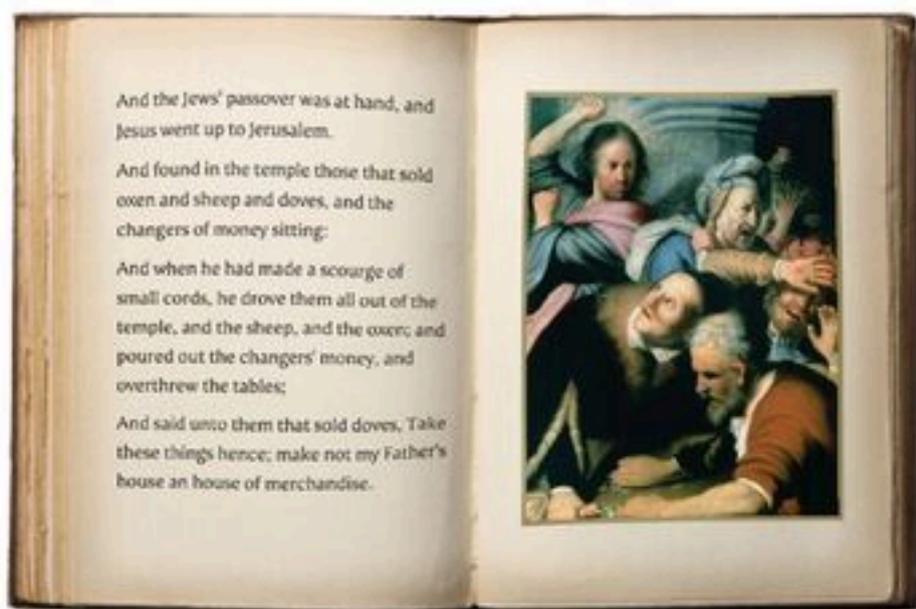


Interpreting Gospel Narratives

Scenes, People, and Theology



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ONE

Are Gospel Writers Interested in Individual Characters?

This chapter contains initial steps toward describing the Gospel writers' interest in the people they portray. But at the outset it will be helpful to recall two roads that have been travelled in the past by interpreters wanting to focus on the Gospels' portrayal of individuals. One of these is "the quest for the historical Jesus" that began in the nineteenth century, which saw many scholars searching the Gospels for what could be learned about Jesus' personality and development. Their efforts were marked by various theological and methodological flaws, however, and this path eventually led to a dead end.¹ Perhaps the biggest error these interpreters made with respect to method concerned their perception of the Gospel genre. They treated the Gospels too much like modern biographies—narratives that systematically trace a person's life and inward growth. This was a mistake, because none of the evangelists wrote with the primary aim of outlining Jesus' life story in a way that traced his personal growth and development.² As scholars came to recognize

¹J. D. G. Dunn (*Jesus Remembered* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 25–65) provides a survey and analysis of the nineteenth-century investigations of the life of Jesus.

²While a strong case can be made that the canonical Gospels do fall within the boundaries of ancient Greek biography, this identification does not open the door to a search for

this, and as other problems attending the life-of-Jesus movement became increasingly evident, the pursuit of biography in the Gospels fell into disrepute.

So this is a route to avoid. Nevertheless, we should be careful not to overreact and go to an opposite extreme. In rejecting the idea that the Gospels are like modern biographies, many interpreters have too quickly assumed that the evangelists display almost no interest in the personal traits and experiences of the people they describe—not even of Jesus himself, and thus even less of the more minor figures who fill the pages of the Gospels.

A second path that many have taken, and still take, is the popular tradition of character-based exposition. Within their repertoire of sermon styles, preachers have long included messages that analyze the experiences and personal qualities of Bible characters—sermons that could be loosely described as “biographical.” But theological education has grown more sophisticated, and such preaching has been charged (often rightly) with numerous faults. These range from an over-use of the imagination to the replacement of God-centered biblical theology with human-centered moralism. As a result of such unhealthy tendencies, students in today’s seminary classrooms are likely to be cautioned against the excesses of Gospel-based devotional biography. Such warnings are certainly fair, though once again there is a risk of overreaction. There are actually good reasons to affirm at least some of the insights and instincts of character-focused preaching. For one thing, this tradition takes Gospel characters seriously. It sees their portrayed experiences as a means to affect the experience of those who hear the Gospels read and expounded. As for the devotional tone that typifies this style of exposition, why should we not expect well-rounded Gospel interpretation to reflect an integration of doctrine with feeling or experience? Nevertheless, many who approach the Gospels to gain inspiration from the lives of the people they portray do fall into traps along the way. We examine some of these pitfalls in this book.

Jesus’ life story in the manner attempted by nineteenth-century interpreters. See D. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987); R. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison With Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 255–57; G. Stanton, “Matthew: βίβλιος, εὐαγγέλιον, or βίος?” in *The Four Gospels*, ed. F. Segbroeck et al. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 2:1197–1201.

These examples from the past alert us to the difficulty of exploring the Gospels' interest in individual characters. They also help explain why many contemporary scholars hesitate to pursue facets of Gospel narratives that hint at such interests.³ At the same time, the very fact that there have been such persistent attempts to interpret the Gospels along these lines suggests that there *are* elements in them that repeatedly lead readers to perceive significant characters—living people—in the Gospels.

We must now proceed with our own investigation. The question before us is this: If the Gospels do not present anyone's full life story or offer a comprehensive analysis of anyone's personal development, then what kind of portrayal of individuals *do* they offer? In this first chapter we consider four types of Gospel character portrayal: (1) the depiction of a moment of human experience, (2) the brief story of inward change, (3) consistent characterization, and (4) the story thread.

I. THE HUMAN MOMENT (LUKE 5:12–16)

The phrase “the depiction of a moment of human experience” refers to a brief yet significant glimpse at a person in a Gospel episode. Such glimpses may highlight an aspect of the character's condition, an attitude, a personal trait, a feeling, or any combination of these. These highlighted qualities lead to or come to expression in a particular moment of experience. In most instances this experience involves an encounter with another character. The narrative's focus in such cases is therefore not just on one person but on two (one of whom is almost always Jesus) in interaction; the human moment is thus often a moment in a relationship. These brief pictures of individual attitudes and experience are the most common form of “biographical” interest that the Gospels display. They can be powerful, and they almost always contribute to the meaning and impact of the episodes where they occur.

The portrait of the leper in Luke 5:12–16 provides a good example. Readers of the more literal English versions may notice that the word “behold” is inserted just before this man is introduced: “While Jesus was in one of the towns, behold, a man full

³For further reflections on scholarly hesitation in this area, see F. Burnett, “Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels,” *Semeia* 63 (1993): 3–28; and T. Wiarda, “Peter as Peter in the Gospel of Mark,” *NTS* 45 (1999): 22–26.

of leprosy.” The use of “behold” (ἰδοῦ) is a common feature in Luke when a new character is brought onto the scene,⁴ so perhaps we should follow the practice of most modern translations and not assign the word any particular force here. On the other hand, even in Luke, “behold” *does* seem to add a note of emphasis in many of its contexts.⁵ So it is probably fair to conclude that the evangelist is telling us to take special notice of this man.

In just a few deft phrases, the narrative builds a picture of this person—his condition, his inward attitude, and the question on his mind. He has leprosy. In fact, as readers are told for emphasis, he is “*full of leprosy*.” In the cultural setting of the story, this single statement implied a great deal: physical suffering, social exclusion, religious impurity, and scant hope for any change. Such connotations would have been felt among Luke’s original hearers or readers, particularly among those from a Jewish background.

Then the leper’s manner of approaching Jesus is described. We should try to picture the scene. The leper falls on his face. He begs. He addresses Jesus as κύριε—a title that conveys respect at the very least (“Sir”) and perhaps much more (“Lord”). What do these details combine to show us? A desperate man, acutely conscious of his need, humble before Jesus. What feelings do they evoke? Readers who give themselves time to visualize the scene, to indeed *behold* this man, are likely to be prompted to pity him and desire to see him healed.

Then we hear the leper’s appeal. What form does it take? He does not begin (as did the father of the demon-possessed boy depicted in another Gospel episode) by saying, “If you *can* do anything, help me” (Mark 9:22). The leper’s question is quite different. It concerns Jesus’ desire rather than his ability: “If you are *willing*.” Jesus’ response to the leper then picks up and repeats this emphasis. “I am *willing*,” he says.

Looking back over this whole scene, we can now see how effectively its opening portrayal of the leper’s condition and attitude prepares readers for the episode’s ultimate focus on Jesus’ willingness to heal. The description of the leper arouses our compassion. Because readers themselves are first led to feel compassion for this person, they can readily imagine that Jesus feels compassion

⁴Cf. I. H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 208.

⁵E.g., 5:18; 7:12,37; 8:41; 10:25; 13:11; 19:2.

as well. The quality of compassion goes hand in hand with a desire to help; it both motivates and characterizes such desire. The compassion-evoking portrayal of the leper thus enables readers to better understand Jesus' response to the leper.

