them against signs faith (Keener 2005, 630; Nicklas 2008, 100). Both options seem plausible. If this is accepted then the royal official seems to represent a group, most probably the Galileans.

Views on the interpretation of 4:48 differ. Busse (2002, 124-125) points out that the miracle plays out what verse 48 warns against: the royal official and his family only fully believed after he realized that a miracle had taken place (vv. 52-53). His perspective of Jesus’ word changes to faith based on the miracle. Thus the miracle does not illustrate what true faith is, but becomes a practical illustration and confirmation of Jesus’ warning: people only believe if they see signs (v. 48). Busse (2002, 125) concludes: “Sie öffnet dem Leser die Augen für einen potentiellen Zweispalt in seinem eigenen Glaubensbegriff – ja, sie illustriert ihm die dem Glauben inhärente

Gefahr, jederzeit in inadecuaten Glauben bzw. Unglauben umschlagen zu können.” Keener (2005, 633) also concludes that the royal official only had sign inspired faith. The problem with this interpretation seems to be the negative note on which the first miracle cycle then ends. This should not be a major problem, since up to Chapter 9, where true faith is practically illustrated (Van der Watt 2005,119-122) there are several references to faith that falls short of the ideal (for instance, Ch. 6:60, 66; 8:31ff.).

The more common interpretation of this miracle tends to move in the opposite direction (for examples see Brown 1971, 191-192; Haenchen 1980, 261), namely that the rebuke against a faith based on miracles introduces a process in which the faith of the royal official dynamically grows and matures (Kysar 1986,74): he is warned against a faith that is based upon works; he shows his faith by believing the word of Jesus, i.e. faith in a word (v. 50 - see Brown 1971, 191) and then he fully believes (v. 53 – the verb believe is used absolutely). The narrative reflects a growth in faith from a sign inspired faith to a mature faith, expressed by the verb used absolutely (4:53 – this view has much support, for instance, Schnackenburg 1968, 467-468; de Boor 1985, 151; Kysar 1986, 74; Witherington 1995, 128; Köstenberger 2004, 171; Neyrey 2007, 100). This faith would then explain the link with the first sign (2:1-10) where the disciples also believed, and echo the growth in faith of the Samaritan woman (4:19, 29) as well as the Samaritans in general (4:39, 42).

This interpretation is also not without problems. The first problem is that the man travelled a long distance to ask Jesus to heal his son. Moreover, when Jesus rebuked him, he still insisted that Jesus should go to heal his son. Would someone who simply wishes to see a miracle truly go to all this trouble? The underlying motif of caring for the life of his son seems to point away from just wanting to see a wonder or sign. A second problem seems to be that there is little reference to Jesus when it comes to faith, a point Busse (2002:124) rightly notes. What does the man believe in when the narrative records that he and his family believed (absolute)? The reference to the “sign” in 4:54 might be an indirect reference to Jesus, since the function of signs in John is indeed to refer to the person of Jesus.

Another option for interpreting the remark in 4:48 is to read it as a statement: “Seeing signs and wonders would lead you to faith” (cf. Bittner 1987, 128-134). Jesus then proceeds to perform such a sign which leads the royal official to come to faith. This option, however, does not take the Greek seriously enough (Ἐὰν μὴ ... οὐ μὴ – if not... certainly not). It has an overly positive view of a signs directed faith, which is not the case in 2:23.

This was a long-distance healing which heightens the significance of the sign. Keener (2005, 632) points out that the lack of faith as well as sceptics being convinced by miracles might not have surprised ancient readers, since these were common themes in the Epidaurus inscriptions (see inscription. 3.4.9.36.37). Scepticism changing into amazement is also a core theme in Lucian’s narrative (*Abdic.* 5) of the disinherited son who healed his father (see also 2 Kings 5:11 and the ensuing results). Even though there are parallels in ancient literature, the specific Johannine theological context should remain the primary frame of reference for the interpretation of this miracle. However, long-distance miracles were rare by First Testament as well as other Jewish or Greco-Roman standards (Keener 1993, ad loc.).

A characteristic of the style of this narrative is the rich variation of words accompanied by a few phrases that are repeated with minimal change. The sick child is described as υἱός (son), παιδίον (dear child) and παῖς (boy) (see Newman and Nida 1980, 136); his father is described as βασιλικός (royal official/officer), ἄνθρωπος (man), and πατήρ (father); healing is described in terms of ἰάομαι (heal) and ζάω (give life/heal). On the other hand, some phrases are repeated, such as ὁ υἱός σου ζῆ (4:50, 51, 53 - your son lives/is healed) and ἐκ τῆς Ἰουδαίας εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν (4:47, 54, see 4:46 – ‘from Judea to Galilee’). The father’s request that Jesus should

come down and heal his son is also repeated twice.

