Chapter 7

Misunderstanding, Christology, and Johannine Characterization: Reading John's Characters through the Lens of the Prologue

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> [T]he Prologue is no introduction or foreword in the usual sense of the words . . . It is far more a mystery itself, and is fully comprehensible only to the man who knows the whole Gospel. It is only when the circle is complete, and the 'Son' has returned to the δόξα which the love of the 'Father' has prepared πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου (17.24), only when the reader has been led back to the temporal sphere into the eternal, that he can judge conclusively in what sense the Prologue leads out of the eternal into the temporal.
>
> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*[1]

I. Introduction

For all the controversies surrounding its sources[2] and theological outlook,[3] there is little dispute that the Johannine Prologue (1.1-18) sets the literary

1 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. George R. Beasley-Murray; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), p. 13.

2 See, e.g., Matthew Black, 'Does an Aramaic Tradition Underlie John 1:16?', *JTS* 42 (1941), pp. 69–70; John A. T. Robinson, 'The Relation of the Prologue to the Gospel of St. John', *NTS* 9 (1963), pp. 120–9; J. G. van der Watt, 'The Composition of the Prologue of John's Gospel: The Historical Jesus Introducing Divine Grace', *WTJ* 57 (1995), pp. 311–32; P. J. Williams, 'Not the Prologue of John', *JSNT* 33 (2011), pp. 375–86.

3 The interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in recent history has seen the emergence of four major views on the theological outlook of John's *Logos* Christology: (1) *Logos* is a concept taken over from the 'word of the Lord' traditions in the OT; (2) *Logos* is a substitute term for the concept of wisdom in the OT wisdom literature; (3) John's *Logos* is similar or nearly identical to the concept of *Logos* as it is used by Philo; and (4) *Logos* is drawn from the *memra* traditions found in the *Targumim*. For more on these views, see Peder Borgen, 'Observations on the Targumic Character of the Prologue of John', *NTS* 16 (1969), pp. 288–95; A. T. Hanson, 'John 1:14-18 and Exodus 34', *NTS* 23 (1977), pp. 90–101; Henry Mowley, 'John 1:14-18 in the

and theological agendas for the entire Gospel narrative.[4] Like an overture that rehearses the major symphonic movements in the forthcoming story, the Prologue serves as an audience-elevating device by providing privileged information to which characters in the story have no access. The Prologue thus introduces all the themes that are needed to interpret properly John's story of Jesus, and provides the audience with comprehensive inside information regarding the Gospel's developed Christology.[5] The audience's subsequent experience with misunderstanding characters – who have neither read the Prologue nor have access to the information it reveals – serves as a constant reminder of its insider knowledge of Jesus' origins and identity.

It has long been recognized that misunderstanding is a major motif in the Fourth Gospel, though little has been written on the connection between misunderstanding and character development. In my recent monograph, *John and Thomas: Gospels in Conflict?*, I argued that misunderstanding is the trait most consistently displayed by Johannine characters.[6] In fact, apart from the Beloved Disciple there is no character who fully grasps what the audience has learned from the Prologue.[7] Armed with this information, the audience is able to evaluate the different character responses to Jesus – all of which fail in one

Light of Exodus 33:7–34:35', *ExpTim* 95 (1984), pp. 135–7; John Ashton, 'The Transformation of Wisdom: A Study of the Prologue of John's Gospel', *NTS* 32 (1986), pp. 161–86; Thomas H. Tobin, 'The Prologue of John and Hellenistic Jewish Speculation', *CBQ* 52 (1990), pp. 252–69; Daniel Boyarin, 'The Gospel of the Memra, Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John', *HTR* 94 (2001), pp. 243–84; T. Baarda, 'John 1:17b: The Origin of a Peshitta Reading', *ETL* 77 (2001), pp. 153–62; and most recently, John Ronning, *The Jewish Targums and John's Logos Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010).

4 This idea is hardly new or disputed. As far back as 1898, Wilhelm Baldensperger (*Der Prolog des vierten Evangeliums: sein polemisch-apologetischer Zweck* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1898]) asserted that the Prologue was the key to understanding both the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine epistles. In his tendentious but important commentary, *Le Quatrième Evangile* (Paris: Picard, 1903), Alfred Loisy also insisted that the Prologue's 'incarnation theology' was the interpretive key to the entire Gospel. See, more recently, Michael Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung des Logos: Studien zum Verhältnis des Johannesprologs zum Corpus des Evangeliums und zu Joh 1* (NTAbh, NF 20; Münster: Aschendorff, 1988).

5 Throughout this essay I have chosen to use the term 'audience' rather than 'reader' in recognition of the predominantly oral nature of early Christian storytelling. I am indebted to Prof. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon for this insight.

6 See Christopher W. Skinner, *John and Thomas: Gospels in Conflict? Johannine Characterization and the Thomas Question* (PTMS 115; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009). Most recently, Susan Hylen (*Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009]) has argued that ambiguity is the most prominent character trait displayed by characters in the Fourth Gospel. While I find her treatment compelling, I remain convinced that the reader-elevating Prologue provides information that highlights the subsequent partial understanding or complete misunderstanding on the part of characters who interact with Jesus.

7 That the Beloved Disciple consistently responds to Jesus in an appropriate way, apart from the information provided in the Prologue, is strong evidence that he is to be regarded as the Johannine disciple *par excellence*. As such the Beloved Disciple is the ideal character with whom the implied audience should identify and after whom the implied audience should pattern its behaviour.

way or another – and further allows the Johannine Jesus narrative space to clarify elements of his message, mission and identity.[8] In a very real sense, the Prologue fashions the implied audience by raising expectations and explaining things heretofore unknown. Moloney expresses this concept well:

> The prologue to the Fourth Gospel begins the shaping of the reader. The author acts as teacher, but the truthfulness and even usefulness of all that has been taught is yet to be tested. The author has created an implied reader with exalted notions about Jesus Christ which are tested by the story of his life. The implied reader now begins to read a narrative designed to draw the reader more deeply into the privileged experience of a community of believers which the implied author claims to represent.[9]

I would also add that one major way in which the audience tests the truthfulness of this information is by observing character interactions – specifically interactions between Jesus and uncomprehending characters.

