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## **Twofold Shepherding: An Argumentative Analysis of 1 Peter 5:1-11**

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### **Abstract:**

Biblical interpretation is an important theological task in the life of the church. After the golden era of the historical-critical approach, some approaches focused on the text in its final (literary) form. One of them is Argumentation Analysis, developed by Thomas R. Schreiner with a case study on Paul's letters. This approach traces the logical relationship between propositions in the text, which is then very effective for interpreting letters in the New Testament that are argumentative in nature. This time, the authors apply the approach to 1 Peter 5:1-11, which has never been applied before. The aim is to reveal Peter's argumentation structure and rhetorical strategy in delivering his pastoral advice. The result shows a two-layered pastoral exhortation that forms two major propositions that are related *in series*. Both are advice to the church leaders (elders) and the congregation (young people). This approach is also expected to enrich practical hermeneutical understanding for the contemporary church as it focuses on the text in its final form.

### **Keywords:**

Argumentation  
Analysis; Church  
Leadership; Pastoral,  
Propositions; Rhetoric.

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## INTRODUCTION

Understanding the Bible is a central pillar in the life and sustainability of the church.<sup>1</sup> The Bible is not just an ancient text but also the word of God, which reveals His will and purpose for humanity.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, biblical interpretation is an essential theological responsibility for the church, both in the context of internal congregational development and in responding to the challenges of the times. Biblical interpretation is the bridge between the earliest documents of the faith tradition and the life and thought of the church today.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout history, approaches to biblical interpretation have undergone complex methodological developments.<sup>4</sup> One approach that stood out from the 19th to the mid-20th century was the historical-critical method.<sup>5</sup> This approach emphasizes analysis of the historical setting, textual sources, redaction, and literary forms of the Bible. Joel B. Green presents a map of biblical interpretation approaches based on the position of the meaning of the text, viz: "behind the text; within the text; in front of the text; and between two or three of the previous approaches."<sup>6</sup> Based on this map, the historical-critical approach falls into the category of meaning being "behind the text."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Graham, *Beritakan Injil* (Bandung: Lembaga Literatur Baptis, 1992), 144.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Guthrie, *TAFSIRAN ALKITAB MASA KINI 3: MATIUS - WAHYU (VOLUME 3, EDISI INDONESIA)* (Jakarta: YKBK/OMF, 1999), 710. The term *δικαιοσύνη* is understood to mean that God is absolutely true, a consistent God who always acts according to His nature. He gives His Word to all humanity so that they can hear, learn, memorize, and implement it in their daily lives.

<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Grant dan David Tracy, *Sejarah Singkat Penafsiran Alkitab* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1993), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 225.

<sup>5</sup> Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism, Second Edition* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1981), 87. The historical-critical method is often used as an umbrella term for all approaches that emphasize the historical aspects of the biblical text (textual criticism, source criticism, form criticism, and editorial criticism). Behind this term lies the nineteenth-century principle that reality is uniform and universal, that it is accessible to the human mind and can be investigated, that historical and natural events can be compared analogically. The present human experience can be an objective criterion for judging whether or not something in the past really happened.

<sup>6</sup> Joel B. Green, "Hermeneutical Approaches to the New Testament Tradition," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D.G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 972–999.

<sup>7</sup> Pelita Hati Surbakti, *Yang Terutama Dalam Amanat Agung* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2017), 10.

In the history of interpretation, criticism of the historical-critical approach has also led to the emergence of more literary and rhetorical approaches to interpretation, or what Green refers to as meaning being "within the text."<sup>8</sup> One of them is Argument Analysis (*argument tracing*), developed by Thomas R. Schreiner.<sup>9</sup> In his book *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*,<sup>10</sup> Schreiner shows this approach by tracing the logical relationships between propositions in the text, which is very suitable for interpreting argumentative New Testament letters, especially Paul's letters.<sup>11</sup> Through this analysis, each unit of thought can be traced for its contribution to the primary purpose of the author of the text as a whole. Thus, this approach requires the interpreter to focus more on the content and structure of the arguments contained in the text itself without relying too much on reconstructing the historical process of text formation. This approach enables a more thorough examination of the text as a comprehensive and definitive work of theological literature.

As mentioned above, the analytical model developed by Schreiner is still about interpreting Paul's letters. The question is whether this analysis model can be used to interpret other letters, such as Peter's. If we trace the view of John H. Elliott, an interpreter who developed *Social-Scientific Criticism*, the use of argumentation analysis for the letter of 1 Peter is indeed possible.<sup>12</sup> In his book *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Elliott states, "Although the letter of 1 Peter does not explicitly mention Paul, it nevertheless exhibits an epistolary form that suggests the possibility that both authors shared similar sources or early Christian traditions."<sup>13</sup> In the book,

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<sup>8</sup> Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation Volume 3: Renaissance, Reformation, Humanism* (Houston Mill Road, Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 87-94.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 97-126.

<sup>10</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 97-98.

<sup>11</sup> Paul B. Fowler, *The Structure of Romans: The Argument of Paul's Letter, The Structure of Romans: The Argument of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 55.

<sup>12</sup> John H. Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 60.

<sup>13</sup> John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation, Introduction And Commentary* (New York:

Elliot does not apply the argumentation analysis popularized by Schreiner above. However, Peter's letter has the same rhetorical tradition as Paul's letter. After all, both Peter and Paul were sucked into Hellenistic culture, which made them both heavily influenced by Greek rhetoric.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, using an argumentation analysis approach to interpret the epistle of 1 Peter becomes very possible, especially in tracing the author's logical flow and rhetorical strategy in delivering his pastoral advice to the congregation in the midst of a severe crisis or even suffering.<sup>15</sup> However, so far, interpretation using argumentation analysis has not been applied to 1 Peter 5:1-11. Some commentaries that the author has surveyed, such as those by John Stott,<sup>16</sup> Reinhard Feldmeier,<sup>17</sup> and Norman Hillyer<sup>18</sup> show that argumentation analysis, as mentioned by Schreiner, has not been used. In some of the previous commentaries, the interpretive approach to 1 Peter 5:1-11 generally focuses on the socio-historical context,<sup>19</sup> grammatical history,<sup>20</sup> and a combination of both.<sup>21</sup>

This lacuna is the basis for the need for research with an Argumentation

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Doubleday, 2000), 37-40.

<sup>14</sup> Sola Gracia Willcory Melina Nuban and Pelita Hati Surbakti, "Upaya Menghadapi Segregasi Sosial Dan Bidat: Analisis Sosial-Ilmiah Kolose 2:16-23," *Mitra Sriwijaya: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen* 5, no. 2 (2024): 242-243.

<sup>15</sup> To see the reality of the great suffering faced by the church, see: Jenrianto Sagala and Pelita Hati Surbakti, "Penderitaan, Hidup Suci, Pengharapan: Tiga Tema Utama Dalam Surat 1 Petrus," *The New Perspective in Theology and Religious Studies* 4, no. 2 (2023): 103-118.

<sup>16</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Peter* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 197-220.

<sup>17</sup> Reinhard Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), 230-252.

<sup>18</sup> Norman Hillyer, *1&2 Peter Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 138-149.

<sup>19</sup> Fika Janse van Rensburg, "Constructing the Economic-Historic Context of 1 Peter: Exploring a Methodology," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 67, no. 1 (2011): 1-11. The article discusses how to construct the economic-historical context of the recipients of the letter of 1 Peter to inform an economic interpretation of the book and the rest of the New Testament.

<sup>20</sup> Ferdianus Parirak, "Kajian Eksegesis Terhadap Tugas Penatua Dalam Menggembalakan Jemaat Masa Kini Berdasarkan 1 Petrus 5:1-4" (Institut Agama Kristen Negeri (IAKN) Toraja, 2023), 1-10.

<sup>21</sup> DAVOU MWANVWANG DANTORO, "A SOCIO-HISTORICAL APPRAISAL OF THE MODE AND MOTIVATION OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP IN 1 PETER 5:1-11 IN ITS GRAECO-ROMAN CONTEXT FOR NORTHERN NIGERIA" (ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY, LIMURU, KENYA FACULTY OF THEOLOGY, 2021), 1-4.

Analysis approach to 1 Peter 5:1-11. This approach is expected to reveal the pattern of relationship between ethical appeals, theological foundations, and eschatological promises that coalesce in Peter's pastoral message. Thus, this study aims to examine how the argumentation structure in the text forms the basis of spiritual leadership and strengthens the faith of the congregation, especially young people in crises or even suffering. So, the argumentation diagram or scheme produced in this study is expected to contribute theoretically to the field of biblical hermeneutics, as well as provide practical benefits for church leaders in carrying out their role in nurturing and shepherding the church members. Specifically, it can be applied to the group of Bible Study (BS)<sup>22</sup> and even to the preparation of the creation of BS materials.

## METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method by taking literature or document studies as a data collection technique.<sup>23</sup> In interpreting 1 Peter 5:1-11, the authors use the hermeneutical theory of Argumentation Analysis popularized by Thomas R. Schreiner.<sup>24</sup> By using this method, we will be able to see and explain how each paragraph (or smaller unit) relates to the previous and subsequent paragraphs (or smaller units).<sup>25</sup>

The steps taken are to ensure that the text used is the most stable (final redaction) or the one judged to be the closest to the autograph.<sup>26</sup> This is because we will be looking at the use of *conjunctions*, while the original text and the translation may have differences in the use of conjunctions. After that, all the propositions in the text under study were traced. Then, each proposition is

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<sup>22</sup> In Indonesia called Penelaahan Alkitab (PA).

<sup>23</sup> Nuban and Surbakti, "Upaya Menghadapi Segregasi Sosial Dan Bidat: Analisis Sosial-Ilmiah Kolose 2:16-23," 3; John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (California: SAGE Publications, 2018), 303-304 [https://spada.uns.ac.id/pluginfile.php/510378/mod\\_resource/content/1/creswell.pdf](https://spada.uns.ac.id/pluginfile.php/510378/mod_resource/content/1/creswell.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 97-126.

<sup>25</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 97.

<sup>26</sup> See Pelita Hati Surbakti, "Kepedulian Sosial Yang 'Rasional Dan Mendidik' Di Masa Krisis: Belajar Dari Nasihat Tentang Sikap Kepada Para Janda," *DUNAMIS: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristiani* 8, no. 1 (2023): 403.

separated and organized by making codes based on its respective verse. After that, it is time to determine the relationship between one proposition and another.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the text will be read and interpreted in the form of a scheme or diagram of the argumentation relationship that has been produced.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Looking at the Use of Conjunctions**

In general, *conjunctions* are words or expressions that connect two clauses, sentences, or other elements in the text. Its function is crucial in building arguments and narratives,<sup>28</sup> because it will help organize the logical relationship between the ideas presented. In particular, Schreiner explains that the use of conjunctions can affect the way a text is interpreted. It is because conjunctions show the logical relationship between parts of a piece of writing.<sup>29</sup> For example, conjunctions such as "and," "but," "because," and so on, carry specific meanings that clarify the interrelationships between parts of the text. Therefore, in tracing and interpreting the text, attention to the use of conjunctions is crucial to understanding the author's intent and argumentative structure.<sup>30</sup>

### **Determining the Number of Propositions in the Text**

After identifying conjunctions, the next step is to divide the text into propositions. A proposition is a statement or assertion about something.<sup>31</sup> To fully understand and interpret an argument, the process must begin with an exploration of all the propositions contained in the text under study. Each proposition is then identified, separated, and organized systematically by coding them according to their respective verses. One of the common

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<sup>27</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 99.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas S Huffman, *The Handy Guide to New Testament Greek : Grammar, Syntax, and Diagramming* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 26.

