

**The Characterization of Peter in John's Gospel:
An Examination of John 21:15-19**

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The Gospel of John is a remarkable text which has amazed, convicted, and stirred countless readers with its message. From the very first words of his Gospel, John embarks on a sweeping presentation of Jesus' person and mission, in all of its cosmic significance; this Jesus is not merely a man, but the very *logos* of God who was with God in the beginning and who *is* God. Accordingly, the Fourth Gospel has found itself at the center of Christological controversies, most famously in the fourth century. Throughout his Gospel, John emphasizes themes such as testimony, love, truth, light, darkness, and more as he presents his self-testimony as one of Jesus' twelve disciples (John 21:24). Though the traditional view of John's authorship has been challenged by modern interpreters, orthodox interpreters have long identified the author to be John, the son of Zebedee, who also wrote three epistles which bear his name and happen to explore many of the same themes. Many modern interpreters have not only rejected the traditional view of the Gospel's authorship, but they have dismissed the historicity of the account altogether, considering it to be a largely mythological document authored after John's death and containing very little historical information. These critics often cite the Gospel's marked difference from the Synoptic Gospels as proof of its historical unreliability. Certainly, there are significant differences between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics, as D. A. Carson notes in his commentary on John's Gospel.¹ For one, John excludes a significant amount of material which appears in the Synoptics, as he makes no mention of the narrative parables, nor the exorcisms, nor the institution of the Lord's Supper, nor the temptations of Jesus, nor the Transfiguration. Themes which find central emphasis in the Synoptics such as the kingdom of God are scarcely mentioned, while John presents a great deal of material in the Fourth Gospel which is not found in any other account. Such material includes Jesus' miracle at Cana, his ministry in Samaria, his discourse with Nicodemus, his numerous visits to Jerusalem, his resurrection of Lazarus, as well as his extended dialogues in the temple and with his disciples. In addition to these differences in material, a number of thematic, chronological, and stylistic differences between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics can be observed. However, the fact that John's Gospel stands apart from the Synoptics merely suggests that John had a unique purpose in how he chose to organize and present his material, and it says nothing of its historical reliability.

Of course, the unique character of John's Gospel is but one of many reasons that it has garnered such skeptical treatment from modern interpreters. When it comes to interpreting John's Gospel, however, orthodox interpreters would do well not to dismiss every insight of these modern interpreters simply on account of their unorthodox conclusions. In fact, as Robert Strimple remarks in his discussion of Redaction criticism in *The Modern Search For The Real Jesus*, the insights of critical scholars can benefit "Bible-believing" interpreters as they seek to understand the perspectives and particular emphases of each Gospel writer.² Strimple mentions his old professor Ned Stonehouse, a "Bible-believing" scholar who encouraged his students to wrestle with both the unity and the diversity of the Gospels, insisting that by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, each evangelist presents a distinct "portrait" in their Gospel; a notion not dissimilar to the aims of the Redaction critics. By presenting a distinct portrait, Stonehouse means that each of the evangelists made deliberate decisions about how they would organize and present their content in order to best serve their distinct purposes. What then is the distinct portrait presented in John's Gospel? Furthermore, how might the insights of modern interpreters benefit orthodox interpreters as we seek to understand this Gospel? Consider the work of

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 21–23.

² Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus: An Introductory Survey of the Historical Roots of Gospels Criticism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publ, 1995), 147–49.

scholars like David Rhoads, who have approached their interpretations of the Gospels with an eye toward the texts' rhetorical and narrative features. In *Mark As A Story*, David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie present a narrative method for interpreting Mark, in which the work's narrator, setting, plot, characters, and rhetoric are analyzed in order to understand the narrative "on its own terms".³ Though their skeptical presuppositions lead them to conclusions which the orthodox interpreter would disagree with, they present a helpful interpretive method for those seeking to understand the distinct portrait presented in the Gospel of Mark. This paper will demonstrate the usefulness of these interpretive ideas, specifically the analysis of characterization, in the work of exegeting the Fourth Gospel as an orthodox interpreter.

This paper will examine the characterization of Peter and consider how it serves the overall purpose of John's Gospel. Special attention will be paid to a passage found in chapter 21 of John's Gospel, often called The Restoration of Peter, in order to demonstrate the climactic significance of this passage not only in the character arc of Peter, but in the Fourth Gospel as a whole. The purpose of this entire study is to demonstrate how analyzing characterization within the Gospel accounts may be useful to the orthodox interpreter who seeks to understand the distinct portrait presented in John's Gospel, as well as the pastor who labors to "feed his flock" in obedience to the Lord's commission of Peter in this very passage from John chapter 21.