In this essay I will attempt to draw connections between three elements of the Fourth Gospel – the role of the Prologue, John's Christology, and the motif of misunderstanding – and demonstrate their importance for approaching John's characters. The reading strategy that emerges is meant to situate the Prologue *vis-à-vis* misunderstanding characters in the overall rhetorical plan of the narrator.

II. John's Prologue: The Identity, Origins and Mission of the Logos

Numerous concepts appear in the Prologue and are reintroduced throughout the Gospel in both character interactions and lengthier theological discourses. These concepts provide the necessary foundation as the audience comes to terms with the identity, origins and mission of Jesus. There is not space here to provide a full-scale exegesis of the Prologue, though it is necessary to identify important terms and themes as they appear in its various sections. In what follows, I provide a basic exegetical sketch of the Prologue.

a. John 1.1-5: The Word – God's Agent of Creation and Light of the World

The Fourth Gospel begins its story of the *Logos* with a transparent allusion to the creation account in Genesis 1. The narrative that ensues is thus situated

8 I argue that there are levels of misunderstanding in the Gospel. Clearly a character like Nicodemus represents a much greater degree of incomprehension than the Samaritan woman, who subsequently goes on to evangelize her entire village. Nevertheless, the Samaritan woman and other characters who are ultimately characterized in a favourable way, display elements of misunderstanding that allow Jesus to clarify something about his message, mission, identity, origins, etc.

9 Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1–4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. 52.

within the story of the God of Israel and how that God creates, sustains and covenants with humanity. Just as the creation account takes place 'in the beginning' (ἐν ἀρχῇ, Gen. 1.1, LXX), where God 'spoke' (καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός, Gen. 1.3a, LXX), and created both 'light' (γενηθήτω φῶς, Gen. 1.3b, LXX), and all living creatures (cf. Gen. 1.20-31), so John's story of Jesus Christ starts 'in the beginning' (ἐν ἀρχῇ, John 1.1) with the 'word' (λόγος, John 1.1-2) who is the purveyor of both life (ζωή, 1.4) and light (φῶς, 1.4, 5). The complete realities of the God of Israel are fully present in the *Logos* (1.1c; see the helpful rendering of the NEB: 'and what God was the Word was'), and the *Logos* is also the agent through whom God created the universe (1.3). The light of the *Logos* shines forth into a darkness which can neither comprehend nor overcome it (ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν, 1.5).[10]

The theologically significant terms 'light' (φῶς)[11] and 'life' (ζωή)[12] appear elsewhere in the Gospel, though the concepts are present in the story even when these specific terms are not used. The presence of these concepts helps to add contours to various character interactions as the story presses forward. One such example is the coming of Nicodemus to Jesus by night (Νικόδημος . . . ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτὸς, 3.1-2). This description not only represents Nicodemus's darkened understanding but proleptically announces his complete bewilderment at Jesus' teaching (πῶς δύναται ταῦτα γενέσθαι; 3.9). He comes to Jesus, the light of humanity, under the cover of darkness and leaves without comprehending the substance of his words. In a very real sense, the audience's first experience with Nicodemus confirms the truth of the narrator's words: 'the darkness has not *understood*' the light (cf. 1.5).

Another example can be found in chapter 18, where a delegation of temple police and Roman soldiers arrives in the garden at night to arrest Jesus. In John 18.3 the delegation is pictured with lamps (λαμπάδων) and torches (ὅπλων) – two sources of illumination – in order to take the light of humanity into custody. The group boldly seeks Jesus but when he identifies himself (λέγει αὐτοῖς· ἐγώ εἰμι, v. 5), the delegation falls back into a quasi-worship posture (v. 6) – a response that is ironic and admittedly difficult to understand apart from the audience's knowledge of Jesus' exalted status. In the end the delegation takes Jesus into custody only because he allows it to happen; he exercises control over the situation from start to finish. This second night-time passage depicts a character interaction in which the darkness does not *overcome* the light (cf. 1.5). It is up to the audience to make these subtle connections and thereby test the truthfulness of the Prologue's witness to Jesus Christ.

10 *Double entendre* is a prominent feature of Johannine discourse. Numerous commentators have pointed out that καταλαμβάνω can be rendered 'overcome' or 'comprehend'. Both nuances are probably intended here. See BDAG, s.v. καταλαμβάνω (p. 520).

11 Cf. 5.35; 8.12; 9.5; 12.35, 36, 46.

12 Cf. 3.15-16, 36; 4.14, 36; 5.24, 26, 29, 39, 40; 6.27, 33, 35, 40, 47, 48, 51, 53, 54, 63, 68; 8.12; 10.10, 28; 11.25; 12.25, 50; 14.6; 17.2, 3; 20.31.

b. John 1.6-13: The Logos and the World

The second section of the Prologue begins with a reference to John the Baptist (though the Fourth Gospel never refers to John using the titles ὁ βαπτίζων[13] or ὁ βαπτιστὴς[14]). The recent history of Fourth Gospel interpretation has yielded all sorts of speculation about the significance of John's insertion at this point in the Prologue. For our purposes, what is important to note is John's designation as ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ (1.6b). According to the narrator, he has no special messianic status *vis-à-vis* the *Logos*, but is simply the one authorized by God to bear witness to Jesus (1.7-8). As such, John's subsequent witness to Jesus (1.29, 34, 36) will prove to be reliable.

In v. 10 the audience is introduced to the κόσμος and learns of the relationship between the *Logos* and the world. In Hellenistic Greek, κόσμος carries a range of meanings, several of which are employed by the evangelist.[15] The term is used to refer to the material reality of the created world,[16] the physical realm into which Jesus has entered,[17] and the object of God's affection and salvific intentions.[18] In 1.10 the term appears to function metonymically as a symbol for humanity. In the story that follows, there are at least eight instances where κόσμος emerges as a technical term for humanity and in those contexts it is presented with a 'distinctly pejorative meaning'.[19] In 1.10 the audience learns that the *Logos* was, 'in the world (ἐν τῷ κοσμῷ), and though the world (ὁ κόσμος) was created through him, the world (ὁ κόσμος) did not know him'. This statement further prepares the audience for humanity's rejection of Jesus in the Gospel, and again confirms the truthfulness of the *double entendre* in 1.5: the darkness has not understood/overcome the light. Throughout the story, the darkened 'world' (= humanity) consistently fails to comprehend Jesus' words and works, and at the end of the narrative, the powers of darkness do not prevail against the risen Jesus.