<sup>29</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 99.

<sup>30</sup> Rainer Scheunemann, *Panduan Lengkap Penafsiran Alkitab Perjanjian Lama & Perjanjian Baru* (Yogyakarta: Andi, 2009), 12.

<sup>31</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 99.

characteristics of a proposition is the use of conjunctions that function as connectors between sentences or between parts of the text.<sup>32</sup> However, in certain cases, propositions are not connected by conjunctions.

A proposition is generally formed from a sentence consisting of a subject (S) and a predicate (P). However, in some cases, the subject and predicate are not always explicitly stated, but only implied. For example, in the Greek imperative verb *λύετε* (*luete*), which is often translated as "Let go!" A more grammatically correct translation would be "Let you all go!" In this case, "all of you" is the implied subject, while "let go" is the predicate.<sup>33</sup>

### **Determining Inter-propositional Relationships**

After determining the propositions, the next step is to determine the relationships between propositions. In general, these relations are classified into two main categories, namely coordinative relations and subordinative relations. Coordinative relations occur when two clauses or propositions stand independently, without being structurally dependent on each other, yet each still contributes to the overall meaning of the argumentation.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, the subordinative relationship refers to a situation where one clause or proposition depends on the other to form a complete meaning. It is important to note that inter-propositional relations are not only limited to the sentence level but can also arise between paragraphs, verses, and even broader sections within a passage.

As demonstrated in Paul's letters, argumentative relations can be found at various levels. They can be between sentences within a verse, between verses, or between passages, depending on the context and the logical structure that the writer wants to build.<sup>35</sup> Determining these inter-propositional

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<sup>32</sup> Gorys Keraf, *Argumentasi Dan Narasi* (Jakarta: PT. Gramedia, 2004), 5.

<sup>33</sup> Surbakti, "Kepedulian Sosial Yang 'Rasional Dan Mendidik' Di Masa Krisis: Belajar Dari Nasihat Tentang Sikap Kepada Para Janda," 409.

<sup>34</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 97-98.

<sup>35</sup> Pelita Hati Surbakti, *Materi Kuliah Hermeneutik Perjanjian Baru (HPB) Skema Argumentasi* (Cipanas, 2024), 5-16.

relationships should ideally be done based on the original text (Greek). However, it is still possible to use translated texts, as Schreiner did, provided that care is taken in tracing the equivalent structure and meaning in the original language.<sup>36</sup>

As we know, a sentence can be simple or complex. Relations between simple sentences form coordinate relations, while relations in complex sentences form subordinate relations. In this case, the relation between propositions is the same.

Coordinate relations between propositions are divided into three types: (1) *Series*: this relation occurs because each proposition contributes to the whole sentence; (2) *Progression*: in this relation, each proposition moves towards a climax; and (3) *Alternative*: this relation explains that each proposition states different possibilities for the same situation. Meanwhile, the subordinate relation between propositions consists of three types as well, namely: (1) relations supported by *restatement*, consisting of five subtypes: *action-manner*, *comparison*, *negative-positive*, *idea-explanation*, and *question-answer*; (2) relations supported by a clearer or *distinct statement*, consisting of eight subtypes: *Ground*, *inference*, *action-result*, *action-purpose*, *conditional*, *temporal*, *locative*, and *bilateral*; and (3) relations supported by a *contrary statement*, consisting of two subtypes: *concessive* and *situation-response*.<sup>37</sup>

Due to the limited space in this paper, I will only explain the sub-types of relations used directly in the analysis of 1 Peter 5:1-11. For a more complete description of all types and subtypes of relations, readers are advised to refer directly to Schreiner's work. Furthermore, as an effort to facilitate the coding and classification of argumentation schemes, Surbakti has compiled a systematic summary of the types of inter-propositional relations and their recognition codes. This summary serves as a practical reference in analyzing

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<sup>36</sup> Julius Stefanus Sibagariang and Pelita Hati Surbakti, "MENYELESAIKAN PEMBERIAN YANG TERTUNDA: Analisis Argumentasi Dan Analisis Sosial 2 Korintus 8:1-9," *Jurnal Amanat Agung* (2024), 19.

<sup>37</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 98-101.



argumentative New Testament texts:<sup>38</sup>

| I. Coordinate Relationships                                                    | II. Subordinate Relationships                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Series (S)</b><br><b>2. Progression (P)</b><br><b>3. Alternative (A)</b> | <b>A. Support by Restatement</b><br>1. Action-Manner (Ac-Mn)<br>2. Comparison (Cf)<br>3. Negative-Positive (-/+)<br>4. Idea-Explanation (Id/Exp)<br>5. Question-Answer (Q/A)<br><b>B. Support by Distinct Statement</b><br>1. Ground (G)<br>2. Inference (∴)<br>3. Action-Result (Ac-Res)<br>4. Action-Purpose (Ac-Pur)<br>5. Conditional (If/Th)<br>6. Temporal (T)<br>7. Locative (L)<br>8. Bilateral (BL)<br>9. Double Ground (DG)<br><b>C. Support by Contrary Statement</b><br>1. Concessive (Csv)<br>2. Situation-Response (Sit-R) |

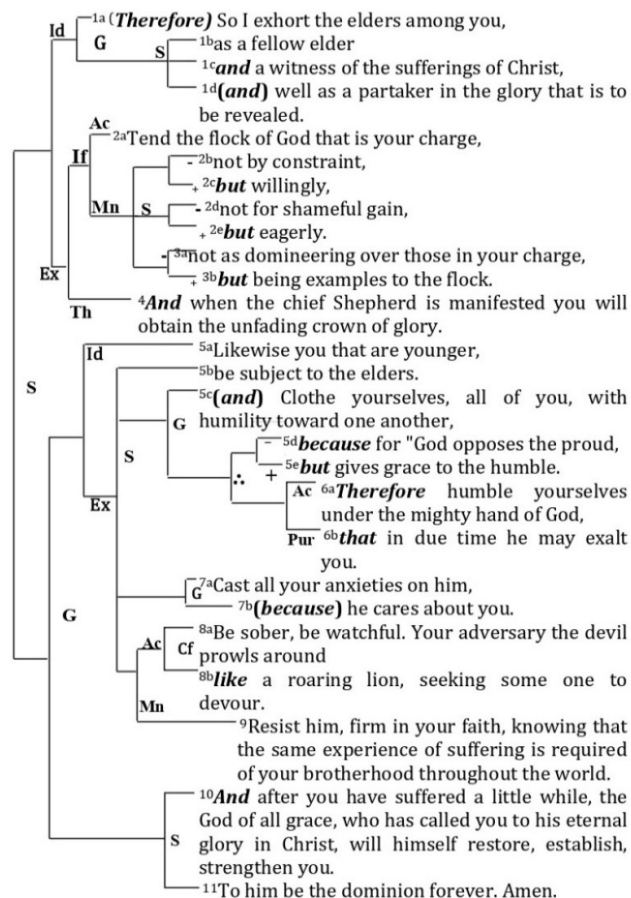
### Argumentation Analysis 1 Peter 5:1-11

After explaining the Argumentation Analysis popularized by Schreiner, in this section, the authors apply the method to the stages mentioned above. To ensure the accuracy of the identification of *conjunctions* and argumentation structures in the text, the authors used two versions of the text as study materials, namely the original Greek text based on the 27<sup>th</sup> *Nestle-Aland* edition (NA27), as well as the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV). This was done to ensure that the conjunctions found in the translated texts had a stable and appropriate equivalent to the original text. As part of the analysis process, the results of this

<sup>38</sup> Surbakti, "Kepedulian Sosial Yang 'Rasional Dan Mendidik' Di Masa Krisis: Belajar Dari Nasihat Tentang Sikap Kepada Para Janda," 410.

study are later presented in the form of a diagram. In the diagram, the authors no longer mention verse references based on chapter and verse numbers, but use a propositional numbering system (p). Next, the authors identify and establish logical relationships between propositions in the text. In the analysis section, each proposition will be explored in depth and then compared with scholars' interpretations to reveal both similarities and differences. Thus, through this approach, some significant new findings are expected, both in terms of argumentation structure and the theological meaning of the passage 1 Peter 5:1-11.

### Scheme or Diagram of 1 Peter 5:1-11



### Diagram Analysis of 1 Peter 5:1-11

The text of 1 Peter 5:1-11 begins with the conjunction *un* (οὐν), which

means "therefore" or "then."<sup>39</sup> The use of this conjunction indicates that the passage is a logical continuation of the previous passage, 1 Peter 4:12-19, which discusses the sufferings of believers.<sup>40</sup> Thus, chapter 5 transitions from external issues, such as persecution, to a focus on the internal life of the church, particularly the leadership and *ethos of the* Christian community. Based on the results of the argumentation analysis, all units from p.1a-p.4 and p.5a-p.11 form a *series* relationship pattern, which is a structure that displays sequential and complementary contributions to the main message.<sup>41</sup> In this section, Peter gives two main groups of advice, namely:

To the elders (p.1a-p.4)

It can be seen that p.1a and p.1b-p.1d form a *Ground* relation, i.e., the central proposition (p.1a) is reinforced with a basis or reason that contains Peter's moral and spiritual legitimacy with three series propositions (p.1b, p.1c, and p.1d).<sup>42</sup> He identifies himself as: (1) a fellow elder, (2) a witness of Christ's suffering, and (3) part of the glory to be revealed. This relation shows the reason for proposition p.1a, where it illustrates Peter's moral and spiritual credibility as the basis for the advice he will give to the elders. The three *grounds* reveal Peter's self-identity, which is rooted in his participation in Christ's suffering and eschatological hope of glory.

Peter's main advice to the elders is on p.2a, which is further elaborated on on p.2b-3b in the form of an *Action-Manner* (Ac/Mn) relationship.<sup>43</sup> The

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<sup>39</sup> J.W. Wenham, *Bahasa Yunani Koine* (Malang: Literatur SAAT, 1977), 51-59. Wenham explains that the dative case in koine Greek grammar is used to explain indirect objects, possession, cause, because, or temporis, which expresses the time and or place of the event.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Vol. 37) (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 296.

<sup>41</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 100. *Series*: This relation occurs because each proposition contributes to the whole sentence. For example: "He ate, and he read". Conjunctions: *and likewise, neither ... nor* (και, δε, τε, οὔτε, Οὐδέ, μήτε, μηδέ).

<sup>42</sup> Schreiner, 104. *Ground (G)*: The main proposition, which is then explained by a reason or Ground. For example: "Do not touch the snake because it is venomous". "I worship Jesus because He is God." Conjunctions: *for, because, since* (γὰρ γάρ, ὅτι, ἐπεὶ, ἐπειδὴ).

