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

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

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

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

---

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


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

2.1. Character in Ancient Hebrew Literature

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

5. Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg, Nature of Narrative, 164–67 (quotations from p. 164 and p. 166 respectively). This view has been maintained since the 1966 edition.
through indirect characterization, that is, through the subject’s speech and actions rather than inward speech or statements by the narrator, we are essentially left in the realm of inference. Sternberg emphasizes that the reader’s task of gap-filling is legitimate and by no means an arbitrary process, since any hypothesis must be validated by the text.

Alter adds that Hebrew characters who are dealt with at any length exhibit a capacity for change, and this developing and transforming nature of character is one reason biblical characters cannot be reduced to fixed Homeric types—Jacob is not simply “wily Jacob,” Moses is not “sagacious Moses.” Sternberg agrees that biblical characters can display change, unpredictability, ambiguity, complexity, and surprise. Indeed, characters such as Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Saul, or David can hardly be labeled as “static,” “type,” or “flat.” Sternberg goes on to say that “[c]onsidering the range of the Bible’s portrait gallery, it is amazing how distinct and memorable its figures remain, without benefit of formal portrayal. And this is largely due to the surplus of inner life expressed in act and speech.”

Gowler affirms that Scholes and Kellogg’s claim that the inner life of characters is assumed rather than presented is easily disproved because the narrator does provide readers with the inner life of characters when necessary, as Gen. 27:41 and 2 Sam. 13:15, for example, indicate. Alter aptly concludes that “the underlying biblical conception of character as often unpredictable, in some ways impenetrable, constantly emerging from and slipping back into a penumbra of ambiguity, in fact has greater affinity with dominant modern notions than do the habits of conceiving character typical of the Greek epics.”

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


15. Alter, *Narrative Art*, 129. Although Alter’s conclusion holds true for Homeric characters, later Greek literature was capable of more complex portrayals of character with aspects of inner life and development (see section 2.2).
structuralism) but that there is a two-way traffic between them, an inferential movement from character to action to character.¹⁶

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

### 2.2. Character in Ancient Greco-Roman Literature

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

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

---

represents people. . . . [24] Character is that which reveals choice, shows what sort of thing a man chooses or avoids in circumstances where the choice is not obvious, so those speeches convey no character in which there is nothing whatever which the speaker chooses or avoids. (Poetics 6:7-24)\textsuperscript{17}

Aristotle’s view of character as fixed and subordinate (even inessential) to the plot is well known. Rather than the modern idea that a person’s character may develop through their actions and thought, and through external factors, for Aristotle, character is unchanging: “character is that which determines people’s nature/qualities” (Poetics 6:8; cf. 6:12) and “character is that which reveals (moral) choice” (Poetics 6:24). Aristotle’s “character” or ἦθος comes close to the modern notion of disposition—people’s inherent qualities that influence their thought and actions.\textsuperscript{18} Aristotle’s notion of character corresponds to the modern category “flat” or “type.”\textsuperscript{19} Many Gospel critics have accepted this Aristotelian view of character as static, consistent ethical (stereo)types to represent the whole of ancient Greek thought—over against character development in ancient Hebrew narrative and modern fiction.\textsuperscript{20} Christopher Gill states it succinctly:

It is often claimed that in the ancient world character was believed to be something fixed, given at birth and immutable during life. This belief is said to underlie the portrayal of individuals in ancient historiography and biography, particularly in the early Roman Empire; and to constitute the chief point of difference in psychological assumptions between ancient and modern biography.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{enumerate}
\item[18.] According to BDAG (3rd ed.), ἦθος is “a pattern of behavior or practice that is habitual or characteristic of a group or an individual”—a custom, usage, or habit.
\item[19.] Theophrastus, a disciple of Aristotle, developed his master’s ideas in his \textit{Characters} (late fourth century BCE). \textit{Traits} would actually be a better translation of this work since the Greek title χαρακτήρ means “a characteristic trait or manner” (BDAG [3rd ed.]), and ἦθος is normally used to translate “character” (although not with the modern psychological sense of character). \textit{Characters} contains thirty chapters, each describing and elaborating on a single trait so that Theophrastus’ “characters” are effectively types (cf. J. Rusten, “Introduction to Theophrastus,” in \textit{Characters}, ed. and trans. J. Rusten [LCL 225; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002], 5–13).
\end{enumerate}
I will demonstrate, however, that Aristotle’s view of character in Greek tragedy is not irrefutable or representative of ancient Greek literature at large, but that character could be more complex and take on more dimensions than Aristotle will have us believe.\textsuperscript{22}

The earliest example of character advancing beyond the category “flat” or “type” is found in classical Attic tragedy of the fifth century BCE. In his analysis of Aeschylus’ \textit{Agamemnon}, Gowler brings out the complex characterization of Clytemnestra to show that she is not a standard type of character. Her character dominates the play and the emphasis is on her royal authority in her husband Agamemnon’s absence. Clytemnestra does not conform to the accepted cultural order: for example, she takes on a public role, turns against her own husband, shows greater masculinity than he, and overpowers him both verbally and physically. Then, showing no shame, she glories in murdering Agamemnon and Cassandra, and clashes with the chorus.\textsuperscript{23}

On examining Sophocles’ tragedies \textit{Ajax} and \textit{Antigone}, Albin Lesky finds it unsatisfactory to label their respective protagonists Ajax and Antigone as “types,” but the term “round” is also inadequate since they lack the abundance of individual features that can be seen of modern characters.\textsuperscript{24} Lesky suggests the following way out of the dilemma:

\begin{quote}
To understand the great figures of the Attic stage, especially those of Sophocles, we must realise that neither the usual concept “type” nor that of individual character brings us any nearer. . . . They are not determined by typical features that can be repeated at will, but entirely by their own fundamental qualities, and it is this which makes it a great experience to encounter them. We have rejected the terms “type” and “character” (in the modern sense); perhaps the best definition is the classical concept of “personality” as expressed by Herbert Cysarz: “Personality instead of just interesting individuality, a norm instead of the original and the bizarre.”\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{22} Cf. Gowler, who states that while Aristotle’s \textit{Poetics} is an important voice in the analysis and critique of the characters of Greek tragedy, it remains a secondary source and cannot take the place of a firsthand analysis of the plays themselves (and there are thirty-three complete ancient Greek tragedies extant) (\textit{Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend}, 88).