Verse 11 reiterates the substance of v. 10 using a slightly different concept: 'He came to *his own place* (τὰ ἴδια) and *his own people* (οἱ ἴδιοι) did not receive him.' The neuter plural use of ἴδιος in the first half of the verse is a reference to the world as the physical realm into which Jesus has entered. The

13 Cf. Mark 1.4.

14 Cf. Matt. 3.1.

15 See *TDNT*, 3.868–98; BDAG, s.v. κόσμος (pp. 561–3).

16 Most notably 1.10b: ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο.

17 The Fourth Gospel presents Jesus as the one who has come 'from above'. Thus, his departure from the Father represents his entrance into 'the world', the realm of 'below'. On this, see 1.9, 10a; 3.17ab, 19; 6.14.

18 See, among others, 1.29; 3.16, 17c; 4.42; 6.51.

19 '"Obscure" though its etymology remains to this day, κόσμος is still beyond doubt one of the principal concepts of Greek thought. It was, to be sure, the richness of its various meanings that fitted it for the role it played in Greco-Hellenistic philosophy . . . For in this variety of meanings lay its potential to become "one of the most important terms in Greek philosophy" and "one of the great original creations of the Greek spirit". It is, therefore, doubly puzzling that κόσμος comes to have a *distinctly pejorative meaning* in the NT, and particularly in the Gospel of John' (Stanley B. Marrow, 'Κόσμος in John', *CBQ* 64 [2002], p. 90) (emphasis added).

masculine plural use of ἴδιος in the second half of the verse simply refers to humanity. The *Logos* has come into a world he created (cf. 1.3), which is also shrouded in darkness. That darkness renders humans both unable to understand the *Logos* and hostile toward his intentions. However, despite this existential reality, there are some who will recognize the *Logos*, call upon his name,[20] and become a part of God's newly constituted family (1.12-13) – a family built solely by God's initiative. The authority to grant one status as a 'child of God' has also been granted to the *Logos*.

As above, this section of the Prologue introduces concepts that appear in subsequent character interactions. For example, the audience is told in three separate instances that the κόσμος hates Jesus and his followers (cf. 7.1-7; 15.18-21; 17.14-15). In addition, the audience witnesses 'the world's' antipathy toward Jesus in his specific interactions with both 'the Jews' (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι)[21] and others present in 'the crowd' (e.g., 6.59-65).

c. John 1.14-18: The Incarnate Son Reveals the Father

Numerous commentators have pointed out that after the Prologue, the evangelist abandons *Logos* terminology altogether, though this should not be regarded as problematic in light of the incarnation described in 1.14: ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν. The *Logos* existed prior to creation in the presence of God (1.2), but now has taken on a new form of existence by inhabiting human flesh. The contrast created by the use of εἰμί (cf. 1.1-2) and γίνομαι (1.14) underscores the significance of this incarnation. Never before has the *Logos* 'become' something. The *Logos* has always just 'been'. There is no longer a need for *Logos* language. The incarnate word will hereafter be known as Jesus Christ (1.17). The grace and truth God unveils through him will be greater than *Torah*, which God unveiled through Moses. In a final affirmation of the intimate union between Father and Son, the narrator asserts that: (1) Jesus is εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ('in the bosom of the Father') – a phrase that will reappear at a significant stage of the story – and (2) Jesus reveals the Father to humanity.

As in the two previous sections of the Prologue, themes are introduced here which come into play later in the story. One example is found in chapter 14, where Jesus is discussing with the disciples his imminent departure to the

20 While some contend that the phrase τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ is a reference to the name 'Jesus', I think something far greater is intended here. The connection between the *Logos* and God was explicitly spelled out in 1.1c and is a major theme throughout the Gospel. Therefore, I am persuaded that the use of ὄνομα is meant as a reference to הַשֵּׁם – a common way of referring to the divine name. As the revealer of the Father, the *Logos* shares the very name of God, YHWH.

21 Few issues within Johannine scholarship have occasioned as much discussion or controversy as the identity of 'the Jews' in the Gospel of John. Too much has been written on the topic to provide a comprehensive bibliography here. See, more recently, Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (eds), *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

Father. After he proclaims that no one can come to the Father apart from him (14.6), Philip proclaims, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us' (14.8). The audience already knows that Jesus is one who reveals the Father to humanity (cf. 1.18) and is in the position to see this request as rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus' origins and identity. Jesus goes on to explain, 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (14.9). The audience knows this, but apparently Philip and the other disciples do not.

Many more examples could be brought forward to demonstrate this theory, though space constraints preclude a lengthy examination. By way of overview, we have seen that the Prologue describes the *Logos* as existing with God and in a unique divine state before time (vv. 1-2). He is further described as the agent of all creation (v. 3), the light of humanity that enlightens those in the world (vv. 4, 9), the possessor of the authority to both appoint God's children (v. 12) and display God's glory (v. 14), in intimate union with the Father (v. 18b), and the one who reveals the Father to humanity (v. 18c). These propositions set the stage by providing the audience with information necessary to evaluate every character's response to Jesus, and thereby they become the interpretive grid through which the audience can understand the Gospel's main purpose: to engender belief in those who hear the story (cf. 20.31). In addition to these descriptive phrases, important terms in the Prologue that appear elsewhere in the Gospel include: (1) 'life' (ζωή),[22] (2) 'light' (φῶς),[23] (3) 'witness' (μαρτυρία/μαρτυρέω, 1.7, 8, 15)[24]; (4) 'the world' (κόσμος, 1.9, 10),[25] (5) 'truth'/'true' (ἀλήθεια/ἀληθινός, 1.9, 14, 17),[26] (6) 'to believe' (πιστεύω, 1.7, 12),[27] (7) 'one's own' (ἴδιος, 1.11),[28] (8) 'glory' (δόξα, 1.14),[29] and (9) the phrase εἰς τὸν κόλπον.[30] Pamment perceptively notes that 'characters use these concepts in slightly different ways, allowing the narrator to indicate their full range of meaning, and this is the purpose of the dialogues'.[31] Characters thus appear as uncomprehending to the degree that they fail to grasp these terms and themes from the Prologue.