The variation of words seems to have two functions. It adds to the ambiance of the narrative while also giving insights into the character of the actors in the plot. The royal official is a man and a father. He fulfils multiple roles. Nicklas (2008, 101) argues that calling the royal official a 'man' opens up his character towards the readers who can more easily associate with him now. The son is a child, no, a dear child, emphasizing the relationship between father and son. On the other hand, pieces of information are missing from the narrative. The illness of the son is called "fever" (πυρετός – fever), but no reason for the illness is given (see also Mk 1:31 *par.*; Ac 28:8). Aspects like the origin (for instance, demonic), nature or treatment do not come into focus at all. The readers are merely told that it was serious and that the boy was about to die. Nothing more should be assumed – guessing about this will distract from the real focus of the narrative.

The repetition of the phrases focuses the narrative: the geographical data emphasizes that this event did not take place in Jerusalem (his fatherland where the house of his father stands – see also Nicklas 2008) but Galilee (Keener 2005, 630), the place that welcomes him. The considerable distance between Cana and Capernaum (more than 26 km) also emphasizes the significance of this healing over a vast distance. The question remains why the father was only met the following day by his slaves while he was descending the mountains leading to the Sea of Galilee (4:51-52)? It was possible to have travelled the previous day, especially if the seriousness of the father's concern for his son is taken into account. It is reckoned that a person could travel about 32 km per day, starting in the morning. Perhaps 25 km was too far for a half a day's travel (Köstenberger 2004, 170; Keener 2005, 633). Others read confidence into the father's actions. He is not hastening home since he is confident of his son's healing (Bruce 1983, 119). It could also be to heighten the effect and dramatize the miracle by emphasizing the distance for readers who do not know the geography.

There are interesting grammatical and semantic nuances in the narrative. The narrative mode changes from past tense to present tense and back (for instance, the change to the present tense in 4:49, 50 (λέγει) amidst past tense verbs that carry the narrative. This variation is typical of a lively narrative. More notable is the change in 4:52: the Hellenistic phrase κομψότερον ἔσχεν (4:52 - getting better/getting on nicely) assumes that the healing process had begun (Barrett 1978, 248). The verb ἀφῆκεν (5:52 – left), used by the slaves to describe the healing, refers to an instant healing. The use of ζῶω (give life/heal) is also significant. In the Gospel as a whole ζῶω (give life/heal) is used to refer to eternal life (Van der Watt 2000, 119-122). Here it is apparently used to refer to physical healing, while an alternative ἰάομαι (heal) is available and used elsewhere in John (4:47; 5:13; 12:40). The use of the word here seems to have a double meaning (against Haenchen 1980, 50 who wants to limit the meaning to "is healed") – the son is healed but in the end also receives eternal life (Beasley-Murray 1999, 73; Nicklas 2008, 101), since the father and his family, including the child, believed (4:53 – see 3:16). In this light the reference in 4:54 to the event as a "sign" invites the reader to reread what just happened in light of a second spiritual meaning: eternal life is mediated here. Thus the life-giving presence of Jesus is underlined; Jesus is the one who gives life. He gives life that is earthly as well as eternal, and does so now as well as in the future. These events are thus a preamble of the sign of the resurrection of Lazarus.

The symbolic nature of Jesus' words of healing may even go further. Schnackenburg (1968, 467) suggests that Jesus' words, "Your son lives" could be an allusion to the words of Elijah to the woman of Zarephath, recorded in 1 Kings 17:23. If this was the case, it would associate Jesus' messianic activity to the healing ministry of First Testament figures like Elijah.

Pragmatically, the richness of the narrative in its use of words, repetition of phrases, and creation of tension, results in a colourful narrative that aims to involve the reader actively. Jesus'

surprising rebuke challenges the readers to find a reason for the rebuke and indeed measure themselves against that. The exceptional use of ζῶω (give life/heal), in the instance of John, with the reference to the events as a sign also invites the reader to rethink what is happening in the narrative.

3. RELEVANT SOCIAL INFORMATION FOR INTERPRETING 4:46-54

This narrative is firmly framed within the social world of the first century. This calls for clarification of some aspects of the narrative.

