



journal of biblical
perspectives
in leadership

LEADERSHIP OF JESUS REVEALED IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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This paper provides an interpretation of the leadership of Jesus revealed in Chapter 21 of the Gospel of John. The socio-rhetorical interpretation provided in this writing are used to help the reader develop a deeper understanding of the leadership of Jesus. As such, the basic principles and guidelines of a socio-rhetorical interpretation are discussed and shown as an effective means for gaining a greater understanding of scripture. The strategies of a socio-rhetorical interpretation were used to provide an exegetical interpretation of John 21. Jesus' role as a change agent is also discussed. A comparison of leadership from a Johannine perspective and current leadership models are also made.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper defines the role of Jesus as a leader and change agent in this critical analysis of John 21. Jesus' authority in the Gospel of John is unique in comparison to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). "The depth and grandeur of Jesus' authority comes across more starkly in John than in the other Gospels. The number of incidents narrated are fewer, but the drama of the conflict over Jesus is heightened."¹ Jesus' leadership and authority are very evident in the Gospel of John and are discussed at length within this paper through the use of a socio-rhetorical interpretation.

A socio-rhetorical interpretation of biblical documents is an effective tool for gaining understanding of the intended message of the author. Robbins introduced this

¹ Carey, G. *The bible for everyday life*. Grand rapids, MI: (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 204.

unique concept in the area of exegetical interpretation (1996). This paper provides some of the basic principles and guidelines used in a socio-rhetorical interpretation of Chapter 21 of John's gospel and Jesus' role as a leader. This paper further defines the role of Jesus as a change agent in this critical analysis of John 21. The analysis provided will apply Robbins' theory of socio-rhetorical interpretation using the five sets of strategies: repetitive texture; progressive texture, opening – middle – closing texture; narrational texture; and sensory-aesthetic texture.

II. REPETITIVE TEXTURE

Robbins noted that repetitive texture refers to a repetition of words within a rhetorical unit (1996). From the repetition one can develop a system or pattern that may be used to gain a deeper understanding of the discourse. John 21 exhibits a variety of repetitive words as well as units. John 21:15-17 stated:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?' 'Yes Lord.' He said, 'You know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my Lambs.' Again Jesus said, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me?' He answered, 'Yes Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'take care of my sheep.' The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said feed my sheep.'

From an analysis of repetitive texture, one can see the pattern of Jesus asking Peter if he loves him and Peter responding affirmatively. Then Jesus says "feed my lambs" or sheep three times throughout the unit. This pattern provides the reader with some key or interpretive messages. One interpretation is linked to Peter's three denials of Jesus in John 18:15-18, 25-27. Spencer refers to these repetitive statements in John 21 as echoes (1999). "The implied author guides the implied reader to the acknowledgement that Peter's repudiation of and subsequent departure from Jesus in the final scenes before the crucifixion represent the thoughts and actions of all the disciples."²

This interpretation suggests that Peter as well as the others have distanced themselves from Jesus and have gone back to their ordinary lives without regard to his message. This interpretation also suggests that Peter finally accepted Jesus as God when he stated in his third response "Lord you know all things." The first two responses do not communicate the same message. The third message implies that Jesus as God, knows all.

In John 21:15-17 Jesus first tells Peter to feed his lambs. The Greek word used for feed is different in the following progressions in which he tells Peter to feed his sheep. Oladipo addresses the relevance of using the word *boske* initially and *poimaine* later in the dialogue (1997). Oladipo identified the meaning of the Greek word *boske* as

² Spencer, P. *Narrative echoes in John 21: Intertextual interpretation and intratextual connection*. (Journal for the Study of the New Testament, 1999), 65.

“to graze or feed.”³ The meaning is that Jesus wants the lambs fed because they are very precious and dear to him. The use of the Greek word *poimaine* has broader implications other than just feeding. “Christian ministry includes many dimensions of taking care of the sheep”.³ The many dimensions include protecting them, caring for them and listening to them in addition to feeding them.