<sup>43</sup> Schreiner, 102. *Action-manner* statement (Ac-Mn): A statement of an action, and then a more specific statement indicating the manner in which the action is to be carried out, for

exhortation emphasizes that shepherding God's flock must be carried out in a way that is in accordance with Christ's character. The three ways of carrying out the task are conveyed in the form of a *series* relation<sup>44</sup> constructed in contrast with a negative-positive (-/+ ) forming relation pattern, where each proposition contains a prohibition on one side and a command on the other.<sup>45</sup> *First*, elders should not pastor under compulsion (p.2b) but willingly and in accordance with God's will (p.2c). *Second*, they must not serve for personal gain (p.2d) but rather with self-devotion (p.2e). *Third*, they should not abuse their authority to rule the congregation (p.3a). Rather, they are to be examples of character and behavior (p.3b).<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, p.4 forms a *conditional* relationship (If-Then) with p.2a-p.3b, namely that if the elders shepherd the flock of God and in the three right ways, then they will receive a crown of glory that will not wither when Christ the Great Shepherd reveals Himself.<sup>47</sup> The term "Great Shepherd" emphasizes that Christ is the Supreme Leader of the church, while the elders are servants under His authority. This relationship provides eschatological motivation for church leaders, that their faithfulness in service will be eternally rewarded.

Thus, the series of relations p.1a to p.4 form an *Idea-explanation* relation (Id/Exp), which is a structure where the central proposition is further explained or clarified through additional information.<sup>48</sup> Peter not only

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example. "I asked for money by *taking* the coins from the drawer". (using *modal caluse*).

<sup>44</sup> Schreiner, 100.

<sup>45</sup> Schreiner, 103. Negative-positive (-/+): Gives two alternatives: one denies, the other confirms, for example. "It is not hard, but it is soft; Do not be foolish, but understand the will of God.". Particles and conjunctions: *not, but* (ου, μὴ, ἀλλὰ, δε.).

<sup>46</sup> R.C. Sproul, *1-2 Peter: An Expository Commentary* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2019), 421-422.

<sup>47</sup> Schreiner, 105. *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles. Conditional* (If/Th): Shows that the cause of action is merely potential. For example: "If my exam results are good, then I will be admitted to that university". So, being admitted to the university is only a potential, not a certainty, even if the exam results are promising. (*conditional clause*) Conjunctions: if ... then, if, provided that, except, (εἰ, ἐάν).

<sup>48</sup> Schreiner, 103. *Idea-explanation* (Id/Exp): The addition of clarifications to the main proposition. Sometimes, we also give an example statement. For example: "It is scorched, that is, there has been no rain for about 3 months"; "They eat together because they are one family and one ancestor". Conjunctions: *that is, for* (ἐστίν, γὰρ).

emphasized the responsibility of shepherding fellow sheep and the three right ways as an ordinary ministerial duty, but rather, as a calling that must be carried out in submission to the will of Christ. Peter's experience as a witness to Christ's suffering was the basis of his credibility in advising the elders. He affirmed that faithfulness in service would earn rewards that came directly from Christ Himself. The crown of glory that will be promised is not just a symbol of recognition, but an eschatological reality that motivates church leaders to remain faithful in service, even amid challenges and suffering.

To the young people (p.5a-p.11)

After advising the elders, Peter turns his attention to the group of young people (p.5a).<sup>49</sup> Unlike the previous section, which begins with Peter's self-identification as an elder and witness to the sufferings of Christ, this section contains no such introduction. It can be interpreted that the legitimacy of Peter's authority has been previously affirmed and does not need to be repeated. In this unit, four main imperatives form a *series* relationship,<sup>50</sup> i.e., a complementary and progressively evolving arrangement of exhortations, namely: Be Subject (p.5b); Clothe yourselves with humility (p.5c); Cast all your anxieties on Him (p.7a); and Be sober, be watchful (p.8a).

Three of these four commands, p.5c; p.7a; and p.8a, are further expanded through explanatory propositions that deepen their urgency and meaning. Meanwhile, the command "Be Subject" (p.5b) stands alone without further elaboration.

*Clothe yourselves with humility (p.5c)*

The exhortation to humble (humility) oneself comes as a continuation of the command to submit (to be subject), and is addressed not only to spiritual authorities but also in relationships between people. The Greek verb

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<sup>49</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Vol. 37), 302-302.

<sup>50</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 100.

*tapeinōthēte*, used here, refers to the active act of placing oneself humbly.<sup>51</sup> The relation between p.5c and p.5d-p.6b forms a *ground* relation, where the underlying theological reason strengthens the command.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, p.5d-p.6b, forms the *Inference* relation (:.), which conveys the reason or motivation that is the conclusion of the principle already mentioned.<sup>53</sup> The motivation is in the form of a negative and positive (-/+ ) contrast, namely: "for God opposes the proud, but has mercy on the humble." The theological implication of this verse is that humility is not just social etiquette but an attitude that is directly related to God's response to His people.<sup>54</sup> Then, p. 6a-p. 6b form an *action-purpose* (Ac/Pur) relation, where the act of humbling oneself has an eschatological purpose: "He will exalt you in due time" (p.6b).<sup>55</sup> Thus, the whole unit p.5c-p.6b forms a *Ground* relation that forms a unified argument that emphasizes the importance of humility as a response to God and a means to receive the rapture in His appointed time.<sup>56</sup>

*Cast all your anxieties on Him (p.7a)*

The next exhortation is "Cast all your anxieties on Him." The verb *epiriptō* implies fully surrendering the burdens of life to God.<sup>57</sup> The relation between p.

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<sup>51</sup> Hasan Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II* (Jakarta: LAI, 2014), 745. Translated from the verb *tapeinōthēte*, the aorist passive imperative form of the word *tapeinō*, which emphasizes the voluntary act of humbling oneself in the community of faith.

<sup>52</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 104.

<sup>53</sup> Schreiner, 104. *Inference* (:.): A statement or event from which a conclusion is drawn. The difference with *Ground* is in the order of the main propositions. In *Ground*, the supporting statement/proposition comes after the main proposition. *Inference* is the other way around.

<sup>54</sup> Schreiner, 103.

<sup>55</sup> Schreiner, 105. *Action-purpose* (Ac-Pur): This propositional relation involves an action to fulfill a particular result. For example: "He diligently exercises so that he can lose weight significantly". It should be noted that Action-Result and Action-Purpose are similar in meaning. The difference is that Action-Purpose focuses on an expected result, even though the result is not necessarily achieved. (*purpose clause*) Conjunctions: in order that, that, with a view to, to the end that, lest (ὥστε, ὅπως, ἵνα ... μή).

<sup>56</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation, Introduction And Commentary*, 838.

<sup>57</sup> Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II*, 305. The verb means "to throw over" or "to hand over completely."

7a and p. 7b forms a *Ground* relation, i.e., the central proposition is explained and strengthened by a theological basis or reason.<sup>58</sup> In this case, the command to give up worry (p.7a) is explained by the reason that "He cares for you" (p.7b). This expression affirms God's personal, active, and ongoing care of His people.

Thus, surrender is not a passive or fatalistic expression but an active manifestation of faith in God's loving character. In the context of suffering, this act becomes a means of spiritual strengthening and assurance of God's presence in every dimension of believers' lives.

*Be sober, be watchful (p.8a)*

The command to be vigilant is expressed through the call to "be sober" (Greek: *nēphō*<sup>59</sup>, *grēgoreō*).<sup>60</sup> The relation between p. 8a and p. 8b forms a *Comparison* (Cf) relation, where Peter describes Satan as "*a roaring lion that walks around, looking for someone to devour.*"<sup>61</sup> This comparison makes clear the fundamental nature of the spiritual threat, showing that resistance to Satan requires spiritual awareness and preparedness.

Furthermore, p.9 presents practical strategies in the form of imperatives: "*resist him with firm faith.*" The relation between p. 8 and p. 9 forms an *Action-Manner* relation (Ac/Mn), which is the act of resisting along with the means of implementation.<sup>62</sup> In addition, Peter emphasizes that the suffering experienced is collective, experienced by all believers in the world.

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<sup>58</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 100-104.

<sup>59</sup> Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II*, 536. This verb is an aorist imperative form and indicates an urgent and persistent command. The word means "to think clearly" or "to be unaffected by illusion or intoxication," and metaphorically refers to spiritual alertness.

<sup>60</sup> Sutanto, 176. This verb means "to keep watch," with the connotation of preparedness for danger.

<sup>61</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 102. *Comparison* (Cf): A statement or action in the main proposition that is explained more specifically by a comparative statement that shows what the central proposition is like. For example: "I love you like a brother". (using *Comparative Clause*). Conjunctions: just as, even as, like, as ... so (ὥς, καθὼς, οὕτως, ὥσπερ).

<sup>62</sup> Schreiner, 105.

This reinforces the solidarity dimension of the body of Christ in the face of suffering and emphasizes that suffering is not contrary to faith but rather part of the fellowship in Christ's suffering. Thus, the whole unit of p. 5a-p.9 forms an *Idea-explanation* (Id/Exp) relation, where the four main imperatives are explained through the theological basis of the contextual reality of suffering faced by the people.<sup>63</sup> The final section of p.10-p.11 closes with an amplification in the form of a prayer of blessing that forms a *Series* relation, where each element contributes to the meaning of the whole: God, who has called His people to eternal glory in Christ, will "*perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish*" them after their temporary suffering (p.10).<sup>64</sup> This *doxology* is the culmination of the entire exhortation, underlining that all of Peter's pastoral exhortations culminate in God's restoration and the hope of eschatological restoration.<sup>65</sup>

As such, the entire unit of p.5a-p.11 establishes the *Ground* relation, namely that the four imperatives, "*submit, humble yourself, submit, and be sober,*" are rooted in the hope of God's active providence and the promise of eternal strengthening and glory in Christ.<sup>66</sup> With a structured logic of argumentation centered on divine grace, the passage affirms that the Christian life is not an escape from the reality of suffering, but rather a journey of faith lived with humility, trust, and spiritual alertness in the light of eschatological hope.

### **Reinterpreting the Text of 1 Peter 5:1-11**

Based on the study of the interpretation of 1 Peter 5:1-11, the authors find different views in determining the argumentation structure of the text compared to interpreters such as Reinhard Feldmeier and Norman Hillyer. Both tend to divide this passage into two main parts, namely: (1) advice on

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<sup>63</sup> Schreiner, 103.

<sup>64</sup> Schreiner, 100.

<sup>65</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Vol. 37), 311-312.

<sup>66</sup> Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 104.



leadership and service in the community (vv. 1-5),<sup>67</sup> and (2) a call to humility and perseverance amid suffering (vv. 6-11).<sup>68</sup> However, the authors agree more with the structural division proposed by John Stott and R. C. Sproul, who distinguish two major themes, namely: (1) advice to the faithful Shepherd (vv. 1-4) and (2) an invitation to the whole church to live in humility (vv. 5-11).<sup>69</sup>

The argumentative structure of the letter suggests a division of pastoral responsibilities directed towards two main groups in the Christian community: the elders (*πρεσβύτερος*) and the young people (*νεώτεροι*). First, the term elder in the context of Judaism refers to community leaders who have a supervisory function in worship and social life.<sup>70</sup> This designation reflected high moral character<sup>71</sup> and a respected spiritual authority.<sup>72</sup> In the Roman context, the equivalent term was *senex* (an elder), which gave birth to the concept of *senatus*, an assembly of elders who played a role in government.<sup>73</sup> This suggests that the leadership of the elders had both spiritual and social legitimacy.

Secondly, the group of young people (*νεώτεροι*) mentioned in verse 5 probably refers to those who are younger in terms of both age and spiritual experience.<sup>74</sup> Elliott interprets the term to include those who are relatively new to the Christian faith, including those who have been newly baptized. Therefore, the exhortation to this group emphasizes the importance of submission to spiritual leaders and character development through humility. In other letters, such as Titus 2:6-8, young people are also given special advice because they tend

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<sup>67</sup> Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter*, 230-243.

