

JESUS AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE IN JOHN 21

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As Jesus appears to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee after his resurrection, he comes as an agent of change. In this role, although he encounters the disciples first as a group but in subsequent scenes, he interacts only with Peter. Examining this pericope of John 21¹ using socio-rhetorical interpretation reveals different concepts in these texts. This paper organizes around two elements of socio-rhetorical interpretation: Inner Texture and Intertexture.²

The topic explored here is Jesus' leadership in bringing change to his disciples. Jesus uses a particular way of bringing this direction to his followers. Discovering this "way of leadership" is the question and once discovered how does it compare with other models of leadership and how does it apply in modern contexts?

Inner Texture

To set the tone and context of the study this paper begins with inner texture. "The inner texture of a text resides in features in the language of the text itself, like repetition of words and use of dialogue between two persons to communicate the information."³

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¹ John 21:1-25 New American Standard Bible

² Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996).

³ Ibid. 7

The observation of this inner texture comes in narrational texture, argumentative texture, repetitive and progressive texture.

Narrational Texture and Pattern

In this pericope, there are three scenes. The first begins and ends with the word “manifested” in the *New American Standard Version*. The scene begins as Jesus “manifested Himself” in verse 1 and 2. Then it ends in verse 14 when it concludes, “Jesus was manifested” forming an inclusio. The second scene is the repetition of a question by Jesus to Peter three times. This section begins and ends with this question and answer session beginning with Jesus questioning Peter and then ending with Jesus answering the question.⁴ In the third scene, Jesus speaks directly to Peter about his future, no longer asking questions but giving directives. The overall text begins and ends with narration but has a narrative texture that moves through the three scenes. Scene one opens and closes with narration about the manifestation of Jesus with a good amount of direct speech in the body of the scene. Scene two opens and closes with Jesus speaking to Peter but the pattern is set by the repetitive questions and answers. Finally, scene three begins with direct speech from Jesus and ends with narration about Jesus. This texture highlights the movement of the revelation of Jesus to the disciples and its implications of the revelation of Jesus to the reader. This table shows the narrational movement in the text.

⁴ John 21:15-17

Table 1 – Narrational Texture of John 21

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This movement shows the opening-middle-closing texture of the text as well. Each scene has an opening then a body and finally a conclusion. In the pericope, generally there is this same pattern of an opening, then a body, with a conclusion when the narrator endeavors to move this revelation of Jesus from the disciples to the reader.

Repetitive and Progressive Texture

Scene one is about Jesus manifesting Himself to His disciples. In this first section, the word *phaneroo* (reveal) refers to the revelation that happens through Jesus, this is the theme of this pericope.⁵ There was movement in the story as the disciples progressed in their revelation of the Lord. In verse 4 they did not know it was Jesus but by verse 12 the disciples recognized the Lord. The important word repetitions in this section are fish or fishing, boat, net, and caught. There is a progression. In the early section, they caught nothing, while in the later section John describes a large catch. The difference between

⁵ Francisco Lozado and Tom Thatcher, *New Currents through John: A Global Perspective* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 60.

these occurrences is that Jesus comes into the scene between these events. As he comes into the scene, he reveals himself through a process of interaction with the disciples.

Table 2 summarizes this scene.

Table 2 – Progression of people and topics in John 21:1-25

1	Jesus		manifested		
2				Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, sons of Zebedee (James and John)	
3		fishing, caught nothing,	boat	disciples	
4	Jesus			disciples	
5	Jesus	fish		disciples	
6	Jesus	fish	catch	boat	disciples
7	Jesus			Peter, disciple whom Jesus loved	
8		fish	net full	boat	disciples
9		fish		disciples	
10	Jesus	fish	caught	disciples	
11		fish	net	Peter	
12	Jesus			disciples	
13	Jesus	fish			
14	Jesus	fish	manifested	disciples	
15	Jesus			Peter	Do you love me?
16	Jesus			Peter	Do you love me?
17	Jesus			Peter	Do you love me?
18	Jesus			Peter	
19	Jesus			Peter	Follow me
20	Jesus			Peter, disciple whom Jesus loved	
21	Jesus			Peter	
22	Jesus			Peter	Follow me
23	Jesus			the disciple	
24	Jesus			the disciple	
25	Jesus				

There is a chiasm in the middle of this section:

- A Verse 3 – the disciples went out and caught nothing
- B Verse 4 – Jesus was present but no revelation of Him
- C Verse 5 and 6 – Instruction from Jesus about catching fish
- B' Verse 7 – Revelation of Jesus to John and Peter
- A' Verse 8 – Dragging the net full of fish

The focal point of this chiasm is the central two verses. In this section, Jesus taught the disciples about obedience but the message was about moving to the revelation of Jesus.