Jesus is approached by a βασιλικός (royal official/officer). The intended meaning is not clear, except that the person is somehow linked to the royal house. The word itself could be used to refer to somebody of royal blood, or somebody in service of royalty, either administratively or militarily. Josephus uses this word to refer the troops of the king (*Bel.* I, 45) and probably even to non-Jewish mercenaries (for instance, *Ant.* XV, 289; XVII, 266, 270, 281). There is also a variant reading [(D, a, boh (codd))] βασιλικός which could be translated as petty king or princelet, but this reading may be due to assimilation to the old Latin and Vulgate *regulus* (Barrett 1978, 247).

Since the man lives in Capernaum on the North-West side of the Sea of Galilee (2:1; 6:12, 24, 59), not far from Tiberias, the seat of the tetrarch Herod Antipas (reign from 4 BC to AD 39) it could be assumed that he was in service of Herod Antipas. Although only a tetrarch, Herod Antipas was also known as “king” (for instance, Mk 6:14, 22; Mt 14:9; Gospel of Peter 1:2). Some suggest that the βασιλικός was a military officer, basing their argument on a parallel passage in Matthew 8:5 where a *centurion* approaches Jesus. In this case the man would have been a non-Jew (Schnackenburg 1968, 466; Bultmann 1971, 206; Barrett 1978, 245; Witherington 1995, 128; Köstenberger 2004, 169). This is of course possible, but Brown (1971, 190) points out that Capernaum was a border town with many administrative responsibilities, which could mean that the man was an administrative official. In this case the man most probably would have been a Jew (see also Nicklas 2008, 97-98). This remains speculation and the more precise details of who and what the man was, are not in focus here. To identify him for instance with Chuzas (Lk 8:3) or with Manaen (Ac 13:1) is pure speculation. What is in focus here is that he was connected to royalty, placing him in the circle of the rich (he has a house and slaves) and privileged who controlled much of the land (Horsley 1994, 214-215). Keener (2005, 630) calls him a Galilean aristocrat. Based on what Josephus has to say, Keener (2005, 630) concludes that the majority of Galileans would not have felt comfortable to associate with such a person (*Vita* 98-99). Keener also refers to Josephus pointing out that many of the wealthy Herodians lived in Tiberias (*Vita* 32-34) which was built on a graveyard (*Ant.* 18.36-38). This was obviously not acceptable to the Jews, inter alia for reasons of purity and holiness. Herod Antipas did not seem to have been the most sensitive man around (*Vita* 65 and *Ant.* 18.136).

Based on what happened, the man and his whole household believe (4:53; see also Acts 16:31-32; 18:8). Within a group-orientated community it could be expected that the *pater familias* would be followed, even in matters of religion (cf. Plutarch *Bride* 19, *Mor.* 140D: “it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in...”), although there are of course exceptions to the rule (Van der Watt 2007, 748-750).

Mention of the seventh hour on which the boy was healed (4:52) assumes knowledge of how time worked in ancient times. At least two systems should be considered here. According to the Roman system counting the hours started at midnight. The seventh hour would then have been 7h00 in the morning. According to the Jewish system, counting the hours from sunrise, it would have been 13h00 in the afternoon. The latter seems the most plausible and is most commonly accepted (Newman and Nida 1980, 139), since it seems improbable that the man would have

approached Jesus at 7h00 in the morning, and if that was the case it seems strange that he took more than the rest of the day to reach the point where he was going down the mountain to the Sea of Galilee (4:52).

Interestingly, the royal official left his sick son and travelled all the way to see Jesus. Ancient missionary practices allowed for emissaries to be sent too, and the official had slaves whom he could have sent. In the parallel narrative in Mt 8:5 the centurion himself came to Jesus, while in Lk 7:3 the centurion sent some Jewish elders, i.e. people of authority to Jesus. This seems to emphasize the importance of the situation where the authority of the person asking carries some weight. It seems plausible to conclude that the presence of the royal official himself contributes to the urgency expressed by the father in this narrative. Keener (2005, 633) also notes that it was not uncommon to meet somebody underway with a message, as the slaves do here (he refers to Cicero *Fam.* 4.12.2; Mk 5:35; Lk 7:6).

