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PETER'S JOURNEY AS A DISCIPLE

An Exegetical-Theological Study of John 21:15–19

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There is no doubt that Simon Peter is the best known among the disciples of Jesus. The four Gospels present interesting stories about him that show different aspects of his character. In the various depictions of him, what dominates is his fickle, impetuous and vacillating personality.[1] In the Gospel of John, there are several instances when he displayed such traits.

At the Last Supper, Jesus stooped down to wash the feet of the disciples, but Peter objected: "You shall never wash my feet" (Jn. 13:8). When Jesus emphasized that foot washing was necessary for Peter to have a share with him (13:8), Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" (13:9). Moreover, during Jesus' arrest, Peter impulsively struck the high priest's servant with a sword, and cut off his right ear (18:10). Again, during Jesus' trial at the court of the high priest, Peter, who had confessed before that he would be willing to die for his master, denied Him not just once but three times (18:15–18; 25–27). Such was the character of Peter—he was a well-intentioned person with the desire to do good, yet when the moment called for it, he wavered and became impulsive and unreliable.

[1]Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 21.

Over the centuries, many Christians have been able to identify themselves with Peter. Indeed, there are followers of Christ who, like Peter, find it difficult to be faithful to their religious commitments. It is easy for them to desire to be faithful, but hard to attain the goal; easy to make promises to God, but hard to keep them; easy to display religious bravado when the sailing is smooth, but hard and unwilling to pay the price when things get rough; easy to think they will withstand persecution, but hard to stand firm when the implement of torture is laid in front of them.[2] Many Christians share with Peter a spirit that is willing but flesh that is weak.

But the followers of Christ have also seen in Peter a person who never gave up on himself. Despite his weaknesses and vulnerabilities, the apostle remained open to the grace of Christ more fully in his life. His personal shortcomings did not prevent him from risking his life for his Master, a doggedness that earned him the moniker "the Rock". Indeed, many of Jesus' followers find the chief apostle so appealing because he is beyond doubt a person who learned from his missteps, an icon of transformation, a model of a renewed man.

In studying John 21:15–19, this author would like to find out how this experience is made concrete in the life of Peter. By delving deeper into the text, he hopes to understand Peter's journey towards becoming the person Jesus wanted him to be.

On the Provenance of John 21

This article focuses mainly on John 21:15–19. This passage, however, is found in a chapter that is a subject of debate among biblical interpreters. It is important then to discuss the controversy to legitimize and warrant our study of the text.

The issue revolves around the question of whether or not the twenty first chapter of John has always been part of the Gospel. Many scholars hypothesize that it was not an original part of the Fourth

[2]Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene,* 21.

Gospel, that it was only added later. For those who consider it as an addendum, they interpret John 21 as a postscript,[3] or appendix,[4] or epilogue,[5] or conclusion[6] to the Gospel. The reasons why the last chapter is said to be an addition are the following: 1) John 20:30–31 is a solemn conclusion to the Gospel—it already ended the story.[7] 2) There are many words, expressions, and literary peculiarities that appear in 21:1–25 but nowhere else in the Fourth Gospel.[8] 3) A problem in the sequence of the story is also noted—after the commissioning of the disciples in 20:22ff, it is more than surprising that the disciples, instead of bearing testimony, are found fishing in the Sea of Galilee.[9]

These arguments, however, are challenged by other bible commentators. According to Thomas Brodie, verses 30–31 of Chapter 20 do help to conclude the Gospel, but on their own they do not constitute the Gospel's conclusion. Rather, they are part of a larger pattern consisting of 19:35–37, 20:30–31, and 21:24–25 and, as the comments on these three texts indicate, it is in the larger pattern, rather than in a single text, that the Gospel's conclusion is to be found.

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[3]Bultmann calls it a postscript. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 700.

[4]Barrett and Bernard designate it as appendix. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), 479; J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 687.

[5]The following authors call it epilogue. Cf. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC (Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 395; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 665; D. Moody Smith, Jr., *John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 389; Ernst Haenchen, *John 2*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 218.

[6]Brown describes it as a (second) conclusion: cf. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 1065.

[7]Thomas Brodie, *The Gospel According to John* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 574.

[8]Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 545.

[9]Bultmann, *The Gospel of John Commentary,* 701.