Before examining Peter's characterization, and understanding its significance in the narrative of the larger text, we must first identify the purpose of John's Gospel: what is the distinct "portrait" which he presents in his Gospel? To ask this question is not to doubt the historical reliability of John's account, as though the Gospel is merely a fictional story that John has fabricated, but to ask the purpose behind the choices he makes as the one organizing this historical information. Why has he chosen to include the material that he does, and why does he emphasize certain themes over others? What is motivating these choices? Who is his "ideal audience", and what transformation is he hoping to affect in the hearts of his audience members? Before presenting his own answer to this question of purpose, D.A. Carson provides us with a survey of explanations which have been proffered by scholars over the centuries.⁴ He writes that "many earlier discussions of the purpose of the Fourth Gospel turned on the assumption that John depends on the Synoptic Gospels," noting that this theory is as old as Clement of Alexandria. According to this view, the purpose of John's Gospel is determined by contrasting it with the Synoptics, with many concluding that John presents a "spiritual" gospel, or that he writes in order to supplement the previous works. Alternatively, many modern scholars have proposed that this work sprung out of an isolated, sectarian, Johannine community, written as a polemical handbook for new converts.⁵ Other scholars have sought to explain John's purpose as narrowly revolving around a single theme, such as writing in order to win Samaritan converts,⁶ or writing with a primarily sociological focus,⁷ or in order to present a docetic Christology.⁸ Lastly, many scholars have taken what Carson describes as a "synthetic" approach, so that John's purpose is at once "to evangelize Jews, evangelize Hellenists, to strengthen the church, to

³ David M. Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 6–8.

⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 87–90.

⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (SNT 14; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967).

⁶ E. D. Freed, *Old Testament Quotations in the Gospel of John* (Lund: Gleerup, 1985).

⁷ David Rensberger, *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John* (SPCK, 1988)

⁸ E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, tr. Gerhard Krodel (ET SCM, 1968).

catechize new converts, to provide materials for the evangelization of Jews, and so forth.”⁹ The issue with this approach, Carson argues, is that it wrongly conflates plausible effects with purpose.

What then is the true purpose of John’s Gospel? Carson reasonably recommends that the first place to begin is with John’s own statement of his purpose: “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these 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 20:30-31). He compares this statement with the stated purpose of 1 John: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). He convincingly argues that in light of this verse from John’s first epistle, which was clearly written to encourage existing Christians, the stated purpose of John’s Gospel seems emphatically evangelistic in nature. Furthermore, Carson argues that the question that John seeks to answer about the Messiah is not a question of kind, but of identity; that is, John assumes that his readers already possess some familiarity with what “the Christ” means, and have some sort of messianic expectation, and he intends to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of their expectation. For this reason, Carson concludes that the specific audience which John aims to evangelize is comprised of Jews and Jewish proselytes.¹⁰

Carson supports this proposed purpose of John’s Gospel throughout his commentary. The claim that John has a biblically literate audience in mind is supported by the number of implicit allusions to the Old Testament which presuppose a strong familiarity with the Old Testament. Carson’s argument finds support from other scholars, like R. Alan Culpepper, who in his work *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* notes several indications that the implied reader has extensive knowledge of the Old Testament, Jewish institutions and festivals, and Jewish beliefs and practices.¹¹ Others have rejected Carson’s proposal that John’s Gospel is an evangelistic work, pointing to passages such as John 14-17 which they claim could not be viewed as primarily evangelistic. Some scholars, such as Craig Blomberg, have questioned whether John would have included such virulent polemics against Jesus’ Jewish opponents if his goal was to win them over.¹² But Carson anticipates this rebuttal, explaining that the evangelist would need to justify “‘how we got from there to here’, especially if the targeted audience was Jewish.”¹³ Secondly, he argues, “the best evangelistic literature not only explains *why* one should become a Christian, and *how* to become a Christian, but *what it means* to be a Christian. John 14 – 17 addresses those concerns rather pointedly, and numerous details within those chapters likewise suggest an evangelistic thrust.”