<sup>68</sup> See. Hillyer, *1&2 Peter Jude*, 138-144.

<sup>69</sup> Sproul, *1-2 Peter: An Expository Commentary*, 488-495.

<sup>70</sup> Barclay M. Newman Jr, *Kamus Yunani-Indonesia Untuk Perjanjian Baru* (Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 2016), 139.

<sup>71</sup> Yohanes Calvin, *Institutio Pengajaran Agama Kristen* (Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 2011), 245.

<sup>72</sup> H.H. Rowley, *Ibadat Israel Kuno* (Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 2012), 186-187. In Synagogue worship, they are also known as *Sheliach* or *Arkon*, which are messengers of the congregation who oversee the implementation of worship and maintain congregational order.

<sup>73</sup> William Barclay, *Surat 1 Dan 2 Timotius, Titus, Filemon* (Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 2011), 111-112.

<sup>74</sup> Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II*, 500. The phrase translated as "young people" comes from the Greek: *νεώτεροι* (*neōteroi*). It is the masculine nominative plural of the adjective *νεώτερος* (*neōteros*), which is the comparative form of *νέος* (*neos*), meaning "new" or "young."

to be more independent, less patient, and sometimes more difficult to submit to authority.<sup>75</sup> The two major sections of this passage will be further elaborated with the support of theological arguments and scholarly interpretations as follows:

#### *Exhortation to the Elders*

Peter opens this section by explaining his authority through three identities: a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings, and a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed (v. 1).<sup>76</sup> Peter's designation as a *witness of Christ's sufferings* uses the Greek term *μάρτυς*.<sup>77</sup> In this context, he does not emphasize his role as an eyewitness, but rather as a participant in the suffering of 1 Peter 4:13.<sup>78</sup> The phrase *ὁ καί*, which links suffering and glory, reveals the epistle's theological framework: suffering precedes glory.<sup>79</sup>

Peter's main advice to the elders comes in verse 2, "Tend the flock of God that is your charge." He uses the word *ποιμάνετε*, which means to lead and to serve actively.<sup>80</sup> This idea is a command to serve.<sup>81</sup> Peter then details how service should be done with its three antitheses:

#### *Not by constraint but willingly*

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<sup>75</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation, Introduction And Commentary*, 836-840.

<sup>76</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Vol. 37), 297-298.

<sup>77</sup> Barclay M. Newman Jr, *Kamus Yunani-Indonesia Untuk Perjanjian Baru*, 103.

<sup>78</sup> Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter*, 233. Reinhard Feldmeier, who emphasizes that the term *martys* in 1 Peter 5:1 is not to be understood narrowly as historical witnesses, but rather as participants in the fate of Christ's suffering, which will be followed by glory, namely, that suffering for Christ's sake will be followed by glory, both in Christ (1:11, 1:21) and in the lives of his followers (2:19; 4:14).

<sup>79</sup> Matthew Henry, *Tafsiran Surat Ibrani, Yakobus, 1 & 2 Petrus, 1-3 Yohanes, Yudas, Wahyu* (Surabaya: Momentum, 2016), 519-520. Henry states in his book, "How different the spirit and behavior of Peter were from that of his pretended successors! He does not command and domineer, but exhorts. He does not claim sovereignty over all pastors and churches, nor style himself prince of the apostles, vicar of Christ, or head of the church, but values himself upon being an elder."

<sup>80</sup> Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II*, 656.

<sup>81</sup> B. F. Drewes and Dkk., *Kunci Bahasa Yunani Perjanjian Baru Surat Roma Hingga Kitab Wahyu* (Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 2010), 318.

Elders are to serve not under compulsion (*ἀναγκαστως*),<sup>82</sup> However, voluntarily (*ἐξουσία*), that is, according to the will of God. Spiritual service does not come from external pressure, but from a consciousness and willingness born of love for Christ.<sup>83</sup> It is "of one's own accord," or "without coercion arising from an inner awareness and willingness."<sup>84</sup> This shows that service in the church is a divine calling, not just an administrative task.<sup>85</sup> Elders are called to serve out of love for Christ and His church, and out of a willingness to obey God's will. This voluntary attitude emulates Christ Himself, who gave Himself voluntarily for the salvation of humanity (cf. John 10:17-18).<sup>86</sup>

*Not for shameful gain but eagerly*

Service should not be driven by profit motivation (*αἰσχροκερδῶς*),<sup>87</sup> but instead by a spirit of devotion.<sup>88</sup> Elders are called to maintain purity of intention and avoid exploiting the office for personal gain. This is also consistent with Paul's exhortation to the elders in Ephesus not to be greedy and to take care of themselves and the whole flock (cf. Acts 20:28-33).<sup>89</sup>

*Not as domineering over those in your charge, but being an example*

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<sup>82</sup> Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II*, 58. This word means the motivation for service should not be materialistic.

<sup>83</sup> Alan M. Stibbs, *The First Epistle General of Peter: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 165. Stibbs states: *elders, as the most privileged and most responsible members of the house of God, are the most exposed to God's judgment. ... Or perhaps the idea is that the inevitability of earthly trials and divine judgment in the experience of God's people makes all the more urgent the need for faithfulness in pastoral care.*

<sup>84</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of The Epistles of Peter and The Epistle of Jude* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987), 191.

<sup>85</sup> Duane F. Watson and Terrance Callan, *First and Second Peter* (Baker Books: Baker Academic, 2012), 118.

<sup>86</sup> Anthony D'Souza, *Kepemimpinan Yesus, Pent. Andry K.S.* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2009), xxii.

<sup>87</sup> Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II*, 28.

<sup>88</sup> Bill Lawrence, *Effective Pastoring (Menggemballakan Dengan Hati)* (Yogyakarta: Andi Publisher, 2009), 114.

<sup>89</sup> Waren W. Wiersbe, *Setia Di Dalam Kristus* (Bandung: Kalam Hidup, 2000), 43.

Elders are not to be authoritarian (κραταιάν),<sup>90</sup> However, they should be living examples (τύπος) for the congregation.<sup>91</sup> Peter reminded the elders not to allow this wrong behavior to stick with them. The ministry of leadership in the church is not an authoritarian form of power but one that sets an example in character, life, and love. Thus, Peter is referring to the elders' lives that the congregation can model.<sup>92</sup> Best writes, "*The ideal of service and readiness to suffer is the best presented not by exhortation but by example.*"<sup>93</sup>

The leadership model offered by Peter is *servant* leadership, as exemplified by Christ (cf. Matthew 20:25-28).<sup>94</sup> A true leader does not demand obedience, but rather one who is willing to sacrifice and demonstrate integrity throughout life. By setting an example, elders show the right direction for the congregation, not through coercion, but by inspiring and exemplifying a life of purpose.

Peter completes the exhortation with an eschatological motivation: "when Christ, the Great Shepherd (ἀρχιποιμήν), appears at His second coming, you will receive a crown of glory that cannot wither" (v. 4).<sup>95</sup> The title "Great Shepherd" emphasizes that Christ is the supreme leader, and the elders are His servants.

In line with Howard Marshall's view, Marshall writes, "*He speaks of Christ as the Chief Shepherd to whom the under shepherds are responsible.*"<sup>96</sup> This emphasizes the elders' accountability to Christ. Thus, Peter wrote the word κομιοῦμα to inform the elders that they would receive something at the end of

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<sup>90</sup> Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II*, 407.

<sup>91</sup> J. Oswald Sanders, *Kepemimpinan Rohani. Pent. Chris J. Samuel Dan Ganda Wargasetia* (Bandung: Kalam Hidup, 1993), 45.

<sup>92</sup> Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II*, 719.

<sup>93</sup> Ernest Best, *New Century Bible Commentary: I Peter* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), 170.

<sup>94</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature Of Legitimate Power And Greatness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977), 21-22.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Arthur Graves, *Pertama Dan Kedua Petrus* (Malang: Gandum Mas, 1982), 62.

<sup>96</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 164.

their ministry. That is, the crown (Στέφανος) is to reward the elders for their faithful labor.<sup>97</sup>

Next, Peter writes the word glory (δόξα), which means honor, majesty, and praise, to describe the crowns that elders will receive. In this text, the word glory refers to honor. Thus, Peter wrote glory to explain that the elders' receiving the crown of glory was an honor. Peter also adds a description of the crown with the phrase that it cannot wither. The phrase incorruptible (ἀμαράντινον) means incorruptible, eternal.<sup>98</sup> So, the phrase "that cannot wither" symbolizes the permanence of the crown that elders will receive.

Finally, the whole of verse 4 is about honoring elders at the time of Jesus' second coming. Peter wrote this as an encouragement. Marshall writes,

Finally, in verse 4, Peter promotes the right motivation for good conduct as an elder: He is thinking of the second coming, or *parousia*, when Christ appears to reward and judge his people.<sup>99</sup>

Therefore, this passage is a promise to elders who fulfill the responsibility Peter is referring to.

### **Exhortation to Young Men**

After advising the elders, Peter turns to the youth group with the connective "likewise" (ὁμοίως, v.5), which implies ethical continuity within the community.<sup>100</sup> This exhortation is particular, targeting those who are not yet stable in faith or spiritual position. In this passage, Peter gives four main imperatives:

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<sup>97</sup> W.R.F. Browning, *Kamus Alkitab: A Dictionary of the Bible* (Jakarta: BPK. Gunung Mulia, 2011), 248.

<sup>98</sup> Stott, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 207. Stott writes, "The word translated that will never fade away is *amarantinos*; the garland may be of *amaranth*, a flower chosen for its everlasting quality."

<sup>99</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter: IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 164.

<sup>100</sup> Marshall, 302.

*Be subject to the elders*

This exhortation demands respect and submission to spiritual authority, although Peter does not elaborate further. In contrast to the second exhortation, humble yourself.

*Clothe yourselves with humility*

Peter gives a theological rationale for the commandment through a quote from Proverbs: "*For God opposes the proud, but has compassion on the humble*" (cf. Prov. 3:4).<sup>101</sup> In other words, the humble attitude *ταπεινώθητε*, which means "to humble (status; self), live simply, discipline oneself,"<sup>102</sup> is necessary because God resists the arrogant but shows grace to the humble. In this case, Peter's act of humbling himself serves its purpose, namely, that "He may exalt you in due time."

Thus, Peter's exhortation (v. 5) to humble oneself both towards others and before God is given a solid basis for why Peter emphasizes humbling oneself, namely because the reasons for the two cannot be separated, because the reasons for the two are rooted in the same principle, namely, God opposes arrogance and loves humility (v. 5). By humbling themselves, they would experience God's grace. For God bestows His favor on those who recognize their need for Him, promising them the rapture at His appointed time.

*Cast all your anxieties on God*

The call to "surrender" (*Ἐπίκτῃος*) implies a complete release of worries.<sup>103</sup> It is a form of total trust in divine providence. Peter emphasizes that in the face of suffering, young people need not bear their worries, but are called

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<sup>101</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation, Introduction And Commentary*, 838.

<sup>102</sup> Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II*, 745. The word is translated from the verb *tapeinōthēte*, the aorist passive imperative form of the word *tapeinoō*, which emphasizes the voluntary act of humbling oneself in the community of faith.