22 See n. 12 above.

23 See n. 11 above.

24 The nominal form appears in 1.19; 3.11, 32, 33; 5.31, 32, 34, 36; 8.13, 14, 17; 19.35; 21.24. The verbal form appears in 1.32, 34; 2.25; 3.11, 26, 28, 32; 4.39, 44; 5.31, 32, 33, 36, 37, 39; 7.7; 8.13, 14, 18; 10.25; 12.17; 13.21; 15.26, 27; 18.23, 37; 19.35; 21.24.

25 See also 1.29; 3.16, 17, 19; 4.42; 6.14, 33, 51; 7.4, 7; 8.12, 23, 26; 9.5, 39; 10.36; 11.9, 27; 12.19, 25, 31, 46, 47; 13.1; 14.17, 19, 22, 27, 30, 31; 15.18, 19; 16.8, 11, 20, 21, 28, 33; 17.5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24, 25; 18.20, 36, 37; 21.25.

26 ἀλήθεια appears in 3.21; 4.23, 24; 5.33; 8.32, 40, 44, 45, 46; 14.6, 17; 15.26; 16.7, 13; 17.17, 19; 18.37, 38. ἀληθινός appears in 4.23, 37; 6.32; 7.28; 8.16; 15.1; 17.3; 19.35. ἀληθής appears in 3.33; 4.18; 5.31, 32; 6.55; 7.18; 8.13, 14, 17, 26; 10.41; 19.35; 21.24. ἀληθῶς appears in 1.47; 4.42; 6.14; 7.26, 40; 8.31; 17.8.

27 See also 1.7, 12; 2.23; 3.12-18, 36; 4.50, 53; 5.24, 46-47; 6.29-47; 7.38-39, 48; 8.24, 45-46; 9.35-38; 10.37-38, 42; 11.26-27; 12.11; 13.19; 14.1-2, 11-12; 16.9; 17.21; 19.35; 20.31.

28 See also 1.41; 4.44; 5.18, 43; 7.18; 8.44; 10.3, 4, 12; 13.1; 15.19; 16.32; 19.27.

29 See also 2.11; 5.41, 44; 7.18; 8.50, 54; 9.24; 11.4, 40; 12.41, 43; 17.5, 22, 24.

30 A variation of this phrase appears in ch. 13, where the Beloved Disciple is described as ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ. This significance of this phrase will be discussed below.

31 Margaret Pamment, 'Focus in the Fourth Gospel', *ExpTim* 97 (1985), p. 73.

It is not a problem for the implied audience that characters have not been exposed to the truths revealed in the Prologue. This is part of the narrator's rhetorical strategy. These misunderstandings heighten the audience's awareness and understanding of Jesus' origins, mission, and identity. The narrator then uses the discourses of Jesus to shed light on the fuller meaning of these misunderstood themes and accomplishes this in contexts where Jesus is instructing or correcting a given character. Several common elements appear during these character interactions: (1) Jesus speaks or acts in the presence of another character in a manner consistent with his mission; (2) the character in question misperceives some element of Jesus' words or deeds in a way that requires instruction or correction; and (3) Jesus speaks or acts again with the purpose of instructing or correcting the character(s) in question. In these interactions, one or more themes from the Prologue appears, further revealing the depth of the character's misunderstanding, and in turn more fully elucidating the truth about Jesus to the implied audience.

Since there is not enough space in the present essay to demonstrate this theory comprehensively we will test it by examining one major character and demonstrating how that character's misunderstandings are related to the 'insider information' to which the audience is privy. Peter is an ideal test case because – aside from Jesus – he appears more often and has more words attributed to him than any other character in the narrative. Since there is little direct characterization in John's Gospel, speech and action necessarily serve as the primary means of characterization. Peter's speech and actions, especially during the scenes in which he misunderstands, will validate the theory that misunderstanding and character development point back to and arise from the implied audience's knowledge of the Johannine Prologue. The remainder of this essay will focus on the narrator's presentation of Peter in chapters 1, 6, 13, 18 and 20.[32]

III. Simon Peter: A Test Case

a. Peter in John 1.35-42

The audience meets Peter for the first time in 1.35-42 on the day following John's proclamation that Jesus is the 'Lamb of God' (1.29) and 'God's Chosen One' (1.34). In 1.36 John announces for a second time that Jesus is the 'Lamb of God', this time in the presence of two unnamed disciples. Having heard their teacher exalt Jesus three times, two of the Baptist's disciples leave him and begin to follow Jesus. After his initial conversation with Jesus (1.38-39), one of the disciples, Andrew, seeks his brother to inform him that he and the other disciple have 'found the Messiah' (1.41b). Identifying Andrew

32 I have chosen not to include ch. 21 for several reasons. First, the device of misunderstanding is largely absent from that chapter since the risen Jesus is now face to face with the disciples. Second, the scholarly consensus – with which I agree – is that ch. 21 is a later addition and, as such, does not constitute the original ending of the story.

by name, the narrator refers to him as the brother of Simon Peter (v. 40a). Little narrative time passes between the first mention of Simon Peter (v. 40) and the first meeting between Jesus and Simon Peter (v. 42b). This face-to-face encounter is immediately followed by the changing of Simon's name to Cephas. The narrator introduces this new character as Σίμωνος Πέτρου, after which Jesus proclaims σὺ κληθήσῃ Κηφᾶς (v. 42d). The implied audience, which knows Greek and realizes that Peter means 'rock', perceives that this name-change promises that Peter's character will hold some significance later in the story. These words are seemingly an announcement of what Peter will become. This initial interaction between Jesus and Peter is a positive sign for the early development of Peter's character. The implied audience's initial impression of Peter is a favourable one.