Table 1.1

Key Narrative Elements

1							
2	Peter						
3	Peter		Fish				
4							
5			Fish				
6			Fish				
7	Peter	Disciple whom Jesus loved					
8			Fish				
9			Fish	Bread			
10			Fish				
11	Peter		Fish				
12							
13			Fish	Bread			
14							
15	Peter			Love me	Feed	Lambs	
16				Love me	Feed		Sheep
17	Peter			Love me	Feed		Sheep
18							
19	Peter						Follow me
20	Peter	Disciple whom Jesus loved					
21	Peter						Follow me
22							
23							
24							
25							

The key narrative elements in Table 1.1 outline the repetitive texture of John 21. The elements defined in Table 1.1 were selected by the writer as a part of an analysis of John 21. This was done to identify the main characters as well as key ideas in this area of interest. Evident in the repetitive texture in Table 1.1 is the idea that Peter is the main figure. Peter was mentioned nine times in this writing. As this paper develops, a special relationship between Peter and Jesus will become more evident.

The use of fish and bread in this chapter is important in understanding the meaning of John 21 and the reconciliation of the disciples with Jesus and his word. The number of times the word fish is used versus the word bread is significant. A Eucharistic connection evolves such that the followers of Jesus (the fish) are brought back to the table of the lord and eat the bread of life.

³ Oladipo, C. John 21:15-17. (*Foundation, nature, and challenge of Christian discipleship*). (Interpretation, 1997): 66.

The use of the words *love me*, *feed*, *lambs*, and *sheep* draws a significant amount of focus to the interpretation of John 21. These are mentioned in conjunction three times and provide some insight into the relationship between Peter and Jesus. Finally, the words *follow me* occur twice in John 21 near the end of the unit. This is the critical climax that draws Peter back into the fold and reconciles him to the spiritual calling of Jesus.

III. PROGRESSIVE TEXTURE

The theory of progressive texture appears in John 21. Progressive texture can be understood as a pattern that unfolds and builds to a dramatic conclusion. "Progression builds new expectations."⁴ That is, there is a distinction between repetitive texture and a progressive texture. A repetitive texture refers specifically to the repetition of words, whereas the progressive texture develops or reveals a deeper understanding of the discourse through the use of that pattern. The repetitive pattern found in John 21 builds the context for the progression as Jesus unveils His message throughout the verses.

This progression begins after Jesus' death when the disciples returned to their prior occupation. The disciples seem to leave their spiritual calling behind. Jesus then intervenes by calling from the shore and telling them to cast out their nets to the right side of the boat. The abundance of fish netted prompts the recognition of the post-resurrection Jesus. This is a significant progression where the disciples begin the reconciliation process back to being evangelists and preaching the good news. Jesus is providing the way and calling for the disciples, in particular Peter, to follow his word.

The progressive texture in John continues for the remainder of the chapter, and it can be identified as it relates to Peter. Peter is the primary character in John 21. As the story develops, Jesus speaks directly to Peter questioning whether or not Peter loves him. In the repetitive texture the writer discussed how Jesus questioned Peter three times in this regard. When Peter responds affirmatively Jesus asks him to feed his lambs and sheep. Jesus, in John 21:19 and 21:22, tells Peter to follow him. This is the point when Jesus reconciles Peter with his mission.

"The dramatic encounter between Peter and Jesus is therefore the pivotal event of this chapter; it is the encounter in which the risen Jesus draws Peter into his reconciling presence."⁵ Peter is not only being called back to reconciliation to Jesus' word but to be the leader of his church. When Jesus tells Peter to follow him, he is asking him to succeed him here on earth because Jesus could not remain here. "The implied reader concludes that Peter, as the God Shepherd, assumes the obligations of a broker, one who facilitates the exchange of benefaction between patrons and clients."⁶ At this point the progression texture has reached its climatic conclusion. The repetitive texture unveils the progressive texture as discussed in this analysis which is the natural flow that Robbins identified.

⁴ Robbins, V. *The tapestry of early Christian discourse*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 47.

⁵ Paddison, A. *Exegetical notes: John 21:1-19*. (Expository Times, 2007), 293.

⁶ Spencer, P. *Narrative echoes in John 21: Intertextual interpretation and intratextual connection*. (Journal for the Study of the New Testament, 1999), 66.