The essence of the larger pattern is that it is concerned not only with the Gospel's destination but also with its origin. Both elements are necessary, and they are synthesized in the final verses, 21:24–25.[10] Edwin Hoskyns earlier explained the significance of John 21:

> A Christian Gospel ends properly, not with the appearance of the risen Lord to His disciples, and their belief in Him, but with a confident statement that this mission to the world, undertaken at His command and under His authority, will be the means by which many are saved … all the three synoptic Gospels end this way.[11]

Moreover, Donald Carson posits that the linguistic considerations are not in themselves enough to establish the position that John 21 was not originally part of the Gospel. One can find in chapter 21 words and syntactical constructions that are typical of chapters 1–20. The double "amen" in verse 18 and the variation of synonyms that characterize verses 15–17 are among the examples that can be mentioned.[12]

Regarding the problem of the series of events in chapters 20 and 21, the interpretation depends on how one looks at them. Their sequence may be surprising, but it does not necessarily mean that the surprising element was a later addition. Thomas Brodie elaborates:

> Much depends on how one regards the fishing. Obviously if it is seen as aimless, or as a return to an earlier stage of life, then it does go against the forward looking implication of chapter 20. But within John's Gospel it does not constitute a return or regression. Since the disciples had never before been spoken of as fishermen, it represents rather some form of advance. And it is far from aimless; it involves the crucial business of providing food, and it acquires overtones of a far-reaching ministry.[13]

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[10]Brodie, *The Gospel According to John,* 574–575.

[11]Edwin Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 656.

[12]D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 665.

[13]Brodie, *The Gospel According to John,* 575.

The aforementioned arguments refute the contention that John 21 was a later addition. Joined with these explanations, Bruce Metzger established the fact that there is no existing manuscript of the Fourth Gospel that does not include John 21. All the extant manuscripts of the Gospel of John, including the ancient P66, contain chapter 21.[14]

There is no compelling reason then to negate John 21 as a constitutive part of John's Gospel. It is really central to the work of the Fourth Evangelist. Andreas Kostenberger argues, "It is part of John's overall literary plan and provides the culmination of various strands carefully woven earlier into the Gospel."[15] Thus, John 21 is to be interpreted in the light of John 1–20. In fact, with the contemporary rise of canonical and literary approaches to biblical narrative, Francis Moloney observes that there is an increased effort among a newer generation of scholars to explain John 1–21 as a literary and theological unit.[16] For example, Martin Hasitschka, in his recent article entitled "The Significance of the Resurrection Appearance in John 21," shows

[14]Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 40. In 2006, a fourth century Sahidic papyrus manuscript (Bodleian MS. Copt.e.150[P]) came to light that ends with John 20:31 (Gesa Schenke, "Das Erscheinen Jesu vor den Jüngern und der ungläubige Thomas: Johannes 20,19–31," in Louis Painchaud & Paul-Hubert Poirier, eds., *Coptica-Gnostica-Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* [Les presses de l'Université Laval/Peeters, 2006], 893–904). However, the probative value of the papyrus manuscript is still being studied by textual critics.

[15]Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 585–586.

[16]Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 546. Hoskyns was virtually alone among 20th century commentators of John who advocated that John 21 belongs to the original plan of the gospel. Cf. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, 1ff. The following names are the scholars who followed him: Paul S. Minear, "The Original Functions of John 21," *JBL* 102 (1983): 85–89; Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 574–576; Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 546; Gail R. O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 854–855.; Sandra Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe* (New York: A Herder & Herder Books, 1999), 202; Kostenberger, *John*, 583–586; Martin Hasitschka, "The Significance of the Resurrection Appearance in John 21," in Craig Koester

clearly that John 21 is connected to individual parts and statements in John 1–20. He further explains his position in this fashion:

> Several times in the Gospel of John, the author conveys the announcements and indications concerning future events as well as memories of past incidents or encounters. Through anticipating future events and referring back to the past, he creates mental links and establishes relationships between certain parts of his work. Such special connections are also recognizable between John 21 and the rest of the Gospel.[17]

His article then focuses on how John 21 is essentially related and connected to John 1–20, and how the last chapter can be read as an integral part of the Johannine Gospel. Taking the same stance, Sandra Schneiders argues:

> … Chapter 21 is an integral part of the Gospel in fundamental theological continuity with chapters 1–20 and that its purpose is to bring the Gospel account to a close by transferring the reader's attention from the experience of the first disciples with the historical Jesus to the experience of the contemporary church with the glorified Jesus, that is, from the story of those who "saw" to the story of those who "believe without having seen (20:29)."[18]

This article then proceeds with the view that John 21 is part of the literary and theological plan and design of the Fourth Gospel. In fact, some of the discussions endeavor to show that the last chapter is essentially connected with the rest of the Gospel.