b. John 6.60-71

Exegetical Summary

Peter makes his second appearance in 6.68, on the day following Jesus' multiplication of loaves for the five thousand (cf. 6.1-15). John 6 narrates a series of events over a two-day span, which culminates in two mutually exclusive responses to Jesus by his 'disciples'.[33] At several turns in the 'Bread of Life' discourse preceding the present pericope, Jesus' words have led to confusion and outrage. Jesus has encouraged his audience to 'eat his flesh' and 'drink his blood' in order to have eternal life. This saying produces the two opposing responses to Jesus in vv. 60-71. One group falls away on account of this saying and the other draws closer to Jesus. Here, Peter is again presented in a substantially positive light.

Peter in John 6

In v. 60 'many disciples' react negatively to the difficult saying. A key reason why the disciples fail to grasp and accept what Jesus has said is that they have taken his words about 'eating flesh' and 'drinking blood' literally. So Jesus condemns the flesh as useless (ἡ σὰρξ οὐκ ὠφελεῖ οὐδέν) and then affirms that his words are not flesh but spirit and life (v. 63). The audience has the privileged position of knowing what the Prologue affirms about the relationship between Jesus and 'life' (ζωή; 'in him was life and that life was the light of humanity', 1.4), as well as his relationship to 'flesh' (σάρξ; though his origins are heavenly, Jesus 'became flesh' in order to dwell among his own, 1.14). The 'disciples' to whom this message is addressed do not have this insight and will ultimately depart in ignorance. The inability of the disciples to understand Jesus ultimately gives way to their unbelief, which Jesus confirms in v. 64. This is followed by a narrative aside where the reader is told that

33 In 6.60-71 there is an increasing specificity on the part of the narrator regarding Jesus' 'disciples'. Two groups emerge in this unit: one group simply referred to as 'many of his disciples', and another group known as 'the Twelve'. The former represents a falling away on account of Jesus' message. The latter represents an acceptance of his message, mission and person.

Jesus knew ἐξ ἀρχῆς (cf. ἐν ἀρχῇ, 1.1, 2) not only who would not believe in him but also who would betray him. This statement brings together two future realities that will culminate in the passion narrative. Jesus is going to be betrayed by one of his disciples and ultimately rejected by his own (cf. οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον, 1.11).

The group of bewildered disciples decides that this 'hard saying' is ultimately too difficult to accept and they depart from following him (v. 66). Drawing upon the imagery of the Prologue, Stibbe comments that the λόγος of God has himself become the σκληρὸς λόγος ('hard word', cf. 6.60) for these departing disciples and, in many ways, for the audience.[34] Aware that many 'disciples' have left, Jesus turns to 'the Twelve'[35] and asks if they intend to depart as well (v. 67). In answer to Jesus' question, Peter confesses that Jesus has the 'words of eternal life' (v. 68), recalling the truth of what Jesus has just stated in v. 63 about his words being 'spirit and life' and the prominent theme of 'belief in Jesus' word' that runs throughout 2.1–4.54.[36] This confession also affirms truths about Jesus that reflect what the audience has learned in the Prologue. Peter correctly identifies Jesus' relationship to ἡ ζωή (ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, 1.4) and ὁ θεός (ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, 1.1b), allowing him to stand out, temporarily, as an example of a Johannine character with spiritual insight, though his next few appearances will reveal the limitations of that insight. After his second appearance in the story, Peter remains a positive figure in the eyes of the implied audience.

c. John 13

Exegetical Summary

In an 'example' (ὑπόδειγμα)[37] that prefigures his service on the cross, Jesus washes his disciples' feet at the beginning of chapter 13. This is where Peter begins his descent into incomprehension as a series of critical misunderstandings ensues. Following the foot-washing, the disciples and Jesus share a meal, at which time Jesus predicts that he will be betrayed by one of the Twelve. When Jesus informs the disciples that he is going away and that they will be unable to follow, Peter protests that he is willing to lay

34 Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John's Gospel* (New Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1994), p. 24.

35 Outside of this chapter, this designation for Jesus' closest followers occurs only one other time in the Gospel; in John 20.24, Thomas is identified as 'one of the Twelve'.

36 In that unit a handful of characters including the mother of Jesus (2.5), the Samaritans (4.39), and the royal official (4.50) believe Jesus on the basis of his word. By contrast Nicodemus (3.4, 9) fails to believe because he does not understand Jesus' words. At this stage of the narrative, Peter fits squarely within the tradition of those who believe in Jesus' word. Peter also proclaims that Jesus is the 'Holy One of God' (6.69). With these words the audience witnesses another confession to add to the growing list of Christological affirmations in the Gospel.

37 For more on the significance of ὑπόδειγμα, see R. Alan Culpepper, 'The Johannine *hypodeigma*: A Reading of John 13', *Semeia* 53 (1991), pp. 133–52.

down his own life for Jesus. Peter's naïve misunderstanding is met with Jesus' correction and a prediction of Peter's future threefold denial.

Peter in John 13.1-15

In 13.1-5, Jesus is washing and drying the disciples' feet until he comes to Peter, at which point there is an abrupt break in the foot-washing. Peter first expresses surprise (v. 6) and then registers an outright objection (οὐ μὴ νίψῃς μου τοὺς πόδας εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα) to Jesus washing his feet. The combination of οὐ μὴ and εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα underscores the intensity of Peter's protest. The use of οὐ and μή with the aorist subjunctive is the strongest way to negate something in Hellenistic Greek, denying even the potentiality of an action.[38] In response to Peter's protest, Jesus declares that if Peter rejects the foot-washing he can have no share (μέρος) with Jesus. Often translated 'part', the term μέρος probably refers to a portion of an inheritance – a concept upon which Jesus will elaborate in 14.2-3.[39] Once again, Peter does not understand what Jesus means and responds by asking Jesus to wash his feet, head and hands. In a manner similar to the overly literal 'disciples' in chapter 6, Peter fails to see the symbolism in the washing of his feet and focuses rather on the act itself. If the act of washing brings one into union with Jesus, Peter wants more than a foot-washing; he desires that his entire body be cleansed. The audience cannot doubt Peter's sincerity, but is beginning to question his spiritual insight.