IV. OPENING – MIDDLE – CLOSING TEXTURE

“Repetitive and progressive texture begin to reveal important insights into the opening, middle and closing.”⁷ The key narrative elements in Table 1.1 will be applied during this part of the analysis. One of the key areas that Robbins questioned is how far the opening extends into the unit. In John 21, based upon the narrative elements identified, one can see a blocked pattern that defines the opening, middle, closing texture. The use of the word fish in the text provides the reader with the opening portion of the unit. The opening extends from 21:1 through 21:13. A transition occurs in 21:13 when Jesus and the disciples eat the fish and the bread. Henry discussed how the call to come and dine with Jesus can be seen as Eucharistic, a call into communion with Him in grace (2008). This event transitions from the initial gathering of fish to the symbolic eating of Christ’s flesh.

The middle section extends between 21:14 and 21:17. This texture contains the three-fold questioning of Peter. Jesus asks Peter if he loves him and he responds affirmatively; then Jesus asks Peter to feed his lambs and his sheep. This middle texture provides the direct relationship between Peter and Jesus. The discourse between them provides readers with some insight into Jesus’ intentions for Peter and his calling.

In John 21:8 Jesus welcomes Peter to the charcoal fire on the beach. The scene is reminiscent of the charcoal fire when Peter denied Jesus prior to the crucifixion. “The last time Peter stood by a charcoal fire he had denied Jesus three times.”⁸ The relation back to the three-fold denial of Jesus by Peter resonates in this middle texture. Peter’s role in this text is pivotal which provides some understanding of the deep relationship Jesus and Peter have and the new role Jesus is asking Peter to play within his church.

The closing extends from 21:19 through 21:21. This unit is defined by Jesus asking Peter to follow him. It becomes clear that Peter is reconciled with Jesus and his mission. John 21 started out with the disciples turning from their ministry to fishing at the prompting of Peter. In the closing texture Jesus has a direct discussion with Peter, changes Peter’s heart, and reconciles him back to his mission. Peter plays a pivotal role in the formation of the early church, and in the closing texture of John 21 the insight of how this came to be is revealed. It is Jesus who is the change agent and who’s leadership restored Peter to his rightful place in the church.

V. NARRATIONAL TEXTURE

John 21 is a post-resurrection narrative that draws the Gospel of John to a conclusion. “Of all the New Testament narratives, John especially invites this mode of analysis because the author has provided us with some of the most extensive and finely crafted stories of the New Testament.”⁹ John 21 provides insight into the reconciliation process that Jesus used to bring his Lambs back into the fold. It is through his

⁷ Robbins, V. *The tapestry of early Christian discourse*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 70.

⁸ Paddison, A. *Exegetical notes: John 21:1-19*. (Expository Times, 2007), 293.

⁹ DeSilva, D. *An introduction to the New Testament*. (Madison, WI: InterVarsity, 2004), 397.

considerate detail of the setting that provides us with an understanding of the importance of the events that took place.

The disciples' abandonment of the ministry in the opening section provides some insight into their lack of commitment to spreading the word of Jesus. The hostile environment for Christians is commonly known during that time and provides some level of insight into the actions of the disciples. Regarding conflict avoidance, "Many people find engaging in conflict uncomfortable. Some individuals would rather avoid disagreements than say something that may draw them into a conflict."¹⁰ However, after having been with the Christ and having seen his miraculous works personally, why the disciples were willing to return to their prior occupations is puzzling. Quite disconcerting also is the fact that it was Peter who initiated the return to their prior occupations. Matthew 15:18-19 stated, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church....I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven." Once the disciples and Peter specifically, turn away from the ministry, reconciliation needed to occur through Jesus intervention.

It should be noted how Jesus phrased his words to Peter in John 21:15-17. In the first part Jesus used Peter's full title to address him. Oladipo ascribed significance to this manner of address (1997). "The use of a full title of an individual implies that an important message is to follow."¹¹ Oladipo suggested that the important message is that the motivation of Christian leadership originates from love and devotion to Jesus. By questioning Peter three times, Jesus is shepherding Peter. Jesus was reminding Peter to cling to a love of Jesus to be able to lead His church. All humans are flawed and should look to their love of Jesus to help them become leaders and work through their personal shortcomings here on earth.

VI. SENSORY-AESTHETIC TEXTURE

"Sensory-aesthetic texture moves beyond inner reasoning into the evocative power of all the senses available to human life and imagination."¹² Several areas within John 21 provide opportunities for analysis of sensory-aesthetic texture. One such area occurs when the disciples first see Jesus on the shore. "Their recognition of the person cooking breakfast on the shore as Jesus denotes the movement of their rehabilitation, that is, for the first time in the Gospel they actualize their observance of Jesus in cognitive terms."¹³ He further suggested that the disciples faltered in their faith, but by recognizing Jesus they have started the reconciliation process.