A Closer Look at the Text: John 21:15–19

Basically, John 21 is divided into two parts: a) The Appearance of Jesus to his Disciples at the Sea of Tiberias (vv. 1–14) and b) Jesus,

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& Reimund Bieringer, eds., *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 311.

[17]Hasitschka, "The Significance of the Resurrection Appearance in John 21," 311.

[18]Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, 202.

Peter and the Beloved Disciple (vv. 15–25). Obviously, our chosen text (vv. 15–19) belongs to the second part. It specifically deals with the dialogue of Jesus and Peter. Our concern would be mainly on this encounter. In other words, we delimit our study to this particular text and have our reasons for such delimitation. In its immediate context, our text of study is preceded by vv. 1–14, which deals with a different subject, that of Jesus appearing to his disciples in the Sea of Tiberias. It also narrates how the disciples pulled in a miraculous catch of fish. It is followed by vv. 20–25 which speak about the Beloved Disciple. Although John 21:15–25 can be taken as a whole, vv. 20–25 is not included in our study since this section deals particularly with the Beloved Disciple.[19] Hence, this writer focuses only on vv. 15–19 which speak about the meeting between Jesus and Peter.

Although the preceding passage (vv. 1–14) has a different theme, it is important for our study because it provides us with the setting to understand vv. 15-19. The first section furnishes us with the details of time, location and characters with which we can contextualize the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Verses 1–4 give us the information that Peter was with six other disciples at dawn on the Sea of Tiberias. In other words, the first part of John 21 serves as a background to our interpretation of vv. 15–19.

Let us take a look at the text of John 21:15–19:

> When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" And he answered, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate

[19]O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, 860.

the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me." (NRSV)

Understanding John 21:15–19

Simon Peter in John 1–20

To better understand the encounter of Jesus and Peter in vv. 15–19, let us look back on how Peter is portrayed in John 1–20.

In the Fourth Gospel, Peter first appears in the story of his call. He came to Jesus through the witness of his brother, Andrew (1:41). With this story, Peter is placed among the disciples. To this extent he is a typical disciple.[20]

Yet, Peter is more than simply one among others. In 6:67–68, his representative role is highlighted. At the end of the bread of life discourse, when many people defected after he spoke about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, Jesus questioned the twelve: "Do you also wish to go away?" (John 6:67); Peter spoke on behalf of the group: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68).

Like any other disciple, Peter also had his share of weakness. There were times when he displayed impulsiveness and lack of understanding. For example, at the last supper, Jesus took a basin of water, girded himself with a towel, and began to wash the disciples' feet in an act of servitude, showing them how they should act toward one another, not as masters but as slaves (13:1–11). When it was his turn, Peter said to Jesus: "You shall never wash my feet" (13:8). Peter meant well, but it was a rash comment. If Jesus was the Master, he could do as he wanted and what he wanted was to take on the role of a servant.[21] Jesus quickly put him in his place: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me"

[20]Raymond F. Collins, *These Things Have Been Written* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 39.

[21]Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*, 18.

(John 138). He then made an abrupt about-face: "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" (John 13:9).

We also consider the scene of the arrest of Jesus (18:1–11). When Jesus was to be led away, Peter struck the high priest's slave with his sword and he was rebuked by Jesus: "Put your sword back into its sheath" (18:10–11).

The human frailty of the apostle was most evident in his denial of Jesus. At the outset of the passion narrative, Peter unabashedly denied Jesus thrice (cf. 18:15–18; 25–27). Not only did he disown Jesus, the apostle also denied being his disciple. The close relationship that Peter had with Jesus was dramatically destroyed by the disciple's threefold denial and the subsequent events of the crucifixion of Jesus.[22]

In the post-resurrection account, the Evangelist tells us that Mary Magdalene, on the third day, went to visit the tomb of Jesus and found it empty. Mary ran and reported this to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple. Mary told them: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (20:2). The two disciples rushed to the tomb. The beloved disciple outran Peter and arrived first to look inside, but it was Peter who actually entered the tomb first and "saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself" (20:6–7). The text does not say that Peter came to believe in the resurrection on the basis of the discovery. It was only the beloved disciple who "saw and believed" (20:8).