<sup>103</sup> Marshall, 305.

to entrust their lives to God's providence.<sup>104</sup> Peter is not only giving practical advice, but also instilling a solid theological foundation of hope.

As such, Peter's exhortation to surrender is not an act of passivity or a fatalistic attitude, but an active response to God's loving and caring character.<sup>105</sup> Peter's antidote to excessive worry is to surrender all our worries to God and entrust our lives to God's care.

*Be sober and be watchful*

This final exhortation emphasizes spiritual awareness and vigilance against Satan, who is described as a roaring lion seeking prey (v. 8). Peter uses the term sober (*νήφω*), which means self-controlled, calm-minded. It literally refers to one who becomes sober from drunkenness.<sup>106</sup> The term watch (*γρηγορέω*), on the other hand, means not sleeping but alert and alive.<sup>107</sup> These words emphasize the importance of spiritual awareness and alertness to dangers that are not always visible to the naked eye. They remind the young people in the community not to be spiritually careless, especially in the midst of suffering that can make one careless or weak in faith.

Peter uses the legal term (*ἀντίδικος*) and the designation (*διάβολος*) to describe the character of the evil one as an accuser and slanderer.<sup>108</sup> Peter, therefore, emphasizes that the struggle of believers is not merely social or moral, but has a real and deep spiritual dimension. The call to watchfulness has a solid basis: the actual danger of the spiritual enemy. Therefore, vigilance is not an optional choice, but an urgent necessity in the life of a faithful person. Peter's response to this threat is not flight, but resistance through steadfast faith (*ἀντίοιητε τῇ πίστει*), i.e., a firm trust in Christ (v. 9).<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Sproul, *1-2 Peter: An Expository Commentary*, 429-430.

<sup>105</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation, Introduction And Commentary*, 846-851.

<sup>106</sup> Sutanto, *Perjanjian Baru Interlinear Yunani-Indonesia Dan Konkordansi Perjanjian Baru (PBIK) Jilid II*, 536.

<sup>107</sup> Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 176.

<sup>108</sup> Watson and Callan, *First and Second Peter*, 121-194.

<sup>109</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation, Introduction And Commentary*, 858-859.

As a consolation, Peter stated that suffering is not an individual experience, but is shared by brothers and sisters throughout the world (v. 9).<sup>110</sup> This collective awareness fosters spiritual solidarity and steadfastness. A profound theological declaration marks the end of this section: God is the "fountain of all grace" who has called His people to His eternal glory in Christ (v. 10). The promise that God will "perfect, establish, strengthen, and confirm" His people indicates a comprehensive divine restoration. The closing doxology (v. 11) redirects the congregation's attention to God's eternal majesty and power.

After looking at the above description based on the schematic diagram of the argumentation of this text unit, it becomes clear that the argumentation structure of 1 Peter 5:1-11 is built on two principal axes: the responsibility of elders to shepherd the congregation with joy, sincerity, and example; and the expectation of young people's response to live in submission, humility, faith, and spiritual vigilance. All these imperatives stand on a strong theological foundation: God's eternal grace and providence. Therefore, this passage not only conveys the ethics of community but also reveals the eschatological and spiritual reality of the Christian life in suffering. Peter's exhortations aim to encourage the believers to remain faithful and hopeful as they look forward to glory with Christ.

### **Suffering and Twofold Shepherding**

There are three important themes in 1 Peter: Suffering, Holy Living, and Hope.<sup>111</sup> Of the three, the theme of Suffering is the most prominent. That is why quite a lot of research has been done on the theme of suffering in this letter.<sup>112</sup> In

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<sup>110</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Vol. 37), 309–310.

<sup>111</sup> Sagala and Surbakti, "Penderitaan, Hidup Suci, Pengharapan: Tiga Tema Utama Dalam Surat 1 Petrus."

<sup>112</sup> Randy Hall, "For to This You Have Been Called : The Cross And Suffering in 1 Peter," *Restoration Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1976); Gordon E. Kirk, "Endurance in Suffering in 1 Peter," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138, no. 549 (1981): 46–56; D Edmond Hiebert, "The Suffering and Triumphant Christ: An Exposition of 1 Peter 3:18-22," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139, no. 554 (1982): 146–58; Ivan T. Blazen, "Suffering and Cessation from Sin According to 1 Peter 4:1," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 21, no. 1 (1983): 27–50; Dennis E. Johnson, "Fire in God's House : Imagery From Malachi 3 in Peters Theology of Suffering ( 1 Pet 4 : 12-19 )," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*



the New Testament (NT), the word translated as suffering is found in at least three different words, namely *πάσχω/paschō*, *θλίψις/thlipsis*, and *παθημά/phthēma*. In 1 Peter 5:1-11, the word translated as “suffering” appears three times: *παθημά/phthēma* (vv. 1, 9) and *πάσχω/paschō* (v. 10). In terms of frequency, it appears once in the first layer of shepherding and twice in the second layer.

As mentioned above, the first readers of this book (the congregation) were in crisis or even suffering. The two layers of shepherding presented in this passage are clearly shown by Peter's identification of himself as “a witness of Christ's sufferings” (v. 1c). The goal, of course, is to position himself on the same side as those he is advising. The suffering condition of the congregation is also the basis for Peter's three pieces of advice to the elders in the first layer, namely: Be willing, not by constraint (p.2b-p.2c); Be eager, not for shameful gain (p.2d-p.2e); and Be an example, not as domineering (p.3a-p.3b). Furthermore, in the second layer, the idea of suffering is further emphasized both explicitly (p.9 and p.10) and implicitly. Implicitly, this is seen in the advice not to worry or feel anxiety (p.7a) with the affirmation of God's providence (p.7b) as its basis (G).

### **Practical Benefits for Church Leaders in Nurturing and Shepherding Their Church Members**

As mentioned in the introduction, the results of this analysis are expected to be of practical use to church leaders in carrying out a series of tasks for the nurturing and shepherding of church members. The practical benefits we refer to are training in the Bible Study (BS) group and even the creation of BS materials. Borrowing the inductive BS method used in various Christian ministries, there are three types of questions asked when reading the text, namely Observation, Interpretation, and Application.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, when creating BS materials, there are also three types of questions.

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29, no. 3 (1986): 285–294.

<sup>113</sup> Hans Finzel, *Observe Interpret Apply: How To Study The Bible Inductively* (Wheaton, IL:

It must be acknowledged that, generally, the Inductive SB materials used in discipleship groups within various church organizations and/or Christian ministries in Indonesia are translated from English. Persekutuan Kristen Antar-Universitas (Perkantans) Foundation is a Christian organization that is quite productive in publishing SB materials. In our observation, there are still a few SB materials written by Indonesians themselves. In addition, the SB material that studies each book in the Bible is almost entirely BS material that was previously written in English and then translated into Indonesian.<sup>114</sup> This phenomenon shows the importance of presenting a work that facilitates the creation of BS materials for each book in the Bible.

Based on the diagram shown above, several observations or even interpretation questions are immediately apparent upon examining it. The examples presented below show that the diagram makes it much easier for church leaders or creators of BS materials to compile questions. Some of these questions are:

- a. "Name three aspects of Peter's identity that he mentions before delivering his pastoral message." This observation question comes from the clear relationship between p.1a and p.1b, p.1c, p.1d. From the diagram, p.1b, p.1c, p.1d, which are related in series (S), become the ground (G) for p.1a, which contains the statement of the command.
- b. "Name the three ways of shepherding the flock that Peter commands the elders." This observation question comes from the relationship between p.2a and p.2b-c, p.2d-e, p.3a-b, which are related to action (Ac) and manner (Mn). From the diagram, it is clear that p.2a is an action (Ac) in the form of a command, and the three series-related proposition units (p.2b-c, p.2d-e, and p.3a-b) are the manner (Mn), which is how to carry out the command to shepherd.

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Victor Books, 1994).

<sup>114</sup> See <https://literaturperkantans.net/product-category/pemahaman-alkitab/>

- c. "What is meant by the unfading crown of glory, which is the reward for every shepherd when the Chief Shepherd comes?" This interpretation question arises on p.4
- d. "Why does Peter give more and more complex advice to young people in this passage?" This interpretation question is easy to see when looking at the diagram as a whole. The scheme of advice to young people (p.5a-p.11) is indeed longer and more complex in its argumentation than the advice to the elders (p.1a p.4).

With the examples of questions above, the presence of a diagram produced by this argumentative analysis will make it easier for someone to formulate BS questions, especially BS for books of the epistolary genre. Church leaders can even use a single diagram as the basis for creating several BS materials with different topics according to their needs.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study confirms that the Argumentative Analysis approach developed by Thomas R. Schreiner is relevant not only to Paul's letters but also to Peter's letters. It is partly because both Paul's and Peter's letters inherit the same rhetorical tradition. Thus, this approach can be used to trace Peter's rhetorical structure and strategy in conveying his theological and pastoral messages. The results of the analysis show that the argumentative structure of 1 Peter 5:1-11 is built on two principal axes that form two major propositions with a series relationship, namely:

1. The responsibilities of elders, which include voluntary, sincere service and being role models (p.1a-p.4);
2. The response of young people, which includes obedience, humility, surrendering their worries to God, and vigilance against spiritual threats (p.5a-p.11).

These two parts form a series of twofold pastoral actions simultaneously, namely, to the church leaders and to the congregation itself. Shepherding a

congregation facing crisis or suffering must therefore be twofold, addressing both the congregation and its leaders simultaneously. These two sections contain ethical and spiritual advice that does not stand alone, but is firmly rooted in theological and eschatological foundations: that God is the source of grace who actively cares for, strengthens, and restores His people. Peter's call is not merely a moral exhortation, but a call to live in the light of grace and hope for eternal glory in Christ (eschatological).

Thus, the main contribution of this research is to open a new space for reading New Testament texts in a literary-rhetorical manner, especially to the non-Pauline letters. The results of this research are also expected to contribute to the study of contemporary biblical hermeneutics and to nurture and shepherd the church members rooted in the final form of the biblical text, in this case, by preparation to create BS materials as mentioned above.

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## **Forgiveness Among People as an Expression of Jesus' Hospitality in Matthew 18:21-35**

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### **Abstract:**

The theme of forgiveness plays an important role, both in the biblical context and today, because the Bible is the basis for reflecting on how the content should be the proclamation of hospitality in everyday life. Matthew 18:21-35 makes this topic even more important because in addition to forgiveness that should be based on love and has no limits, for those who have suffered deep wounds or trauma, it requires an admission of guilt from the offender. Forgiveness must come from those who are hurt (victims), but the person who hurt (the perpetrator) must also not be passive, but must make efforts to support forgiveness, namely by humbling themselves and declaring their full guilt. The author uses a qualitative method through a descriptive approach and literature review, such as biblical books and books in which figures who discuss ethics are informed. Through this research, it is found that humans who are expected to give forgiveness are also entitled to receive an admission of guilt from the perpetrator. It does not mean that forgiveness cannot be presented in this situation, but rather to realize one's position as a guilty human being. Here, self-awareness becomes a very important aspect.