One more narrative detail then reinforces this theme of sympathy and readiness to heal. With a certain degree of emphasis, the narrator explains that Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the leper. A number of commentators suggest that Jesus' gesture signals a message about his stance towards the Mosaic law, since according to the law lepers were ritually impure and therefore could not be touched. But surely this detail about Jesus' reaching out to touch the leper does something more. At the level of common human experience, the gesture of touch conveys concern and personal connection, particularly when directed towards a person in need. Such connotations would be heightened all the more in a situation like the one depicted in the present scene, where the one receiving the touch is a person who has been barred from normal social contact.

And so the human moment unfolds. On one side there is desperate appeal, on the other compassionate touch. Though not the most highly developed or dramatic of Gospel episodes, this brief narrative does carry significant emotive force.⁶

The details through which this narrative portrays characters and human experience help clarify the theological and pastoral points it makes. If we are insensitive to this kind of clarification, our interpretation can become vague or perhaps even misdirected. Several episodes in the larger narrative of Luke's Gospel record a healing or a deliverance. Do they all convey more or less the same general theological message? Is it only the incidental features that change as we move from one episode to another—here the person healed is a woman, there a man; here it is a case of paralysis, there of blindness? No. Each of these healing and deliverance stories does contribute to one common, underlying message, of course:

⁶Literary critics sometimes debate whether certain Gospel figures should be identified as mere "plot agents" (as opposed to genuine characters) or "types" (as opposed to individuals). While analysis in these terms has its place, they are not always the most helpful questions to ask. If answered too quickly, we may miss something important. The important thing to see with respect to the leper is that he is brought to life for readers and made a focus of interest. This can be affirmed without defining the extent to which he falls into the category of either "character" or "agent," "individual" or "type."

that Jesus has power over sickness and Satan; that the age of salvation has come; that Jesus is Lord and Savior. But it is also true that each separate episode reveals a *fresh and distinctive aspect* of the great central truth that Jesus is the Savior. One episode may emphasize his authority, another the priority he attaches to forgiving sins, another the importance of faith, and yet another Jesus' relation to the Sabbath. Faithful Gospel exposition must discover and highlight these distinctive pastorally directed points.

As we attempt to identify the special emphases of a particular Gospel episode, it naturally increases our confidence to find that our own conclusions coincide with the mainstream of interpretation. But if we discover that our exegesis is leading us in a different direction from the majority, we are forced to go back and think through the evidence more carefully—though we need not automatically abandon the track we have been on. The analysis of Luke's story of the leper offered above, I am afraid, does not receive universal support in the commentaries. In fact, a survey of the recent works reveals that only a few commentators pick up strongly on the theme of Jesus' compassionate readiness to heal.⁷ A review of the evidence is therefore in order.

There are three main reasons that many commentators perceive an emphasis other than compassion in this episode, and we must give them due consideration. First, some of the narrative details that I have taken to indicate the leper's pity-evoking condition could be perceived as carrying a different nuance. For instance, some interpreters suppose that the detail that the man is "filled" with leprosy is designed to highlight the *difficulty* of the healing (and thus to set the stage for a display of Jesus' power) rather than call attention to the depth of the leper's misery (and thus, as I have argued, prepare the way for a demonstration of Jesus' pity). Others see the leper's prostration before Jesus as a sign of *reverence* more than desperation.

Second, Luke drops the explicit mention of Jesus' compassion that Mark includes in his version of this story.⁸ Some take this as an indication that Luke is not interested in Jesus' emotions.⁹

⁷D. Bock (*Luke 1:1–9:50* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 473) views the text as emphasizing the theme of compassion.

⁸Cf. Mark 1:41 with Luke 5:13.

⁹E.g., J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981/85), 1:574.

Third, a more fundamental influence on interpretation arises from the presence of a central theme that runs through several episodes in this section of Luke's Gospel. This overarching theme, which relates to Jesus' power and the in-breaking of the messianic age, tends to dominate commentators' perception of the story of the leper's healing. As interpreters have focused on this central theme in the larger section of Luke's Gospel (not a bad thing in itself), they have been less sensitive to the presence of a distinctive emphasis in this individual episode. Factors such as these have led commentators to overlook the narrative's focus on Jesus' will or, when they do notice it, to interpret Jesus' will primarily as an aspect of his power. According to this latter reading, the story is not shaped to highlight the *compassionate direction* of Jesus' will (his desire to heal the leper), but rather its *sovereign power* (his ability to do whatever he wishes).¹⁰

But in this case the interpretive tendencies of the majority should be resisted. While it is true that some of this episode's narrative details taken singly could bear more than one meaning or serve more than one purpose, their significance is far less ambiguous when they are seen in combination. Physical gestures and other details in a narrative scene function much like words in a sentence: they do not reveal their meanings in isolation, but rather in the company of all the other items in their immediate contexts. In this story, elements like the leper's posture, the description of the extent of his disease, and Jesus' touch are mutually reinforcing; they work together to convey one clear meaning: need met by compassion.

As for Luke's omission of the direct reference to Jesus' compassion that occurs in Mark, a comparison of the two Gospels reveals another difference that is equally significant: Luke adds a narrative detail that *strengthens* the theme of compassion. Luke shows the leper falling on his face rather than simply kneeling.¹¹ This strengthens the picture of this person's desperation, and therefore of Jesus' responsive compassion.¹² What Luke actually does is to rely more fully on a mode of character portrayal that concentrates

¹⁰ For this emphasis on Jesus' power, see Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 574; Marshall, *Luke*, 209; J. Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 225–29; R. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 171–74.

¹¹ There is some question about the textual status of "falling on his knees" in Mark 1:41, but this does not affect the conclusion about Luke's narrative shaping.

¹² Luke also contains a different word to depict the leper's begging, though it is difficult

on indirectly *showing* (through the depiction of a concrete action) rather than on directly *telling*. The effect is a strengthened, rather than a weakened, portrait of Jesus' compassion.

The strongest indication of this episode's distinctive message, however, comes through the form in which the leper phrases his appeal ("If you are *willing*") and the way Jesus expresses his response ("I am *willing*"). The details and overall shaping of this narrative do indeed support the conclusion that it puts a special emphasis on Jesus' compassionate willingness to heal.

II. THE BRIEF STORY OF INWARD CHANGE (LUKE 5:1–11)

Most Gospel episodes qualify as brief stories in that they have their own self-contained plots. In other words, a typical episode offers more than just a glimpse of a single moment of experience or a static description of a person; it also involves motion—a series of connected events that lead to a changed situation. Such episodes may also contribute to some larger story that unfolds within an entire Gospel, of course, but each episode nevertheless has its own beginning, middle, and ending, all within the compass of a single short unit of narrative. But when I use the phrase "brief story of inward change," I have something more specific in mind: a small, single-episode story of *personal development*. The story of the leper Jesus healed would not qualify as this kind of story. The leper undergoes a change in outward condition, but no inward change of character or attitude is depicted. We might well imagine that internal change did in fact take place, but the Gospel narrative says nothing about it; the evangelist's interests lie elsewhere. But if we can identify other stories in the Gospels that do show individuals experiencing inward growth—narratives that do not just offer still portraits, but moving pictures of people who are changing—then our search for evidence of the Gospels' interest in people advances a step.

Such stories of personal development are not as prevalent in the Gospels as depictions of moments of human experience. Examples can nonetheless be found. One of these is the story of Peter's encounter with Jesus in Luke 5:1–11. When this episode is

to say whether this change in any way increases the nuance of the leper's helplessness and desperation.

read closely, we can observe Peter's attitude towards Jesus passing through three stages. First, Peter stands in the privileged position of one who does Jesus a favor. He acts as Jesus' host, as it were, by taking him into his boat. Then, when Jesus proposes that Peter let down his nets, Peter displays an interesting combination of skepticism and polite respect. Finally, at the story's end, Peter is overcome with awe; he is fully conscious of his unworthiness, and he is ready to follow Jesus without reserve.¹³

There is a clear focus on Peter throughout this narrative. Until late in the episode, he is the only disciple named. It is his boat that is chosen, he who is instructed to put out into the deep, he who answers Jesus and agrees to lower the nets, he who asks Jesus to depart from him, he who is told not to fear, and he who is promised a new role.

While the narrative does not specifically highlight Peter's inward attitude during the first stage of the story, it does portray a situation that at least hints at the existence of a particular set of relational dynamics between him and Jesus. Peter has a boat. Seeing that the boat would be useful to teach from, Jesus does not command but asks (ερωτάω) Peter to take him out in it. Peter takes him on board. He is, in fact, doing Jesus a favor. The narrative offers no indication that at this point Peter feels that either he or his boat is unworthy of Jesus. Would it be going too far to suggest that Peter may even feel like a generous host, with Jesus as his guest? Certainly the host-guest relationship was a significant one in first-century Mediterranean society. It implied mutual acceptance between the two parties involved and tended to put the host in a position of honor and the guest in a position of obligation. At many points throughout his Gospel, Luke shows himself very well aware of the social implications of hospitality, and it is clear that he expects his readers to share this awareness.¹⁴ It must be said that the present episode gives no direct emphasis to the host-guest relationship. It simply presents a basic sketch in which Peter takes Jesus into his boat. Nevertheless, a first-century audience may well have associated some of the dynamics of hospital-

¹³ See T. Wiarda, *Peter in the Gospels: Pattern, Personality and Relationship* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 99–103.