Evidently, the first twenty chapters of the Fourth Gospel give an ambivalent portrayal of the chief apostle. Peter was a willing disciple who decided to follow Jesus. He emerged as a leader representing the other disciples. Yet, he was a person who was at times impulsive and indecisive. He displayed stubbornness, unbelief and defiance. Peter clearly manifested such a character by denying Jesus. Indeed, the apostle drifted away and became estranged from the Lord.

[22]Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 555.

Simon Peter in John 21:15–19

William Thomas Kessler holds that the figure of Peter is very prominent in John 21.[23] But one can understand what transpires in this chapter if he/she takes into consideration the portrayal of Peter's character in John 1–20. In John 21, Jesus shares a meal with Peter to symbolize their reconciliation. Then Simon Peter confesses and declares his love for the Lord three times. Indeed, one cannot appreciate this important event in the apostle's life without going back to John 1–20. In fact, with John 1–20 as a background, one can describe this experience as Peter's rehabilitation,[24] his restoration and reinstatement into service,[25] his re-commissioning,[26] reaffirmation of his leadership position,[27] establishment of a new relationship,[28] or transformation of his role.[29] True enough, the denial must be overcome, the bond must be restored, the estrangement must be repaired, the trust must be brought back, and the call and commission renewed.

It is in this perspective that one has to understand the dialogue of Jesus and Simon Peter in vv. 15–19. As Peter came face to face with the Risen Jesus, he was given a new opportunity, a new beginning, a new life. What happened earlier was now superseded by the loving encounter between the disciple and his master. It is no wonder then that biblical scholars contend that the threefold confession

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[23]William Thomas Kessler, *Peter as the First Witness of the Risen Lord* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Gregoriana Universita, 1998), 30.

[24]Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, 1110; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 404; Brodie, *The Gospel According to John*, 590.

[25]Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 675; Kostenberger, *John*, 596.

[26]F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 405.

[27]Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 94.

[28]Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 555; O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, 860.

[29]Michael H. Crosby, *Do You Love Me?* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 197.

of Peter corresponds to his threefold denial of Jesus.[30] Right after the declaration, Peter is commissioned by Jesus. "The Risen Jesus restores Peter's status in the Johannine church with this solemn commissioning."[31] With this encounter, indeed, Peter enters into a new relationship and receives a new status.

Commissioning (John 21:15–17). Let us go to the text itself (vv. 15–17) and see what this new life of Peter entails. We begin by looking at the diagram of the dialogue of Jesus and Peter:

Question	Response	Task
"Simon son of John, do you love (ἀγαπᾷς) me more than these?" (v. 15a)	"Yes, Lord; you know (οἶδας) that I love (φιλῶ) you." (v. 15b)	"Feed (βόσκε) my lambs (ἀρνία)." (v. 15c)
"Simon son of John, do you love (ἀγαπᾷς) me?" (v. 16a)	"Yes, Lord; you know (οἶδας) that I love (φιλῶ) you." (v. 16b)	"Tend (ποίμαινε) my sheep (πρόβατά)." (v. 16c)
"Simon son of John, do you love (φιλεῖς) me?" (v. 17a)	"Lord, you know (οἶδας) everything; you know (γινώσκεις) that I love (φιλῶ) you." (v. 17b)	"Feed (βόσκε) my sheep (πρόβατά)." (v. 17c)

As one examines the words of the pericope, he/she notices that the vocabularies employed belong to the semantic camps of "love," "knowing" and "shepherding." One finds two verbs for love (ἀγαπᾶν and φιλεῖν), two verbs for knowing (οἶδα and γινώσκειν), two verbs

[30]With exceptions of a few, most scholars claim that the three questions match the triple denial of Jesus by Peter. Cf. Raymond Collins, *John and His Witness* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 75; Alan R. Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 248; Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John,* 485; Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 555; O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, 860; Haenchen, *John 2*, 226; Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, 1111.