Peter in John 13.16-38

After the foot-washing is complete, Jesus begins to be troubled in spirit and informs the Twelve that one among them – the one who was previously called a 'devil' – will betray him (13.18-22). Upon hearing this statement the disciples are at a loss (ἀπορέω) and begin speculating as to who the betrayer might be. In v. 23 the audience meets the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' for the first time.[40] From this point forward, when the reader encounters Peter, the Beloved Disciple is usually present.[41] Here the Beloved Disciple is seated next to Jesus and leaning against his breast (ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ) – a description that recalls the words of the Prologue where Jesus is described as εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς (1.18). This description sets up an implicit contrast between the Beloved Disciple, who is experiencing an intimate union with Jesus like the one Jesus displays with the Father, and Peter who descends

38 On this see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 546.

39 See BDAG, s.v. μέρος.

40 It is possible, though not certain, that the narrator intends the unnamed disciple with Andrew (1.37-40) to be regarded by the reader as the Beloved Disciple.

41 The only time they are separated throughout the remainder of the Gospel is in chs 18–19. A critical contrast is set up between Peter (ch. 18), who denies Jesus, and the Beloved Disciple (ch. 19), the only member of the Twelve to draw near to Jesus' cross. They are together at the empty tomb and they are together in ch. 21. Some believe that the 'other disciple' in 18.15 should be understood as the Beloved Disciple.

into greater incomprehension. Filled with curiosity about the betrayer, Peter asks the Beloved Disciple to play the role of intermediary and find out the identity of the person about whom Jesus is speaking. The Beloved Disciple asks (v. 25) and Jesus answers (v. 26) but curiously the Beloved Disciple never reports the answer to Peter. The audience, however, is informed that Judas Iscariot is the betrayer, and by receiving the dipped morsel, Judas confirms the prophetic pronouncement uttered by Jesus when he quoted Ps. 41.10 (40.10 LXX). In accord with Jesus' command (v. 27), Judas departs immediately (v. 30).

On the heels of Judas's departure Jesus begins to explain his 'glorification'. He has spoken of his glory on a number of previous occasions in the narrative.[42] In this setting he speaks of his glorification in the context of his betrayal and death. The 'hour' for which the audience has been waiting has finally arrived.[43] Jesus tells the disciples that he will be going away and they will not be able to join him (13.33; cf. 7.33). Again Peter's ignorance is front and centre when he asks Jesus, 'where are you going?' (v. 36a). The Prologue has revealed that Jesus is from the Father (1.1-2) and the audience is now learning that Jesus will return to the Father through his crucifixion. Peter is unaware of Jesus' heavenly origins and therefore fails to appreciate what it means for Jesus to return, even if through the violent means of the cross.

Jesus refuses to answer and reinforces what he has earlier said in v. 33 – the disciples cannot come to where he is going. His hour has come and his glorification entails a departure to the Father who sent him. Because Peter does not understand this truth, he ignorantly protests that he is willing to lay down his life for Jesus. Peter's insistence that he will die with Jesus is met with a sarcastic question (τὴν ψυχήν σου ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ θήσεις;) and an authoritative contradiction (ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι οὐ μὴ ἀλέκτωρ φωνήσῃ ἕως οὗ ἀρνήσῃ με τρίς, v. 38). The audience is arrested by the prediction of Peter's denials. While Peter may fall short of fully comprehending the truth of Jesus' origins and identity, he has been a positive and sympathetic character up to this point in the story. Nevertheless, his numerous misunderstandings have put him on an increasingly negative trajectory that will not be reversed until chapter 21.

d. John 18

Exegetical Summary

At the conclusion of the Farewell Discourse, Jesus and the disciples have departed across the Kidron Valley (18.1). In an unnamed garden the events of Jesus' final night and day begin to unfold. Judas Iscariot, earlier dispatched

42 The theme was introduced in the Prologue in 1.14. The audience sees Jesus 'reveal his glory' in 2.11. Then, in 8.50, 54; 11.4, 40; 14.13; 16.14; 17.4, 5, 10, 22, 24, Jesus speaks of the glory he and the Father share that will ultimately be revealed in his betrayal, crucifixion and resurrection.

43 Jesus has previously spoken about his 'hour' in 2.4; 4.21, 23; 5.25, 28; 7.30; 8.20; 12.23, 27.

to complete his commission 'quickly' (13.27), leads Roman soldiers and a detachment from the chief priests and Pharisees to arrest Jesus in the garden. After a brief conversation in which Jesus self-identifies twice as the 'I am' (cf. vv. 5, 6, 8), he is taken to the Jewish authorities. While Jesus is inside facing the Jewish leaders, Peter is outside denying that he knows Jesus. The predictions of betrayal from chapter 13 are realized.

Peter in John 18.1-14

Jesus and the disciples have now ventured out into a garden where the earlier prediction of betrayal by one of Jesus' closest friends is now coming to pass. Judas appears accompanied by an unlikely pairing of groups. With him are a Roman cohort[44] and a delegation of temple officers sent from the chief priests and Pharisees. In v. 5, the narrator indicates that Judas is 'with them' (μετ' αὐτῶν). Such a description indicates where Judas's loyalties now sit. Opposition to Jesus makes for strange bedfellows as he is face to face with one of his own (Judas), the Jewish leaders (with whom he has been at odds throughout the entire narrative), and a new group (representatives of the Roman government).