In summary, Carson argues compellingly that the Fourth Gospel is written as an evangelistic tract to Jews and Jewish proselytes, in order that they may believe that Jesus is indeed the Christ. But how will these audience members respond to John’s testimony? As John lays out his testimony, he seems to anticipate that many of his audience members are reluctant to embrace Jesus as “the Christ” out of fear of the repercussions they may incur. Consider verses 42

⁹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Word Books, 1987).

¹⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 90–91.

¹¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, Nachdr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), 219–22.

¹² Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, Third edition (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2022), 280.

¹³ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 92.

and 43 of chapter 12: “Nevertheless many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.” In chapter 9, a similar response is seen as the Jews interrogate the parents of the man whose sight was restored by Jesus in verses 20 – 23: “His parents answered, ‘we know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’ (His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.)”

These passages hold up the mirror to the ideal audience, those Jews and Jewish proselytes who have heard the testimony about Jesus, but remain sitting firmly “on-the-fence”, and asks: “How will *you* respond?” Consider Carson’s comments on these verses:

If the setting of this book is as proposed in this commentary – written toward the end of the first century with the primary aim of evangelizing Jews and Jewish proselytes – then John’s readers, if they are becoming sympathetic to Jesus at all, must now identify themselves either with the parents, whose faith was not strong enough to act with courage, or with the healed man, who comes to a growing understanding of who Jesus is. His eyes were opened, physically and spiritually, and the frank confession of his new faith, even in the face of distinguished opposition, provides a model for a new generation of Jews and Jewish proselytes who are coming to faith.¹⁴

These passages are not the only way that John holds a mirror to his audience in order to challenge, stir, and affect transformation within them. At this point, we turn our attention to Peter, one of the most significant characters in the Gospel of John, and the subject of our analysis. As David Rhoads demonstrates in *Mark As A Story*, characterization is one of the primary features employed by an author in accomplishing their purpose, as characters play a significant role in how the author convicts, encourages, challenges, and otherwise affects their audience members.¹⁵ But how exactly does John present the character of Peter, and how does it serve his aim of evangelizing his Jewish audience? A consideration of Peter’s characterization is in order. In the foreword of his book, *Peter*, F. B. Meyer writes:

Peter comes nearer to us than any of his brother Apostles. We revere James, the brother of our Lord, for his austere saintliness. We strain our eyes in the effort to follow John to the serene heights, whither his eagle-wing bore him. But Peter is so human, so like ourselves in his downittings and uprisings, so compassed with infirmity, that we are encouraged to hope that perhaps the Great Potter may be able to make something even of our common clay... It needed the Saviour’s insight to discover an Apostle in Simon Bar-Jona, the fisherman; and the Saviour’s patient culture to elicit the dormant qualities of his character, which speak in every paragraph of his Epistles, and fitted him to be the leader of the Primitive Church. But if the Master could do so much for him, what may He not effect, my reader, for thee and me?¹⁶

¹⁴ Carson, 372.

¹⁵ Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 123–30.

¹⁶ F. B. Meyer, *Peter: fisherman, disciple, apostle, a biblical biography* (Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Adansonia Press, 2018), 5.

Meyer's foreword captures one of the qualities of Peter which have most intrigued interpreters from the beginning: readers see themselves within Peter. No disciple of Jesus is so vividly portrayed, especially within the Gospel of John. When we consider the character of Peter within the narrative of John, we find that he plays a significant role in John's aim of evangelizing his audience, functioning as a mirror held in front of the audience, not unlike the function of the verses quoted above. In order to see the function of his character, compare his characterization to that of Judas and the Beloved Disciple.

Professor R. Alan Culpepper explores the characterization of the disciples within his work, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, and offers a description of these three. Culpepper describes John, the Beloved Disciple, saying, "he is unlike the other Johannine characters only in that he is the ideal disciple, the paradigm of discipleship. He has no misunderstandings."¹⁷ John is loved by Jesus, reclining on his chest at the Last Supper in a position of favor and intimacy, and the only disciple mentioned at the foot of the cross, to whom Jesus entrusts the care of his mother. Furthermore, it is John who is identified as the Gospel's narrator; the one who has borne true witness. As Culpepper reiterates, "he is the epitome of the ideal disciple. In him belief, love, and faithful witness are joined." Meanwhile, Judas is described as one "representing the humanization of the cosmic forces of evil," who is "the representative defector."¹⁸ His betrayal is known by Jesus from the beginning (6:64), and he is described as a devil (6:70). Though Jesus and the Father will enter their disciples, it is the devil who enters Judas (13:27). John makes no mention of the payment of silver, nor does he provide any motivation nor depict any remorse on the part of Judas over his betrayal of Jesus.