\textsuperscript{23} Gowler, \textit{Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend}, 89–94.


\textsuperscript{25} Lesky, \textit{Greek Tragedy}, 124 (my emphasis).
Christopher Gill also ascribes “personality” to Sophocles’ Ajax, in which he associates “personality” (i) with a response to people that is empathetic (i.e., understanding someone by placing oneself in the other person’s position) rather than moral (i.e., evaluating a person from the outside in terms of vice and virtue), and (ii) with a concern with the person as an individual rather than as the bearer of character traits that are assessed by reference to general moral terms.  

Jacqueline de Romilly makes similar observations, arguing that Sophocles employs a vivid and nuanced characterization in which characters can take a variety of positions that are often in direct conflict with one another. She says, for example, “Sophocles does not simply choose an ideal to embody in Antigone; he puts a living Antigone before us. Yet at every juncture of the plot he manages to reveal in her a set of principles and an ideal of proper conduct that together make up her unique personality.” As Simon Goldhill asserts, Greek tragedy may not have the same notion of character as the modern novel, but this does not mean that Greek tragedy has no interest in the inner life of its characters. Patricia Easterling, arguing that Sophocles depicts his characters as life-like individuals, goes so far as saying, “[I]n the matter of characterization the differences between Sophocles and modern dramatists are ultimately unimportant . . . there is nothing in modern drama that does not have its counterpart in his plays.”

Although the Sophoclean characters could have “personality,” Lesky argues that they were nevertheless unable to change since Sophocles adhered to the basic idea in ancient Greek culture that the inherent qualities of people (their φύσις) determined their character irreversibly. The idea of development or change in a character, Lesky continues, was only introduced by Euripides, after a revolution in ideas about human nature.

beyond the norm, appears inconsistent, “out of character.”³² Although it is debatable whether we can speak of a real change or development in character in Sophocles, it appears that Sophoclean characters could fluctuate between flat and round, static and dynamic, and Lesky’s suggested category of personality may be appropriate.

A related issue is the appearance of a hero in multiple plays by the same writer or different writers. Goldhill, for example, argues that Sophocles might have drawn on and developed the Ajax in Homer’s *Iliad*. Characters of Greek drama draw on, define themselves through, and develop in relation to other texts.³³ Similarly, Creon appears in three of Sophocles’ plays, and Burnett wonders how to compare the docile and passive Creon of the *Antigone* with the active and tyrannical Creon in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and the brazen liar Creon in *Oedipus at Colonus*. He then suggests that, for ancient audiences, oral traditions and private and public discussions about Creon may have contributed to Creon’s change of character between plays.³⁴

In *Euripides’ Medea*, the central figure Medea displays a tragic conflict within herself and the intensity of her inner experiences, oscillating between furious passion (θυμός) and thoughtful reflection (βουλεύματα) (*Medea* 1079), is unequaled in Attic tragedy.³⁵ Medea’s intense dialogue with herself in *Medea* 1019–80, for example, reveals her inner life with all its psychological reversals, not unlike a modern character.³⁶ In *Euripides’* later plays, such as *Electra* and *Orestes*, Kitto sees characters “who are regarded purely as individuals, not in any degree as types, or tragic and exemplary embodiments of some universal passion.”³⁷ In his later plays, Euripides shows a radical new valuation of humankind: (i) in *Electra*, *Orestes*, and *Ion*, environment and education are the decisive factors that shape one’s character rather than one’s φύσις; (ii) in *Antiope*, the contrast between the two brothers Amphion and Zethus reflects the important split between thought and action—thought no longer being the servant of action.³⁸ The implication is that characters can change or develop:

³³. Goldhill, *Greek Tragedy*, 188.
their external environment can influence inner thought and move them to a particular action rather than that they act solely out of their φύσις. Lesky thus concludes that “[t]his lively interplay between external changes and the characters’ internal reactions represents a line of development that begins with the increased dramatic movement of Sophocles and brings us close to modern drama.”

We do not know much about postclassic Hellenistic tragedy of the fourth and third century BCE, but Lesky conjectures that the preoccupation with psychological portrayal of characters that we saw in Euripides continued or even increased. Alongside tragedy, the genre of comedy emerged in the second half of the fifth century and into the fourth century BCE. In this new genre, there was a sporadic resemblance to character in tragedy. De Romilly observes that Menander, who belonged to New Comedy, replaced politics (characteristic of Old Comedy) with psychology, and although he mainly used typecast characters, they exhibited variety and subtle psychological nuances.

Two new genres of Greek literature appeared in the Roman era: biography (βίος), which took its place beside history, and romance or the novel. In a widely acclaimed study, Richard Burridge makes a convincing case for viewing the Gospels as Greco-Roman βίοι. Examining ten Greco-Roman βίοι from the fourth century BCE to the third century CE, he observes that ancient characterization was much more indirect than its modern counterpart, revealing character primarily through the subject’s words and deeds rather than by direct, psychological analysis. Regarding early Greco-Roman βίοι, pre-dating the Gospels, Burridge argues that although there is interest in the individual (otherwise, there would be no βίος), most characters are stereotyped as examples of general, ethical qualities. Regarding βίοι that came after the

39. Lesky, Greek Tragedy, 190.
40. Lesky, Greek Tragedy, 202–5.
42. De Romilly, Short History, 191. Although the historians of the Roman age (e.g., Diodorus, Josephus, Tacitus, Dio Cassius, Eusebius) had considerable influence, they were inferior to the great Greek historians of the fifth century like Herodotus and Thucydides (de Romilly, Short History, 197–202).
43. Burridge, What Are the Gospels? (see n. 2, above, for details).
44. Burridge, What Are the Gospels?, 117, 139, 172.
45. Burridge, What Are the Gospels?, 144.
Gospels, he ventures that although we should not look for modern concepts of character in these βίοι, “we may find some quite carefully drawn characters—some stereotypical and others more realistic—emerging through the narratives.”

Burridge asserts that in Plutarch’s Lives, for example, there is evidence of character change.

Comparing Plutarch’s biographical theory and practice, Christopher Pelling makes similar observations. He observes that although the concern in Plutarch’s Lives is character (ἦθος) and their ultimate purpose is protreptic and moral, in some of the Lives Plutarch displays real psychological interest in the characters. Regarding Antony, for example, Pelling notes that, after the entrance of Cleopatra, Plutarch’s moralism becomes rather different from crude remarks of praise and blame: “It is the moralism of a sympathetic insight into human frailty; the moralism which, like the tragic aspects of Pompey, points a truth of human nature.”