¹⁴ E.g., 5:27–32; 7:34; 15:1–2; 19:1–10. See the study of 19:1–10 in chap. 2 for more about the cultural implications of hospitality.

ity with this briefly depicted opening scene—at least enough for those cultural conventions to have provided a backdrop against which the soon-to-be-revealed shifts in relationship and attitude would stand out more clearly.

Jesus finishes his teaching and tells Peter to put out into deeper water for a catch of fish. As he does so their roles begin to change. Jesus is no longer asking favors; he now gives instructions.¹⁵ Readers may wonder whether Peter found this change unsettling. Two opposing attitudes seem at play in his response. On the one hand, he clearly lacks enthusiasm for Jesus' proposal: he tells Jesus that he and his partners have fished all night without catching anything. If this remark were given in the form of third person narration (part of the narrator's direct communication with the reader), we might conclude that the evangelist was simply preparing readers to see that Jesus was able to grant a catch even in the most unpromising circumstances, thus highlighting the greatness of the miracle that ensued. But the statement about having fished all night is placed on Peter's lips. He addresses these words directly to Jesus. When we visualize this scene concretely, it is hard to avoid the impression that Peter is voicing an objection.¹⁶ He seems to imply that he understands the situation with respect to catching fish better than Jesus.

At the same time, however, the narrative portrays Peter as one who has sufficient respect for Jesus to carry out his request. He addresses Jesus as "Master." This is an acknowledgement of Jesus' authority, though the expression leaves the degree of this attributed authority imprecise. "At your word I will let down my nets," Peter says. What does this remark reveal about Peter's mind-set? In a different narrative context, a reference to Jesus' "word" as the reason for taking action might be filled with theological significance. It might point to the authority and faith-creating power of Jesus' address. If we could assume the presence of such a rich theological nuance in the present context, we might decide that Peter's response reflects exemplary faith and obedience in response to Jesus' word.¹⁷ But it is equally possible

¹⁵ Imperative verbs are used.

¹⁶ Cf. Luke 8:24,45; 9:13; 10:40.

¹⁷ E.g., W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt), 128; H. Schürmann, *Ursprung und Gestalt. Erörterungen und Besinnungen zum Neuen Testament* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1970), 270.

to imagine Peter's comment spoken in quite a different tone with a very different meaning. He might simply be saying, "If you say so"—the verbal equivalent of a resigned shrug of the shoulders. What then does the narrative show us, faith or skepticism? At this point we may wish that we were not limited to words on a page, that instead we could actually hear the characters speaking and thus pick up their tones of voice. But as written narratives, the Gospels have their own ways of revealing tone and meaning. In this case, nothing in Peter's comment about obeying because of Jesus' "word" especially points towards faith or awareness of Jesus' special authority. On the other hand, nothing indicates an intensely skeptical tone. Peter's preceding statement about having fished all night does reflect a measure of skepticism, to be sure. But his additional remark about Jesus' word is presented in a fairly neutral way that neither adds to nor subtracts from the characterization that has already been established. It is therefore best to simply see Peter's attitude as an uncertain mixture of skepticism and respect at this stage.

A radically different picture of Peter emerges at the end of this story. Seeing the enormous catch of fish, he falls at Jesus' knees. Peter acknowledges himself to be a sinner and urges Jesus to depart from him. He calls Jesus "Lord." The dramatic nature of the outward scene almost forces readers to form an impression about Peter's inward state of mind. What are his thoughts and feelings at this moment? Though the word "Lord" (κύριε) could be used in addressing a wide range of authority figures, in the present context it does seem to represent an advance from the term "Master" that Peter has used earlier. This is especially so since it comes in combination with Peter's prostration and confession of unworthiness. The act of falling before Jesus in this context suggests a sense of awe. In fact, Peter's astonishment is directly mentioned in the narrator's explanatory comment.

What lies behind Peter's confession of sin? Does it simply indicate a general sense of human unworthiness in the presence of the divine, such as that which prompted Isaiah's cry of woe at the vision of the Lord in the temple?¹⁸ Or is Peter suddenly aware of some more specific fault?¹⁹ Since the preceding narrative gives no

¹⁸ E.g., I. H. Marshall, *Luke*, 205; J. Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 222–23.

¹⁹ E.g., J. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1:561–62.

hint of any misdeed that Peter committed, it is best to see a more general sense of sin and inadequacy at work here, brought on by Peter's sudden new awareness of God's power at work in Jesus. Nevertheless, Luke may intend his readers to recall two earlier elements of the story at this point, and to see them as further reasons for Peter's present reaction. The first of these is that just prior to this moment of insight, Peter had been in particularly close and free contact with Jesus, hosting him in his boat. Would remembering this now heighten Peter's sudden sense of unworthiness? Certainly there was a popular perception that it was inappropriate for a religious teacher to accept hospitality or acts of service from sinners; this is a major Lukan motif, in fact. A second element Luke may want his readers to recall is Peter's shortly preceding expression of doubt at Jesus' instruction to let down the nets. Should this not be seen as an additional factor contributing to Peter's sudden unease in the presence of Jesus?

We must reflect on the attitude toward Jesus revealed by Peter's request that Jesus depart from him. On the surface, Peter's words express a wish for distance; but as a speech-act in this specific context, they may in fact function quite differently. They could be seen simply as a spontaneous and unrestrained expression, resulting from Jesus' suddenly revealed authority on the one hand, and Peter's corresponding awareness of his own unworthy condition on the other. But Peter's reaction also suggests something more. When Gospel characters are depicted kneeling or falling before Jesus, the situation is most commonly one in which an appeal for mercy is being made. Is there a hint of this here? Does Peter's posture, in addition to expressing his awe in the presence of divine power, also signal a plea that actually runs counter to the surface meaning of his words about Jesus' departing from him? However we answer this question, Jesus' response to Peter is certainly a gracious reversal of all that Peter senses he deserves. When Jesus tells Peter not to fear, he not only offers him assurance in the face of the supernatural but also indicates that no separation would be necessary. Peter's immediate readiness to follow Jesus the moment he is given the opportunity suggests that this is in fact the true desire of his heart.

Rich themes permeate this story of Peter and Jesus. The episode plays a role in Luke's larger unfolding story of Jesus, of

course. In particular, it shows him exercising power and gathering disciples. It also contributes to a larger picture of Peter that Luke develops as the Gospel progresses. But within the episode itself, two themes stand out most clearly: Jesus' supernatural authority, and the experience of grace as the foundation of discipleship. It is important to see that much of the highlighting that these two concepts receive comes through the narrative's portrayal of Peter's changing attitude. It is not the bare depiction of a miracle that convinces readers of Jesus' majesty. Rather, they are led to appreciate and feel the impact of Jesus' power particularly as they observe the changes that take place in Peter.

As for the theme of grace, this story does not show readers the experience of an obvious sinner (as do the parables of the tax collector in the temple and the prodigal son, for instance). We might almost say that this narrative sneaks up on us. It gives us a picture of a person who provides a service to Jesus and who confidently associates with him. In the early stages of the story, readers may thus be happy to identify with Peter, and even with the mild skepticism the narrative attributes to him. But when they then see this same person suddenly overwhelmed in the presence of Jesus—that Peter is acutely conscious of his own inadequacy, no longer confidently providing for Jesus but instead needing Jesus to provide for him—they can appreciate what an amazing thing it is for anyone at all to be called into Jesus' service.

III. THE CONSISTENT CHARACTER (JOHN 13:2–11, 33–38; 18:8–11)

We have seen that Gospel narratives do indeed display significant interest in people. In a single episode a narrator may portray a set of traits, a moment of experience, or even a process of personal development. But does specific interest in a particular character ever persist across the boundaries that separate one episode from another? Is there ever an intentional connection between the way a character appears in one episode and the way that character is presented at later points in the same Gospel?

During the heyday of form criticism in the first half of the twentieth century, Gospel scholars focused very much on individual units. Each Gospel unit (pericope) was considered in relative iso-

lation from the others. Interpreters gave little thought to how one episode might relate to another in a larger literary or theological plan. This dominant pattern of interpretation began to change with the rise of redaction criticism. Attention then increasingly shifted to whole Gospels and to the evangelists' role in shaping theologically consistent works. Greater emphasis was placed on the connections between individual units of narrative. But redaction critics tended to describe these links largely in terms of common theological themes. The thought that there might also be a developing *story* or a unified *characterization* extending across several episodes still did not receive strong emphasis. Thanks to the rise of narrative criticism in our own day, however, there is new awareness of the ways in which whole Gospels function as unified stories. This change of climate offers fresh encouragement to a search for evidence of consistent characterization across Gospel episodes.

I am using the term "consistent character" to refer to a pattern of characterization in which an individual figure is shown to display one or more distinctive traits, attitudes, or values in multiple episodes in a single Gospel.²⁰ Repeated association of a particular quality with a particular figure implies a more-than-accidental conception of that character and a specific narrative focus on at least certain aspects of his or her person. The depiction of Peter in John's Gospel during the events leading up to Jesus' arrest provides a good example of this type of character portrayal.²¹

Three separate scenes, each set on the night of Jesus' arrest, work together to present a consistent portrait of Peter at this stage in his relationship with Jesus. These are the foot-washing episode (13:2–11), the narrative of the denial prediction (13:33–38), and the account of Peter cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant (18:8–11). In each of these episodes Peter displays a distinctive combination of two qualities: devotion to Jesus and resistance to Jesus' role as the one who lays down his life for his disciples. In each instance it is the first quality that motivates the second.²²

²⁰ The consistent characterization of Jesus and of major group figures such as the religious leaders is a feature widely recognized among scholars. I am more interested here in the extent to which similar consistency might also occur in the portrayal of individual characters other than Jesus.