4. IS THERE A SOURCE(S) BEHIND 4:46-54?

A major issue in John 4:46-54 is its link to the synoptic tradition, specifically its relation to the synoptic narratives in Mt 8:5-13 and Lk 7:1-10 (Haenchen 1980, 260-261; Beasley-Murray 1999, 71). Basic to this discussion are different views of the relationship between the Synoptics and John. This complex matter cannot be discussed here in any detail but some remarks are needed (see Lindars 1992, 1985-2000; Labahn & Lang 2004:443-516). The relationship between these three passages was already noticed by Irenaeus, Origen and Chrysostom (Plummer 1929, 128). The latter two were against a single tradition, while the position of Irenaeus is not clear.

The basic flow of the narratives is similar, but there are several significant differences. For instance, the father is described as a royal official in John while he is identified as a centurion in the Synoptics. In Luke the centurion sends some Jewish elders to Jesus. In John the event takes place in Cana, while in both Synoptic narratives it takes place in Capernaum. In John the son has a fever; Luke does not mention the nature of the illness, while in Matthew he is paralyzed. In Matthew and Luke the petitioners feel unworthy while in John this is not highlighted. In John Jesus rebukes and heals at a distance, while in Luke Jesus accompanies the petitioner (cf. Schnackenburg 1968, 471-474; Brown 1971, 192-194; Köstenberger 2004, 169).

Schnackenburg (1968, 471) generalizes when pointing out that the tendency among Protestant theologians was to accept that there was one tradition that found expression in three variations (see also Kysar 1986, 73), while Catholic theologians tended to argue for a different independent incident that resulted in the Johannine narrative. It is difficult to determine what the situation actually was, since the similarities as well as differences are noteworthy (cf. Schnackenburg 1968, 471-474; Brown 1971, 192-194) and it depends on how the similarities and differences are evaluated by the interpreter. However, it seems that one can exclude neither of the possibilities. Brown (1968, 193), for instance, takes a careful middle road by arguing that most of the differences could be explained logically if one assumes the peculiarities of each Evangelist. The same incident seems to lie behind all three renderings, but the Johannine version developed independently from the others. Köstenberger (2004, 169) argues for two separate occasions being described in John and the Synoptics respectively.

Of special importance for Johannine source criticism is the remark that the healing of the official's son was the second sign done (in Cana), although other signs done in Jerusalem are mentioned elsewhere (2:23; 4:45). This resulted in arguments for a signs source in the Gospel (Bultmann 1971, 206; Fortna 1988). The point of departure for such a signs source hypothesis is taken from this passage, since it is numbered as the second miracle, which leads to identifying a number of miracles that could have completed the list, seven in total (2:1-10; 4:46-54; 5:1-9; 6:1-

13; 6:16-21; 9:1-7; 11:1-54). The general pattern of the “first two” miracles seems to correspond – both happened in Cana, both start with a request, both are followed by a rebuke, both lead to faith – which leads some to conclude that it indicates a unique tradition, or set of signs (cf. Brown 1971, 194-195). They are part of the same signs source (Schnackenburg 1968, 468-470; Bultmann 1971, 113-114). It is then argued that the healing of the son should directly follow the wine miracle in 2:1-10, since 2:12 will serve as an ideal introduction to the healing narrative (scholars like Bultmann, Schnackenburg, Schweizer, Fortna support this argument).

In Mark 7:24-30, and the parallel in Matthew 15:21-28, another healing over a distance is described. There are some agreements, like the petitioner coming urgently to Jesus, Jesus’ rebuke of the woman in Mark, the daughter that was left at home, and Jesus sending the woman home. Brown (1971, 193-194) suggests that these similarities are too few to conclude that there was dependence. However, what it does illustrate is that what we read in John is not simply made up by John.

Although belonging to a later date, the rabbinic narrative of the healing of the son of Rabban Gamaliel is noteworthy (Berakoth 34b). It also narrates a distance-healing. Two disciples were sent to R. Hanina b. Dosa who announced that the son will be healed; the healing took place at the exact same hour (cf. Strack and Billerbeck 1924, 441).

5. WHAT ARE THE MAJOR THEMATIC FOCI OF 4:46-54?

Nicklas (2008, 91) linked his understanding of 4:46-54 to the words of Umberto Eco, namely, that it is an “offenes Kunstwerk”. Although it is a seemingly basic wonder narrative, the interesting nuances in the text, as it is described above, makes it a complex and indeed an open text that allows for multiple interpretations.