In verse 4 they did not know it was him. However, in verse 5 and 6 the disciples obeyed

Jesus instruction without objection, even though they were the professional fishermen. Did some of the disciples suspect that this was Jesus? The disciples' obedience to his word implies that they had already believed.⁶ First, his familiarity with them and then his manner with them in telling them where to cast their nets must have stirred something in the disciples. They obeyed and once the net was full, the disciple whom Jesus loved explains this revelation to Peter. However, when did the disciple see Jesus as who he was? It was somewhere in verses 5 and 6. It was a common event until the great number of fish but even then, it needed the eye of faith. It is here that Jesus begins to change their perspective. He engages them in a way that eventually moves their vision from catching fish to following the Lord. Jesus leads the disciples here toward change in themselves and ultimately toward becoming leaders of change in others as well.

The second scene involves Jesus speaking directly to Peter about issues of leading Jesus' sheep. The key wording in this section is the repetition, the repetition of Jesus' question to Peter and the repetition of Peter's responses. There are small variances in these repetitions that are noteworthy. One is the difference in the Greek words used for love. However, F.F. Bruce challenges this separation of these two words for love because these two words *agapao* and *phileo* operate interchangeably in other places in the writings of John.⁷ Bruce also notices there are four sets of synonyms used in these 3 verses that are stylistic more than informative. However, the question remains, why are

⁶Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 584.

⁷F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983; reprint, 2001), 404.

these parallel synonyms here? The two parallel synonyms in question here are *agapao* and *phileo* for love as well as *boskoo* and *pomaino* for taking care of the sheep. Brodie proposes that even though the use of these sets of synonyms is puzzling that there are indications that the variations are meaningful. In fact, he declares that the failure of scholars to find variations in the way John uses *agapao* and *phileo* in other places proves nothing it is simply an area for ongoing research.⁸ Could these differences have influenced the implied audience through the hearing or the reading of this text? Though there are stylistic issues here, I think it is imperative that the text itself informs the interpretation of the text. In poetry, there is a great focus on style with an interchange of words for emotional effect. This passage is not poetry; it is prose where words are significant for their meaning more than effect. John tells the story as Hellenistic biography with elements of story telling in general: comedy, romance, satire/irony, and tragedy making this a classic religious text.⁹ Some of these elements have only to do with structure like comedy whereas the others combine in the story that is full of irony, tragedy, and romance. In these styles or genres, words are a very important part of the story especially when there are word changes in the direct speech of the individuals. The word differences need notice here, especially since this is not narrative but direct speech between Jesus and Peter.

Jesus' response to Peter changes each time telling Peter to "Tend my lambs," then to "Shepherd my sheep," then lastly to "Tend my sheep." Jesus charges Peter to feed

⁸ Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, 591.

⁹ Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John's Gospel: New Testament Readings* (London, New York: Taylor and Francis Routledge, 1994), 71-72.

(*boske*) the sheep and the lambs and to shepherd (*pomaine*) the sheep.¹⁰ In addition, Peter alters his third response in this section in that Peter said to Jesus that he knew all things and the narrator tells us that Peter is grieved at this point. Jesus is challenging Peter to a new level of leadership that has to do with how he will function as a leader but also concerning his motive in leadership. This motive in connection with the function of leadership must become deep love for the Lord not just affection. From this motive comes the ability to shepherd and tend Jesus' sheep.