²¹ See T. Wiarda, *Peter*, 106–14, 136–40.

²² We might also mention another distinctive personality feature that characterizes Peter

The foot-washing episode opens with slowly building detail. Jesus gets up. He takes off some of his outer clothing and wraps a towel around himself. Then he pours water into a basin. He begins to wash the disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel. Step by step the scene develops. And *then* (the narrator uses the particle οὖν, which often marks the arrival of something new in this Gospel) Jesus comes to Peter. The moment Jesus reaches Peter is thus given dramatic focus. Such focalization calls attention to what is about to transpire and may even encourage readers to view Jesus' progressing actions from Peter's visual perspective.

To this point the disciples have remained silent; now Peter speaks up. He begins with a relatively mild protest. The way he words his question gives readers a fair indication of how Peter sees things. To begin with, he addresses Jesus as "Lord" (κύριος). In using this form of address, Peter is not at this moment thinking of Jesus' divine status, but rather of his role as Peter's teacher or rabbi. We can see this if we jump ahead to a later point in the scene (vv. 12–16) and notice some comments Jesus makes there. Jesus offers explanatory remarks after washing his disciples' feet. He tells his disciples he has given them an example to follow. He then says that the power of this example stems from the fact that he stands in the social category of master or teacher. He reminds the disciples that it is their custom to call him "Teacher" and "Lord." Further, he points out that recognized cultural expectations govern the relations between teachers and disciples, and between lords and their servants. As Jesus puts it, the servant is not greater than the master (κύριος).²³ We must assume that Peter, as a character in this narrative scene, is fully conscious of the social norms Jesus refers to, and that these norms shed light on his mind-set when he addresses Jesus as "Lord." The particular way in which Peter goes on to state his protest against Jesus' act of foot-washing then gives further evidence that he is troubled by what he perceives to be a violation of normal and proper behavior in the master-disciple

in these scenes, especially the foot-washing and sword-attack episodes. This is Peter's tendency towards outspokenness and emphatic speech or action.

²³For more information concerning such role-relations in the society of Jesus' day, see M. Aberbach, "The Relations Between Master and Disciple in the Talmudic Age," in *Exploring the Talmud*, ed. H. Dimitrovsky (New York: Ktav, 1976), 202–25; M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark); and A. Köstenberger, "Jesus as Rabbi in the Fourth Gospel," *BBR* 8 (1998): 97–128.

relation. Peter puts the pronouns referring to Jesus and himself in emphatic positions.²⁴ In English the effect would be something like, “*You wash my feet?*”

In the background of this scene—as well as that of the two other narrative units we examine below—lie two quite different sets of role relations. Foremost on Peter’s mind is that between a disciple and his master/teacher/rabbi. According to the generally recognized rules governing this kind of relationship, Peter owes Jesus loyalty, honor, and service. As the dialogue between Jesus and Peter progresses, however, it becomes clear that Jesus is concerned with the demands of another, deeper type of relationship. The best way to describe the set of role relations Jesus has in mind is to borrow imagery from John 10, where Jesus speaks of himself as the good shepherd who loves, protects, provides for, and lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus’ act of washing his disciples’ feet (in addition to setting an example of service) is designed to symbolize how Jesus takes up this good-shepherd kind of role by giving his life for his followers.

Several features in the narrative of the foot-washing point in this direction. One is the very nature of foot washing as a voluntary act of self-lowering for the benefit of others.²⁵ Another feature is the setting of this incident in the Gospel’s larger story; the foot washing comes on the very eve of Jesus’ crucifixion. Other indications appear in the Jesus-Peter dialogue itself. At one point Jesus tells Peter that letting Jesus wash his feet is a condition for continuing in fellowship with him. A moment later Jesus links the foot washing with a cleansing that is more than physical. It is thus quite clear that Jesus’ symbolic action points forward to the cross, his act of self-giving as the disciples’ good shepherd.

Here then is the source of the tension between Jesus and Peter. While the norms of the master-disciple relation dominate Peter’s thinking, Jesus is aware of and at this time especially concerned with the good shepherd-sheep relation. Motivated by his desire to protect Jesus from the dishonor involved in performing a servant’s

²⁴ Κύριε, σὺ μου νίπτεις τοὺς πόδους;

²⁵ This act of self-lowering serves as an example for the disciples to emulate, of course, but it also points to something more. Jesus tells Peter that he will understand the meaning of Jesus’ symbolic action “later” (v. 7), which seems to point to a time after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The exemplary aspect of the foot-washing, on the other hand, was explained immediately (vv. 12–17).

task, Peter resists him. He brushes aside Jesus' response to his initial protest and, in the most emphatic terms, restates his objection to having his feet washed. It would probably be too strong to say that Peter thereby directly rejects Jesus' good shepherd role. Instead, he appears largely oblivious to it. Nevertheless, this scene does portray Peter as responding to Jesus in a way that suggests or portends an attitude that is far from receptive to this entire aspect of Jesus' mission.

But if Peter's resistance to Jesus' purpose stands out in this episode, so also does his devotion to Jesus. His loyalty reveals itself first in his discomfort at the thought of Jesus' humbling himself to wash his feet. Peter alone among the disciples voices an objection, and the depth of his feeling shines through his protest. The narrative portrays Peter's devotion most fully, however, at the point when Jesus warns him that he will have no part with Jesus if he refuses to let him wash his feet. Without evidencing any particular advance in theological understanding, Peter immediately overreacts in an opposite direction: "Lord, not just my feet, but my hands and head as well."

These aspects of Peter's characterization—devotion and resistance to Jesus—are fairly obvious in the foot-washing scene. What is less frequently observed (but very interesting) is that the same combination of devotion and resistance reappears in two additional episodes that offer glimpses of Peter's behavior on the night of Jesus' arrest. We turn first to the narrative of the denial prediction (13:33–38). Here again we find ample evidence of Peter's devotion. At the same time, we see ongoing resistance to the thought of Jesus' taking up the role of good shepherd and a corresponding reluctance to view himself as a helpless sheep in need of a Savior.

In the early part of this narrative section Jesus addresses his disciples as beloved children and explains that he will leave them shortly. A dialogue between Peter and Jesus then ensues. This is now a more person-to-person conversation, with verbs and pronouns switching to the singular. It begins with Peter asking, "Lord, where are you going?" We should stop to consider the possible tone and nuance of this question. It seems to be more than a bare request for information. Jesus has just announced that he will be leaving his disciples and told them that they will not be able

to follow him. Is Peter's question then an indirect way of asking that he be allowed to go with Jesus? Earlier in John's Gospel two would-be disciples indirectly invite themselves to spend the day with Jesus by means of a very similar question, "Where are you staying?" (John 1:38).²⁶ Does Peter's question here serve a similar purpose? Notice that Jesus does seem to treat Peter's words as an appeal to go with him. Rather than giving Peter an informational answer explaining where he is heading, Jesus repeats—this time with a more individual focus—that Peter cannot follow him at the present time. But here again, just as in the foot-washing episode, Peter resists Jesus' initial answer. He persists with a yet stronger appeal: "Lord, why can't I follow you now?" Peter's devotion thus expresses itself in a strongly felt desire to continue with Jesus. His sense of loyalty is such that he even affirms his willingness to die for Jesus. Jesus' reply warns readers that Peter's commitment is not as strong as he thinks it is, of course, but the sincerity of Peter's feelings is not called into question.

At the same time that it reveals his devotion, however, Peter's claim that he is ready to die for Jesus provides a very strong hint that he continues to be out of step with the demands and premises of Jesus' good shepherd role. In fact, his assertion of being willing to die for Jesus reflects a conception of his role in relation to Jesus that exactly reverses the shepherd-sheep relationship Jesus had outlined earlier in John's story. Jesus had spoken—not just once, but twice—of laying down his life for his sheep (John 10:11,15). Now Peter uses almost exactly the same words to describe himself as one who will lay down his life for Jesus.²⁷ Lest we miss the implications of Peter's statement, the narrative brings it to our attention again, in that Jesus immediately picks up Peter's words and repeats them: "You will lay down your life for me?" Jesus then solemnly affirms that, directly contrary to Peter's promise and intention, he will in fact deny Jesus three times.

When Peter talks about laying down his life for Jesus, is he *consciously* alluding to and rejecting Jesus' earlier statements that he, in his role as the good shepherd, would be the one to give his life for his followers? The narrative does not suggest that he is.

²⁶ See chap. 3 for further discussion of this passage.

²⁷ Cf. τὴν ψυχὴν μου τίθημι ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων (John 10:15) with τὴν ψυχὴν μου ὑπὲρ σουσ θήσω (John 13:37).

Once again, Peter seems oblivious to the full implications of what he is saying. Nevertheless, the evangelist is certainly aware of the complete reversal Peter's attitude involves, and he is concerned to highlight this for the reader. John thus reinforces the portrait that began to emerge in the foot-washing scene, a picture of Peter as one whose inclinations run counter to accepting Jesus' sacrifice on his behalf and whose very sense of devotion contributes to his resistance to Jesus' purposes.