Peter and the other disciples are granted release from the imminent police action of the mob though Peter's actions in v. 10 reveal once again a fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus' mission. If Jesus is going to return to the Father, he must be arrested by the delegation of police and soldiers. This is the way to the cross, which for the Johannine Jesus is the way back to the Father. Instead of departing, however, Peter pulls his sword and strikes Malchus, the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. Jesus rebukes Peter for his impetuous action by commanding him to put his sword away, and by pointing out that he must fulfil the will of the Father (v. 11). Jesus' question[45] to Peter is the climactic moment in this scene and, as in previous scenes, there is no response from Peter and no explanation by the narrator. The setting shifts without a word about Peter's misunderstanding. The audience needs no explanation; the narrator intends this silence as an implicit criticism of Peter's inability to see the divinely ordained destiny of Jesus.

Exegetical Summary

As the mob leaves the garden, Jesus is bound, taken into custody, and brought before the Jewish leadership. While Jesus is inside being questioned by Annas, Peter is outside being questioned by those who are standing around and warming themselves. A critical contrast develops between the actions of Jesus and Peter. Jesus speaks boldly before those who have authority to condemn him, while Peter cowers in the presence of a little girl and a slave (18.17, 26). Jesus confesses the truth, while Peter denies it, consequently disavowing

44 A Roman cohort was a military unit with a capacity of 600 soldiers.

45 In v. 11 Jesus says: τὸ ποτήριον ὃ δέδωκεν μοι ὁ πατὴρ οὐ μὴ πίω αὐτο. When οὐ μή is combined with the subjunctive to form a question, the resulting clause has the force of an affirmation. On this, see BDF, s.v. 365.

Jesus. Even the prior confession of Jesus (ἐγώ εἰμι, vv. 5b, 6b, 8a) stands in contrast to Peter's denials (οὐκ εἰμι, vv. 17, 25).

Peter in John 18.15-27

While Jesus is inside being questioned by Annas, Simon Peter and 'another disciple' (ἄλλος μαθητής) are following at a distance. The other disciple is acquainted with the high priest and is able to gain access to the courtyard (v. 15). Eventually Peter (v. 16) gains access to the inside when the other disciple speaks to a slave girl who watches the door and Peter is allowed to enter. The introduction of this slave girl provides Peter with his first opportunity to confess or deny Jesus. As he enters the courtyard, the slave girl inquires of him, μὴ καὶ σὺ ἐκ τῶν μαθητῶν εἶ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τούτου; Her question expects a negative answer and that is exactly what Peter provides. By replying οὐκ εἰμί (v. 17b), Peter not only denies Jesus but also utters words that stand out against the threefold appearance of ἐγώ εἰμι in vv. 5-8.

This scene ends with a side comment from the narrator. A group of characters, including slaves and guards, are warming themselves by the fire in the courtyard of the high priest (v. 18a). The narrator comments that Peter is μετ᾽ αὐτῶν (v. 18b), a phrase that recalls the presence of Judas among the members of the arresting party (Ἰούδας ὁ παραδιδοὺς αὐτὸν μετ᾽ αὐτῶν, v. 5). The connection between the betrayals of Judas and Peter that was so vividly drawn in chapter 13 is re-emphasized in this scene. The irony here is that, while Jesus is inside facing the judgement by the Jewish leaders, Peter is outside in subtle, if unintentional, collusion with those who oppose Jesus. Even when Peter is on the inside (in the courtyard with the other disciple), he remains an outsider because he is 'with them'.

The setting briefly flashes back to Jesus' interview before Annas (vv. 19-24) before returning to Peter who is still 'with them'. When being questioned, Jesus responds to Annas, 'Ask those who have heard me' (v. 21). Ironically, this could be accomplished by going out and questioning Peter! Meanwhile, an unidentified group within the courtyard asks Peter for a second time whether he is one of Jesus' disciples. As with his first denial, the question posed to Peter expects a negative answer, which he is wont to provide: οὐκ εἰμί (v. 25). Without a break in the action Peter is questioned for a third time about his relationship to Jesus. This time a relative of Malchus (18.10) poses the question with the expectation of an affirmative answer: οὐκ ἐγώ σε εἶδον ἐν τῷ κήπῳ μετ᾽ αὐτοῦ; (v. 26). The last words of the question recall Peter's presence with those in the courtyard and again draw the intended contrast. Will Peter confess to having been μετ᾽ αὐτοῦ or will he deny it and remain μετ᾽ αὐτῶν? Having heard Jesus' prediction in chapter 13, the audience is not surprised that Peter denies knowing Jesus for a third time. After the third denial the cock crows immediately. In denying Jesus, Peter has failed to honour the love commandment and has become a betrayer on the level of Judas Iscariot.

e. John 20

Exegetical Summary

The last time the reader saw Peter was on the occasion of his third denial (18.26-27) and his final words in the text were words of disavowal (οὐκ εἰμί, 18.25). Since that point there has been no mention of Peter and no attempt to absolve him of the responsibility of denying Jesus three times. Nevertheless, Peter retains the important status he has achieved throughout the Gospel. This much is clear in the depiction of Mary's discovery of the empty tomb. Peter becomes the first recipient of the news (v. 2) and, despite his recent indiscretions, he remains chief among the small group of Jesus-followers.

Peter in John 20.1-10

It is now early on the first day of the week. The narrator makes sure to point out that these events take place σκοτίας ἔτι οὔσης ('while it was still dark', v. 1a). The audience recognizes the theological motif of 'darkness' and its association with unbelief throughout the Gospel.[46] Again, the audience is led back to the words of the Prologue: 'The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not overcome it' (1.5). The light of the world has seemingly been extinguished by the proceedings of the previous few days, but the events at the empty tomb will confirm that the light has triumphed over darkness.

Mary Magdalene, whom the reader has only just met at the foot of the cross in 19.25, is the first to venture to the tomb of Jesus.[47] Upon arriving she notices that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance. The terse description provided by the narrator (βλέπει τὸν λίθον ἠρμένον ἐκ τοῦ μνημείου), makes it appear that Mary's immediate response is not to investigate the tomb but rather to run directly to the disciples. She remains, for the moment, ἐν σκοτίᾳ. Mary finds Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple and reports that the tomb is empty (v. 2). Her report leads to immediate action on the part of the two disciples.