The third act completes the drama of Jesus challenging the disciples, specifically Peter, and redirecting them toward a new way of life of "Kingdom" priorities.¹¹ This scene opens with a discussion between Peter and Jesus again but the difference is that Jesus is no longer asking questions. Instead, he is instructing Peter. The key phrase in this section is "follow me" which, Jesus says to Peter twice. In this section, there is another chiasm:

- A 18 Instructions about Peter's future
- B 19 Instruction to "Follow me"
- C 20-21 Peter's question about the other disciple
- B' 22 Instruction to "Follow me"
- A' 23 Explanation about the disciple's future

The focus here is Peter's question. His response to Jesus' instruction to follow him was one of comparison to the other disciple. Jesus helped Peter to refocus on the issue, the issue of redirecting Peter's life with new "Kingdom" priorities. Leadership is an issue of following – whom are you following? It is also an issue of how you are following; in this

¹⁰ Francis J. Maloney, *The Gospel of John*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 4, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 555.

¹¹ John 21:18-25

instance, Peter's following will glorify God. Finally, each person follows in a unique way, it is not about how someone else follows but how you follow.

Table 3 – Scenes based on Repetitive and Progressive Texture

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Argumentative Texture

Jesus engaged the disciples in these three scenes to bring change to their thinking, which would in turn affect them individually and the larger culture as well. According to Charles Kraft, “All culture change is rooted in mind change.”¹² He engages them to change their minds from the *status quo*, of everything returning to the norm after the crucifixion. Jesus uses rhetoric to convince Peter of the ramifications of following him. Jesus uses a rhetorical logical progression when he asks about Peter's love and when Peter responds in the affirmative Jesus moves to the logical application of that love in

¹² Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996),366.

telling Peter to feed his sheep. Next, Jesus tells Peter about his coming death and in this way, he will glorify God. This is a further rhetorical or argumentative style in that Peter will glorify God by his death because of his following Jesus; this is substantiation in that the conclusion comes first. Then finally, once Peter asks Jesus the question about the other disciple Jesus uses the persuasion of a rhetorical question with an obvious answer then a short instruction. These arguments firmly communicated the message to Peter. Nevertheless, this verbal exchange is not the only rhetorical device here. The writer is also using a syllogism to convince the reader. The major premise is that Jesus is the Lord risen from the dead, then the minor premise is that he is to be followed. This reality has ramifications for individuals. The conclusion is that the reader should believe this testimony, and by implication, follow Jesus as well.

Jesus wanted to change their revelation of who he was and of what they were to become. He challenges Peter to think about his love for Him as a motive to proper leadership. Finally, he redirects Peter's thinking about his future and the path of following Him. As Jesus challenges the disciples, he uses principles of change to advocate change in their lives. By this time, he has a close relationship with his disciples. He speaks their language not only the common language of the time, but also the language of fishing to those baptized in the culture of fishing. However, he also deals with them up close as individuals or a small close-knit group. "People are opened up to change through the development of friendship with and respect for the change agent."¹³

There are some striking similarities between the method of leadership that Jesus uses here in John 21 and one contemporary theory of leadership. Transformational

¹³ Ibid. 391

leadership is a process for bringing about change and transformation in followers that can include individuals or whole cultures.¹⁴ Jesus is promoting change in the individual disciples and there are ramifications at least for the Christian community and possibly cultures as well. However, transformational leadership brings change by encouraging leaders to focus on the task outcomes, on transcending self-interest for the team, and activating higher order needs.¹⁵ It is also of note that this type of leadership uses inspirational motivation to communicate high expectations for the followers' part in the vision of the organization.¹⁶ Jesus did have task outcomes that he spoke about, but the motivation was different. The motivation in Jesus' model is clearly deep abiding love for him, the Lord. This love is the point of change here not the task or the vision of a certain wonderful future for the team. Though Jesus' approach looks like transformational leadership on the surface, I see that it is different in the area of motivation, which is the core of Jesus' model of leadership. The next phase of study looks at a comparison of language outside the text, with new ramifications for leadership.

Intertexture

Examination of the intertexture begins once the inner texture sets the broad strokes of the study. "The intertexture of a text is the interaction of the language in the

¹⁴ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership Theory and Practice*, Third ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 169-170.

¹⁵ Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, Fifth ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981; reprint, 2002), 253.