If John is the epitome of the ideal disciple, and Judas is the representative defector, who is Peter? Culpepper describes Peter saying, "Next to Jesus, Peter is the most complex character."¹⁹ While the other two disciples are flat, two-dimensional characters, Peter is complex: at times, he shares a resemblance with John, and at other times, he more closely resembles Judas. Yet, Peter is altogether a unique, dynamic character. As we examine Peter's characterization, and understand his role in John's narrative, let's first consider how John introduces him into the narrative. In chapter 1, we read, "[Andrew] brought [Simon Peter] to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas' (which means Peter)" (1:42). In his introduction in John's Gospel, Simon is given the name "Peter" by Jesus, which means "rock". Many scholars have pondered the significance of Peter's renaming. Bultmann concludes that Jesus shows himself to be the one "who recognizes and sees into the hearts of the strangers whom he meets,"²⁰ while Westcott notes that "the title appears to mark not so much the natural character of the Apostle as the spiritual office to which he was called."²¹ Carson writes, "This is not so much a merely predictive utterance as a declaration of what Jesus will make of him."²² John's presentation of Peter's renaming contrasts with the Synoptic accounts' presentation. In Matthew's account, Peter's renaming is found after his confession at Caesarea, alongside Jesus' statement, "on this *rock* I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it," connecting Peter's confession with the establishment of the church. However, in John's gospel, we are given no such explanation of the

¹⁷ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 121.

¹⁸ Culpepper, 124–25.

¹⁹ Culpepper, 120.

²⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 101–2.

²¹ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 25.

²² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 156.

significance behind the renaming. Many scholars note a degree of irony behind Peter's name and the impetuous and cowardly behavior that he will later express, with F. D. Bruner remarking, "'Sandy', not 'Rocky', might have been a more apt nickname for Peter."²³ An explanation of Peter's name is not all that is absent from Peter's introduction, however. Conspicuously absent from this section is an explicit call for Peter to "follow" Jesus. This stands out, as Andrew and Philip are both instructed to "come" and "follow" Jesus in the passages immediately before and after Peter's introduction. Per John's construction, though Jesus has claimed Peter in chapter 1, and even declared what he will make of him, the instructions "follow me" are reserved for much later in John's Gospel.

As we consider Peter's characterization as the narrative unfolds, we see that on the one hand, Peter shares many of the traits of an ideal disciple with John. He appears alongside him in many scenes, including the Last Supper, the empty tomb, the miraculous catch of fish after the resurrection, and the final conversation with Jesus in chapter 21. Though many have characterized this relationship between the two disciples as a rivalry, commentators like Carson assert that this "[flies] in the face of the Fourth Gospel as a whole, where the two are presented as friends, not competitors."²⁴ Indeed, when the two disciples appear together in these scenes, they express a shared devotion to Jesus, appearing less as competitors and more as teammates. Peter is portrayed positively in other passages as well; in chapter 6, he has the insight to see that Jesus is the Holy One of God whose words are the words of life, and time after time he demonstrates an unmatched zeal for his master (13:9, 13:37, 18:10, 20:6, 21:7).

Unlike the Beloved Disciple, however, Peter frequently demonstrates incomprehension and impetuosity²⁵ (13:6-8, 13:37-38), as well as over-confidence. In chapter 13, as Jesus speaks of going away, and Peter interprets that Jesus is speaking of his death, Peter speaks up. "Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered him, 'Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.' Peter said to him, 'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.'" (John 13:36-38) Jesus rebukes Peter, challenging his profession of loyalty, and foretells Peter's greatest failure. In chapter 18, we see this foretold threefold denial of his master; as he stands in the courtyard of the High Priest, warming himself by the coals, Peter is asked three times whether he is a disciple of Jesus, and he denies Jesus each time. In this moment, Peter more closely resembles Judas the defector than the Beloved Disciple. The dramatic framing of this chapter casts Peter's fearful denial alongside Jesus' unflinching testimony, moving between the two different scenes as they unfold simultaneously. Jesus' answer to his interrogators, "Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said," is ironically followed by Peter's insistent denial. Rather than standing with his master in the face of the world's questioning, and bearing witness to the truth, Peter denies his master, fearing the repercussions that he might incur.