[31]Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Resurrection Stories* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 91.

used for the shepherd's care for his sheep (βόσκειν and ποιμαίνειν) and two nouns for the sheep, (ἀρνίον and πρόβατον). With the author's penchant for synonyms, the presence of the different words does not lead one to analyze them with different meanings and implications. The author used them interchangeably here. So, the difference between "lambs" and "sheep", between "tending" and "feeding" does not appear significant. The same holds true for the two verbs ἀγαπᾶν and φιλεῖν. Some biblical interpreters propose distinct meanings for these verbs, i.e., ἀγαπᾶν for divine love and φιλεῖν for human love. They argue that Jesus is asking Peter for a more noble form of love (ἀγαπᾶν), but Peter responds only with the lower form of love (φιλεῖν). Most likely, however, the Evangelist is using the terms for love interchangeably in this context. But Jesus' play on words and repetitive questioning may simply be a ploy to get Peter to react and reaffirm his love for Jesus. As a result, the apostle grieves that Jesus seemed not to take him at his word.[32] Explaining the matter further, Andreas Kostenberger opines:

> The fact is that the word ἀγαπάω, said to convey the notion of divine love, is used with reference to human love—and evil humans at that—in texts as 3:19 and 12:43, and that φιλέω, said to connote human love, is used for God the Father in 5:20 (where he is said to love the Son) and 16:27 (where he is said to love the disciples).[33]

Therefore, the two words used for "love" in this context do not suggest different meanings.

Love as a Prerequisite for Commissioning. Andreas Kostenberger stresses, "It surely is significant that the one thing about which Jesus questions Peter prior to commissioning him for service is love, specifically supreme love for Jesus himself."[34] Before feeding the sheep and following Jesus once again, Peter has to ground his love. Jesus can only have the assurance that Peter will love those

[32]Smith, Jr., *John*, 396.

[33]Kostenberger, *John*, 596.

[34]Kostenberger, *John*, 596.

entrusted to his care if he has the utmost love for his Master. Thus, Jesus' commission to Peter in this story can be accomplished because of his love of Jesus.[35] The concretization of Jesus' love in loving those who are entrusted to Peter reminds us of what the Lord uttered in 14:15–26:

> If you love me, you will keep my commandments …. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them …. Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. (NRSV)

Because Peter loves the sheep as Jesus loves them, he is also fulfilling another commandment of the Lord: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34–35).

In v. 15, Jesus formulates his first question in this way: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" What does the phrase "more than these" mean? The Greek word for "these" is τούτων which can be either masculine or neuter. In its context, "these" can refer to the disciples or the fishing equipment. Actually, the question can be possibly interpreted in three ways: 1) Does Peter love Jesus more than he loves the disciples? 2) Does Peter love Jesus more than he loves his fishing gear? 3) Does Peter love Jesus more than his fellow disciples do?[36] On one level, "all three are true: Peter must love Jesus more than he loves other people or his natural profession, and he is called to love Jesus more than these other men do and to be willing to render extraordinary sacrifice on behalf of his master."[37] Jesus is not

[35]O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, 864.

[36]Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 675–676.

[37]Kostenberger, *John*, 597.

comparing Peter's love with the love of the other disciples; he simply wants to examine Peter's love because the apostle himself asserted, in the first place, that his love and loyalty exceeded those of the other disciples (Cf. 13:37): during the last supper, when Jesus revealed to the disciples that one of them would betray him, Peter insisted "I will lay down my life for you!" while the others kept quiet. But physical courage failed him that night, because Peter, whose spirit was willing but whose flesh was weak, would later disown the Lord. Thus, accomplishing whatever task Peter is entrusted to do would depend not only on Jesus' forgiveness, but also on Peter's reaffirmation of his love for Jesus.

Verses 15–17 then present Peter to be the embodiment of what is true of all Jesus' disciples and the model of what it means to live out one's love for Jesus. Raymond Brown aptly expounds this further in his statement: "Jesus' question would be meant to establish that Peter has the devoted love that is of the essence of discipleship."[38] Peter's threefold response to the threefold question of Jesus establishes his readiness to embrace the mission Jesus is entrusting to him. Peter can now shepherd his Master's flock now that Jesus has been assured of the apostle's love.