Further sensory-aesthetic textural study of John 21:5-7 indicates the recognition of Jesus by the sound of his voice. Jesus calls out to the disciples and helps them net some fish. The Beloved Disciple first recognizes Jesus on the shore after hearing his voice. This echoes John 10:3-5 in the parable of the Good Shepherd.

¹⁰ Keebler, D. *Understanding the Constructs of Groupthink and Learning Organizations*. (International Leadership Journal, 2015), 96.

¹¹ Oladipo, C. *John 21:15-17. (Foundation, nature, and challenge of Christian discipleship)*. (Interpretation, 1997), 65.

¹² Robbins, V. *The tapestry of early Christian discourse*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 92.

¹³ Spencer, P. *Narrative echoes in John 21: Intertextual interpretation and intratextual connection*. (Journal for the Study of the New Testament, 1999), 65.

The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they know the voice of strangers.

The implication is that the disciples, first being the Beloved Disciple, heard the voice of the Good Shepherd and recognized it as Jesus' and they followed the voice which was that of the risen Christ. There must have been some visual difference. This is based on John 20:12 "None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?'" Some scholars suggested that Jesus' post-resurrection body may have been slightly different in appearance making it difficult for those who knew him to identify him visually. Similarly, the inability to recognize Jesus by sight was mentioned in John 20:10-18 and Luke 24:13-35. Recognizing Jesus and beginning the reconciliation process was truly a transformative experience that could only have occurred through the leadership of Jesus.

VII. REVELATION OF LEADERSHIP THEORIES AND JOHN 21

Christian leaders rely on faith to provide insight into resolving complex issues. It can be argued that scriptural references may provide deeper meaning to current leadership theories. As shown, John 21 provides a continuation of the Gospels that form a cohesive picture of Christianity through the continuing ministry of the church after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Just as God provided divine empowerment through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, leaders must develop a trusting relationship with their followers by increasing communication, showing respect, being fair and predictable, and demonstrating competence. Winston suggested that the acts of the servant leader should increase the followers' agapao love as well as their self-efficacy and commitment to the leader (2003). Having a leadership style that supports cohesiveness is extremely important. Divisive behavior can destroy the trust in a leader/follower relationship. Building trust in a group setting can be difficult but it is essential for leaders to be effective.

Leadership strategies have developed over the centuries but were not formally studied to any meaningful degree until the twentieth century. In recent years, researchers have documented the development and growth in this area of study. From these theories, constructs were developed revealing the characteristics observed by leaders over the course of history. The qualities that Jesus displayed in John 21 are identified in contemporary leadership models. There are many theories related to the construct of leadership. Some well-known theories include: trait, transactional, leader-member exchange (LMX), situational, path-goal, charismatic, transformational, and servant leadership. A host of characteristics that identify specific types of leaders have been documented by researchers for each of these theories. In John 21, there are two types of leadership that closely align with the behaviors exhibited by Jesus. The two leadership styles that can best represent the behaviors of Jesus are transformational and servant.

To better understand transformational leadership, Yukl noted transformational behaviors include; idealized influence; individualized consideration; inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation (2006). Transformational leaders try to motivate

followers by bringing them into the decision-making process. The needs of the followers are requisite as an integral part of transformational leadership.

In recent years, servant leadership has taken hold and is a widely discussed philosophy that has stirred much debate. There are some aspects of Greenleaf's model of servant leadership that have religious overtones. Greenleaf defined servant leadership through the use of questions, "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?"¹⁴ The theory of servant leadership is an example of a leadership construct that seeks to serve the follower and provide for his or her needs, similar to how the Peter and the disciples were shepherded by Jesus. The servant-leadership philosophy is perhaps the best leadership style to follow as a Christian leader and one that Jesus displayed throughout the gospels and the construct revealed in John 21.