In the category of Greco-Roman biographies and historiographies, Christopher Gill examines the issue of character development in the first-century writings of Plutarch and Tacitus. Plutarch’s ήθος means “character” in an evaluative sense (like Aristotle’s ήθος) in that his point of view is highly evaluative, passing moral judgment on great people of the past and thus providing the reader with examples of behavior to imitate and avoid. However, contra Aristotle, Plutarch’s characters are not necessarily flat, static, or typecast. Quite the reverse. Like Pelling, Gill argues that Plutarch’s moral essays clearly suggest the possibility of development of character, in that the journey of life can introduce changes in adult character. Gill adds that in Tacitus we also find the idea of the development of the adult character.

47. Burridge, What Are the Gospels?, 178.
49. Pelling, “Plutarch’s Adaptation,” 138. Regarding Suetonius’ Lives of the Caesars, Gowler asserts that this biography shows a terse realism where the emperors remain individuals and resist attempts to typify them (Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend, 131).
51. Gill, “Character-Development,” 474–75. In fact, Plutarch seems to regard two kinds of character development acceptable: (i) the development of a child or youth toward a good or bad adult character; (ii) the process of an adult to improve his character, in some cases by conscious correction of deficiencies. What Plutarch finds problematic is when a good adult character turns bad (Gill, “Character-Development,” 478). In turn, Christopher B. R. Pelling affirms Gill’s findings and concludes that Plutarch had “a considerable interest in ‘personality’” (“Childhood and Personality in Greek Biography,” in Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature, ed. Christopher B. R. Pelling [Oxford: Clarendon, 1990], 225–44 [quotation from p. 228]).
that in Tacitus’ *Annals* the characters “can represent types—such as the sage, tyrant, or informer—but many come to be individuals in their own right.”

Gill warns against two extremities. On the one hand, though there was a general awareness in the Greco-Roman culture of that time that the adult character depended on a combination of factors (innate qualities as well as upbringing and influences of individuals and of society at large), and could therefore develop, this is not fully reflected in the historiography and biography of that time but merely lightly sketched. On the other hand, it would be a gross oversimplification to say that ancient writers were incapable of conceiving of a change of character. Burnett argues in a similar vein that there is evidence from nonliterary sources of a move from the typical to the individual in the ancient Greek and Roman world, which would perhaps allow the reader to construct a character’s individuality. Nevertheless, Easterling warns that the Greeks were interested in individuals as part of a community rather than in the individual’s unique private experience found in modern literature.

Examining characterization in the ancient novel, Alain Billault observes that although novelists sometimes draw on characters in comedy, they also delineate new types of characters. Some characters are given personal features such as a name, and the novelists often make psychological remarks beyond the stereotyped categories “good” or “bad,” thereby providing a character with a true psychological existence that comes close to ordinary people. For example, Chariton and Heliodorus depict characters that are “a complex whole of various qualities and contradictions, which seems to be the real thing”; Longus subtly describes characters’ psychology; and Achilles Tatius’ protagonists often employ self-deprecating humor. In addition, Billault observes that character development through suffering is a favorite theme in the ancient novel; some
heroes are not the same in the end as they were in the beginning of the story.\textsuperscript{59} Examples of characters that develop through suffering are Chaereas in Chariton’s Chaereas and Callirhoe, Theagenes in Heliodorus’ Aethiopica, Lucius in Apuleius’ The Golden Ass, and Callisthenes in Achilles Tatius’ Leucippe and Clitophon.\textsuperscript{60}

From this survey, I conclude that character and characterization in ancient Greco-Roman literature is much more varied than most biblical scholars assume. David Gowler admits that the stereotypical view of ancient characters as types and immutable is not easy to overcome, but after a broad survey of Greek literature, he reasons:

The varieties of characterization found in ancient narratives make it impossible to predict how a character may be presented in an individual ancient narrative. The best course seems to be one that would simply examine characters in individual narratives without taking any prefabricated frames and boxes in which to encase them. . . . The happy result for readers following this prescription will be an experience of the diversity of characters and characterization in ancient narratives.\textsuperscript{61}

Likewise, Fred Burnett’s conclusion is worth quoting at length:

From modern views of characterization, which are interested in psychological description and change, indirect characterization in tragedy or in ancient biography and historiography appears to be simplistic. It appears to be minimal characterization, and thus it is easy to argue from a modern point of view that characters were only types and symbols. How audiences and readers inferred characters from the words, deeds, and relationships, and by what larger codes, however, still seems to be an open question. The discussions of the interest in the individual in portraiture and in tragedy, and the limited number of extant sources for both tragedies and biographical writing, should make Gospel critics reconsider the possibility from a narrative-critical viewpoint that ancient audiences and readers constructed much fuller characters than is usually thought.\textsuperscript{62}

Artaxerxes with “enough inconsistency in their portrayal to allow the possibility for change or development” (Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend, 167).
This more nuanced and measured understanding of character in ancient Greco-Roman literature also implies that the difference with characterization in the Hebrew Bible may not be so great.

### 2.3. Character in Modern Literature

Aristotle’s concept of character as type and subordinate to plot has been advanced by Russian Formalists (e.g., V. Propp) and French Structuralists (e.g., A. J. Greimas), who argue that characters are merely plot functionaries. In Greimas’s well-known actantial model, characters are subordinated to action, reducing them to mere actants or agents. If the focus is on actions and plot, an actantial analysis may be beneficial, but for a study of characters, Greimas’s approach is too reductionistic. To reduce, for example, all the Johannine characters to merely six actants will be to deny the complexity and variety of the cast of John’s Gospel. Seymour Chatman challenges this Aristotelian or structuralist approach to character, arguing that plot and character are equally important. Similarly, Rimmon-Kenan suggests that character and plot are interdependent.