This developing representation of Peter carries on into one more scene, that in which Peter cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant (John 18:8–11). While the bare act of seeking to defend Jesus bespeaks Peter's sense of loyalty, the way in which the story is structured gives his gesture a special color. The narrative first portrays a scene where Jesus tells the arresting party to take him, since he is the one they want, and let his disciples go. Jesus thus makes an arrangement that will allow his followers to escape. This is then highlighted: the evangelist comments that this fulfilled Jesus' earlier statement that he would not lose any of those the Father had given him. So Jesus is clearly portrayed protecting his disciples through giving himself up—in other words, acting as their good shepherd.

The disciples are present to hear Jesus' request that they be let go. So when Peter draws his sword and strikes—and this is the very next event the narrative recounts—his action implies that he is deliberately setting Jesus' plan aside. The narrative thus portrays Peter's act, not simply as an attempt to prove his courage or as a reaction against Jesus' enemies, but as Peter's reaction against an arrangement in which he is dismissed to safety while Jesus suffers arrest. This overall slant is then reinforced by the content of Jesus' rebuke of Peter's deed. He calls specific attention to his own sacrificial death: "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11). Jesus is committed to carrying out this central aspect of the Father's plan; Peter, despite his sense of loyalty, has once again failed to perceive that it is necessary.

These three narrative segments offer a striking example of consistent characterization across episodes. Noticing this consistent portrayal of Peter's misunderstanding enriches our understanding of John's theological message, particularly with respect to the nature of Jesus' mission. Each time Peter displays resistance to

Jesus' role as the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, that role gains clearer definition and its importance is underlined. Readers are also reminded that the concept of Jesus' needing to give his life for others can be a difficult one to understand.

What about other instances of this particular form of "biographical" interest in the Gospels? First a word of warning: consistently developed transepisodic portrayal of individual characters is not a feature that can simply be assumed in the Gospels. It sometimes occurs, but very often secondary characters play a more limited role with Gospel episodes and the evangelists are not concerned to link one of their appearances to another. In John's overall portrait of Peter, for example, the combination of devotion and resistance appears only in the three episodes we have surveyed; the other episodes involving Peter focus on different matters.

Nevertheless, examples of consistent characterization do occur here and there in the Gospels. For example, in John's Gospel characters such as Thomas, Philip, and Mary of Bethany merit a close look. Consistent and distinctive lines of characterization relating to Peter also appear in each of the other three Gospels. Mark's portrayal of Judas reflects consistent characterization, and perhaps his depiction of the disciple John does as well. To mention a figure from the book of Acts, many interpreters have found material there for a consistently developed portrait of Barnabas, the "son of encouragement." Even without taking his nickname as a clue—and the debate as to whether it should be translated "son of encouragement" or "son of exhortation" is fairly evenly argued—readers can find a remarkable series of scenes that present Barnabas as a character distinguished by his way of encouraging others.

IV. THE STORY THREAD (MARK 14:27-42,54,66-72; 16:7)

One further form that Gospel writers used to express their interest in people is the "story thread." Like the consistent character portrayal explored in the previous section, a story thread is transepisodic and focuses on an individual character. But it goes a step beyond mere consistency of characterization in that it shows a person developing or growing in some way. A story thread presents

the story of a person's change. It runs through a Gospel in the way a distinctively colored thread might weave through a carpet, surfacing at intervals in the midst of some larger design.

The portrayal of Nicodemus in John's Gospel provides an excellent example of this kind of narrative thread.²⁸ Other good examples occur in connection with Gospel portrayals of Peter. This should not surprise us since Peter is the disciple who receives the greatest individual attention in the Gospels. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to see how each Gospel tells Peter's story. They do not all put the same themes in the forefront. Mark develops the inward aspects of Peter's experience quite differently than either Luke or John, for example. Here we examine Mark's story of Peter, particularly as it unfolds across several episodes during Jesus' passion and its aftermath (14:27–31, 32–42, 54, 66–72; 16:7).²⁹

Mark 14:27–31 begins with a focus on the disciples as a group, but then narrows down to a focus on Peter. The dialogue that fills the scene is initiated by Jesus. Though he is the first to speak, his words largely concern the disciples. He speaks of how his death and resurrection will affect them. They will stumble and be scattered, Jesus says, but all that is about to take place does so in a relationship in which he is the shepherd and they are the sheep. After he has been raised, he will go before them into Galilee. Peter then responds to Jesus' words. From this point on he becomes the center of the narrator's attention.

Peter's individuality is conveyed first simply through the fact that he alone speaks up. Jesus' prediction was addressed to the whole group: "You will *all* fall away." Any pressure to respond to this disturbing prediction would be evenly distributed among the disciple group. Does Peter's individual protest therefore suggest a special sensitivity on his part? However we answer this question, the specific content of Peter's protest singles him out all the more. He draws an emphatic contrast between himself and the others: "Even if all stumble, I will not."

In response, Jesus repeats his prediction of Peter's coming failure in a more personalized and pointed form. He now uses singu-

²⁸ See chap. 3 for a closer look at the Nicodemus story.

²⁹ The analysis of these passages offered here is based on the fuller discussion in T. Wierda, *Peter*, 80–88, 127–29.

lar pronoun and verb forms, including an emphatic “you” (v. 30).³⁰ He specifies that Peter’s failure will extend to denying Jesus three times. This will happen that very night, before the rooster crows.³¹ This whole prediction is prefaced by the solemn formula, “Amen, I say to you.”

But the evangelist then allows Peter the last word. If Jesus has raised the stakes, Peter responds in kind. He speaks emphatically or repeatedly (ἐκπερισσῶς). He asserts that he is even willing to die with Jesus. He insists in the strongest terms that he will not deny him (οὐ μῆ).³² The episode concludes by noting that the other disciples speak in a similar way. But this is added in a rather nonemphatic manner, as if to suggest that the others simply were following Peter’s lead. The focus remains on him.

If the spotlight thus falls on Peter, how is he characterized? Peter’s most clearly displayed quality is a positive one, his desire to be loyal to Jesus. This is seen in his affirmations that he will remain faithful even if others should fall away and even if he must die. In affirming these things Peter is not simply making a general claim to courage and consistency. Within the context of this scene, the issue is more specific. It concerns Peter’s relation to Jesus. This is particularly evident in the second interchange between Jesus and Peter. “You will deny *me*,” Jesus tells Peter. “I will die with *you*,” Peter replies; “I will never deny *you*.”

Our perception of Peter’s desire to be loyal should not be clouded by an overemphasis on certain other traits that interpreters sometimes discern in this scene. For example, it is sometimes suggested that Peter is boasting. But we must remember the narrative setting of Peter’s words. It is a context in which the relationship between Jesus and his disciples is strongly emphasized.

³⁰ οὐ σήμερον ταύτη τῆ νυκτὶ . . . τρίς με ἀπαρνήση. See the NIV: “you yourself will disown me three times.”

³¹ There is a difficult question here and in 14:68,72 as to whether the text speaks of one rooster crow or two. The issue only becomes important for interpretation in the narrative of Peter’s denial itself. If 14:68 does include mention of the rooster crowing after Peter’s first denial, this could be understood as a warning he receives following his first misstep (similar to the reminder received after his first failure in Gethsemane) or simply as Mark’s way of showing that Jesus’ prediction was on course toward being fulfilled. The dramatic effect of the cock crow following Peter’s third denial, however, and the mention of Peter’s remembering Jesus’ prediction then, suggests that he had not received an earlier reminder.

³² Gundry pointed out that this is a stronger form of negation than the simple οὐκ employed in v. 27. See R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 846.

Immediately preceding the denial prediction episode comes a meal scene—a setting implying close fellowship—in which Jesus predicts that one of those in the circle of his own disciples will betray him. The disciples respond to these words with sadness and soul searching (14:18–21). Mark’s narrative then goes on to portray Jesus’ offering his disciples bread and a cup representing his body and blood (14:22–26). So thoughts of faithfulness and connection to Jesus lie heavy in the air. Against this backdrop, Peter’s words can easily be seen as an act of commitment to Jesus. To say these things at this particular moment is almost what loyalty demands. For this same reason, we should not see the primary emphasis of the narrative to lie on Peter doubting Jesus’ word, as if he thinks his knowledge of the future is superior to that of Jesus.³³ While Peter indeed rejects Jesus’ prediction, this simply comes as a by-product of his primary desire to assure Jesus of his devotion.

But a second trait revealed in this scene is Peter’s self-confidence. Though he does not appear to affirm his constancy simply to vaunt his courage, Peter’s words do imply his belief that he will be able to remain loyal to Jesus whatever comes. Jesus’ predictions, of course, reveal a radically different estimate of Peter’s strength and courage. An audience that does not know the ending of this story is left with a question at this point: who has the better sense of Peter’s character, Jesus or Peter himself? In the narrative world of Mark’s Gospel, it is clear that Jesus is someone whose words are reliable; readers and hearers are therefore likely to assume that Jesus’ prediction will come true. On the other hand, the thought that Peter could deny Jesus comes as something of a surprise. Despite his weaknesses and misunderstandings, Peter has been portrayed as a faithful follower up to this point in Mark’s narrative. Readers must wait to see what develops. But two points of tension have been disclosed. One is the conflict between Peter’s evident desire to be loyal and the pressures Jesus implies will come when the shepherd is struck. The other point, which is still more explicitly portrayed, is the tension between Peter’s own self-estimate and Jesus’ radically divergent prediction about the way he will behave.

