CHAPTER TWO

CHARACTERIZATION IN LITERARY THEORY

The goal of this study is to analyze the characterization of Jesus in the book of Hebrews according to the theories and practices of modern narratology and ancient rhetoric. This analysis will begin with modern theories and practices of narratology before exploring ancient understandings of characters and their appropriation in rhetorical theory and practice. At first blush one might object to the legitimacy of applying modern narratological theory to the study of the book of Hebrews. Two objections may be raised. First, is it appropriate to apply modern theory to an ancient writing? Second, is it fitting to apply narratological theory to a non-narrative text such as Hebrews?

The twentieth century saw the rise of many new literary movements, such as Russian formalism, Anglo-American New Criticism, and French structuralism, which successfully applied their theories not only to modern literature, but to older works of literature as well. This is because these theories were largely descriptive in their tasks, rather than prescriptive. Scholars did not merely impose their theories upon works of literature, but observed how language and literature worked in actual practice. So, while much of literary theory is relatively new, it is based upon the practice of literature which is centuries old. The insights from these theories began to be applied to the biblical text in a new discipline called narrative criticism in the early 1980s. Since then, numerous studies have emerged

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which have fruitfully employed narrative criticism to illuminate the biblical text.\textsuperscript{3}

With regard to the second objection, Kenneth Schenck argues that “Hebrews’s thought is fundamentally \textit{narrative} in orientation.”\textsuperscript{4} That is, it assumes an underlying story world behind its discourse. So, although Hebrews takes the form of an argument, “it is important to realize that \textit{all its arguments are based on a story}.”\textsuperscript{5} Hence, there are underlying events, characters, and settings that comprise the \textit{story world} or \textit{narrative world} of Hebrews.\textsuperscript{6} This will be explored further below.

\textbf{Characterization in Modern Literary Theory}

\textit{Definition of Character}

Most discussions on characterization rarely offer a clear definition of \textit{character}. Part of the difficulty is the ambiguity of the term. Anyone who peruses a standard English dictionary will immediately discover a host of definitions for the term. I will begin by offering my own set of definitions of \textit{character} based on my study of narratological theory. \textit{Character} is a construct of the totality of traits and attributes belonging to a particular human or non-human figure in a given story. A secondary definition is derivative: a \textit{character} refers to the literary figure which is the locus of the totality of these traits and attributes. Thus, one can refer to a specific figure in a given story as a \textit{character} (e.g., Moses is the main character in


\textsuperscript{4} Schenck, \textit{Understanding}, 2 (italics his).

\textsuperscript{5} Schenck, \textit{Understanding}, 2 (italics his).

\textsuperscript{6} Schenck, \textit{Understanding}, 3.