Chatman carries on developing a so-called open theory of character. He disagrees that characters in fiction are mere words restricted to the text; rather, characters should be treated as autonomous beings we must try to figure out. He maintains that to curb “a God-given right to infer and even to speculate about characters” would be “an impoverishment of aesthetic experience.” Chatman does not confuse fiction and reality: characters do not have “lives” beyond the text, but we endow them with “personality” only to the extent that they are familiar to us from real life. Therefore, Chatman argues, we

---


64. Sheridan claims that I misread Greimas’s actantial model (*Retelling Scripture*, 81 n. 151), but does not elaborate. It seems to me that Greimas’s actantial model, where (by definition) characters are subordinated to the plot (rather than coordinated), produces “flattened” characters. I have used Greimas’s actantial model in an earlier work (Cornelis Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel* [WUNT II/148; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007], 106–7), where it was useful to understand the characters’ function in relation to the plot rather than to understand the characters themselves. See also Farelly’s critique of Greimas’s actantial model (*Disciples in the Fourth Gospel*, 166–67). For a critique of the structuralist view of character in general, see Shepherd, *Narrative Function*, 57–59.


reconstruct character by inferring traits from the information in the text. Chatman points out two important features of trait: (i) often the trait is not explicitly named in the text but must be inferred; (ii) since readers rely upon their knowledge of the trait-name in the real world, traits are culturally coded. This then leads Chatman to define character as “a paradigm of traits,” in which trait is a “relatively stable or abiding personal quality.” Rimmon-Kenan agrees with Chatman to a great extent, but she points out that Chatman’s character as “a paradigm of traits” may become too static a construct, and therefore she allows for a developmental dimension of character: “When, in the process of reconstruction, the reader reaches a point where he can no longer integrate an element within a constructed category, the implication would seem . . . that the character has changed.”

One of the earliest and most familiar classifications of characters in literary criticism is E. M. Forster’s categories of “flat” and “round” character. Flat characters or types are built around a single trait and do not develop, whereas round characters are complex, have multiple traits, and can develop in the course of action. Forster’s criterion for deciding whether a character is round or

69. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 137–38. Cf. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 33; Billault, “Characterization,” 115. Uri Margolin writes, “The IND [nonactual individual] is a member of some domain(s) of this possible world, and in it/them, it can be uniquely identified, located in a space/time region, and endowed with a variety of physical and mental attributes and relations, including social, locutionary, epistemic, cognitive, emotive, volitional, and perceptual. The IND may possess inner states, knowledge and belief sets, traits, intentions, wishes, dispositions, memories, and attitudes, that is, an interiority or personhood” (“Individuals in Narrative Worlds,” *Poetics Today* 11 [1990]: 843–71).


71. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 123–25. For example, from John 13:36–38 and 18:10–11 we may infer that Peter speaks and acts before he thinks, and label this trait “impulsive” without the text ever mentioning this word. Or, if someone habitually produces an eructation after meals, we may assign the trait “impolite” whereas in some cultures this is entirely acceptable or even appreciated.

72. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 126. Elsewhere, Chatman defines trait more extensively as “a narrative adjective out of the vernacular labeling a personal quality of a character, as it persists over part or whole of the story” (*Story and Discourse*, 125).

73. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 39. Although Chatman does not focus on the developing character, he does realize that a character’s traits can change in that a new trait may emerge earlier or later in the course of the story, or it may disappear and be replaced by another trait (*Story and Discourse*, 126).
flat is whether it is capable of surprising the reader.\textsuperscript{74} W. J. Harvey uses three or four categories of characters: (i) protagonists (the central characters in the narrative); (ii) intermediate figures, whom he divides into cards (characters who support and illuminate the protagonists) and fcelles (typical characters who serve certain plot functions); (iii) background characters (characters who serve a mechanical role in the plot or act as chorus).\textsuperscript{75} Where Forster classifies characters according to traits and development, Harvey classifies them according to narrative presence or importance.\textsuperscript{76} Thus Harvey’s classification does not improve our understanding of the characters themselves but only of how active they are in the plot. If we accept Chatman’s definition of character as “a paradigm of traits,” Forster’s “psychological” classification has scope but is still too reductionistic because not every character would neatly fit into either one of his categories.\textsuperscript{77}

This has led some people to refine Forster’s classification. Berlin, for example, uses the categories of full-fledged character (Forster’s round character), type (Forster’s flat character), and agent (the plot functionary), but she considers these categories as degrees of characterization rather than fixed categories.\textsuperscript{78} Rimmon-Kenan draws attention to the more advanced classification of Yosef Ewen, who advocates three continua or axes upon which a character may be situated:

- **Complexity**: characters range from those displaying a single trait to those displaying a complex nexus of traits, with varying degrees of complexity in between.
- **Development**: characters range from those who show no development to those who are fully developed.
- **Penetration into the inner life**: characters range from those who are seen only from the outside (their minds remain opaque) to those whose consciousness is presented from within.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{75} W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 52–73.
\textsuperscript{76} Cf. Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin, *How to Read Bible Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Criticism* (London: SCM, 1999), 60.
\textsuperscript{78} Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 23, 32. However, even Forster admits that a flat character could acquire “roundness” (*Aspects of the Novel*, 74–75, 112–13).
Baruch Hochman has proposed the most comprehensive model for classifying characters to date. His classification consists of eight continua of polar opposites upon which a character may be located:

- stylization ——— naturalism
- coherence ——— incoherence
- wholeness ——— fragmentariness
- literalness ——— symbolism
- complexity ——— simplicity
- transparency ——— opacity
- dynamism ——— staticism
- closure ——— openness.\(^80\)

Mieke Bal also suggests that we select relevant “semantic axes” on which to mark characters in order to map out the similarities and oppositions between them. However, instead of using polarized axes (e.g., an axis with the two poles “strong” and “weak”), she recommends grading axes either by degree, creating a sliding scale (very strong, reasonably strong, not strong enough, somewhat weak, weak), or by modality, creating nuance (certainly, probably, perhaps, probably not).\(^81\)

Some biblical scholars take a similar position. Sternberg and Bar–Efrat, for example, view biblical characters as moving along a continuum rather than existing as two contingencies—flat or round.\(^82\) While acknowledging the usefulness of Forster’s “flat” and “round” categories, Malbon views them as extremes on a continuum rather than fixed categories.\(^83\) Based on Jens Eder’s work on character in film, Sönke Finnern proposes no less than ten Gegensatzpaare (“opposite/contrasting pairs”) to analyze characters.\(^84\) However, it is unclear whether he intends to use them as binary categories (a character is, for example, either static or dynamic) or as continua (a character can be

---


positioned, for example, on a continuum that ranges from static to dynamic). Based on his extensive research on character in antiquity, Burnett concludes:

[I]t does seem plausible that reading conventions that demanded that the reader infer character indirectly from words, deeds, and relationships could allow even for the typical character to fluctuate between type and individuality. If so, then it would seem wise to understand characterization, for any biblical text at least, on a continuum. This would imply for narratives like the Gospels that the focus should be on the degree of characterization rather than on characterization as primarily typical.

