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Character in Antiquity and Modernity
Deconstructing the Dominant Pattern/Paradigm

In the previous chapter, I suggested that many scholars assume or work with a set of beliefs or a paradigm based on particular views regarding character in antiquity and modernity. The minimum pattern prevalent in New Testament character studies shares three assumptions: (i) Hebraic and Hellenic characterization is radically different; (ii) ancient and modern characterization is radically different; (iii) modern literary methods of fiction apply to biblical narratives. We observed that this pattern (or paradigm) is a fair sample or reflection of the kind of thinking and practice that is common in biblical scholarship regarding the study of character in New Testament narrative. While acknowledging there are different voices too (and some of these will be in agreement with the argument in this chapter), this has not resulted in a consensus on how to approach character in the New Testament. In this chapter, I wish to argue that the pattern or paradigm we identified is flawed and needs replacing with one that more accurately reflects the nature of character in antiquity and also justifies the incorporation of insights from modern literary theory. We must, therefore, reexamine character in *both* ancient Hebrew and Greco-Roman literature *and* modern literary narrative in order to develop a robust, comprehensive theory of character for New Testament studies. In this chapter, I seek to deconstruct the existing pattern or paradigm of character reconstruction, and in the next chapter, I will construct a new paradigm.

The rationale for looking at ancient Hebrew and Greco-Roman literature is easy to explain. First, the Jewish roots of early Christianity are obvious: (i) the Hebrew Bible (the source document of Judaism) was readily accepted by early Christians as part of their heritage, and (ii) the New Testament (the source document of early Christianity) builds on and reflects this Jewish heritage.

It would be safe, therefore, to assume that the New Testament authors were familiar with characterization in the Hebrew Bible. Second, early Christianity spread rapidly beyond Palestine into various parts of the Greco-Roman world, and most New Testament documents were composed in this environment. As such, the authors may also have had an understanding of characterization in Greco-Roman literature. Besides, all of first-century Judaism—both in Palestine and the Diaspora—had been permeated to various degrees by Hellenistic culture.[1] It is therefore not surprising that Gospel critics have almost reached a consensus that the Gospels, in terms of genre, belong or correspond to the Greco-Roman biography or βίος.[2] Fred Burnett goes so far as to say that, due to a lack of comparable presentation of character in Jewish literature, Gospel critics have been forced to turn to Greek classical literature for the study of character.[3] I will closely examine ancient Greco-Roman literature because many biblical scholars still view characters in this body of literature as types.

The rationale for looking at modern literary narrative is that narrative criticism of the Gospels is derived from contemporary literary theory. In addition, character and characterization are subjects of literary inquiry, so we assume that we can gain insights from the study of character in modern literary theory. There is the danger, however, that we may compare apples and oranges since critics contend that character and characterization in ancient and modern literature are very different. We have also seen that many scholars contend that within ancient literature, character in the Hebrew Bible differs greatly from that in Greek literature. Hence, we must examine whether it is legitimate to apply modern methods used in literary theory to ancient narratives *and* if we can compare Hebrew and Greek literature regarding character.

On this point, I draw attention to one challenge to my previous study of ancient character. Richard Rohrbaugh, an authority on the social and cultural

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1. This has been forcefully argued by Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1974).

2. The compelling case for this has been provided by Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). Cf. David E. Aune, "Greco-Roman Biography," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres*, ed. David E. Aune (SBLSBS 21; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 107–26; Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14–18; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 184–86; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 276. Among those who are skeptical of viewing the Gospels as ancient βίοι is Peter Stuhlmacher, "The Genre(s) of the Gospels," in *The Interrelations of the Gospels*, ed. D. L. Dungan (BETL 95; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 484–94. Burridge responds to some critical reviews in his *What Are the Gospels?*, ch. 11.

3. Burnett, "Characterization," 7–8.

world of the New Testament, questions the legitimacy of applying modern literary methods to analyze characters in ancient texts. In a scathing review of my 2009 work, he alleges that I naïvely use modern trait-names for understanding ancient characters, and questions how I infer a character's traits from the text.[4] If Rohrbaugh is right, my efforts to deconstruct and reconstruct a paradigm to understand character in the New Testament will be largely in vain. I must therefore address two pertinent hermeneutical issues: (i) the legitimacy of applying modern literary methods to study ancient characters; and (ii) the suitability of the method of inference to reconstruct characters from a text. Is it hermeneutically viable and valid to compare ancient and modern characterization? I will seek to respond to Richard Rohrbaugh's criticism, arguing that it is not only legitimate but also necessary to draw on modern labels to infer a character's traits.