### **Keywords:**

Forgiveness; Hospitality;  
Love; Self-Awareness;  
Trauma

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Matthew 18:21-35 provides a profound foundation for practicing hospitality in embodying forgiveness. This narrative is framed through an allegory in which the “King” represents Jesus, the “Servant” represents humanity, and the “Debt” represents sin, thereby drawing an analogy between Jesus’ forgiveness and human forgiveness. The key points clearly convey three essential truths: (1) forgiveness must be unlimited and without exception; (2) those who receive God’s forgiveness must extend the same forgiving attitude toward others; and (3) the unforgiving will be excluded from the mercy of God. Taken together, these highlight that every person is called to forgive just as the Lord has forgiven with compassion, leaving no room for any excuse not to forgive.

This study argues that Matthew 18:21-35 presents forgiveness not merely as an unlimited moral obligation to imitate God’s mercy, but as an expression of Jesus’ hospitality that ethically involves both the victim and the offender. While forgiveness is initiated by the victim, the text implicitly demands the offender’s self-awareness and acknowledgment of guilt. Thus, when questions about forgiveness arise, they can be answered with confidence that everything ultimately points back to Jesus, rooted in His compassion. One example concerns whether victims of trauma can still extend forgiveness despite the heinous and extreme acts committed against them. Forgiveness, no doubt, is not easy, yet hatred must not be allowed to corrode harmonious relationships. In this regard, the solution necessarily involves both parties: the perpetrator must sincerely acknowledge their wrongdoing to the traumatized victim, and the victim, with readiness of heart, must extend forgiveness.

Several studies have examined forgiveness in Matthew 18:21–35. R. T. France emphasizes unlimited forgiveness as the imitation of God’s boundless mercy, stressing the moral obligation of disciples to forgive as those who have already been forgiven.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Davies and Allison interpret the passage within

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<sup>1</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew: New International Commentary on the New*

the framework of ecclesial discipline, presenting forgiveness as a non-negotiable ethical demand placed upon members of the Christian community.<sup>2</sup> John Nolland further underlines that forgiveness presupposes the seriousness of sin, yet his focus remains on the responsibility of the one who forgives rather than on the ethical role of the offender.<sup>3</sup> While these studies rightly highlight the necessity and limitlessness of forgiveness, they give little attention to the ethical responsibility of the offender, particularly in situations involving deep trauma. This study differs by arguing that forgiveness in Matthew 18:21–35, understood as an expression of Jesus' hospitality, presupposes not only the victim's readiness to forgive but also the offender's self-awareness and acknowledgment of guilt. In particular, the study finds that while humanity must look to Jesus as the limitless giver of forgiveness, human beings are also entitled to receive acknowledgment of wrongdoing from their fellow human beings. This does not mean forgiveness cannot be extended in such situations; rather, it points to the necessity of recognizing one's own position as a fallible human being. In this respect, the study will further explore the concept of self-awareness.

## **METHODS**

In this study, I employ a qualitative method through a descriptive approach and literature review. The study will be presented by first outlining how the intended theme is portrayed in the text. This, of course, cannot be separated from the interpretation of the text itself, but ultimately it will lead to the ethical values implied within it. In undertaking this effort, I seek to analyze sources that support the discussion of this topic, such as biblical works as well as books that introduce key figures who have contributed significantly to ethical

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*Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 704-7.

<sup>2</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Volume II: Matthew 8–18* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 789-93.

<sup>3</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 758-61.

discourse. All of these serve to strengthen my ideas, ensuring that this work offers novelty while remaining grounded in the insights of established scholars.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Biblical and Scholarly Perspectives on Forgiveness**

The Bible recounts many stories that deal with forgiveness, spanning from the Old Testament (OT) to the New Testament (NT). In the OT, several remarkable narratives concerning forgiveness are presented. First is the story of Esau forgiving Jacob, who had taken his birthright (Gen. 27:33). Although Esau initially harbored open resentment and sought to kill his brother, Jacob, he eventually reconciled with him. Jacob approached Esau with fear and reverence, while Esau ran to embrace his brother without restraint. This moment led Jacob to rightly acknowledge the gracious gift of God. He recognized how God had clearly transformed Esau, as seen not in a face marked by hatred or bitterness, but by brotherly love.<sup>4</sup> In short, Esau's forgiveness toward Jacob is regarded as the generosity of God extended to someone who had clearly done wrong.

Second is the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers, who had sold him into slavery (Gen. 37:12-36; 45:4-8). Despite having the authority to punish them without mercy, Joseph chose not to retaliate. Instead, he interpreted their actions as part of God's plan to demonstrate His sovereign love and care for many nations through Joseph's leadership in Egypt during the famine.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Joseph transformed his brothers' wrongdoing into a personal motivation to channel God's love to all people.

Third is the story of David forgiving Saul, who repeatedly sought to harm him (1 Sam. 18:6-11; 24:1-15; 26:1-25). David made no attempt at revenge but instead spared Saul's life. For David, retaliation was unnecessary, for Saul's fate

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<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, *Genesis 12-33: The Father of Israel* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2015), 141.

<sup>5</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2004), 159.

rested solely in God's hands.<sup>6</sup> The lesson here is that vengeance does not belong to humanity, for life itself belongs only to the Lord.

The NT likewise features three compelling narratives of forgiveness. First is the story of a father forgiving his "lost" son (Luke 15:11-32). This act of forgiveness reveals the restoration of the relationship between father and son. The son is a repentant sinner, while the father is a figure of compassion. The father no longer dwells on the wrongs committed by his son but focuses instead on forming a renewed and better relationship through his compassion.<sup>7</sup> Such forgiveness is future-oriented, refusing to rehash past failures, and instead concentrating on constructive solutions.

Second is the story of Jesus forgiving the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). According to the law of Moses, adultery was punishable by death, often by stoning. Yet Jesus defended the woman, upholding justice by declaring that no one is without sin, and therefore no one had the right to condemn her. What Jesus did for this woman opened the way for her to embrace a new life in the forgiveness and freedom He provided. This does not mean that Jesus dismissed justice; rather, He upheld justice on the basis of His grace.

Third, and serving as the core and central focus of forgiveness, is the parable of forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-35). In this passage, Peter first asks Jesus how many times he should forgive. Jesus responds with a number far beyond Peter's expectation, seventy times seven, and then proceeds to present the parable of forgiveness.<sup>8</sup> This parable will be further explored in the subsequent sections, particularly in relation to the description and implications of forgiveness.

Joseph Butler, a bishop of the Anglican Church, cited by Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton argued that forgiveness is the rejection of resentment, the

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Borgman, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 51.

<sup>7</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke: New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 582.

<sup>8</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997).

resolve to overcome anger and hatred that naturally arise toward an offender who cannot be justified or excused. Butler emphasized the distinction between “forgiving” and “forgetting” (which may occur incidentally). Forgiving is a deliberate act, carried out for a reason, as an expression of virtue and moral duty. Forgetting, on the other hand, may simply happen on its own. Yet Butler stressed that resentment can turn a person into someone vengeful, and thus forgiveness is justified as a way to avoid undesirable consequences. Moreover, he stated that without forgiveness, resentment remains a barrier to many human relationships.

<sup>9</sup> It is clear, then, that Butler recommended forgiveness over forgetting, since forgetting does not necessarily eliminate the element of revenge.

Julie J. Exline and Roy F. Baumeister, both psychologists, observed that victims are far more likely to forgive offenders who respond with genuine remorse. Offenders must acknowledge their wrongdoing, offer sincere apologies with a sense of guilt, and take positive steps to “make amends” for their actions.<sup>10</sup> For forgiveness to occur, it involves not only the “victim” but also the offender’s participation in humbling themselves to admit their fault.

Jacques Derrida argued that true forgiveness consists in forgiving the unforgivable. If forgiveness were only extended to what is forgivable, the very notion of forgiveness would vanish. True forgiveness, therefore, must involve the attempt to forgive what seems unforgivable, whether murder, bloodshed, or acts that cause deep trauma.<sup>11</sup> In essence, genuine forgiveness is universal and unconditional.

Emmanuel Levinas offered a perspective distinct yet not contradictory to the preceding thinkers: forgiveness is a reversal of time, as though the act had never been committed by the offender. In forgiveness, the forgiver acts upon the

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 15-17.

<sup>10</sup> J. J. Exline and Roy F. Baumeister, “Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance: Benefits and Barriers,” in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. M. E. McCullough, K. I. Pargament, and C. E. Thoresen (New York: The Guilford Press, 2000), 136.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001), vii-viii.

past, granting the offender a new past, namely, a past that is forgiven, which releases the offender from the weight of their offensive history and makes possible a new beginning.<sup>12</sup> In short, forgiveness opens the door to a new future: a renewed opportunity to become good.

### **A Description of Forgiveness Between Jesus and Humanity, and Among Human Beings, according to Matthew 18:21-35**

One cause of disharmony within the circle of Jesus' disciples was the actions or attitudes of an individual that were perceived by the rest of the group as "oppositional." They realized that it would be dangerous to allow personal hostilities to poison the community. Thus, forgiveness became the key to restoring relationships toward what is good and harmonious. Verses 21 and 22 in Matthew 18 serve as both the introduction and the heart of how forgiveness ought to be extended, namely forgiveness without limit. Verse 35, in turn, provides the conclusion, showing how human beings are to forgive one another just as God has forgiven them.

The concept of forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35 is anchored in the Greek verb ἀφίημι, which carries a meaning far richer than a mere emotional act of letting go. Lexically, ἀφίημι denotes "to release," "to remit," or "to cancel an obligation," particularly in legal, financial, and moral contexts. According to BDAG, the term is frequently used to signify the remission of debts or sins, emphasizing the release of a legitimate claim rather than the denial of wrongdoing.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Louw and Nida classify ἀφίημι within the semantic domain of removing guilt resulting from wrongdoing, highlighting its juridical and relational dimensions.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher R. Allers, "Undoing What Has Been Done: Arendt and Levinas on Forgiveness," in *Forgiveness in Perspective*, ed. Christopher R. Allers and Marieke Smit (New York: Rodopi B.V., 2010), 31.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 155-56.

<sup>14</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*. 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 502.

In Matthew 18:21-35, the meaning of ἀφίημι is interpreted through the parable's controlling metaphor of debt. R. T. France notes that forgiveness in this passage is expressed entirely in economic terms, namely the cancellation of an unpayable debt, which serves as an analogy for the remission of sin.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, this cancellation does not negate the reality of the debt itself; rather, it presupposes its seriousness. Davies and Allison stress that ἀφίημι in this context refers to the withdrawal of the demand for repayment, not the erasure of the offense.<sup>16</sup> John Nolland further underscores that forgiveness does not trivialize wrongdoing but assumes its gravity as the very condition that makes forgiveness meaningful.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in Matthew 18:21-35, ἀφίημι frames forgiveness as an ethical act that releases the offender from rightful claims while simultaneously presupposing the acknowledgment of guilt, an understanding crucial for interpreting forgiveness in contexts of deep relational harm and trauma.

First, Peter's proposal of up to seven times (a number often used to symbolize perfection) in verse 21 was intended to express the outer limit of one's generosity. According to rabbinic teaching at the time, a person was expected to forgive up to three times; on the fourth, forgiveness was no longer required. Yet Peter proposed more than what was considered the maximum by rabbinic standards, seven times.<sup>18</sup> This reveals Peter's attempt to demonstrate an extraordinary willingness to forgive, exceeding the conventional Jewish norms of his day.

Jesus, however, rejected Peter's suggestion, declaring that it was not enough to forgive seven times but rather "seventy times seven." This number alludes to the story in Genesis 4:24 about Lamech's vengeance, which uses the

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<sup>15</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 704-5.