The idea of plotting characters along a continuum or multiple continua is a significant development, but there is no consensus on a model. In addition, those scholars who have suggested classifying characters using multiple categories or continua do not clarify what they will do with the results. Even Hochman and Finnern, for example, do not indicate what we should do with the resulting eight or ten categories of their comprehensive models.

One last concept of character study is point of view. Any meaningful communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, has a particular purpose, a message that the sender wants to get across to the receiver. In line with its purpose, a story is told or written from a particular perspective. This is called “point of view.” Stephen Moore defines point of view as “the rhetorical activity of an author as he or she attempts, from a position within some socially shared system of assumptions and convictions, to impose a story-world upon an audience by the manipulation of narrative perspective.” James Resseguie states that “[i]t is the mode or angle of vision from which characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and events are considered or observed. But also point of view is the narrator’s attitude toward or evaluation of characters, dialogue, actions, setting and events.” We may call this evaluative point of view. The important questions then are: How does the narrator communicate an ideology through


87. Others prefer the term focalization (Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction, 72; Bal, Narratology, 100; Tolmie, Jesus’ Farewell, 170).

88. Moore, Literary Criticism, 181.
point of view? What point of view does he want the reader to adopt? Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin have best captured the dynamic behind point of view. They explain that since characters in a narrative offer the reader a possible form of life or existence, the narrative creates space for the reader to identify with the characters. This identification of the reader with the characters is secretly directed by the narrator. The narrator tries to influence for his own ends the interaction that occurs between the reader and the characters, counting on “a permanent mechanism of reading which is partly unconscious: the evaluation of the characters.” By implication, a narrative is not neutral since it has an inbuilt perspective. This perspective is communicated to the reader who can therefore also not remain neutral—he or she will either accept or reject the author’s ideology.

2.4. Deconstructing the Dominant Pattern/Paradigm of Character Reconstruction

Having examined aspects of character in ancient Hebrew and Greco-Roman literature as well as modern literature, we are now in a position to challenge the pattern or paradigm that scholars commonly use or assume to analyze characters in the New Testament. To recap, the pattern/paradigm of character reconstruction that we identified in Chapter 1 consists of three features: (i) characters in the Greco-Roman literature are “Aristotelian” (flat/types); (ii) characters in the Gospels and Acts are not like characters in modern narrative (round, individualistic, psychologized) but resemble Greco-Roman characters and hence are mostly flat/types; (iii) (yet) modern literary methods are used

89. Resseguie, Strange Gospel, 1 (original emphasis). Similarly, Mark Allan Powell states that point of view is “the general perspective that an implied author establishes as normative for a work” (What Is Narrative Criticism? [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990], 53).

90. Resseguie, Strange Gospel, 1.

91. Marguerat and Bourquin, Bible Stories, 65–68 (quotation from p. 68).

92. Cf. Andrew T. Lincoln, Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 173–74; Farelly, Disciples in the Fourth Gospel, 9–10. Some view the concept “point of view” as more complex in that they distinguish between different kinds or levels of point of view. For example, Chatman employs perceptual point of view, conceptual point of view, and interest point of view (Story and Discourse, 151–53), while Boris Uspensky uses four/five levels of point of view (ideological, phraseological, spatial and temporal, psychological). For the application of Chatman and Uspensky’s categories to biblical narratives, see Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 47–59. Berlin herself then continues to elaborate on the issue of multiple points of view in a narrative (Poetics and Interpretation, 59–82). Gary Yamasaki also explains and applies Boris Uspensky’s “planes” of point of view (“Point of View in a Gospel Story: What Difference Does It Make? Luke 19:1–10 as a Test Case,” JBL 125 [2006]: 89–105).
to analyze ancient characters. I will now seek to deconstruct this pattern or paradigm by means of four theses.

**Thesis 1: The Nature of Character in Antiquity and Modernity Is Comparable.**

Regarding the nature of character, we observed that most people distinguish sharply between modern narrative and its psychological, individualistic approach to character, and ancient characterization where character lacks personality or individuality. Mary Ann Tolbert represents this position when she writes:

> Our modern textual practices often appear to be a poor “fit” for ancient or culturally distant texts. . . . Biblical scholars are only beginning to chart the gulf between modern Western modes of reading on the one hand and the styles used by the Greek-speaking authors of the New Testament some two thousand years ago on the other and to speculate about the differences those styles might suggest for our interpretations of the Gospels. Nowhere is this gulf between modern and ancient conventions of reading and writing more crucial than in the function and evaluation of characters. . . . Ancient characters existed as a “mouthpiece for the typical,” and this usage was as true for biography as it was for drama. Ancient biographical writing was interested in the individual “as an exemplar of general, ethical qualities.” Thus, one might describe ancient characterization as the practice of particularizing the universal or individualizing the general. Furthermore, it is this intentional blending of the typical with the individual that distinguishes ancient characters from both the profoundly inward, psychological, realistic characters of modern writing.93

In addition, within ancient literature, a common perception is that while character in the Hebrew Bible can develop and be round, character in ancient Greek literature is static or flat—largely based on Aristotle’s view on character as fixed ethical types. Many biblical scholars assume that the Aristotelian view of character was representative of all ancient Greco-Roman literature and also influenced the Gospels.

Having examined aspects of character in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature, we have seen that it is impossible to maintain that Hebrew character can show development while Greek character is a static, ethical type. Our appraisal of ancient Greek literature revealed that Aristotle’s analysis of character

is not necessarily representative. Instead, we have seen that from the fifth century BCE to the second century CE, whether it be classical tragedy, comedy, biography, historiography, or novel, there are notable instances of characters that can be complex, change, have inner life, and even show personality.\(^{94}\) The Aristotelian notion of all character in ancient Greco-Roman literature as flat, static, and one-dimensional seems to be a caricature. Characterization in that period was more complex and varied, and capable of approaching modern notions of character at times.\(^{95}\)

Petri Merenlahti makes a similar point when he examines the issue of how an agent becomes a person in biblical characterization.\(^{96}\) On one hand, Merenlahti affirms the Aristotelian nature of biblical characters: “In antiquity [including the Gospels], characters had not so much ‘personality’ in the modern sense, as ethos—a static, unchanging set of virtues and vices.”\(^{97}\) On the other hand, he observes that “characters who on the atomistic level could be conceived as mere agents, plot functions, or actantial roles . . . gradually turn into more and more complex figures with genuine personality traits.”\(^{98}\) After further analysis, drawing especially on the work of Frank Kermode, he concludes:

In the Gospels, characters are most often not yet quite complete. In the event of being read, some of them will increase, while others must decrease. Which way it will go, depends on how each character relates to the ideology of each Gospel and to the ideology of its readers. In this respect, biblical characters resemble living

---

\(^{94}\) Cf. Gowler’s conclusion (Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend, 173). Based primarily on the work of Christopher Gill, Thompson comes to a similar conclusion, emphasizing that ancient literature often contains two categories of character portrayal—characters as typical figures and characters as individual personalities (Keeping the Church in Its Place, 22–25).