¹⁶Northouse, *Leadership Theory*, 175-176.

text with ‘outside’ material and physical ‘objects,’ historical events, texts, customs, values, roles, institutions, and systems.”¹⁷

Oral Scribal Intertexture

One way that oral-scribal intertexture can occur is through reconfiguration wherein a new event is similar to a previous event and the new event looks beyond the old one.¹⁸ The first event in John 21 is the focus on the disciples. A person on the shore tells them where to cast their net, leading to a large catch. Peter, along with other disciples, realizes that this person on the shore is Jesus. This story is very similar to a story in Luke 5 at the initial call of some of the disciples.¹⁹ The story in John is then a reconfiguration of the story in Luke with a different conclusion. In Luke Jesus gets in Peter’s boat and spoke to the people on the shore. After speaking, Jesus instructed them about the placement of their nets even though they had toiled all night with no catch. When the disciples obeyed Jesus’ directive they caught so many fish that their nets began to break. Peter comes to the revelation that this person is holy and begs Jesus to leave. Nevertheless, Jesus’ instruction is that now they would be catching men. Table 4 shows the similarities and the differences in these two pericopes, green shows the similarities and red the differences.

¹⁷ Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 40

¹⁸ Ibid. 50

¹⁹ Luke 5:1-10

Table 4 – Luke and John Fish Stories

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In contrast, the story in John 21 ends slightly different. Once Peter realizes that this is the Lord, he swims toward the shore instead of begging Jesus to leave. In addition, this time the nets do not break instead they pull in a specific number of fish to the shore. The net not breaking symbolizes the reality of the disciples' ability to bring in a large number of disciples without losing any with the help of Jesus.²⁰ In Luke, the scene moves rapidly to other events. However, here in John 21 the narrative slows down as Jesus speaks to Peter about following him. In Luke, the story was about ministering to people and following Jesus; here the story is again about ministering to people and following Jesus but with more profound ramifications. The early ministry was a beginning for the

disciples but there would be some problems and misunderstandings (breakings in the net). So now, there would be a more profound ministry of following Jesus in more revelation and fruitful ministry. Now the message was about not simply catching men but nurturing them in the faith out of a motive of love for the Lord. It went even deeper.

In these three scenes, Jesus reenacts an earlier scene to bring a message of deep change into the life of Peter. Jesus is challenging certain core issues in Peter. He is challenging him on the level of motive for life and calling. Does his calling have to do with fishing or with Kingdom issues? Does his calling have to do with natural desires or does it have to do with bringing a message that will bring opposition to him personally even to the point of his death? Jesus used his personal relationship with Peter and their history together to invoke this kind of change process.

This method of Jesus influencing Peter through their close relationship has some attributes of the leader-member exchange theory of leadership. This concept focuses on the relationship between the leader and the follower. As the follower becomes closer to the leader this follower will then become more effective.²¹ The leader is then to develop these high quality dyads or vertical relationships with each follower.²² Is Jesus using his relational influence here to motivate Peter to great tasks for the Kingdom? In one sense, yes, this is a relational interaction between Jesus and Peter. The questions posed to Peter were about his intense love for Jesus. However, this was not the development of a special

²⁰Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 355.

²¹Northouse, *Leadership Theory*, 147-151

²²Ibid. 147-151

status for Peter as it is in dyadic relationships, for the purpose of the organization. Instead, it was a change of motive for Peter to one of intense love. On a human level, a leader cannot have these kinds of intense relationships with all followers. However, when Jesus was calling Peter to a new level of love for him it was in his role as Lord not just another man. Developing this kind of relationship was not to accomplish the goals of the organization but to change the internal motive of Peter thereby equipping him for effective leadership. This leadership involved personal transformation in the lives of the sheep not goal accomplishment.

Another concept of reconfiguration takes place here as Jesus speaks to Peter about taking care of the sheep. The picture here is that of a shepherd. Jesus is instructing Peter to be a shepherd to Jesus' sheep. This is similar to a description that Jesus uses for himself in John 10. Jesus challenges Peter to have the same relationship that Jesus had with his flock as the good shepherd.²³ In John 10 Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep and Jesus is calling Peter to no less here in John 21. There will come a time when Peter will also lay down his life for the sheep, like Jesus for those entrusted to his care.²⁴ Just as Jesus did this in obedience to the command of his Father, so Peter would do in obedience to the command of Jesus. These sheep in John 10 know the voice of the shepherd know the voice of the shepherd and by implication follow him. So now, Peter will guide the sheep as a shepherd leader.