<sup>16</sup> Davies and Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 790-91.

<sup>17</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 760.

<sup>18</sup> D. A. Carson, Walter W. Wessel, and Walter L. Liefeld, *Matthew, Mark, Luke: The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 8* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1984), 405.



same figure. Such hyperbolic language deepens the understanding of forgiveness: a disciple must be as extravagant in forgiveness as Lamech was in vengeance.<sup>19</sup> In other words, members of the Christian community must practice forgiveness without measure, not merely three or seven times, but seventy times seven, signifying that forgiveness cannot be exhausted or counted.

Second, Jesus further explained God's forgiveness toward His people through the parable of a servant who owed his king ten thousand talents (vv. 23-25). Ten thousand talents represented an unimaginably vast debt, the largest sum conceivable. Even selling his wife, children, and possessions would not begin to cover it.<sup>20</sup> Such a debt was humanly unpayable, highlighting the servant's utter hopelessness.

Some commentators note that the figure given in the text refers to a measure of weight, namely silver. One talent of silver was typically valued at six thousand denarii. Since a single denarius was a day's wage for a laborer (cf. Matt. 20:1-15), a debt of ten thousand talents equaled sixty million denarii, an amount that would require saving one hundred percent of wages for 165,000 years.<sup>21</sup>

In verse 26, the servant's plea, "Be patient with me", was little more than an impossible promise to repay. At the very least, he sought more time to settle his debt. Yet rather than granting mere patience, the king, moved with compassion, completely forgave the debt (v. 27).<sup>22</sup> In short, the king recognized the futility of repayment and, out of mercy, chose to cancel the servant's debt altogether.

As the servant had been forgiven his immense debt, he was expected to act likewise toward others. Instead, verses 28-30 depict a striking failure: when a fellow servant owed him one hundred denarii, he had the man thrown into

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<sup>19</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 636-37.

<sup>20</sup> David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew: New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), 278.

<sup>21</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 637.

<sup>22</sup> Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew: New Century Bible Commentary*, 278.

prison for failing to pay. One hundred denarii equaled roughly one hundred days' wages, a minuscule fraction (1/600,000) of the first servant's forgiven debt.<sup>23</sup>

Because of this merciless act, the king summoned the first servant once more. Though his debt had been forgiven, his refusal to show mercy toward a fellow servant revealed him as a "wicked servant." He was then handed over to the jailers for torture until he could repay the unpayable debt (vv. 32-34). This illustrates the dual nature of the heavenly Father, overflowing in mercy yet severe in judgment.<sup>24</sup> As a God of compassion, He cannot accept as His own those who themselves lack compassion.

Thus, the fifteen verses of Matthew 18:21-35 employ the metaphor of "debt" to signify sin in need of forgiveness (cf. 6:12), and the figure of the "king" to represent God as the one who forgives humanity. The parable vividly portrays that forgiveness must be reciprocal: God cannot be expected to forgive the unforgiving. The disciples are assumed to be those who have already been forgiven. Clearly, the initiative lies with God, who forgave first; yet the forgiveness received by humans may be nullified by their failure to forgive others.<sup>25</sup> The parable strongly underscores that those who have been forgiven must also forgive, lest they demonstrate themselves incapable of extending forgiveness.

In conclusion, Matthew 18:21-35 emphasizes two central truths: (1) forgiveness must be unlimited, regardless of the magnitude of the offense, and (2) forgiveness requires initiative acknowledge wrongdoing and assume responsibility, just as God Himself took the initiative to freely forgive His servant.

### **Interpreting Forgiveness Toward Others**

The fundamental idea in discussing forgiveness in its practical sense is that forgiveness must arise from within the individual (the victim) and must be

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<sup>23</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 638.

<sup>24</sup> Carson, Wessel, and Liefeld, *Matthew, Mark, Luke: The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 8*, 407.

<sup>25</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 635.

extended without limit and without regard to the size or severity of the offense committed. Therefore, the act of forgiving means practicing a moral virtue, imitating the essential nature of God. To forgive is to follow the ideals and way of life exemplified by Jesus. Thus, forgiveness represents the ethics of the kingdom of God (including love and compassion).<sup>26</sup> Those who embody the ethics of the kingdom are those who strive to make God's reign present in the world by practicing mercy.

A person forgives not because of the general belief that every event has its own cause, but because hatred must be prevented or restrained in certain situations for specific reasons. More broadly, this may be classified as a voluntary act; otherwise, it risks becoming offensive or harmful in the moral character of the relationship between the one who has wronged (the perpetrator) and the one who has been wronged (the victim).<sup>27</sup> In other words, if hatred is nurtured, it will gradually become dominant within the self, shaping a character of resentment.

However, forgiveness also often seems undeserved, for certain transgressions or offenses, in some sense, cannot be forgiven (due to their seriousness, brutality, or the depth of betrayal involved). In such cases, forgiveness cannot be forced, since at its core it must involve an inner change of heart on the part of the victim, releasing hatred and seeing the perpetrator with renewed mind and heart. This commitment cannot be coerced, much less imposed by the presence of a third party.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, if someone attempts to forgive merely to soothe their own mind, whatever outcome they achieve does not fully amount to true forgiveness.

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<sup>26</sup> Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99.

<sup>27</sup> Jerome Neu, "To Understand All Is to Forgive All – Or Is It?," in *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy*, ed. Sharon Lamb and Jeffrie G. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19.

<sup>28</sup> Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 20.

### **What About Trauma?**

When traumatic crimes and injustices committed in one generation remain unresolved, the following generations are inevitably drawn into conflict. In the United States, the impact of mass trauma, such as African slavery and the genocide of Indigenous peoples, continues to echo in the collective consciousness. Immigrant groups who fled extreme circumstances, such as the Nazi Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, or the Vietnam War, have passed down a “legacy of memory” of these events to their descendants. The fate of all individuals involved is deeply accounted for. Although they may have perished, both the victims and perpetrators of mass crimes and trauma maintain their presence in the lives of others.<sup>29</sup> This compels children and grandchildren to feel obligated to resolve what they did not begin and to atone for what they did not commit. In this way, the obligation to pursue revenge remains a persistent force within the next generation.

Transgenerational forgiveness<sup>30</sup> cannot be achieved through a simple apology followed by acceptance. When the actions that caused harm cannot be undone, the path toward forgiveness places specific demands on both sides. For perpetrators or their descendants, forgiveness requires an acknowledgment of guilt, an expression of genuine remorse, and a reasonable offer of restitution. For victims and their descendants, forgiveness entails an act of profound compassion and humility that restores the sweetness of life.<sup>31</sup> Thus, forgiveness leaves the perpetrator with a sense of guilt while liberating the victim from the desire for revenge.

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<sup>29</sup> Ani Kalayjian and Raymond F. Paloutzian, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation Psychological Pathways to Conflict Transformation and Peace Building* (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2009), 149.

<sup>30</sup> In this study, “transgenerational forgiveness” refers to the process by which forgiveness is sought, negotiated, or withheld across generations in situations where trauma, guilt, and moral responsibility extend beyond the original victims and perpetrators, particularly in cases of mass violence and historical injustice.

<sup>31</sup> Kalayjian and Paloutzian, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation Psychological Pathways to Conflict Transformation and Peace Building*, 149.

The cases presented here, of course, do not capture the entirety of traumatic events. Forgiveness is never easy, especially when life itself has been taken. Yet this does not mean that the realization of forgiveness is impossible, provided that the perpetrator experiences and expresses heartfelt remorse and is willing to offer "reparation" in a form deemed appropriate by the victim.

To arrive at such genuine remorse, however, requires self-awareness. Awareness is the state or capacity of understanding, feeling, or perceiving events, objects, or sensory patterns. Cited from Agoes Dariyo, Daniel Goleman asserts that self-awareness functions primarily as a way of reflecting on one's emotional state through past experiences and circumstances.<sup>32</sup> In this study, self-awareness is understood not merely as emotional recognition, but as an ethical capacity that enables the offender to acknowledge guilt and assume responsibility toward the victim. Here, awareness occupies a deeper role than mere knowledge; it involves spontaneous emotional responses.

In such cases, Sydney S. Shoemaker explains that an individual must engage in self-reference through identification. Superficial self-identification produces a kind of immunity to wrongdoing.<sup>33</sup> From this, it becomes clear that self-awareness is a matter of great seriousness: it is not merely recognizing that an action was wrong and then simply forgetting it, for such superficiality will have consequences in the days to come when wrongdoing is repeated. On the contrary, awareness is something attained when one has truly reflected and recognized that an action was wrong through identification with past deeds, followed by reflection, and ultimately by offering a response to the victim (acknowledging the wrongdoing and accepting whatever consequences may follow).

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<sup>32</sup> Agoes Dariyo, "Peran Self Awareness Dan Ego Support Terhadap Kepuasan Hidup Remaja Tionghoa," *Kajian Ilmiah Psikologi* 15, no. 2 (2016): 254-74, <https://journal.unika.ac.id/index.php/psi/article/view/991/660>.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Brook, "Kant, Self-Awareness and Self-Reference," in *Self-Reference and Self-Awareness* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), 9-10.

## CONCLUSION

Forgiveness, like love, must be without limits. Without such forgiveness, a community cannot restore its relationships with one another, nor can it truly embody Christ in its midst. A Christian community ceases to be itself if it does not insist that its members live according to the standard of Christ's conduct. Yet the spirit of forgiveness is not a form of indifference toward sin. It does not mean that Jesus failed to uphold justice; rather, He upheld justice on the basis of His grace, granting forgiveness as the exclusive way to disarm hatred.

God places no limits on forgiveness toward humanity, as illustrated in the parable that contrasts divine forgiveness with human forgiveness. This is because there are no boundaries to God's mercy toward His people. A community of the forgiven must, therefore, be a forgiving community. The deeper motive for this is gratitude and the imitation of God's grace.

It becomes clear that forgiveness is future-oriented, not by reopening past wrongs, nor by merely "forgetting" them in the sense described by Butler, but by focusing instead on constructive solutions. Genuine forgiveness requires not only the participation of the "victim" but also the humility of the offender in acknowledging wrongdoing. Through repentance, the offender lessens guilt; through forgiveness, the victim quenches hatred; forgiveness heals and restores.

Once again, true forgiveness, as taught by Jesus, must be forgiveness "seventy times seven" (without limit). True forgiveness must be forgiveness of "ten thousand talents" (without condition). In essence, genuine forgiveness is forgiveness that is both universal and unconditional.

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## **Being Born Again: A Narrative Interpretation of John 3:1-21 and Its Implications for New Life**

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### **Abstract:**

This study is motivated by the importance of understanding the concept of being born again (new birth) in John 3:1-21 as a prerequisite for entering the Kingdom of God and experiencing spiritual transformation. The method used is narrative interpretation, which emphasizes analyzing the biblical text in its final form with a focus on characters, plot, and the narrator's perspective. The purpose of the study is to explore the meaning of new birth in the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus and to relate it to the reality of the new life that believers must live. The scope of the study includes a narrative analysis of John 3:1-21 and a study of pneumatology in the New Testament. The findings indicate that new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit who spiritually revives and transforms a person, producing a new life that bears fruit in love, obedience, and growth in faith. The implications of the study affirm that the new life must be manifested in concrete actions, including ecological and social responsibilities as part of service and obedience to God. This study encourages readers to apply the message of spiritual transformation holistically in their daily lives.