Bass noted, though transformational and servant leadership are closely aligned they contrast in a significant way. The main difference between the two leadership constructs occurs with the focus of the leader. That is, servant leaders concentrate on the follower's well-being, even to the detriment of the group/organization while the transformational leader concentrates on follower but for the benefit of the group/organization (2000). Based on this fundamental difference as well as Winston's contention that servant leaders increase the followers' agapao love as well as their self-efficacy and commitment to the leader; it becomes clear that the leadership behaviors demonstrated by Jesus in the Gospel of John 21 were those of a servant leader (2003).

The Johannine perspective on leadership as interpreted in John 21 provides us with a loving and forgiving leader. As Peter was feeling guilty about his denials of Jesus, it was Jesus who provided a path back into his ministry. John 21:7 demonstrates how Peter, once knowing it was Jesus, was willing to leave everything behind in order to reconcile with Jesus. At this point Jesus unburdens Peter by accepting that he is flawed and still asks him to minister to his church. Jesus displays compassion, love, and commitment to his follower. Peter reflected those actions taken by Jesus.

Contemporary leadership models suggest that the traits that Jesus displayed in John 21 are servant leadership centric. As revealed, Jesus as the servant leader was seeking to meet the needs of the followers by reconciling them back to their spiritual mission. It is this shared vision that brought the disciples back to their calling. "...leaders must seek out individuals who are progressive and willing to work toward a shared vision."¹⁵ In John 21 Jesus establishes that it is Peter who will lead and fulfill the needs of His church.

¹⁴ Greenleaf, R. *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 13-14.

¹⁵ Keebler, D. *Metaphors Used as Imagery to Describe Organization*. (International Leadership Journal, 2010), 21.

VIII. CONCLUSION

John 21 is a reconciliation narrative that draws the disciples back to the calling of the Christian ministry through Jesus Christ. The socio-rhetorical interpretation provided in this paper provided the patterns and progressions for this piece of scripture. Each of the texture builds upon itself to provide a comprehensive interpretation that one may use to gain a deeper understanding of the Gospel of John and in particular Chapter 21.

John 21 is the fulfillment of Matthew 15:18-19. Peter's reconciliation with Jesus fulfills the promise that Jesus made to Peter and provides the foundation for the early church by charging Peter with the responsibility of his sheep. John 21 provides a view that is the foundation for Christian ministry. The theme is that love and devotion to Jesus will provide reconciliation to Christian thought and practice. "Jesus heals our pasts, confronts us in the present, and re-directs our future."¹⁶ The significance of using scripture in leadership study is grounded in the notion that scripture can be held up as a moral directive and used as a compass for both our moral and ethical conduct. Scripture provides the premise for Christian core beliefs and is what a servant leader should rely upon.

Culture plays a very important role in leadership. Leaders must be responsive to cultural, political, and legal environments within their groups/organizations. Christian leaders can rely on their belief in scripture and use it as solid foundation for guidance. Christian leaders must hold a view of letting their actions speak to their intentions. If their intentions are true then their followers will believe them and start trusting in them. Within groups/organizations they must build trust by valuing each follower; listening to their concerns; and addressing issues that are of importance to their followers. Christian leaders also have to remember that some leader constructs have both leaders and followers at odds with each other. Building trust will take time and investment by the leader. A leader's interaction with their followers should be in a more supportive role rather than a dictative one. As such, one must remember what is stated in Ecclesiastes 9:17, "The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of the ruler of fools."

Scripture portrays humankind as being created in the image of God, biased by sin and alienation, and with the potential to be restored to the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. A moral act is one that enhances the true humanity to those impacted. Ethical leadership enhances human dignity and potential. As Jesus, servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions. As a result, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within the group/organization. The servant leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything possible to nurture the growth of followers and recognize them as having their own special and unique spirits.

¹⁶ Paddison, A. *Exegetical notes: John 21:1-19*. (Expository Times, 2007), 193.

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Daniel Keebler, PhD, works both in industry and academia. He has over 35 years of management, engineering, finance, and operations experience. Dr. Keebler holds three advanced degrees: a Ph.D. in Business, an MS in Mathematics, and an MA in Business. In addition to working in the aerospace and defense industry, he also works as an adjunct faculty member for the School of Business at Rutgers University, The State University of New Jersey. He has published papers in the *International Leadership Journal*, *Human Resource Management Review*, *International Journal of Strategic Decision Sciences* and the *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*. Dr. Keebler is an active member in the Christian community.

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