The model begins to emerge here of a leader who adopts love for God as the motive. Then in relationship to people, there is a model of a shepherd leader who guides

²³ Maloney, *Gospel of John*, 555.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 556

through instruction and through relationship. There is a model of leadership that includes a balancing of two modes of task and relational behavior in the leader called the style approach.²⁵ However, once again it focuses on leader behavior, which is a different focus than the model of Jesus in John 21. There are tasks but these are tasks of relationships and the motive is the primary focus here. It does matter who you are on the inside – the place of character, the place of motive because it is from this position that this type of leadership functions.

In the midst of these concepts, the question arises concerning charismatic leadership. Charismatic leaders advocate a vision that challenges the status quo and give persuasive appeals to influence followers to carry out the mission of the organization.²⁶ This theory gives a list of traits that need to be in the leader or need to be cultivated. Some of these traits are intelligence, self-confidence, integrity, and sociability.²⁷ However, this list is somewhat ambiguous as to the exact traits. Nevertheless, if anyone has charisma it would be Jesus: he just rose from the dead. He constantly challenged the status quo and his dialogue with Peter about love is uniquely inspirational. Again, we see that the focus is different. Jesus imparts vision to Peter but not just inspirational vision because it includes a vision of persecution. Jesus' leadership is not just to get the best out of Peter or to find the most *charismatic* among them. He chose fishermen! The internal issues are more important here. The issue of love for God is the motive, not the vision

²⁵ Northouse, *Leadership Theory*, 65.

²⁶ Yukl, *Leadership Organizations*, 241-243

²⁷ Northouse, *Leadership Theory*, 18-20.

that is ahead. The future vision here is one of Peter's death. Vision is important to leadership but a vision that comes from the Lord and involves the purpose of God.

Conclusion

Jesus comes to the disciples as an agent of change as a leader to move them to a new level of leadership. The disciples see the example of Jesus focusing on internal personal counterculture change rather than on external revolutionary change. This teaches us how to be effective change agents. Jesus came to the disciples here as a change agent to create change agents of the disciples and to teach them to lead through change. By extension, this reaches to the contemporary believer. To be effective change agents we must deal with internal change having to do with the motive. The motive that brings results is love for Jesus. Leadership proceeds from following the Lord in a way that glorifies Him and in a way that is unique and deeply personal. Great leadership begins by learning to follow the Lord well in the fulfilling of the unique call and destiny of the individual believer. I believe we must begin to see leadership as an internal issue first before it is an issue of function. Our North American fascination with function has mesmerized us into a heresy or pragmatism. The issue is not if it works but if it proceeds from a revelation of Jesus and love for Him. Jesus redefines leadership by focusing on the motive and the followers. He then redefines priorities from a focus on vocational expedience to a focus on explicit obedience in following Jesus for personal calling and ministry. I believe our senses deceive us into thinking that what we touch is most important, whereas in reality the most important issues are internal priorities.

How does Jesus answer the question of leadership? This must inform how we answer the question of leadership. Several examples of contemporary leadership theories

compare in some ways to this Jesus model of leadership. Nevertheless, they all lack some of the important ingredients found here in the Jesus model.

This leadership has two important realities, the reality of the transcendent God, and the reality of love for him that changes the individual. Particularly in the church leaders must learn again from Jesus not to follow culture even in the leadership models. I believe the modern progressive leadership models of the age have taken the church captive resulting in a church with functional leadership but not based on the model of Jesus. This captivity then affects every believer in every church in the western world. Jesus' model of leadership has to do with motive and followers whereas the functional models have to do with progress and the organization. There is a wide gap here with far reaching implications. There have been other models suggested based on similar exegetical and practical arguments. One of these is sacrificial leadership as proposed by Jim Walz in an unpublished doctoral dissertation. This sacrificial leadership involves total submission to God and living beyond ones self, having a vision worth living and dying for which is realized only through supernatural intervention.²⁸ I believe the church must find a new model of leadership founded on the Jesus model that will influence culture instead of the culture influencing the church. Jesus is not the CEO, he is God, this makes a difference even in the way he leads, and he has set the pace for us to lead based upon internal motives of love. I believe we must then lead by the Jesus model and change the world instead allowing the world to mold us into its image.

²⁸ Jim Walz, "Laying the Groundwork for Sacrificial Leadership: An Interpretive Biographical Study of Bruce Olson, Missionary and Leader of the Indigenous Tribes of Columbia and Venezuela " (Virginia Beach, VA: Regent University, 2000), 130.