In light of the purpose and ideal audience of John's Gospel which we have identified, Peter's threefold denial takes on unique rhetorical significance. Peter may be accurately described as a proxy, or a surrogate, for the ideal audience member; that is, Peter represents the audience member within the story. Like the members of John's ideal audience, Peter is a fence-

²³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2012), 1233.

²⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 639.

²⁵ Carson, 463-64; Carson, 485-86.

sitter. As we saw earlier, John's ideal audience members are those who are hearing the testimony of Jesus but have yet to embrace this testimony in faith. Like the Pharisees of 12:42-43, some of them may even find the testimony trustworthy and true, yet for fear of the repercussions they may incur, "they [will] not confess it". Like these passages from chapter 9 and 12, which show the reluctance of the hearer to embrace the testimony of Jesus, John uses Peter's threefold denial to hold a mirror in front of the ideal audience member. Will the one who hears this testimony confess faith in their master, though it should incur the enmity of the world? Or like Peter, will they deny him out of fear, thereby rejecting him, and rejecting the one who sent him?

Of course, Peter's story does not end in the courtyard of the High Priest. The next mention of Peter comes after the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. In chapter 20, John recounts Mary Magdalene's visit to the tomb. When she finds that the stone has been taken away, she runs to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, saying "They have taken to Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (20:2). Hearing this, Peter and John race to the tomb, and though John arrives first, it is Peter who first enters into the tomb, only to find linen cloths. John enters after him, and the text notes, "and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes" (20:9-10). Commentators have interpreted the details of these verses in a variety of ways, with regard to the characterization of Peter and John.²⁶ Bultmann concludes that the race to the tomb is representative of the Jewish and Gentile believing communities, with Peter symbolizing the Jews who were first to believe, and John symbolizing the Gentiles who showed greater "readiness for faith" by running more swiftly to the tomb.²⁷ Bultmann stands with a minority of scholars who conclude from this passage that both John and Peter are described here as coming to faith.²⁸ Many others have concluded from the lack of mention of Peter's belief that only John sees and believes, finding support for this conclusion in Luke's account which says that Peter "went away, wondering to himself what had happened" (24:12). That evening, Jesus returns to his disciples as he had promised before (14:18, 16:20-22), and they are overjoyed to see him. Eight days later, Jesus appears to his disciples once again, this time with Thomas present. However, the restoration of Peter is reserved for the third appearance.

The Restoration of Peter is a moment of climactic significance, not only in the characterization of Peter, but in the Fourth Gospel as a whole. In the beginning of chapter 21, we read that seven of the disciples have gone fishing together, with Simon Peter leading the way. Verse 3: "Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing." The following morning, Jesus, whom the disciples do not recognize, calls to them from the shore: "Jesus said to them, 'Children do you have any fish?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea." (21:5-7) Commentators have disagreed on how we ought to judge the behavior of the disciples in returning to their nets, with some insisting that returning to their nets represents a failure on the part of the disciples, while others make no such judgment. E. C. Hoskyns describes the disciples' return to their nets as

²⁶ Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 1146-47.

²⁷ Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 685.

²⁸ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 638.

“complete apostasy,”²⁹ while C. K. Barrett calls it “unthinkable” that “Peter and his brother disciples should contemplate a return to their former occupation after the events of chapter 20.”³⁰ On the other hand, F. F. Bruce insists that there is no reason to conclude that the disciples had abandoned their commission by returning to their nets.³¹ Carson agrees that the disciples had gone to Galilee not to fish, nor to abandon their commission, but out of obedience to the Lord’s command, though he notes, “this fishing expedition and the dialogue that ensues do not read like the lives of men on a Spirit-empowered mission. It is impossible to imagine any of this taking place in Acts, *after Pentecost*.”³² Either way, Peter’s actions are not that of a man who is running away. Instead, he shows his trademark impetuosity, eagerly throwing himself into the sea and swimming to shore at the sight of Jesus. “Characteristically, the beloved disciple exhibits quick insight, and Peter quick action.”³³

As the disciples bring the boat to shore, towing the net full of fish, they find that Jesus has made a charcoal fire and has prepared fish and bread to eat. Peter hauls in the untorn net full of fish, and the disciples join Jesus for a meal. After their breakfast, we read about the climactic exchange between Jesus and Peter in verses 15 through 19:

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Jesus poses the question: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Strikingly, Jesus refers to his disciple not by the name he gave him at their first meeting, but as “Simon, son of John.” James Boice comments on the significance of Jesus’ use of “Simon”: “It was Peter’s old name, the name he had possessed before he met Jesus... This was a play on words... Jesus said that he was going to name Peter ‘a rock.’ He was saying that he was going to turn Peter the jellyfish into a solid and courageous person. Now, in recollection of this earlier incident, Jesus goes back to the old name in order to remind Peter of his weakness.”³⁴ Many scholars, such as Craig Blomberg, have interpreted Jesus’ use of “Simon” as a deliberate callback to Peter’s introduction, arguing that this chapter creates an “inclusio” with chapter 1.³⁵ He also

²⁹ E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, edited by F. N. Davey (Faber and Faber, 1954), 552.

³⁰ C. K. Barret, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and notes on the Greek Text* (SPCK, 1947), 579

³¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament 05 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1984), 399.

³² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 669.

³³ Carson, 671.

³⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary*, Pbk. ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2005), 1637.

³⁵ Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 570.

notes that the accompanying miracle of the miraculous catch is strikingly reminiscent of Peter's original calling in Luke's account. However, John chooses not to make any mention of the first miraculous catch when he introduces Peter. Instead, John excludes Peter's call to leave his nets and follow Jesus (Matt 4:22, Mark 1:20, Luke 5:11), and he only mentions the post-resurrection miraculous catch, after which Jesus will explicitly call Peter to "follow" him (21:19).

As for Jesus' question, "do you love me more than these," scholars have noted that there are a few possible interpretations. Jesus could mean, "do you love me more than you love these people," or "do you love me more than these things," referring to the fishing equipment. However, most scholars have agreed from the context that Jesus is asking whether Peter has a greater love for Jesus than the other disciples do. As Carson notes: "This [reading] makes sense. Peter has always been able to advance the strongest personal boast. On the night Jesus was betrayed, while others were growing quiet, Peter could insist, 'I will lay down my life for you.' [not "We" and "our"!]" (13:37). It was Peter who slashed at Malchus (18:10). Cf. Matthew 26:33. But physical courage was not enough that night, and it was Peter also, spirit willing but flesh weak, who publicly disowned the Lord."³⁶ Peter replies to Jesus: "Yes Lord; you know that I love you." In his reply, Peter excludes any boast or comparison between himself and the other disciples, simply affirming his love for Jesus, insisting that Jesus knows it to be true. Carson notes: "Jesus' initial question probes Peter to the depth of his being. He does not try to answer in terms of the relative strength of his love as compared with that of other disciples. He appeals rather to the Lord's knowledge. Despite my bitter failure, he says in effect, I love you – *you know that I love you*. Jesus accepts his declaration, doubtless to Peter's relief, and commissions him: *Feed my lambs*."³⁷

There is a great deal of interpretive discussion which has swirled around this passage, particularly related to John's use of two different words for love, ἀγαπάω and φιλέω. The big interpretive question is why John uses these two different words for love, and whether he intends a distinction between them or uses them interchangeably. When Jesus asks the question the first two times, he uses the verb ἀγαπάω: "Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με πλεον τούτων;". Peter responds using the verb φιλέω: "σὺ οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε". The third time, however, Jesus uses the word φιλέω, and Peter again responds with φιλέω: "Σίμων Ἰωάννου, φιλεῖς με; ... κύριε, πάντα σὺ οἶδας, σὺ γινώσκεις ὅτι φιλῶ σε." In the past, it was common among interpreters to draw a distinction between these two words for love,³⁸ with ἀγαπάω denoting the stronger, more Godly love, while φιλέω denotes a lower form of love, described as a natural love or personal affection.³⁹ The common interpretation of this passage was that Jesus means to test Peter by asking whether he loves Jesus with the loftiest form of love, to which a no-longer-boastful Peter, finally recognizing his frailty, responds in humility: "No, but I love you with the ardor of personal affection."⁴⁰ The third time, when Jesus adopts Peter's wording, these interpreters insist that he does so in order to question whether Peter truly loves him with this less-than-total devotion that he claims, to which Peter takes offense and appeals even more strongly to Jesus' omniscience. There are some contemporary interpreters, like James Boice and John MacArthur, who have continued to hold to this interpretation, noting a strong distinction between these two

³⁶ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 676.