³³E.g., Gundry sees this episode primarily as a contest of predictive ability (*Mark*, 844).

The narrative postpones its description of how these tensions are ultimately resolved. But it would be a mistake to think the issues introduced in the denial prediction scene are put completely on hold. Peter's story continues in the Gethsemane episode that immediately follows (14:32–42). In addition to the temporal link between these two scenes, three significant narrative features tie the Gethsemane episode closely to the preceding account of the denial predictions. First, the emphasis on the disciples continues (despite the intense focus on Jesus in 14:33b–36), with Peter singled out for special attention. Second, the theme of good intentions tested under pressure also continues. Third, Peter's threefold failure to stay awake (shared with James and John) recalls Jesus' prediction of his coming threefold denial.

As the Gethsemane scene opens, Jesus progressively withdraws from the presence of others. He enters the garden; then he tells most of his disciples to sit and wait while he advances further with Peter, James and John; finally, he instructs even these three to stay and watch while he goes on a little further by himself. The narrative thus focuses the reader's attention on Jesus alone in prayer, though at the same time hinting that he wishes to remain connected to his closest followers. Following a moment of dramatic focus on Jesus at prayer (one of the most emotionally intense passages in Mark's Gospel), attention shifts back to the three disciples and to Peter in particular.

Jesus returns to his disciples three times, and three times he finds them asleep. His comments are recorded in the first and third instances, and the disciples' reaction at being found asleep is depicted in the second. But even though all three disciples are equally guilty, upon Jesus' first return he speaks first to Peter individually. Mark emphasizes this point by showing that Jesus addresses Peter by name.³⁴ Jesus' words to Peter may be translated either as questions or statements.³⁵ They might be read as expressions of disappointment, sarcasm, or anything in between. One thing

³⁴That Mark employed "Simon" in this direct speech context adds a note of realism to the scene, since it is likely that this is what Peter was most commonly called at this period. Mark himself, as a later narrator, typically uses "Peter." For further discussion of this usage, and arguments against the view that "Simon" here bears negative connotations, see T. Wiarda, "Simon, Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Jonah, Son of John: Realistic Detail in the Gospels and Acts," *NTS* 40 (1994): 196–201.

³⁵Gundry argued for this latter possibility (*Mark*, 855).

that is clear, however, is that Jesus is rubbing in the fact of Peter's failure. He highlights the extent of Peter's weakness: "You could not watch for one hour?"

Why does Jesus single Peter out in this way? The immediately preceding scene provides a convincing answer. It was Peter, first and foremost, who insisted that he would be loyal to Jesus even at the cost of his life.

The core issue facing Peter in Gethsemane is loyalty to Jesus, just as it was in the denial prediction scene. The narrative helps us see this by laying great stress on the pressure Jesus feels in Gethsemane. Readers are given two separate descriptions of Jesus' feelings, in fact. The first is given in the direct words of the narrator (14:33b); the second comes indirectly, through the words Jesus addresses to Peter, James, and John (14:34). In both instances the language is strong: Jesus is "greatly distressed and troubled"; his "soul is very sorrowful unto death"—and the words "unto death" recall Peter's claim that he would be faithful to the point of dying with Jesus. This emphatic depiction of Jesus' feelings is important for our understanding of the three disciples, because the narrative shows them being brought into Jesus' struggle. Jesus takes them *with him* as he faces this pressure. He explicitly tells them how he feels and links his request that they "watch" to this disclosure (14:34).

What exactly is Jesus asking his disciples to do? The instruction to "watch" (γρηγορεῖτε) has been understood in a number of ways. Some interpreters see it as a simple command to keep a lookout for those coming to arrest Jesus—a task that, if it was required at all, would seem better suited to the larger group of disciples who were left closer to the garden's entrance. Others see this watching as something the disciples are to do primarily for their own sakes: they are to be spiritually alert so they can handle testing, or they are to observe how Jesus prays so they can learn lessons about Jesus and prayer. This latter suggestion no doubt reflects part of the picture (see especially 14:38). But the overall shape of the narrative, in which Jesus' inward distress receives such great emphasis, points to something else as well. In some way that is not clearly defined, whether it be through their prayers, their empathy, or simply through their being close at hand and aware of his suffering, Jesus wants his disciples' presence and support in the struggle he faces. To recognize this clarifies the

nature of the disciples' ensuing failure: even after Jesus has told them of his deep need and specifically asked for their help, they fail him.

In our analysis of the denial predictions narrative, we saw that scene pointing to a tension between Peter's desire to be loyal on the one hand, and the pressures he will soon face in connection with Jesus' coming arrest on the other. The Gethsemane episode now offers readers a strong hint about how that conflict is likely to end. As it does so, however, the Gethsemane narrative shifts the focus somewhat by highlighting internal aspects of the tension with which Peter must contend. It begins to show readers that the pressures against Peter's desire to be loyal are not only outward (hostile authorities and the threat of arrest) but also inward (Peter's own weaknesses). Jesus' words sum up Peter's situation: "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." In this context "spirit" does not refer to God's Spirit or to humanity as dependent on the Spirit, but simply to an aspect of the inward person.³⁶ Jesus is referring to the disciples', and especially Peter's, wish to be loyal. One part of Peter would indeed like to watch as Jesus has requested, but another aspect of his makeup, his physical tiredness or general human weakness ("the flesh"), makes him want to sleep. As the narrator comments when describing the disciples' second failure to stay awake, "their eyes were heavy." In Gethsemane, Peter's personal weakness proves stronger than his good intentions.

In the denial prediction scene Peter appeared confident, either unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge the possibility that he would act in the way Jesus predicted. Does the Gethsemane episode reveal any change in Peter's self-perception? The narrative implies that that he (together with James and John) does not take Jesus' warning to "pray that you will not enter into temptation" (14:38a) seriously enough.³⁷ This suggests that Peter's self-

³⁶ As in Mark 2:8; 8:12. When Mark uses πνεῦμα to refer to the Holy Spirit, the context makes this clear. For further substantiation of this point see T. Wiarda, "Scenes and Details in the Gospels: Concrete Reading and Three Alternatives," *NTS* 50 (2004): 179–80.

³⁷ Verse 38a could be translated, "Watch and pray, in order that you do not enter temptation" (indicating the purpose of both watching and praying), or "Watch, and pray that you do not enter temptation" (indicating the content of the prayer). The latter option more clearly distinguishes the function of watching from that of praying. That the instruction to pray comes only after the disciples' initial failure to stay awake and precedes a period in which they will again be expected to watch with Jesus suggests that the immediate temptation Jesus has in view is that of falling asleep again. This would be no small matter, since

confidence continues—or at least that he is blind to his desperate need for God’s help. Nevertheless, we are given one glimpse of the disciples’ inward reaction to their failure to keep awake, and this shows them experiencing at least a momentary sense of personal weakness. When Jesus finds them sleeping a second time, the disciples “did not know what to answer him.” The narrative thus portrays the disciples sensing shame.³⁸ Is this a foretaste of a deeper experience of self-awareness yet to come?

The story thread we are tracing resumes in the narrative of Peter’s denials (14:54,66–72). The focus on Peter’s internal struggle continues in this episode, though now the tension is no longer between loyalty and desire to sleep but between loyalty and fear. This struggle appears already in the description of Peter’s entry into the high priest’s courtyard. On the one hand Peter displays courage. When all the others flee, including a young man who even runs away naked (14:50–52), Peter follows after Jesus. His courage is accented by the detail that he goes “right into” the priest’s courtyard (ὡς εἰς τὴν αὐλήν). We should note Mark’s wording at this point. While he might easily have said that Peter “followed them” (the whole arresting party), the evangelist uses a singular pronoun to specify that Peter “followed *him*” (Jesus)—thus providing another small hint that Peter is motivated by devotion to Jesus. But while indicating Peter’s loyalty, the text also points to an element of caution that influences his choices at this stage of the story: he follows Jesus “from a distance” (ἀπὸ μακρόθεν).

The tension that marks Peter’s behavior as he enters the high priest’s courtyard continues when the people there challenge him concerning his relation to Jesus. This conflict within Peter is especially evident following his first denial. He withdraws to the entryway (a sign that his courage is wavering), yet he does not leave altogether. His in-between physical location reflects his uncertain state of mind. But the struggle is soon over. As the weight of the accusations brought against Peter increases—first a maid speaks to Peter directly, then she speaks to others about him, then the others take up the charge, pointing to Peter’s Galilean background as

sleeping would constitute a lapse in their faithfulness to him. But in the larger narrative context, the testing the disciples will face at the time of Jesus’ arrest must also be in view.

³⁸T. Boomershine (“Peter’s Denial as Polemic or Confession: The Implications of Media Criticism for Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 39 [1987]: 58) points out that this kind of inside view into a character’s mind encourages reader sympathy and identification.

evidence—so does the force of his denials. At the third challenge, Peter binds himself with a curse and swears that he does not know “this man you are talking about” (14:71). His courage and loyalty have totally collapsed.