2.1. Character in Ancient Hebrew Literature

Looking at ancient narrative literature, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg comment that "[c]haracters in primitive stories are invariably 'flat,' 'static,' and quite 'opaque'" and "[t]he inward life is assumed but not presented in primitive narrative literature, whether Hebraic or Hellenic."[5] This view, however, has not won over critics of Hebrew narrative, due to the influential works of scholars such as Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, Meir Sternberg, and Shimon Bar-Efrat.[6] Alter argues that the Bible's sparse portrayal of character in fact creates scope for a variety of possible interpretations of human individuality because "[w]e are compelled to get at character and motive . . . through a process of inference from fragmentary data, often with crucial pieces of narrative exposition strategically withheld, and this leads to multiple or sometimes even wavering perspectives on the characters."[7] Both Alter and Sternberg have developed the idea that the author's reticence in characterization invites (even requires) the reader to reconstruct character through inference or "filling the gaps."[8] In addition, since information about a character is conveyed primarily

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4. Richard L. Rohrbaugh, Review of Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John*, *BTB* 41 (2011): 110–11.

5. Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg, *Nature of Narrative*, 164–67 (quotations from p. 164 and p. 166 respectively). This view has been maintained since the 1966 edition.

6. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTS 70; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989).

7. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 114–15, 126 (quotation taken from p. 126).

through indirect characterization, that is, through the subject's speech and actions rather than inward speech or statements by the narrator, we are essentially left in the realm of inference.[9] Sternberg emphasizes that the reader's task of gap-filling is legitimate and by no means an arbitrary process, since any hypothesis must be validated by the text.[10]

Alter adds that Hebrew characters who are dealt with at any length exhibit a capacity for change, and this developing and transforming nature of character is one reason biblical characters cannot be reduced to fixed Homeric types—Jacob is not simply "wily Jacob," Moses is not "sagacious Moses."[11] Sternberg agrees that biblical characters can display change, unpredictability, ambiguity, complexity, and surprise.[12] Indeed, characters such as Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Saul, or David can hardly be labeled as "static," "type," or "flat." Sternberg goes on to say that "[c]onsidering the range of the Bible's portrait gallery, it is amazing how distinct and memorable its figures remain, without benefit of formal portrayal. And this is largely due to the surplus of inner life expressed in act and speech."[13] Gowler affirms that Scholes and Kellogg's claim that the inner life of characters is assumed rather than presented is easily disproved because the narrator does provide readers with the inner life of characters when necessary, as Gen. 27:41 and 2 Sam. 13:15, for example, indicate.[14] Alter aptly concludes that "the underlying biblical conception of character as often unpredictable, in some ways impenetrable, constantly emerging from and slipping back into a penumbra of ambiguity, in fact has greater affinity with dominant modern notions than do the habits of conceiving character typical of the Greek epics."[15]

On the relation between character and plot, Sternberg argues that character is not subordinated to plot (as in Aristotle's view and modern

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8. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, ch. 6; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, ch. 6. Cf. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, ch. 2; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 33–42.

9. Cf. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116–17. Bar-Efrat points out that in real life too we usually infer people's character from what they say and do (*Narrative Art*, 89).

10. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 188–89.

11. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 126.

12. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 323–28. Cf. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 86–92.

13. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 329. For examples of characters' inner life, see Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 53–64. Cf. also Barbara M. Leung Lai, *Through the "I"-Window: The Inner Life of Characters in the Hebrew Bible* (HBM 34; Sheffield: Phoenix, 2011).

14. Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend*, 115.

15. Alter, *Narrative Art*, 129. Although Alter's conclusion holds true for Homeric characters, later Greek literature was capable of more complex portrayals of character with aspects of inner life and development (see section 2.2).

structuralism) but that there is a two-way traffic between them, an inferential movement from character to action to character.[16]

In sum, there appears to be a consensus among current scholarship about character in the Hebrew Bible, but the notion that Hebraic characters are very different from those in Greco-Roman literature persists, so we now turn to this body of literature to test this idea.

2.2. Character in Ancient Greco-Roman Literature

Aristotle's view on character has been immensely influential on New Testament scholars and contributed to the existing pattern or paradigm to understand character. Let me mention an important passage from his *Poetics*:

> [7] And since tragedy represents action and is acted by living persons, who must of necessity have certain qualities of character and thought—for it is these which determine the quality of an action; indeed thought and character are the natural causes of any action and it is in virtue of these that all men succeed or fail—[8] it follows then that it is the plot which represents the action. By "plot" I mean here the arrangement of the incidents: "character" is that which determines the quality of the agents, and "thought" appears wherever in the dialogue they put forward an argument or deliver an opinion. [9] Necessarily then every tragedy has six constituent parts, and on these its quality depends. These are plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. . . . [12] The most important of these is the arrangement of the incidents [i.e., plot], for tragedy is not a representation of men but of a piece of action, of life, of happiness and unhappiness, which come under the head of action, and the end aimed at is the representation not of qualities of character but of some action; and while character makes men what they are, it is their actions and experiences that make them happy or the opposite. [13] They do not therefore act to represent character, but character-study is included for the sake of the action. It follows that the incidents and the plot are the end at which tragedy aims, and in everything the end aimed at is of prime importance. [14] Moreover, you could not have a tragedy without action, but you can have one without character-study. . . . [19] The plot then is the first principle and as it were the soul of tragedy: character comes second. [20] It is much the same also in painting; if a man smeared a canvas with the loveliest colours at random, it would not give as much pleasure as an outline in black and white. [21] And it is mainly because a play is a representation of action that it also for that reason

16. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 342–46.