\(^{95}\) Cf. Lesky’s final comment that “Greek tragedy’s indirect influence on German, English and French literature, through the medium of the comedies, should not be underrated” (Greek Tragedy, 208). For further criticism of Aristotle’s understanding of character, see Simon Goldhill, “Character and Action, Representation and Reading: Greek Tragedy and Its Critics,” in Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature, ed. Christopher B. R. Pelling (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 119–27; Christopher B. R. Pelling, “Conclusion,” in Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature, ed. Christopher B. R. Pelling (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 257–59.


\(^{97}\) Merenlahti, “Characters in the Making.” 51.

organisms that mutate in order to adapt to their environments. This makes all static, comprehensive and harmonious interpretations of these characters problematic.  

While I disagree with Merenlahti’s acceptance of the Aristotelian nature of biblical characters, I glean from his argument the important observation that most biblical characters are in “a process of learning,” and hence developing. Consequently, we can no longer maintain a sharp distinction between character in modern literary narrative and ancient literature. We must, however, remain aware that characterization in ancient and modern literature is not identical but has different emphases: the ancient writers did not give character as much individual and psychological emphasis as the modern Western writers do. Hence, differences in characterization in ancient and modern literature are differences in emphases rather than kind, and it is better to speak of degrees of characterization along a continuum. Both ancient and modern literature portray flat and round, static and dynamic characters, although in modern narrative character is considerably more developed and “psychologized.” Thus while the nature of character in antiquity and modernity is not identical, it is comparable.

100. I borrow this term from Webb, Mark at the Threshold, 12.
102. Cf. Pelling, “Childhood and Personality,” 230–35; idem, “Conclusion,” 247–51. See also Gowler’s conclusion: “[A]ncient characters do not possess a modern (Western) introspective conscience, so their individuality and development will never approach those of characters in modern literature. Yet, character portrayals can be quite complex; persons may show development from a character-viewpoint (i.e., not a personality-viewpoint), and may also become individuals in a pre-Augustinian sense of the word” (Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend, 174 [original emphasis]).
103. Burnett has excellently argued this case (“Characterization,” 6–15). Skinner supports Burnett’s view (John and Thomas, 29).
104. Interestingly, although Malbon contends that Mark adheres to the convention in ancient (Greco-Roman) literature of characterization by “types,” she admits that “twentieth-century readers of Mark’s gospel are not, in fact, in a completely different realm from first-century hearers/readers of Mark in regard to perceiving ‘typical’ characters” (“Jewish Leaders,” 278–79 n. 57). She refers to Baruch Hochman (Character in Literature, 41–47), who argues that our perception of people is typological, in both life and literature, because we tend to reduce people CHARACTERS TO THEIR ESSENTIAL MEANING AND PLACE THEM IN OUR PRECONCEIVED SYSTEMS. ONLY AFTER THAT, IF THERE ARE OTHER INDICATORS, DO WE VIEW THEM IN MORE UNIQUE OR INDIVIDUAL TERMS. I TEND TO AGREE WITH HOCMAN’S OBSERVATION, AND WE MAY, IN SUBSEQUENT REREADINGS OF A NARRATIVE, REACH “ROUNDER” OR “FULLER” UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHARACTERS THAT WE FIRST PERCEIVED AS “TYPICAL.”
**THESIS 2: THE APPLICATION OF MODERN LITERARY METHODS IS LEGITIMATE.**

We are now in a position to address the issue of whether modern methods of fiction (the term many biblical scholars continue to use) can be applied to ancient biblical narratives. Before we set out, we must highlight two issues here: (i) the issue of category or genre (methods of fiction being applied to the historical narratives in the Bible); and (ii) the issue of alleged anachronism (modern methods being applied to ancient narratives). For those attuned to developments in modern literary criticism in the last half a century, it would seem that these issues are, in fact, nonissues. While modern literary methods were first developed based on the (fictional) novel, literary criticism soon broadened its scope and the now widely adopted term *narrative* encompasses a whole range of entities and realities.\(^{105}\) As James Phelan writes,

> narrative theory now takes as its objects of study narrative of all kinds occurring in all kinds of media throughout history: personal, political, historical, legal, and medical narratives, to name just a few—in their ancient, medieval, early modern, modern, and postmodern guises, and in their oral, print, visual (film, sculpture, painting, performance), digital, and multi-media formats.\(^{106}\)

Similarly, based on the extensive work of literary critics Northrop Frye, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, Mikhail Bakhtin, structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and historian Hayden White, William Shepherd delineates the important turn in literary theory from novel to narrative.\(^{107}\) Shepherd argues that the commonalities of historical and fictional narratives have led both historians and literary critics to similar theories and methods, so that recent narrative theories deal with fiction and nonfiction, ancient as well as modern literature.\(^{108}\) In short, “narrative has displaced the novel as the central concern of literary critics.”\(^{109}\)

The implication for our study may have become clear. The scope of our book is literary narrative, by which I mean those literary works that contain a story and a storyteller (see my clarification of terms in section 1.3), with a specific focus on New Testament narrative. Since literary narrative includes fiction and nonfiction, in both ancient and modern texts, the distinction

---


\(^{107}\) Shepherd, *Narrative Function*, 44–49.

\(^{108}\) Shepherd, *Narrative Function*, 44.

\(^{109}\) Shepherd, *Narrative Function*, 49.
between novel and biblical narratives, regarding applying modern literary methods to the Bible, becomes blurred. As Stephen Moore asserts, “[T]he literary study of the Gospels and Acts, in consequence, need by no means be chained to the novel.”