In light of the discussion above it can be maintained that several possibilities exist for understanding the message of this passage: Christologically Jesus is confirmed as powerful giver of life (for example, Schnackenburg 1968, 464, 476; Brown 1971, 197; Smith 1999, 128). The important issue of the true nature of faith comes into focus (for example, Schnackenburg 1968, 475-477; Brown 1971, 197; Keener 2005, 633; Nicklas 2008, 90). On a secondary level the passion of a father for his child as well as the acceptance by Jesus of a royal official who may not have been popular may have some deeply human connotations.

The wonder narrative is described as a “sign”, i.e. an event that illustrates the glory and power of Jesus and underlines the spiritual truths he came to teach. The double meaning in which ζάω (give life/heal) is used, invites the reader to see the miracle not only on a human level, but to place it within a spiritual frame. Jesus gives life in an absolute sense. That his life is given for a royal official that was probably not so popular among the Galileans also breaks social barriers. Keener (2005, 633) remarks, “The heart of the story is the assertion that even a royal official in Galilee could respond to Jesus...”. Jesus and the life he gives, knows no borders. He offered life to Nicodemus (3:3, 5, 15-17), to the Samaritan woman (4:10), both of who came to belief. Jesus also offers his life to the royal official – three completely diverse personalities. The message of Jesus’ offer of eternal life that supersedes all borders opens up the scope for conveying this message even today.

If a “sign” is not accepted in faith, it remains just a miracle (Schnackenburg 1968, 464.475-477). True faith is needed, not sign-faith (4:48), or word-faith (4:50), but faith in Jesus, and that in an absolute sense (4:53). This theme, prominent in 4:46-54, is developed through the Gospel as a whole. That is why Nicklas (2008, 104) is correct in describing 4:46-54 as a “Glaubensgeschichte”. Several instances of inadequate faith are mentioned in the Gospel, for instance, 2:23-25 where there is faith on the basis of signs, or 6:60ff. where people doubt the veracity of the message,

or 8:31ff. where there is a lack of correct and obedient action (see Van der Watt 2005, 101-131 for detailed argumentation). Faith like that of the blind man that was healed (Ch. 9) is required. He believed the word of Jesus, defended him in the most adverse situation, was religiously and socially rejected, but nevertheless accepted and worshipped Jesus as the Son of God (9:35-38). For some interpreters, the royal official's faith shows the same kind of characteristics, while for others his faith is still just a signs inspired faith. Schnackenburg (1968, 476) suggests that in 4:48 Jesus warned the Galileans against inferior signs faith, but illustrated through the narrative of the royal official that the Galileans could also come to true faith in Jesus. When one reads the passage in this way, the rebuke against signs faith and the emphasis on the maturing of faith both fulfil a role in the narrative. Kysar (1986, 75) identifies the royal official (in a military role) as a non-Jew and therefore interprets this passage as a critique of the Jews' unbelief. Be that as it may, the requirement for true faith still remains, even today. This narrative invites the reader, not least through the sharp rebuke (4:48), to beware of inadequate faith.

The reader cannot help but have sympathy for this father – he did nothing wrong, to the contrary, in spite of his position (which separated him from ordinary Galileans) he came to Jesus and insisted on help. He believed Jesus' word, without any guarantee and acknowledged Jesus as the giver of life, including his own, by believing. This commitment and loyalty to his child and family should be commended, even today. In the same vein Jesus is pictured as the healer of families, the one who really cares, not only for spiritual matters; he is also prepared to physically heal the son of a royal official.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The complexity of this brief narrative, the rich use of semantics, tensions created and open spaces left within the story, the rhetorical finesse that invites readers to get involved in the narrative are all elements that tempt one to call it a literary gem in its own right. Our investigation showed that it is indeed true that there is little in this narrative that is entirely 'new' or different from the rest of the Gospel. Themes like life and faith are common in the rest of the Gospel. What should be noted is that the narrative is about a royal official from Galilee – a person who most probably belonged to the higher levels of society and was perhaps not so popular among the ordinary people. This narrative is preceded by that of Nicodemus (Ch. 3) and of the Samaritan woman (Ch. 4). In both cases the identity of these people was important to the narrative – the one an important Jew (3:1) and the other an infamous Samaritan woman (4:7, 16-17). The author made sure that the reader understood the identity of these two clearly. The same happened in the case of the royal official; he is not only an official, he is also a man and a father, distinguishing him from the others. To each of these Jesus makes the same offer, irrespective of who they are. His offer is not influenced by personal, social, gender, political, or any other border – his life is indeed for everyone who believes in him. All three with their divergent backgrounds benefited from the same gift! Whoever believes in Jesus will receive the life he gives.

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TREFWOORDE

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