³⁷ Carson, 677.

³⁸ Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series 4 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), 495.

³⁹ Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 303.

⁴⁰ Meyer, *Peter*, 113.

words for love.⁴¹ However, the prevailing view today is that John does not intend a strong distinction. Carson ably argues for this position in his commentary.⁴² He supports this claim with the fact that the verbs are used interchangeably throughout the Fourth Gospel, as well as in the LXX where no reliable distinction is found. Furthermore, ἀγαπάω is used both in the LXX and in the New Testament to describe love which is ungodly in nature (2 Sam. 13, 2 Tim. 4:10), and even those who have noted a distinction between the two loves have done so inconsistently; some describe ἀγαπάω as an emotionless altruism, far too cold to describe Peter’s affection, while others have seen ἀγαπάω as the loftier, Christian love. Bruce comments: “When two such distinguished Greek scholars [Trench and Westcott], both, moreover, tending to argue from the standards of classical Greek, see the significance of the synonyms so differently, we may wonder if indeed we are intended to see such distinct significance.”⁴³ In the view of Carson, Blomberg, Bruce, and others, the use of ἀγαπάω and φιλέω is merely a minor variation for stylistic purposes.⁴⁴ They point out that in the same passage, we encounter two other synonymous word pairings employed: βόσκω and ποιμαίνω, which mean to “feed” and “take care of”, and ἀρνίον and πρόβατον, which mean “lamb” and “sheep”. Carson concludes, “These have not stirred homiletical imaginations; it is difficult to see why the first pair should.”

What are we to make of Jesus’ threefold questioning of Peter’s love? Is Jesus simply unsatisfied with Peter’s answers? In light of the characterization of Peter throughout this Gospel, many interpreters have noted that this threefold repetition of Peter’s affirmation is meant as a callback to Peter’s threefold denial of Christ in chapter 18.⁴⁵ The reader is reminded of Peter’s denial not only by the threefold questioning, but also by the mention of the charcoal fire, which harkens back to the High Priest’s courtyard. Jesus’ purpose in this threefold questioning is to overturn Peter’s threefold denial in order to restore, affirm, and commission him for the work of pastoral ministry. This commission is seen in the threefold command to βόσκω and ποιμαίνω. Bruce remarks, “What is important is that Peter reaffirms his love for the Lord and is rehabilitated and recommissioned. The commission is a pastoral one. When first he was called from his occupation of catching fish to be a follower of Jesus, he was told that thenceforth he would catch men (Luke 5:10; cf. Mark 1:17). Now to the evangelist’s hook there is added the pastor’s crook, so that, as had often been said, Peter proceeded to fulfil his double commission ‘by hook and by crook.’”⁴⁶ Carson makes a similar observation: “The emphasis is now on the pastoral rather than the evangelistic (cf. v. 11). Peter’s love for his Lord, and the evidence of his reinstatement, are both to be displayed in Peter’s pastoral care for the Lord’s flock (cf. Jn. 10)”⁴⁷ Carson also notes the public nature of Peter’s restoration, arguing that this passage should be interpreted as taking place in the presence of the disciples, based on the immediacy implied in the opening words “When they had finished eating.” He notes the necessity of such a visible restoration: “As Peter had boasted of his reliability in the presence of his fellow disciples, so this restoration to public ministry is effected in a similarly public environment... Whatever potential

⁴¹ John MacArthur, *John 12-21* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 401; Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 1637.

⁴² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 676–77.

⁴³ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 405.

⁴⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 677; Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 571; Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 404.

⁴⁵ Herman N. Ridderbos, John Vriend, and Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 665; Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 570–71; Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 678.

⁴⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 405.

⁴⁷ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 677–78.

for future service he had therefore depended not only on forgiveness from Jesus, but also on reinstatement amongst the disciples.”⁴⁸

After the threefold questioning, Jesus says to Peter, “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go” (21:18). These words are spoken to Peter as a prophecy of the way in which he will die, which John himself explains in the following verse: “(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God).” The phrase “stretch out your hands” was widely understood in the ancient world as referring to crucifixion, and by the time John’s Gospel was written, Carson proposes that this prediction had likely already been fulfilled in Peter’s crucifixion.⁴⁹ Carson notes, “And thus he imitates Christ, not only in the kind of death he suffers (cf. 12:33; 18:32), but also, though to a lesser extent, in bringing glory to God by his death (cf. 12:27-28; 13:31-32; 17:1) ... What is undisputed is that the indelible shame Peter bore for his public disowning of the Lord Jesus Christ on the night he was sentenced to death was forgiven by the Lord himself, and subsequently overwhelmed by the apostle’s fruitful ministry and martyrdom.”⁵⁰