It follows that biblical narratives are a legitimate object of study in the discipline of literary criticism, and therefore Shepherd’s conclusion that “[t]heories of character and characterization can appropriately be applied to biblical texts” is valid.

Our findings in this chapter lead us to the same conclusion. We showed that there is reasonable evidence in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature of characters that could change, be complex, and even show personality. Therefore, character in ancient and modern literature is probably better viewed on a continuum than as distinct. I therefore contend that we can legitimately apply modern literary methods to ancient narratives as long as we take the necessary precautions. We must, for instance, be aware that by applying such methods we are fusing the modern and ancient horizon, and using modern terminology to understand characters in ancient literature.

What then of the use of modern labels to name a character’s traits? If we accept Chatman’s definition of character as a “paradigm of traits” in which traits must be inferred from the deep structure of the text, it would be natural that the trait-names we assign are derived from what we know of real people in the real world. This means we would use contemporary language to reconstruct a character. Indeed, as Chatman argues, since the trait is not often named explicitly in the text but must be inferred, readers will usually rely upon their knowledge of the trait-name in the real world, so traits are culturally coded. We must also note that the names for traits are “socially invented signs . . . Trait-names are not themselves traits.” Chatman states categorically that “characters as narrative constructs do require terms for description, and there is no point in rejecting those out of the general vocabulary of psychology, morality and any other relevant area of human experience.” This would hold true for the study of character in both modern literature and ancient narratives. It is therefore

110. Moore, Literary Criticism, xviii.
111. Shepherd, Narrative Function, 49.
113. Chatman, Story and Discourse, 123–25.
inevitable that when we infer a character’s traits from an ancient text we use trait-names that are familiar to the contemporary world.

Using modern terminology to analyze and describe characters in ancient literature is acceptable provided we remember that the terms or categories we use may be unknown to the ancient authors and audiences. Simon Goldhill, for example, points out that “[s]ince the description of character necessarily involves the mobilisation of (at least) implicit psychological models, it is unlikely that the criticism of Greek tragedy can expect wholly to avoid an engagement with psychological and psychoanalytic theory.” Robert Tannehill likewise defends the use of insights from modern narrative to ancient biblical narratives:

[T]here are qualities which all narratives share and further qualities which various narratives may share, even when some make use of historical fact, if the author has a strong, creative role. Because of the importance of the novel in modern literature, qualities of narrative are often discussed in terms of the novel. With proper caution the biblical scholar can learn from this discussion.117

New Testament scholar Marianne Meye Thompson comments that in character reconstruction readers use their conceptions of real people (including emotional and imaginative responses) and often use language that belongs more to the realm of psychology and human development.118

As long as we are vigilant about the differences between a collectivist, ancient Mediterranean culture and an individualistic, modern Western culture, I maintain that it is possible to speak of an individual in antiquity without transposing a modern individualistic notion of identity onto the text. We can do so using the concept of a “collectivist identity” or “group-oriented personality,” where the individual's identity is embedded in a larger group or community.119 As Burnett points out, there is evidence of a move from the typical to the individual in the ancient Greek and Roman world, allowing for the reader to construct a character’s individuality.120 Similarly, Patricia Easterling notes that even though the Greeks were not interested in the

individual’s unique private experience found in modern literature, they had an interest in individuals as part of a community. Louise Lawrence too concludes that even the primarily collectivist Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures testify to the existence of individualistic traits.

**Thesis 3: The Device of Inference for Character Reconstruction Is Inevitable.**

The main difficulty for developing a method of character reconstruction is that one can rarely read character from the surface of the text. Scholars have recognized that in ancient Hebrew and Greco-Roman literature characterization tends to be indirect—information about a character is conveyed primarily through the character’s speech and actions rather than the narrator’s statements. The reader is thus obliged to reconstruct the character from the text through inference or “filling in the gaps” (cf. section 2.1). Developing a reading strategy for the Acts of the Apostles, Thompson stresses the need for inference in this way:

> The reader, not the text alone, decides which meaning will be realized and which possible meanings will be excluded. Since no text provides the reader with all the information or connections necessary for its realization, these textual indeterminacies or “gaps” stimulate the reader’s imagination so that one fills in those gaps in ways that build a consistent reading.

The practice of inference is employed in modern literature too—it is unavoidable. Seymour Chatman, for example, argues that we reconstruct character by inferring traits from the information in the text. In fact, as Chatman asserts, to curb “a God-given right to infer and even to speculate

---

124. Thompson, *Keeping the Church in Its Place*, 16.
about characters” would be “an impoverishment of aesthetic experience.”¹²⁶ Even in real life, as Bar-Efrat points out, we infer people’s character both from what they say and do.¹²⁷ Thus in both ancient and modern literature, character is reconstructed from the information provided in the text. The only difference is that in ancient literature there is less direct characterization and readers must resort to the device of inference or gap-filling more than they would in modern literature.

In this process of inference, different readers may reconstruct characters differently from the same text, and while this could be a consequence of the narrative’s reticence in characterization, it may also indicate that some characters are not simple, fixed, or types. Besides, even when readers reconstruct characters differently from the same text, just as scholars differ on the meaning of a text, this does not nullify the task of inference. Any interpretation involves an element of deduction because the reader–interpreter tries to make sense of the text in the absence of the author. In this process, the interpreter does not merely restate the author’s ipsissima verba but engages in the task of understanding the meaning of the text—whether that meaning be “behind,” “in,” or “in front of” the text. In other words, the hermeneutical task involves a level of abstraction or aggregation—the interpreter explores the meaning of the text and this includes acts of analysis, comparison, extrapolation, inference, and so on. At the same time, rules of syntax and genre, relation to the wider text, and knowledge of the socio-cultural setting of the text provide the necessary hermeneutical parameters to control the process of interpretation. Thus while readers inevitably use inference to reconstruct characters from the text, they must do so by seeking to understand the text within its original literary and socio-cultural context (see further section 3.1).

We argued earlier that the use of modern terminology to describe characters is legitimate and inevitable (# Thesis 2). Similarly, as we reconstruct character from the text through inference, it follows that the language we use is unlikely to come from the text alone but from our knowledge of the real world and real people. As Hochman asserts, “our retrieval, or reading out, of character is guided by our consciousness of what people are and how people work. To read character adequately we must heighten our consciousness of the reciprocity between character in literature and people in life—between Homo Fictus and Homo Sapiens.”¹²⁸ Stressing that we need “substantive rules of inference,” Margolin suggests that these be borrowed from any real-world

model of readers if the text world resembles or is at least compatible with it. In essence, the language that we use to reconstruct characters is rooted in our knowledge of both the modern world and the ancient world.