In v. 3 the two disciples depart *toward* the tomb (ἐξῆλθεν οὖν . . . καὶ ἤρχοντο εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον), and v. 4 reports that as they make their way to the tomb they are running together (ἔτρεχον δὲ οἱ δύο ὁμοῦ). The picture of the two disciples in vv. 3-4 contrasts with the description of Mary Magdalene who in v. 2 ran away from the tomb (τρέχει οὖν καὶ ἔρχεται πρὸς Σίμωνα). As the two disciples are running, the Beloved Disciple passes Peter and arrives first.[48] The audience already knows of the Beloved Disciple's position as the disciple *par excellence* in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 13.23-26; 19.25-27).

46 Cf., e.g., 1.5; 3.2; 6.17; 8.12; 9.4; 11.10; 12.35, 46; 13.30; 19.39.

47 Mary appears in the passion and resurrection narratives of all three Synoptics (Mark 15.40, 47; 16.1; Matt. 27.56, 61; 28.1; Luke 24.10). She also appears earlier in Luke's Gospel (8.2), where it is reported that Jesus cast seven demons out of her. Mary Magdalene is not a prominent figure in the Fourth Gospel. However, in light of her appearance in the Synoptic resurrection traditions, it is unlikely that she was unknown to the original readership of John.

48 Some commentators have seen this as a race to the tomb; cf., e.g., Walter Bauer, *Das Johannesevangelium erklärt* (HKNT 6; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1933), p. 229.

Throughout the Gospel the reader has also seen Peter in a position of leadership over the disciples – though his example has not always been exemplary. In this instance, however, both disciples run away from the situation of darkness and 'unfaith' evident in Mary's words and depart toward the tomb, the place of faith associated with God's intervention in the story. The Beloved Disciple is the first of Jesus' disciples to witness the linen cloths lying inside the empty tomb. He observes the tomb but cautiously stops short of entering (v. 5); by contrast Peter reaches the tomb second and immediately enters (v. 6).

The description of what Peter sees in the tomb is much more detailed than what the Beloved Disciple witnesses. The latter simply sees κείμενα τὰ ὀθόνια ('the strips of linen cloth there', v. 5). Peter, on the other hand, sees 'the strips of linen cloth there' (v. 6b), 'the towel which had been upon his head' (v. 7a), and notices that 'it was not with the strips of linen cloth but rolled up in a place by itself' (v. 7b). Despite this information, the narrator does not comment on Peter's response to what he has witnessed, though the audience is explicitly told that the Beloved Disciple εἶδεν καὶ ἐπίστευσεν ('he saw and believed', v. 8). It is hard to miss the contrasts created by this presentation of the two disciples. While both disciples move toward genuine Johannine faith, the narrator continues to elevate the Beloved Disciple. Both see the empty tomb (vv. 6-8). Both fail to understand the scripture indicating that Jesus must rise from the dead (v. 9). But only the Beloved Disciple is said to believe.

While both disciples are moving in the direction of faith, the narrator persists in providing a picture of the Beloved Disciple as the disciple *par excellence*. Peter is shown moving from darkness toward light and from unfaith toward faith, but he will not fully learn what the audience knows until he comes face to face with the risen Jesus.

In his previous two appearances, Peter had failed to understand Jesus' symbolic actions (the foot-washing, 13.1-20), explicit teaching about his departure (13.24-38), non-resistance to his departure (18.10-11), or the importance of laying down one's life as implied by the love command (18.15-18, 25-27; cf. 13.34-35). Nevertheless, when he, along with the Beloved Disciple, hears the report of the empty tomb he responds by moving toward the location of God's entrance into the story (20.3-10). In this unit Peter regains some of his lustre of early appearances and is on his way toward becoming the 'Rock' alluded to in 1.42. He shows a level of trust and spiritual comprehension, but he has not yet been fully restored in the eyes of the implied audience.

IV. Conclusion

Throughout this essay I have argued that the Prologue provides a grid through which to read the entire narrative, especially misunderstanding characters. An exegetical consideration of Simon Peter helps validate the theory that character misunderstanding is part of the narrator's rhetorical strategy and is

related both to the Prologue's description of Jesus and to the Gospel's overall Christological presentation. We see that Peter's misunderstandings reveal his ignorance about concepts to which the implied audience has already been exposed in John 1.1-18. Throughout the story, the audience must continually return to the information revealed in the Prologue in order to evaluate character responses to Jesus along with other elements of the narrative. Uncomprehending characters such as Peter advance the plot by causing the audience to look back at what has been revealed, which in turn points forward to the cumulative effect of the story to that point. In each instance of incomprehension the audience is reminded of the information already given about Jesus and also of how each character in the story has received him thus far. This constant back-and-forth movement helps contribute to the narrator's desired effect by keeping the audience aware of what has transpired and building anticipation for what will take place as the story moves toward its climax. In this way, John's uncomprehending characters advance the action of the story while emphasizing the Gospel's Christology.

John's uncomprehending characters also help clarify the presentation of several interwoven theological themes in the Gospel. The identity of Jesus is laid out in the Prologue and a proper or improper understanding of Jesus' identity has implications for the audience's view of belief, Christology, and the Johannine theology of the cross. These related themes come to the forefront of the narrative every time an uncomprehending character fails to understand Jesus. The implied audience (which already knows the story of Jesus but is being exposed to the Johannine version for the first time) understands that Jesus is from above and that he is the revealer of the Father who will eventually die on a Roman cross. An understanding of Jesus' identity informs the Gospel's Christological presentation. An understanding of John's Christology clarifies Jesus' mission toward the cross, which in turn clarifies the nature of authentic Johannine belief. Whether explicit or implicit, these themes are present in the reader's every encounter with an uncomprehending character. A synchronic approach to the narrative provides the audience with the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the revealer of the Father who has come from above, to be glorified on the cross and at the tomb. For one to believe in Jesus, an understanding of these truths must be present. By using the Prologue in concert with misunderstanding characters the narrator illustrates improper belief in Jesus and beckons the audience to respond in belief (cf. 20.31) from a perspective informed not by sight, but by a knowledge of Jesus' origins and identity.