Readers aware of the recent proliferation of character and characterization studies in the New Testament, especially among Johannine studies, will recognize Cornelis Bennema as a frequent writer on the topic. In addition to his earlier monograph,\(^1\) Bennema has written journal articles and contributed essays in two recent collections devoted to the cast of John’s Gospel.\(^2\) In each of his writings, one encounters Bennema’s attention to methodological parameters, scholarly dialogue, and characteristic charts, all of which demonstrate his concern for a consistent and “nonreductive” approach to the interpretation of characters of New Testament narratives. This latest addition to Bennema’s corpus is no exception. Noting the increased attention to characters in recent years, he laments that there is “as yet, no comprehensive theory of character in either literary theory or biblical criticism” (4). Instead, he finds scholars offering a variety of models too focused on singular aspects of character (e.g., misunderstanding, ambiguity, rhetorical techniques) or that employ internally inconsistent theories of character at their core. For Bennema, this amounts to a lot of attention to characters without much

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conversation on how to evaluate and understand these characters. “Instead of adding to this expanding and diverging corpus,” he explains, “this study attempts to regulate and consolidate extant data by proposing a paradigm for character reconstruction in New Testament narrative” (27).

Bennema’s ambitious project proceeds in five chapters. The first chapter outlines the purpose of the study and its need in light of the current state of research. Bennema limits the scope of his specific comments to three New Testament narratives—the Gospels of Mark and John and the book of Acts—which he considers a “fair representation of the narrative material in the New Testament” (5). After summarizing past research, Bennema describes a “dominant pattern/paradigm” running beneath the surface of existing studies that reflects (1) a preference (assumed or articulated) for an “Aristotelian” understanding of ancient, Greco-Roman characters as “flat/types,” (2) an emphasis on the stark contrast between ancient understandings of character and modern constructions of highly individualized, psychologized characters, and (3) the regular use of modern literary theories to analyze New Testament characters. “There is an inherent inconsistency here,” he writes; “if ancient characters are unlike modern characters, we should not use modern methods; for if we apply modern methods to ancient narratives, most characters will appear flat since they do not meet the criteria for roundness” (25). Unsurprisingly, then, this inconsistent paradigm has led to a wide array of opinions on what these “flat—opaque, unchanging, and uncomplicated” characters represent and, moreover, has resulted in “no agreed criteria for evaluation” (27).

Chapters 2 and 3 deconstruct this dominant paradigm and (re)construct a “comprehensive theory” meant to take its place. Although Bennema offers four theses in chapter 2, they all hinge on his understanding of ancient Hebrew, Greco-Roman, and modern theories of character. He argues that, while scholars have traditionally separated these three groupings, their differences are more in “emphases than in kind” (52, emphasis original). The heart of this argument emerges from Bennema’s engagement with various Hebrew Bible scholars and modern literary critics, as well as a number of classicists, who suggest degrees of character development and change among adult characters in Greco-Roman literatures from the classical era through the Hellenistic and Roman ages. From his study, Bennema concludes that “Aristotelian” dominance has been overstated and that Greco-Roman literatures are more congruent with (although not identical to) the dynamism of ancient Hebrew and modern characters. Such comparability sanctions Bennema’s blending of ancient categories (topoi) alongside his selective use of modern literary theories to appreciate the complexity of New Testament characters and evaluate their contemporary significance.
The theory Bennema proposes consists of three broad categories, each of which then divides into various components. The three broad categories are character in text and context, character analysis and classification, and character evaluation and significance. Guiding the understanding of the first category are the “nonfictional” nature of New Testament narratives and the awareness of the reader and the reader’s sources in reconstructing characters. Under the second, Bennema employs three continua to analyze characters: complexity (Are there single or multiple traits?), development (Are traits static or developing over time?), and “penetration into the inner life” (How much is revealed of a character’s thoughts?) (73–82). Bennema then proposes an “aggregate continuum of degree of characterization” to classify characters. This continuum is formed via a chart ranging from the uncomplex, static, and opaque “agent” to the very complex, highly developed, and transparent “individual” (85–86), which forms the basis for a linear scale outlining the overall level of complexity of individual characters in a narrative (87). The detail devoted to such classifications leads to the “evaluation” of characters within and across the New Testament (90). Since persuasive intentions are palpable in every New Testament narrative, Bennema concludes that evaluation of adequate or inadequate responses is necessary (92–97). This evaluation, while not the totality of the character in a narrative, nevertheless forms the foundation for the character’s “representational value” for modern-day readers who, like their ancient counterparts, are either encouraged to imitate virtue (faith) or avoid vice (disbelief) (104–6).

With the theory now in place, Bennema walks his reader through his analysis of a selection of characters in Mark, John, and Acts in chapter 4, before offering an assessment of his method and avenues for further research in chapter 5. Bennema is intentional in his selection of four characters from each narrative who range in complexities and development and who appear in multiple narratives. With such a cast of characters in a relatively concise volume, his analysis of each is understandably brief, culminating in his aggregate chart and concluding comment on each character’s representational value for modern-day Christians. Bennema’s interest in the final representational value of these New Testament characters reflects his continued interest in the ethical dimensions of New Testament narratives, including in the Gospel of John, which is itself often characterized as a gospel without ethics (188–89).

The strengths of Bennema’s work lie primarily in the first three chapters. He brings together a wealth of research on character studies in biblical and classical contexts and calls attention to the variety and varying degrees of characterization in the New Testament, cautioning scholars against the tendency to oversimplify and reduce. His goals of clarity, precision, and parameters for study are helpful in an area so often left devoid of methodological moorings—especially concerning the relationship between ancient and modern theories of character.
Still, Bennema’s contributions, deconstruction, and questions must also be directed at his own work. Readers familiar with Greco-Roman literatures will notice his continued reliance on the analyses of other scholars rather than much of his own interaction. No doubt the parameters of his own project have limited this engagement, but closer readings would add more weight to his interpretation of Greco-Roman theories in particular, providing clarity to concepts of “consistency,” “development,” and even the topoi found in his charts. Indeed, while the addition of ancient topoi is helpful in his charts, Bennema does not discuss the significance of these topoi in either his theoretical discussion or character analyses. Moreover, the charts themselves are at times completed inconsistently, leading to questions concerning the criteria for their completion. All of these issues could be addressed with additional development of his theory; however, a larger question remains: Do interpreters need “a comprehensive theory of character,” or is there room for multiple, well-articulated, theories that provide various perspectives on characters? Bennema repeatedly mentions the role of the reader in reconstructing the characters of each narrative but then provides charts that seemingly confine the reader’s possibilities and render static the topoi listed. Are we to believe that Bennema will read each character the same way every time he encounters that character? Are we to believe other readers will do likewise? Moreover, what is lost in such a move—especially considering Bennema’s faith-based stance? Where is the dynamism for these characters to speak into the ever-changing lives of their audiences? Indeed, while Bennema’s admonishment for clarity and precision is necessary, helpful, and warranted, his own theory results in readings that vary little from the “flat—opaque, unchanging” renderings that prompted his critique.

In the end, Bennema’s work is valuable for raising crucial questions and demanding greater clarity from scholars. He moves the conversation forward with his quest for methodological moorings in the ever-expanding area of character studies. His work is also valuable, however, for what it does not do. By offering an ambitious project, Bennema alerts scholars to the wealth of perspectives and cultural information, both ancient and contemporary, that we have yet to plumb. In this way, perhaps, we can continue shaping ever more “comprehensive” studies by means of multiple perspectives, all of which highlight the compelling nature of New Testament characters and their ability to perplex, confound, and delight audiences of all persuasions.