With the collapse of Peter’s courage come hints of self-knowledge. The final image of the story is that of Peter weeping, but the narrator also gives readers a view of Peter’s thoughts immediately before he breaks down in tears. Peter is said to remember Jesus’ prediction. That he remembers Jesus’ prediction might well lead readers to suppose that Peter likewise remembers the overconfident way in which he had responded to that warning. In this way the narrative suggests that Peter’s present grieving is connected to a new understanding of his weakness and failure. Though the narrative does not explicitly say that this moment marks a permanent change in Peter’s attitude, neither does it suggest that his grief is just a transitory state of mind that will pass without any long-range effect. On the contrary, by climaxing this whole series of Peter-focused scenes with a picture of Peter weeping, the evangelist hints that the change will be lasting.

The passages we have been examining thus present a connected story that develops across three episodes. This story involves a character who undergoes inward change. But though Mark’s portrayal of Peter has reached a point of climax, he is not quite done with his story. The ending of the denial scene, powerful though it is, nevertheless leaves readers and hearers with significant unanswered questions. Did Peter’s devotion diminish and finally disappear through the course of his testing? Did his relation to Jesus come to a final end? Mark does not leave us in total suspense about these questions. He brings Peter back into his narrative one more time and, in doing so, points us toward their answers.

But before looking at this final passage about Peter, we should note that some scholars have detected an almost unbounded negativity in Mark’s portrayal of Peter. They see him as a figure who goes from bad to worse, until he ultimately stands condemned as one who has been ashamed to acknowledge any connection with Jesus. But this negative estimate of Peter in Mark depends on a very one-sided reading of a number of episodes involving Peter. The truth is that Mark’s portrait of Peter and the disciples con-

tains a remarkable mixture of positive and negative features. It is only by suppressing the positive and exaggerating the negative that the extreme negative view can exist. For example, on a hasty reading one might think the narrative sequence that runs from the denial predictions to the actual denials pictures the deterioration of Peter's character and level of commitment to Jesus. On closer inspection, however, we can see that this is not actually the case. What Mark presents instead is a story of steadily mounting pressure that progressively exposes character flaws that have existed in Peter from the start. It is true that Peter's failures become more serious, but this is largely because he is being tested in ways he has not previously experienced.

But it is the Gospel's final mention of Peter that provides the clearest indication of how Mark sees his story ending. When the angel at the empty tomb gives the women a message for the disciples about seeing Jesus in Galilee, he instructs them to "tell his disciples *and Peter*" (16:7). These words send a signal that the shepherd-sheep relation Jesus had spoken of at the time of the denials prediction remains intact—and Peter is still included (14:27). That Peter alone receives individual mention at this point is clearly connected to his unique failure in the high priest's courtyard and the questions this has raised about his status in relation to Jesus. Peter himself needs to hear that his name was specifically mentioned, and so do Mark's readers. Due to its apparently abrupt ending, Mark's Gospel is often said to be open-ended.³⁹ With respect to the specific questions raised by Peter's story, however, Mark provides deliberate and satisfying closure.

What pastoral/theological themes does Mark highlight through this distinctive thread of story involving Peter? We have seen that John presents a picture of Peter that emphasizes Christological truth about Jesus as the good shepherd. Mark's focus is different. In the scenes we have surveyed, he focuses largely on discipleship. Through the negative example of Peter's experience, he warns us not to overestimate our own strength, not to underestimate the pressures that may hit us, and not to fail to prepare ourselves through prayer.

³⁹ There is ongoing debate about whether 16:8 represents the original ending of Mark.

V. GAP FILLING? (LUKE 22:31–34,54–62; 24:12,34)

We have now analyzed a number of Gospel scenes. I have tried to be sensitive to narrative details in these scenes and have sought to show how those details contribute to the evangelists' portrayal of characters. But such an approach inevitably raises an important methodological question. Is it legitimate to take scenic details in Gospel texts and draw conclusions about a character's attitudes, motives, or feelings from them? Can we move with confidence from what is outward and explicit, such as a description of a character's words and physical actions, to what is internal and implied? We must now address this issue.

Two concepts that have emerged from the recent study of narratives give us helpful perspectives on this question. One of these is the distinction literary critics have made between the "telling" and "showing" modes of narration. A "telling" style of portraying character will directly name a character's inward qualities—such as when Luke describes Barnabas as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (Acts 11:24). A "showing" mode of narration, on the other hand, will reveal traits in a more indirect manner, through depicting the character's words and actions—such as when Luke says of Barnabas that "seeing the grace of God he rejoiced and encouraged them all to continue in the Lord with a steadfast heart" (Acts 11:23)—or through describing the way other figures in the story react to this character.

A "telling" style makes the task of interpretation simpler, since character traits are directly identified. The "showing" mode puts greater demands on the reader, but at the same time tends to exert a more powerful impact. Some Gospel narratives combine telling and showing. In Mark's story of the healing of the leper (1:40–45), for instance, readers are directly told that Jesus was filled with compassion,⁴⁰ but then they also read about physical actions that reinforce this theme. The result is both clarity and impact. But at many points Gospel narratives depend entirely on showing. They convey their messages about Jesus or other characters powerfully, but oblige interpreters to draw conclusions about things that are not directly stated. This style of narration is quite common throughout the Bible, as it is in a wide range of narrative literature. The

⁴⁰ I am assuming this to be the best reading, though there is some uncertainty with respect to the textual status of the word "compassion" in Mark 1:41.

issue is really not *whether* it is legitimate to discern motives and traits from narrative details—it would be impossible to read the Gospels without doing so—but rather what rules should govern our drawing of conclusions and what degree of certainty we can ascribe to our interpretations.

A second useful concept is that of “narrative gaps,” or parts of a story that readers are expected to fill in for themselves. Significant gaps are actually present in all human discourse. In many cases these are simply a matter of shared background information: the communicator assumes that the audience already understands many of the circumstances and presuppositions attending the message and therefore feels no need to spell everything out. For example, when a tax collector or Pharisee steps onto the scene in a Gospel narrative, the reader immediately perceives a whole set of unstated attending data. It is not always necessary for the evangelist to explicitly identify the tax collector as a sinner or the Pharisee as one who is concerned with the law.

Gaps can also occur in the course of depicting a series of events. The narrator may pass over certain items because the momentum of the narrative is sufficient to carry readers across the empty spaces. For example, after describing the disciples’ role in distributing the bread at the feeding of the 5,000, Mark does not need to mention their similar participation with respect to the fish. Readers and hearers will simply assume it. According to some theorists, still other narrative gaps may be designed to create a measure of ambiguity and thus challenge readers to reflect on a character’s actions or motives more deeply.⁴¹

In many cases readers will supply missing information easily, hardly noticing they are doing so; in other instances they will have to give careful attention to all available clues. But once again the question is not *whether* we will ever fill in gaps, but what guidelines we will follow when we do. First of all, we need some means for deciding where a narrative invites us to supply missing elements and where it does not. Without such means or criteria our attempts at gap-filling are likely to veer off into mere side-tracking. Then, once we have decided that there is indeed a gap to be filled, we need to know the proper places to look for the miss-

⁴¹ For further discussion of narrative gaps, see M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 186–263.

ing information. To explore these matters further, we will examine Luke's story thread about the Jesus-Peter relationship during the period leading up to and following Jesus' trial and crucifixion. We have already seen the rich and distinctive themes John and Mark highlight through their portrayals of Peter's experience during this period; now we investigate Luke's contribution as he covers some of the same historical ground.

Luke presents a sequence of four scenes relating to Peter's denials and their aftermath. These are the denial prediction (22:31–34), the denials (22:54–62), Peter's run to the tomb (24:12), and the report of Jesus' appearance to Peter (24:34). Throughout this series of episodes the evangelist gives special attention to the relationship between Jesus and Peter. He particularly emphasizes Jesus' concern for and involvement with Peter through the period of Peter's "sifting."

We begin with the second of these scenes and a detail unique to Luke. Luke's account of Peter's actions in the high priest's courtyard reaches a powerful climax at the point of the third denial. In one dramatic moment, three things happen simultaneously: Peter denies Jesus for a third time, the rooster crows, and (the detail that only Luke includes) Jesus turns and looks straight at Peter (Luke 22:61).⁴² It is Jesus' look that I wish to consider here. What thoughts or feelings lie behind it and what does it communicate to Peter? The narrative shows that it certainly does communicate something. Jesus' look and the crowing of the rooster are presented together as joint stimuli that stir Peter's memory and provoke his reaction of grief. Luke gives no explicit indication of its meaning, yet we would not be true to his intentions if we just set this detail aside as unimportant or leave it without interpretation.

