CHAPTER FIVE

TIME IS DETERMINISTIC

Time is just one damn thing after another.

—Anonymous

5.1. Narrative Determinism

It is a well-known metaphor that any reader can read any text-like object and it is a text, at least from a functional perspective, even if the original ontological purpose was decidedly non-textual. Within this broad scope of texts are narratives, a special subset of texts willfully designed with a temporal composition. It is this composition, this movement or progression through time that is the hallmark of narrative. When we bring this idea to bear on a narrative such as the Fourth Gospel, the concern over composition takes on a whole new meaning. On the one hand, there is an element of diachronic composition: the role that compilation, alteration, redaction, and revision play in the development of most every narrative (whether authorial, editorial, or other). On the other, there is the element of synchronic composition: the intratextual interrelationships that either cohere or dissociate a narrative. It is to the latter element of composition that temporal mechanics most illuminate the coherence of the Fourth Gospel.

In the last chapter, I demonstrated that the Fourth Gospel is a pre-modern narrative aligned with a non-absolute temporality (Section 4.1.). This recognition provides an excellent segue into the deeper issues of the temporal composition of a text, specifically the deterministic nature of narrative. Previously, I explained that determinism is a temporal

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1 For a prominent example of this phenomenon, see Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1980), 303–37.

2 The element of diachronic development of the Fourth Gospel is essential to the study of this text; however, it is due to spatial and not theoretical constraints that I am forced to omit further discussion of traditional Gospel composition study in this work.
theory (Section 2.1.5.3.), and I demonstrated that narrative time is fundamentally deterministic (Section 2.2.1.3.). In this chapter, I will consider the deterministic nature of narrative and then explore the degrees and evidences of determinism in the Fourth Gospel. Whereas investigations of determinism are often epistemological in nature, I will consider the narrative determinism of the Fourth Gospel from primarily a functional perspective following suit from previous chapters.

Narrative, as a narrow subset of texts, is by definition incapable of complete incoherence. In light of its finite and composed nature, a narrative is a closed system. Epistemologically, this does not mean that readers are Cartesian neutral observers, but merely observers external to the narrative world who are able to see the narrative (sjužet) as a temporal whole (unlike the author, who cannot perceive the full fabula). The subjective yet external viewpoint of the reader reveals that the composition of the narrative is limited and preset. Therefore, on the most rudimentary level, narrative is fully deterministic in that the temporal composition of the text is frozen from one reading to the next, and its temporal progression is fixed. However, there is more to textual determinism than this one-dimensional approach. The temporality of the beginning and ending of a narrative is met in the middle, and a unity of some degree is formed; Aristotle argued that these parts of a work should be highly unified. Yet unity and cohesion are often elusive qualities, “entwined” amongst the temporal moments of the text, especially in a narrative with a dimensional as opposed to a generally linear temporality. Nonetheless, temporally non-absolute narratives best illuminate the underlying truth of narrative determinism: “Narratives

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3 Further, it is necessary to point out that my use of the terms ‘determinism’ and ‘indeterminism’ do not reflect typical usage of the concepts of ‘determinacy’ and ‘indeterminacy’ in Biblical studies, ideas that refer to whether or not a text’s meaning is linked to the author, text, or at free play; this approach to determinacy is focused on the reader (or the author) and is generally epistemological; for example, see Semeara 71 (1995).

4 Seeing the whole is not necessarily comprehending the whole, as is illuminated by the struggle of writing history; see Danto, Narration and Knowledge, 183.

5 Cf. Carr, Time, Narrative, and History, 51.

6 Similarly, Tanya Reinhart speaks of “possible” versus “practical” coherence; see Reinhart, “Conditions for Text Coherence,” 161.

7 Aristotle, Poetics, 7–8.

8 Meyerhoff, Time in Literature, 146.