**THESIS 4: THE CLASSIFICATION OF CHARACTERS ON A CONTINUUM IS ADVISABLE.**

In the pattern or paradigm that I seek to deconstruct, ancient characters are usually classified by means of fixed categories—whether Forster’s “round” and “flat” or Harvey’s protagonist, card, ficelles, and background character. However, many characters in the New Testament do not fit easily into these rigid classifications, often leading to an understanding of character that is too reductionistic. Elizabeth Malbon, for example, recognizes the difficulty of putting New Testament characters into fixed categories. In her examination of Markan characters, she observes that while Mark adheres to ancient characterization by “types,” he also violates this norm by constructing characters that do not fit the pattern. She suggests that “Mark offers the contrast of a typical character group and exceptional characters, who function not to ‘round’ out the ‘flat’ group but to prevent the type from becoming a stereotype.” In a later essay on Markan characters, Malbon admits that she has begun to see “flat” and “round” as opposite ends of a continuum.

In section 2.3, we observed that a number of biblical scholars and literary critics have steered away from the idea of putting characters into fixed categories, toward an approach that views character as points along a continuum. Finding that characters in antiquity were not always typical but could fluctuate significantly, Fred Burnett concludes that “it would seem wise to understand characterization, for any biblical text at least, on a continuum. This would imply for narratives like the Gospels that the focus should be on the degree of characterization rather than on characterization as primarily typical.”

130. I consider myself a “critical realist.” On the one hand, I cannot claim to understand, for example, the Johannine characters exactly as a first-century Jewish or Greco-Roman reader would; on the other hand, my understanding of the Johannine characters is not an uncritical twenty-first-century Western reading of the text. As I carefully seek to consider the linguistic, literary, and socio-cultural aspects of the Johannine narrative, I maintain that my understanding of the Johannine characters is nevertheless a *Johannine* understanding.
132. Malbon, “Major Importance,” 81 n. 6. Tolbert also objects to using “flat” and “round” categories to classify ancient characters (“Character,” 357 n. 9), but this obviously stems from her conviction that we should not apply modern literary methods to ancient narratives.
Although there is no consensus on how such a continuum should look—Ewen, for example, uses three continua, while Hochman proposes eight—the idea of positioning aspects of characters on various continua is a significant development because it circumvents the rigidity of fixed categories and the hazard of reductionism. I will return to this topic in section 3.2.

2.5. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we examined character in ancient and modern literature, and observed that there is reasonable evidence in ancient Hebrew and Greco-Roman literature that character could, to a certain extent, be complex, change, and even show personality. Based on our findings, we presented four theses. First, the nature of character in ancient and modern literature is comparable and to be viewed as different degrees of characterization along a continuum. Second, it is therefore legitimate to apply aspects of modern literary theory to ancient literature, as long as we remain aware of the socio-cultural differences. Third, it is inevitable that we use the device of inference to reconstruct character from the text. Fourth, it is advisable to view characters on a continuum rather than fixed categories in order to avoid reductionism. I then argued that these theses essentially deconstruct a prevalent pattern or even paradigm of character reconstruction in New Testament scholarship. Even those who deny the existence of such a pattern or paradigm must admit that there is currently no comprehensive theory of character or agreed practice on how to reconstruct character from New Testament narrative. In either case, therefore, our investigation and theses provide the basis and necessary parameters for constructing a (new) paradigm for the study of New Testament character.

Before I turn to the New Testament, I return to Rohrbaugh’s objection to my use of modern literary methods to study ancient characters (# Thesis 2) and the use of the device of inference, which he regards as speculative, imaginative, and oblivious of cultural differences (# Thesis 3). Should the sparse portrayal of character in ancient literature lead us to despair of reconstructing character or abandon the task altogether? No, but caution is essential. I contend that there is reasonable evidence that character in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature could be complex, change, and even show personality, suggesting that character in ancient and modern literature is better viewed on a continuum than being distinct. It would therefore be legitimate to use insights from modern narrative to study character in ancient literature. I maintain that we can apply aspects of modern literary methods to study character in ancient narratives as long as we take the necessary precautions. The interpreter must
be aware, for instance, that by applying such methods she fuses the modern and ancient horizon, and uses modern terminology to understand characters in ancient literature. In the reconstruction of characters, therefore, the interpreter merges two horizons and bridges a vast cultural gap. On the one hand, I unequivocally agree with Rohrbaugh that knowledge of the social and cultural world of the New Testament is essential for understanding the personality, motive, and behavior of ancient characters. On the other hand, since ancient characterization is often indirect, we are compelled to infer aspects of character from the sparse information in the text with the assistance of modern terminology. And this is where the tension lies. I contend that the use of modern trait-names to describe ancient character must be governed by knowledge of the first-century world. This is precisely why the first aspect of my theory is the study of character in text and context, where the latter refers to the socio-cultural first-century environment (cf. section 3.1).134

In the next chapter, I will propose a (new) paradigm of character reconstruction, building on the work of, inter alios, Seymour Chatman, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Yosef Ewen, Mieke Bal, John Darr, Fred Burnett, and Alicia Myers.

134. Ironically, because of his belief in the validity of cultural continuity, Malina concedes that he uses anthropological models of contemporary Mediterranean culture to understand cultures in the first century (New Testament World, xii; cf. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998], 19–20). But how do we know that nothing has fundamentally changed in the last two millennia or the extent to which modern Spanish and Italian societies are comparable to first-century Palestinian society? I dare ask, then: Who engages in anachronism? Although elsewhere Richard Rohrbaugh addresses the issue of extending sociological models diachronically (e.g., he uses the concept of sacred space in relation to the temple before and after 70 CE), he only refers to a time continuum of fifty years (“Models and Muddles: Discussions of the Social Facets Seminar,” Forum 3, no. 2 [1987]: 28–30). Of course, at higher levels of abstraction one can always find correspondence—sacred space, purity, honor/shame, and so forth exist in every culture and time—but the question is whether we can assume, for example, that the purity system in modern Italy is an appropriate model for that in first-century Palestine.