Here is an instance where readers are invited to fill a gap. What makes this so? At least two things, in my judgment. First, in common human experience a deliberate look usually means something. Why would Luke or any other writer mention a look if they did not attach significance to it? Second, this detail is dramatically positioned; not only does it coincide with the third denial and the crowing of the rooster, it also causes Peter to remember Jesus' prediction of his threefold failure and leads him to go out and weep bitterly. These considerations, one based on general cultural

⁴²καὶ στραφεὶς ὁ κύριος ἐνέβλεψεν τῷ Πέτρῳ.

presuppositions and the other on the immediate narrative context, are sufficient to show that this small act of Jesus is rich with implicit meaning. But they do not enable us to specify the exact nature of that meaning. Is Jesus communicating rebuke? Conveying the grief and agony of being abandoned? Expressing anger at Peter's disloyalty? Revealing feelings of concern? Or just reminding Peter, with some kind of bitter triumph, that Jesus' words have come true and Peter's have been proven false? To answer these questions we need further clues, and for these we must turn to the wider narrative context.

We can first go back to the earlier scene in which Jesus predicts Peter's denials (22:31–34). Luke's depiction of this scene is even more distinctive than his narrative of the denials themselves. Compared with Mark, for example, there is much less emphasis on Peter's self-confidence and protestation of loyalty.⁴³ Instead, Luke highlights Jesus' particular concern for Peter during the period of testing that is about to come upon all the disciples. Jesus tells Peter that he has prayed for him that his faith will not fail. He implies that, even though Peter will deny him, Peter will later return and be a source of strength to the other disciples. To catch the full nuance of Jesus' words in this passage we must notice how he first addresses Peter. He says, "Simon, Simon." This doubling of Peter's name is a somewhat conspicuous element in the narrative, inviting the hearer's or reader's attention. Here, in fact, is another small narrative gap to fill, a place where the narrator uses an outward form of words to show readers something about the inward disposition of the speaker.

With what tone does Jesus address Peter, and what does that tone reveal about Jesus' feelings and attitude? This is not at all an improper question. Rather, it would be improper to read these words as if the double "Simon" made no difference and a single vocative, or none at all, would communicate exactly the same message. Luke's original readers would no doubt have grasped the nuance conveyed by this form of address easily, given their sensitivity to the language and usage of the times. For us the significant exegetical clue comes through examining similar usage elsewhere in the Lukan narratives. A double vocative appears on Jesus' lips

⁴³ For example, Luke does not show Peter reaffirming his loyalty a second time and does not mention his claim that he will remain loyal even if all the other disciples fail.

in 10:41 (“Martha, Martha”) and 13:34 (“Jerusalem, Jerusalem”). In both of these contexts the doubling of the name suggests that Jesus is troubled by what he sees in one he cares for. The address of the risen Lord to Saul is also consistent with this (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14). Thus we are on safe ground if we conclude that in the present passage Jesus speaks with a combination of care, concern, and awareness of Peter’s moral weakness.

We return to the denial scene and the question of Jesus’ look. To perceive Jesus as expressing anger, surprise, or scorn in the denial scene would be out of harmony with the way Luke has portrayed Jesus’ tone at the point when he predicts Peter’s denials. We find this conclusion further reinforced as we examine the two remaining scenes in Luke’s developing story of the Jesus-Peter relationship—though each of these episodes also presents readers with a significant narrative gap of its own.

As part of his portrayal of Jesus’ resurrection, Luke presents a scene in which a group of women—those who discover Jesus’ tomb to be empty and who are told by angels that he is living—run to tell the disciples (24:9–12). The disciples do not believe their report. Peter, however, runs to the tomb, sees the strips of linen, and goes away wondering what has happened.⁴⁴ Peter’s action is highlighted by the fact that it stands in contrast to that of the other disciples. The whole group hears the women’s report with unbelief, but only Peter gets up and runs to the tomb. Furthermore, Luke’s depiction of Peter’s action comes at a point in the story when it is almost unavoidable that readers will be asking themselves questions about him. They have heard Jesus say that he has prayed for Peter, at the same time making reference to his repenting. They have then seen Peter deny Jesus and go off weeping. Though the primary focus of attention at this stage in Luke’s narrative concerns what happens to Jesus following his crucifixion, an important secondary matter relates to what becomes of Peter. In this context, the picture of Peter racing to the tomb inevitably provokes readers to reflect on Peter’s state of mind. But they are left with a significant narrative gap to fill. Why does Peter run to the tomb? Is he hoping to discover something? Is he motivated by

⁴⁴ I am assuming the genuineness of v. 12, though some ancient manuscripts omit it. In addition to other arguments in its favor, it forms a link in the Peter story that develops between 22:31–34 and 24:34.

loyalty to Jesus and concerned that his grave has been disturbed? Or are other things on Peter's mind? Equally ambiguous is the precise nature of Peter's wonder as he leaves the grave.

It is wise to recognize that we are given insufficient clues to permit a firm conclusion concerning Peter's precise feelings and motives at this stage of the narrative. But perhaps this is not a problem. Precision and certainty may be more than we actually need in this instance. The narrative offers us a brief glimpse of Peter and through it shows us what is truly important: following his sin and grief, Peter is nevertheless still in the picture and still actively responding to anything that has to do with Jesus. This is enough to prepare us for the coming mention of Jesus' appearance to Peter, while at the same time keeping us in suspense about the way the Jesus-Peter relationship is going to develop.

The final segment of the narrative thread we are tracing comes in 24:12. Luke slips a brief mention of an appearance of the risen Jesus to Peter into his account of Jesus' appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The Emmaus road disciples return to Jerusalem to share their amazing news with the Eleven, only to be informed by the other disciples that Jesus has already appeared to Peter. Luke tells us nothing at all about why Jesus has chosen to appear to Peter, what was said between them, or what impact the encounter has had on Peter. Is this another gap readers are meant to fill? Two factors suggest that it is—the same factors that operate in the case of the earlier scene involving Peter's running to the tomb. First, Peter is singled out for special attention. Jesus appears to him first among the Eleven, and he meets with him alone. Second, Peter's encounter with Jesus comes in the aftermath of scenes portraying a relationship marked by both promise and tension. The denial episode in particular, ending as it does with Jesus' look and Peter's tears, calls for precisely the kind of follow up and closure that this resurrection appearance provides.

Where will we find the missing data to fill the gap created by the total lack of information about what transpired at this appearance to Peter? Our primary clues come from the questions and issues raised by the earlier scenes involving Jesus and Peter. In my judgment these earlier episodes push us towards two conclusions. The first and most basic is that Jesus' encounter with Peter in some way deals with his disloyalty and failure in denying Jesus, so that

the relationship between Jesus and Peter can go on. Second, when we remember that it is always Jesus who takes the initiative in NT resurrection appearances, and that in this instance he chooses to come to Peter alone and first among the eleven disciples, we have reason to see this appearance as a further expression of Jesus' gracious concern for Peter as an individual.⁴⁵

Returning once again to the question of Jesus' look in Luke's narrative of the denials, we can now see that this is a coherent and centrally placed element in a progressing story that highlights Jesus' personal involvement with Peter before, during, and after his moment of testing and failure.

Let me close this discussion of narrative gaps with a few suggestions that emerge from our examination of Luke's story of Peter and Jesus. First, with respect to determining *when* a gap in a story is meant to be filled, one positive indication can be the presence of an element in the narrative that calls attention to itself and almost demands some kind of explanation. Details such as Jesus' look, Peter's run to the tomb, and Jesus' appearance to Peter as an individual seem to fall into this category. Gap-filling in such cases enables readers to keep moving along the road the narrator has set before them. This differs from attempting to imaginatively fill in spaces that lie off to the side of the narrative path or that stretch out beyond its natural end point. So, for instance, nothing in Luke's text encourages us to speculate about the specific details of the Easter morning conversation between Jesus and Peter, or to try to identify Peter's feelings upon seeing the risen Jesus. If we do want to use our imaginations to pursue such matters, we must recognize that in doing so we will be moving beyond the actual boundaries of the story.

With regard to the question of what *sources* we should turn to when searching for missing information, the answer is simple: we must follow all the normal exegetical procedures. Factors such as historical and cultural background, immediate literary context, and the author's habits of style and usage provide the clues needed for interpreting actions or details that are not directly explained in the narrative. Perhaps the only exegetical factor that requires

⁴⁵ Sensitivity to Luke's unfolding story of the relationship between Jesus and Peter tips the exegetical balance away from the common view that Luke includes 24:34 to highlight Peter's ecclesiastical position stemming from being the first resurrection witness.

special mention, because it is sometimes overlooked, is the importance of considering the wider narrative context in which a gap appears. In our attempt to understand some of the gaps in Luke's portrayal of Jesus and Peter, we found vital help through considering the whole sequence of interrelated scenes.

Finally, the matter of *ambiguity* in connection with narrative gaps calls for a comment. In the course of our exploration of Luke's story we saw that not all gaps can be filled in completely. Some remain vague and uncertain. But this should not be taken to mean that all interpretive options are equal, or that we cannot make substantial progress towards discerning the direction and tone of the author's story. In some cases we find a measure of ambiguity that nevertheless remains within a limited range. If the nature of Jesus' look and the feelings and attitude expressed through it remain difficult to describe with precision, we can still eliminate certain possibilities as unlikely. It may be that the storyteller's purposes simply do not require a greater degree of precision at this point, or even that they are best achieved through the portrayal of actions whose exact motivation remains indistinct and allusive. Gestures such as Jesus' look or Peter's run to the tomb have an important impact on the story Luke tells, but the emotive force they carry does not depend on our ability to define the thoughts lying behind them with exactness.