

Preface

This book proposes a paradigm shift in the study of character in New Testament narrative (or a new paradigm if one thinks there was not one to begin with). There is currently no consensus on how to study character in either literary theory or biblical studies. Nor is there a comprehensive theory of character. Many New Testament scholars appear to operate with a pattern or paradigm that has three assumptions: (i) characters in the Greco-Roman literature are “Aristotelian,” that is, “flat” or “types”; (ii) characters in the Gospels (and Acts) are not like characters in modern fiction (round, individualistic, psychologized) but resemble Greco-Roman characters (“flat,” one-dimensional); (iii) it is acceptable to use insights from modern literary methods to study ancient characters. While these scholars rarely justify this paradigm and sometimes overlook its inherent inconsistency, other scholars argue that modern theories of character in fiction should not be used to analyze characters in the Bible. In reply, this book introduces a comprehensive theory of character in New Testament narrative in four steps. In Chapter 1, I will identify a dominant pattern or paradigm of character reconstruction in the New Testament. In Chapter 2, I will deconstruct this pattern/paradigm, showing that characters in antiquity and modernity are more alike than different and that using modern methods to analyze characters in antiquity is both inevitable and legitimate. Then, in Chapter 3, I will propose a new paradigm for character reconstruction, which consists of three aspects: (i) character study in text and context; (ii) character analysis and classification; (iii) character evaluation and significance. Finally, in Chapter 4, I will validate the new paradigm by applying the theory to select characters in the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of John, and the Acts of the Apostles.

This book builds on my earlier work on character reconstruction. In 2009, I wrote a twofold work on Johannine characters where I aimed at reversing the consensus view that Johannine characters are types, have little complexity, and show little or no development.¹ Arguing that the differences

1. Cornelis Bennema, “A Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel with Reference to Ancient and Modern Literature,” *BibInt* 17 (2009): 375–421; Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2009).

in characterization in the Hebrew Bible, ancient Greek literature, and modern fiction are differences in emphases rather than kind, I suggested that it was better to speak of degrees of characterization along a continuum.² I then outlined a comprehensive theory of character that comprises three aspects: (i) the study of character in text and context, using information from the text and other sources; (ii) the analysis and classification of characters along Yosef Ewen's three dimensions (complexity, development, inner life), and plotting the resulting character on a continuum of degree of characterization (from agent to type to personality to individuality); (iii) the evaluation of characters in relation to John's point of view, purpose, and dualistic worldview. I then applied this theory to John's Gospel, showing that only eight out of twenty-three characters are "types." Since then I have contributed further essays on the subject.³

Here I seek to sharpen and develop my earlier theory of character in two ways. First, I engage with Christopher Skinner and Susan Hulen, whose books on Johannine character were published simultaneous with my 2009 work. Reading their work, I raised the question of whether I could (or should) enhance my theory by adding further continua of misunderstanding and ambiguity (see section 3.2). I also respond to various scholars who have critically interacted with my 2009 work, such as Richard Rohrbaugh, who reviewed my *Encountering Jesus* in 2011, Ruth Sheridan, Alicia Myers, Judith Christine Single Redman, and John Lyons. This kind of interaction is all a scholar hopes for, and their critique has stimulated my thinking and (hopefully) advanced the discourse on character reconstruction presented in this book. Second, this

2. I was especially indebted to Fred W. Burnett, who has excellently argued this case in "Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels," *Semeia* 63 (1993): 3–28.

3. Cornelis Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character in the Gospel of John," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner (LNTS 461; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2013), 36–58; idem, "The Character of Pilate in the Gospel of John," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner (LNTS 461; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2013), 240–53; essays on the crowd, Judas, and the chief priests in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann (WUNT 314; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 347–55, 360–72, 383–87; idem, "Virtue Ethics in the Gospel of John: The Johannine Characters as Moral Agents," in *Rediscovering John: Essays on the Fourth Gospel in Honour of Frédéric Mams*, ed. L. Daniel Chrupcała (SBF 80; Milan: Edizioni Terra Santa, 2013), 167–81; idem, "Figurenanalyse und Wundererzählungen im Markusevangelium," in *Hermeneutik der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen*, ed. Bernd Kollmann and Ruben Zimmermann (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming 2014); idem, "Gentile Characters and the Motif of Proclamation in the Gospel of Mark," in *Character Studies and the Gospel of Mark*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner and Matthew Ryan Hauge (LNTS; New York: T. & T. Clark, forthcoming 2014).

book broadens the scope of my earlier work. While my 2009 work on character was limited to the Gospel of John, this book aims to show that my theory works equally well in the Gospel of Mark and the Acts of the Apostles, and by extension to other New Testament narratives. Although I have retained many Johannine examples, I have tried to ensure that they do not take up a disproportionate amount of space. Having said that, I must highlight that the majority of work on characters in the New Testament has been done on the Gospel of John.

I must thank various people who have been instrumental in the completion of this book. I am grateful to Professor Emeritus Max Turner, my former doctoral supervisor and longstanding friend, who prompted me to challenge an existing paradigm. As I seek to do exactly that in this book, I have dedicated it to him. I thank my wife Susan for patiently weeding out, once again, all the clutter and odd expressions a non-native writer in English is prone to. I am grateful to publisher Brill in The Netherlands for granting me permission to reuse the material from an earlier article in their journal *Biblical Interpretation* (see n. 1, above, for details). I must especially thank Dr. Neil Elliott and the entire team at Fortress Press for believing in this project and their help in realizing this book. Fortress Press is also publishing the second edition of my *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (forthcoming 2014), so that, just as in 2009, we have a twofold work on characters in the New Testament. *Ad Dei gloriam*.

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