The Commissioning: To be a Shepherd. The love that Peter has reaffirmed must be concretely manifested in the service that he is to carry out in his life. Thus, Peter is now commissioned to "shepherd" (ποιμαίνειν) and "feed" (βόσκειν) the "lambs" (τὰ ἀρνία) and "sheep" (τὰ πρόβατά) of Jesus. Paul S. Minear rightly describes this reality when he states: "Love for Jesus must be seen to be inseparable from the care for his flock."[39] It is only in this way that Peter could truly prove his love for Jesus.

One notices that the threefold queries and answers about love are accompanied by a thrice-repeated command of Jesus to feed and tend the sheep. Accordingly, Jesus' threefold repetition of his question may reflect the custom of the Ancient Near East of reiterating a

[38]Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, 1111.

[39]Minear, "The Original Functions of John 21," 94.

matter three times before witnesses in order to convey a solemn obligation, especially with regard to contracts conferring rights or legal dispositions.[40] Thus, the threefold repetition of Jesus' command lends a special authoritativeness and emphasis to Peter's role as a shepherd.[41] It highlights the solemnity of Peter's commissioning to be a shepherd of Jesus' flock.

It is very clear now that after the renewal and restoration of Peter, Jesus lets him assume a vital and important role in the community. Michael H. Crosby explains such an experience of Peter in this way:

> Now, in the embrace of love, not only was he restored, but his very status was transformed. In the midst of the other disciples, Peter was empowered with a new role: he was to feed the community through the exercise of a pastoral authority that would not divide the flock but ensure its unity. Where once his role had been that of someone who makes promises but can't deliver, now his promise of love, grounded in Jesus' transforming words, would enable him to accept responsibility for the flock, even to the point of manifesting his love by laying down his life.[42]

The role of shepherding is now assumed by Peter. Everything that characterizes Jesus, the Good Shepherd, Peter must now strive to embody.[43] Thus, the traits of the good shepherd which Jesus points out in John 10:1–18 must be lived and manifested by Peter: he enters by the door (10:2); he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out (10:3); he is with them that they may have life, and have it abundantly (10:10); he is ready to protect them when the wolf comes (10:12); he is ready to lay down his life for them (10:11, 15, 17). Here, in the description of the shepherd, there is no emphasis on the shepherd's superior position but rather on his familiarity with the sheep and his total dedication to

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[40]Kostenberger, *John*, 597.

[41]Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, 1112.

[42]Crosby, *Do You Love Me?*, 197.

[43]Hasitschka, "The Significance of the Resurrection Appearance in John 21," 324.

the flock even to the point of death.[44] Therefore, the commissioning of Peter as a shepherd consists in his leadership, service and in laying down his life. The apostle's life has to be shaped according to the life of his Master. The authority he now holds does not derive from his "office," but from the fullness of his love for Jesus and Jesus' love for him.[45] Evidently, this is the meaning of the love expressed by Peter. It is a love that is concretized in caring for Jesus' sheep even to the extent of sacrificing his own life. Peter, who once disowned and denied the Lord, is now transformed and renewed to continue the task of the Lord and to follow Him in His path.

Following the Lord (John 21:18–19). Verses 18–19 are intrinsically connected with the passage in which Peter declares his love for the Lord (vv. 15–17). What is described here is a logical consequence of the life of shepherding that has been entrusted to Peter. Raymond Brown points out that a connection can be made between the theme of Peter's restoration after three denials and that of his following Jesus to death. Peter's martyrdom testifies to the sincerity of his threefold profession of love for Jesus, for "No man can have greater love than this: to lay down his life for those he loves" (15:13).[46]

V. 18, "Very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go," describes what Peter has gone through in his life as a disciple. Francis J. Moloney beautifully illustrates Peter's journey reflected in this episode:

> Introduced by the Johannine double "amen," his words remind Peter of a time in the past, the time during the ministry of Jesus when Peter showed a great deal of good will but ultimately went on his own way into denial. That was the time when Peter was young, when he girded himself and went where he would (v. 18a). Those days are over.

[44]Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, 1115.

[45]O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, 862.

[46]Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, 1117.

> He has now overcome the scandal of his rejection of Jesus and has unconditionally committed himself to the way of the Good Shepherd (vv. 15–17). The time will come, "when you are old," when Peter will lay down his life for the sheep of Jesus that have been entrusted to his pastoral care. Another will gird him and carry him where he would not prefer to go.[47]

That is the whole process of transformation in the life of Peter—a movement from denial to confession, from separation to reconciliation, from rejection to acceptance. Jesus is finally assured that Peter could now readily offer his life for his friend.