After this prophecy of the manner of Peter’s death, we read, “And after saying this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’” How do we interpret these words of Jesus? Is he simply inviting Peter to follow him on a walk along the beach? In context with the rest of this book, and the analysis of Peter’s characterization in the Fourth Gospel, we find climactic significance in these words. After restoring and commissioning Peter for the work of pastoral ministry, and foretelling Peter’s martyrdom – through which Peter will ultimately make good on his broken pledge in chapter 13, to lay down his life for his master – Jesus calls Peter to follow him into both ministry and martyrdom. John has reserved Jesus’ explicit call for Peter to follow him until this climactic moment. The culminating, climactic significance of this moment is further underscored by the number of callbacks to the significant moments in Peter’s journey so far, from his introduction and renaming, to his boast at the Last Supper, to his threefold denial; all these find their culmination in Peter’s restoration and subsequent calling. Furthermore, the audience is not left with any uncertainty about whether Peter will respond to Jesus’ call. Not only would his fruitful ministry as a Spirit-filled leader, preacher and pastor have preceded John’s testimony and been well-known among his audience, but John’s interpretation of the prophecy itself assures the reader of how Peter’s story will end; he will follow Jesus until the end. Peter is a vacillating fence-sitter no more, and his place as a beloved disciple has been confirmed.

When we consider the function of Peter’s character in the context of John’s Gospel, as a proxy for the ideal audience member, what we find in the climax of Peter’s character arc is a challenge for the audience. The audience member has heard the testimony about Jesus, and they too have been called to follow Christ in faith. Will they allow themselves to be ruled by fear? Will they be content to remain fence-sitters? Or will they follow Christ, no matter the cost? Suppose that *φιλέω* is interpreted as describing the love of a friend, as it is often employed outside of John’s Gospel, and *ἀγαπάω* is interpreted as that love which expresses itself in selfless action, as many have posited; is the audience member content to remain merely a friend of Jesus,

⁴⁸ Carson, 675–76.

⁴⁹ Carson, 680.

⁵⁰ Carson, 679–80.

or will they love Jesus with the sacrificial love which Peter demonstrates in his martyrdom? Regardless of how these words are translated, this is the main thrust that we find in this passage. In conclusion, we see that this passage not only has culminating, climactic significance in the character arc of Peter, but it is a climactic moment in the Gospel as a whole. John's purpose in his evangelistic writing is to affect transformation within the hearts of his Jewish audience members, in order that they "may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [they] may have life in his name". John concludes his Gospel by holding up a mirror to his audience one last time, through the proxy character of Peter, calling them to respond in faith; calling them to follow Christ, no matter the harm and hatred they will incur.

What can we conclude from this study? As exegetes, pastors, and students of Scripture, let us recognize the extraordinary beauty of Scripture. Let us not neglect the unity, nor the diversity, of the various Gospel accounts, but appreciate the distinct portraits found within each. Let us not forget that these authors wrote with distinct purposes in mind, and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have deliberately organized and presented their information to accomplish these purposes. Let us appreciate both the robust narrative beauty and the infallible historical reliability of the Spirit-breathed Scripture, neither reducing Scripture to cold, historical fact, nor treating it as merely a story. As this study has demonstrated, by studying the author's use of narrative elements like characterization, the student of Scripture can uncover rich pastoral insight. For instance, how many within our own churches need to look to Peter's restoration and be reminded that no matter the seriousness of their failure, Christ offers restoration? How many need to hear that no matter the weakness of their faith and the fickleness of their love, the object of their faith is one who himself is faithful, and one who will transform us into his own likeness? How many could benefit from seeing the life of the Christian epitomized in the character of Peter who, though he proves himself disloyal, runs to his savior in desperation, hurling himself overboard in order to be reconciled, restored, and recommissioned? And how many still remain on the fence right now? How many need to hear the challenge of John, calling them to respond to his testimony in faith, no matter the cost? These are but a few of the pastoral insights that such an analysis can bring to the surface. May these interpretive methods aid us in the work of fulfilling Jesus' commission in this very passage, as we labor to feed his sheep.

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