According to many Biblical scholars the phrase "you will stretch out your hands" foreshadows Peter's crucifixion.[48] This is how this expression was understood in the ancient time. Following the example of the Good Shepherd, Peter will embrace martyrdom by crucifixion to confirm his love and his claim of readiness to lay down his life for Jesus' flock. Obviously, this is the same kind of death that Jesus Himself experienced.

The parenthetical explanation in v. 19 ("He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God") is a further manifestation of what awaits Peter. The death of the apostle will be for the glory of God. "Peter follows Christ not only in the kind of death he suffers (i.e. crucifixion) but also in [his] bringing glory to God."[49] As a shepherd of Jesus' flock, his self-sacrificing love, which will culminate in his death, will also lead to the glorification of God.

After the Lord has laid down what it takes to be a shepherd, He now asks Peter to follow Him: "After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'" (v. 19b). This "following" indicates an undeviating discipleship

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[47]Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 556.

[48]Bultmann, *The Gospel of John Commentary*, 713; Haenchen, *John 2*, 226–227; Kostenberger, *John*, 598; Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 556.

[49]Kostenberger, *John*, 599. It is also held that at the time this episode was written, Peter had already died a martyr's death during the persecution under Nero (in the 60's). Cf. Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 249.

for the rest of his days.[50] It is an invitation to truly live as a model of love and discipleship. Thus, Jesus' call to Peter to follow him takes on a new and deeper meaning. For Peter, this "following" means a second call, another opportunity to show his worth as a disciple of Jesus. In his first call, it was through his brother Andrew that Peter became a disciple of Jesus (1:42). Now, in this second call, it is Jesus who directly calls him to follow him. Peter is personally asked by the Lord to go through the program of discipleship. The apostle has come now to understand that the rest of his life must be lived in the shadow of the cross, just as Jesus' life was.[51] As he is called once again, the apostle strives to imitate Jesus as a shepherd in his self-sacrificing love.

Such was the journey of Peter as a disciple in the Gospel of John. If we look closely at the story of Peter, there is a chiastic structure that can be drawn:

John 1-20	*A*	1:41	First call: Pater's call was through his brother, Andrew.
	B	14:5–9; 18:10–11	Peter was indecisive, impulsive, wavering, vacillating.
	C	18:15–18; 25–27	Threefold denial of Peter
John 21	*C'*	21:15–17	Threefold declaration of Peter's love for Jesus.
	B'	21:18	Peter is determined, firm to follow Jesus even unto laying down his life.
	A'	21:19	Second call: Jesus personally calls Peter.

One can clearly see that what has been wanting in John 1–20 is completed in John 21. Indeed, as a result of Peter's encounter with the Risen Lord, he emerges as a new Peter, the rock which becomes the pillar of our Church.

[50]Beasley-Murray, *John*, 409.

[51]Kostenberger, *John*, 599.

Summary

We began this article with the presupposition that Peter is the model of a renewed man, an icon of transformation. In spite of his shaky character and wavering commitment, the apostle has shown himself to be a person who could rise from his human frailty to become a devoted and committed disciple. We proposed that John 21:15–19 supports our claim. To warrant our discussion of the chosen text, however, we tried to provide evidence that John 21 is essentially part of the Fourth Gospel. We endeavored to refute those who claim that John 21 is an addition to the Gospel of John. After discussing Chapter 21 as an integral part of the Gospel that is in fundamental theological continuity with chapters 1–20, we proceeded to take a closer look at the chosen text (John 21:15–19).

To unravel the meaning of the dialogue between Jesus and Peter in this passage, it was imperative to have a glimpse of how Peter was presented in John 1–20. We can only appreciate the restoration and renewal of Peter in John 21 when we see how he was characterized in John 1–20. In Chapter 1, the story of Peter's call was presented. He became a disciple of Jesus through the instrumentality of his brother, Andrew. In Chapter 6, he became a representative figure of the disciples. In Chapter 13 (Washing of the Feet) and Chapter 18 (Arrest of Jesus), the rashness and vacillation of the apostle became evident. Peter reached the lowest ebb of his life as a disciple when he openly denied Jesus thrice (Chapter 18). In Chapter 20, when Mary Magdalene told them about the empty tomb, it was only the beloved disciple and not Peter who believed.

It is with this background that John 21 must be understood. What unfolds in this chapter is the reconciliation, restoration, renewal and re-commissioning of Peter. Evidently, the center of the chapter is in vv. 15–19. In the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, the following significant elements emerge: a) Peter makes his threefold confession to match his threefold denial; b) Jesus wants to be assured of Peter's love before he is entrusted with a mission; love, indeed, is a prerequisite for commissioning; c) Peter's love is concretized when he embraces his

task to be a shepherd of Jesus' flock; Peter assumes Jesus' role even to the point of laying down his life; d) Peter understands that Jesus is calling him once again to truly live his discipleship, to follow Jesus by embracing his own cross and offering his own life.

Conclusion: Peter and Discipleship

Peter is a model whom every believer can identify with. The apostle is an ideal follower worth emulating not because he is a perfect disciple, but because he exemplifies what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus. Peter has demonstrated how to be patient with oneself, how to learn from his mistakes.

Peter's journey to true discipleship has not been easy. There has been ups and downs, shadows and lights, failures and successes, and denials and confessions. There are times when his weakness overtakes him, causing Peter to falter in following our Lord. Yet in times of failure, he does not totally abandon his call. Rather, he allows himself to be touched by the grace of the Lord Jesus. That is why when the opportunity comes for him to renew, restore and transform himself, the apostle completely surrenders himself to Jesus. Because he has denied Jesus three times, he also confesses and declares his love three times.

Like Peter, we, Christians, are called to follow Jesus in our life. "Being a follower is every disciple's affair, not just Peter's."[52] We are invited to put on the person of Christ. This is what discipleship entails—putting on Christ so that we may share his vision and see the world as he does, so that we may partake of his mission and follow his way of life.

The text of John 21:15-19, which we have just looked into, provides us with a glimpse of the itinerary which Peter has taken in the way of discipleship. Actually, Peter's journey typifies the story of every disciple. In John 21, we see the role of Peter as representative of the

[52]Gerard Sloyan, *John,* Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 231.

process which every believing disciple must pass through if he/she is to be faithful to Jesus' words: "Follow me."[53]

This experience of Peter has implications in our life as followers of Jesus and as a community of disciples. First, like Peter, we must be willing to learn from our mistakes. Indeed, we are learners along the way towards full conversion. We know that our lives as disciples of Jesus are not perfect. There will be times when we will fail and fall. Perhaps we may also deny and betray our Lord. Yet, like Peter, we must also be open to the Lord's offer of renewal. As Michael Crosby aptly puts it: "If we are embarrassed because we have denied Jesus, we can embrace him again and be empowered, as was Peter, with strength and courage to feed the flock ourselves."[54]

Secondly, as followers of Jesus, we must strive each day to live a true discipleship. We must be forever on the road towards perfection. Our call then demands greater understanding and constant support for one another. It requires accompanying one another on the road, being companions toward discipleship. It also means tolerance and patience toward those who commit mistakes in the community. Peter has failed dismally in his following of Jesus. But when he is called a second time, he repents and is rehabilitated and restored. The same chance we must give to our errant brothers and sisters in our community: we must give them the opportunity to respond to a second call, or even a third, fourth, or fifth call.

Thirdly, when Peter declares his love for Jesus, he is given the task to shepherd Jesus' flock. He takes care of the sheep to the point of laying down his life for them. His call to follow the Lord consists in the service he offers to others. The same commission is also given to the leaders of the community. They, too, are given the task of shepherding.

Our shepherd's role may not be as great as that of Peter, but we can be shepherds in our own way. We feed the lambs and tend the sheep

[53]Crosby, *Do You Love Me?*, 197.

[54]Crosby, *Do You Love Me?*, 197.

of Jesus every time we give our humble service to others. Although we may not have the opportunity to lay down our life for others (the gift of martyrdom), we are nevertheless invited to concretize our love by consecrating our lives in the service of others. Truly, we can show our love for Jesus by caring for, and helping others in our own small ways. It is in our willingness to offer our acts of love that we can be faithful to the injunction of Christ: "Follow me."

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