### **Keywords:**

Born Again; John 3:1-21;  
Narrative; New Life;  
Nicodemus

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## INTRODUCTION

John 3:1-21 records an important conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. This conversation took place at night and discussed the concept of being born again as the primary requirement for seeing and entering the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and respected Jewish religious leader, as well as a teacher of Israel. As a Pharisee, he was part of a religious group that was very devoted to the Torah and Jewish traditions, which generally opposed Jesus and His teachings.<sup>1</sup>

According to Brown, the narrative of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus is one of the most important dialogues in the Gospel of John. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he had not yet understood the true truth that is likened to light. Nicodemus acknowledged that Jesus was a teacher sent by God, but in reality, Jesus was more than that truly from God. Therefore, Nicodemus is depicted as someone whose faith was still imperfect.<sup>2</sup>

One reason worth considering why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night relates to his background of being bound to religious tradition and the possible pressure from other religious leaders. However, he tried to approach Jesus to discuss privately, but with great caution so that no one would see him learning from Jesus because this would create a negative stigma from people around him who saw him learning many things from Jesus. Nicodemus's coming at night also shows his deep longing and inner restlessness. He had heard about Jesus' miracles and teachings, and his heart was moved to seek truth further, but he had to cross the social, religious, and status "chasm" that separated him from Jesus. Night time became the right time for a private and secret meeting so he could learn directly from Jesus without disturbance or judgment from others.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anthoneta Faoth, "Refleksi Pemaknaan Hidup Baru Dalam Pandangan Paulus," *ANTUSIAS: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pelayanan* VII, no. 2 (Desember 2021): 107.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Brown and Marion L. Soards, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Abridged edition, The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 131.

<sup>3</sup> Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John: Based on the Revised Standard Version*, Repr, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans [u.a.], 1992), 149–50.

Nicodemus's night time visit to Jesus, as described in John 3, reflects both his cautious approach due to social and religious pressures and his inner yearning for truth. The opinion that Nicodemus came at night to avoid stigma and to seek Jesus privately is well-supported by the context of the Gospel. His status as a Pharisee and a leader among the Jews would have made public association with Jesus risky, potentially damaging his reputation and position. However, his restlessness and curiosity show that he was genuinely seeking spiritual understanding beyond mere tradition. This interpretation is sound because it aligns with the Gospel's portrayal of Nicodemus as someone wrestling with faith and truth, even if he initially approached Jesus with hesitation and secrecy.

The explanation strikes me as highly plausible, capturing the complexity Nicodemus faced as a religious leader of his time. His decision to visit Jesus at night was not a mere matter of convenience but reflected an inner conflict between his deep spiritual curiosity and the social pressures and expectations from his religious peers. As a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus held a respected position he needed to protect, so his private meeting with Jesus reveals both boldness and prudence. Nighttime served as a "safe space" where he could seek the truth without risking judgment or confrontation from other religious authorities who opposed Jesus' teachings. This account also underscores that the pursuit of genuine truth often requires humility to set aside ego and traditions, even if it means initially doing so in secrecy.

Jesus teaching to Nicodemus about being born again became the foundation for a broader understanding of new life in Christ. Being born again is the starting point where the Holy Spirit revives the human spirit, enabling believers to experience true spiritual transformation. After experiencing new birth, a person is called to live a new life a process of growth and renewal that

displays the fruit of the Spirit and obedience to Christ, as Paul explained in Romans 6:3-4.<sup>4</sup>

New life is a concept of profound change experienced by everyone who places their trust in Jesus. Everyone who lives a new life will certainly depend their life on Jesus and receive Christ to transform them from the old life to the new life. Everyone who accepts Christ as Savior and leaves their evil deeds to always live in Christ. According to Paul, the concept of new life is not just remaining in Christ without doing anything, but everyone who wants to live a new life must manifest the glory of Christ who has risen. Everyone who wants to live a new life must also be willing to be like Christ who has risen by obeying all His commands and abiding in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The Apostle Paul defines in Romans 6:3-4, "Everyone who has been baptized into Christ has been baptized into His death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so also everyone will live in new life." The foundation for everyone to receive new life is only because Jesus Christ has been raised, so everyone who receives Christ will also be raised and will receive new life in Jesus Christ. Through His resurrection, every Christian must also live in Christ's resurrection through new life, namely by repenting and leaving evil deeds, because evil has been buried together with Jesus' death. Everyone who has received new life will receive the Holy Spirit who will guide them to receive sanctification and abide in Christ. As Christ is love, so everyone who lives a new life through Jesus' death must also live in love.<sup>6</sup>

The Apostle Paul's emphasis on the resurrection as the foundation of new life in Romans 6:3-4 highlights the objective reality of Christ's resurrection and its transformative power for believers. In contrast, Rudolf Bultmann argued that salvation is not merely a result of historical events, but must be personally

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<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According To Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (La Vergne: IVP, 2020), 215–20.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Guthrie, *Teologi Perjanjian Baru*, II (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1992), 297.

<sup>6</sup> Guthrie, *Teologi Perjanjian Baru*, II, 297.

experienced by each believer as an existential event. For Bultmann, the death and resurrection of Jesus become meaningful only when internalized through faith and personal transformation, rather than simply being accepted as past facts. This existential interpretation complements Paul's teaching by emphasizing the necessity of personal faith and experience, but it does not negate the objective historical basis of Christ's resurrection. Both perspectives can be seen as complementary: Paul grounds new life in Christ's resurrection, while Bultmann stresses the personal appropriation of that event.

Previous research has extensively discussed the salvation that Jesus introduced to Nicodemus, as well as Nicodemus's active response in receiving that teaching. However, in this study, I attempt to identify the research gap by connecting the concept of salvation to new life and concrete steps of new life. These two concepts are continuations of the theme of being born again discussed in that narrative. Thus, this research not only focuses on academic aspects alone but also has applicative value, namely to increase awareness that everyone who has experienced new birth must manifest real change in their life through new life and apply the Narrative of John 3:1-21 in Understanding New Life and concrete steps of new life.

The responsible attitude of humans who have lived a new life is a reflection of Christ's love reflected in daily deeds and controlled by His indwelling in believers, whose lives are led by the Holy Spirit and leave behind the old sinful life pattern. New birth is the starting point of spiritual transformation where a person receives God's gift through faith, is spiritually revived, and establishes an intimate relationship with God in Christ. However, it must be followed by a continuous process of new life, namely living a renewed life according to God's will by producing good fruit and imitating Christ's righteousness. The attitude of new life also includes the responsibility to care for God's created environment as an expression of love and honor to the Creator, so that new life not only focuses on spiritual aspects but is also manifested in concrete actions that maintain environmental sustainability and support

sustainable living, reflecting God's character that is full of love and holistic justice.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of new birth in John's Gospel (John 3:1-21) is about spiritual rebirth and transformation through faith in Jesus. While the passage itself does not directly mention ecological responsibility, the broader theme of new life in Christ living in love, righteousness, and holiness can be extended to include care for creation. The renewal of life in Christ calls believers to reflect God's character, which includes love, justice, and stewardship of the created world. The Gospel of John emphasizes that those born again are led by the Spirit (John 3:8) and are to live in accordance with God's will, which can be understood as encompassing care for the environment as an expression of love and justice. John 3:8 is particularly relevant: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." This verse illustrates the mysterious and transformative nature of new birth, which, when lived out, should affect every aspect of life including how one relates to the environment. The Spirit-led life, as described in John, calls for holistic transformation, which can be interpreted as including ecological responsibility as a natural extension of love and justice in Christian living.

## **METHODS**

In this study, I use the narrative interpretation method to reconstruct the text of John 3:1-21. According to Mark Allan Powell, narrative interpretation is a new and innovative approach in investigating the Bible that places primary focus on narrative characters in biblical texts. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the Bible, especially the Gospels which contain many narratives about the life and work of Jesus, as a complete and independent literary work. In the Historical-Critical interpretation tradition, narrative

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<sup>7</sup> Guthrie, *Teologi Perjanjian Baru*, II, 133.

elements in biblical texts often receive inadequate attention because the focus is more directed toward the history behind the text, such as historical background, social context, and reconstruction of past facts. As a result, the rich and dynamic narrative dimension in the text is often neglected.<sup>8</sup>

This research begins by identifying problems regarding the concept of being born again found in John 3:1-21, then constructing the text in its final form as a complete narrative with focus on the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Next, relevant literature sources are collected to strengthen the theoretical foundation and interpretation. Then, an in-depth discussion is conducted on the interpretation of John 3:1-21 by examining the characters, plot, and theological message contained in the text. Finally, this research attempts to present the meaning of being born again in concrete steps of human life that has experienced spiritual transformation, so that the research results are not only academic but also applicable in daily faith life.

The main problem related to the concept of being born again in John 3:1-21, especially when approached through narrative interpretation, is the ambiguity and misunderstanding surrounding the phrase "born again" (or "born from above") in Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and teacher of Israel, struggles to comprehend Jesus' statement that one must be born again to enter the kingdom of God, revealing a fundamental confusion about the nature of spiritual rebirth. This confusion is central to the narrative tension and theological depth of the passage, as Jesus uses the dialogue to challenge conventional religious understanding and to introduce a radical, transformative experience that transcends mere ritual or intellectual knowledge.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **John 3:1-21 as a Narrative**

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, New Testament Series (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 1990), 35.

## Overview of the Gospel of John

The author of the Gospel of John is traditionally believed to be the Apostle John, son of Zebedeus and the beloved disciple of Jesus, who wrote this Gospel while in Ephesus using Aramaic as his mother tongue, although there are doubts due to the clear Greek language ability and Hellenistic thought patterns in the text. However, this can be explained by the influence of Hellenization in Palestine in the first century. Additionally, there is an opinion that the author is a disciple of the Apostle John who recorded his teacher's teachings and writings, as well as the possibility that the author is John the Elder, a figure in the Ephesian church who was also known as the beloved disciple, so there is a combined theory that this Gospel was written by the Apostle John with contributions from that elder. Some scholars, such as Sanders, propose that John Mark, who received sources from Lazarus, Jesus' beloved disciple, is the author of this Gospel, although this view receives less widespread support. There is also a view that the beloved disciple in the Gospel of John is an unnamed figure, possibly one of the twelve disciples or an ideal member of the Johannine community, whose identity was deliberately obscured by the author to emphasize the Gospel's message.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding the authorship of the Gospel of John, I believe the most plausible position is that the Apostle John, son of Zebedee, was the primary source of the Gospel, but it was likely written or compiled by someone within his circle possibly a disciple or scribe based on his testimony and teaching. The Gospel's sophisticated Greek style and Hellenistic thought patterns do suggest a level of education that may not have been typical for a Galilean fisherman, but this can be explained by the influence of the broader Hellenistic culture in Ephesus and the possible involvement of literate followers who shaped the final text. The tradition of the Beloved Disciple as the author fits well with the Gospel's internal references and the early church's consistent witness, even if the exact process of composition involved collaboration. In my view, the Apostle John's

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<sup>9</sup> Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 28.



authority and witness are central, but the final form of the Gospel reflects the work of a Johannine community that preserved and shaped his message for a wider audience.

The writing of the Gospel of John is estimated to have occurred between 90 and 110 AD, most likely in Ephesus, after Christians were expelled from Jewish synagogues around 90 AD. This evidence is supported by historical records and ancient manuscripts showing that the Gospel was already circulating before 135 AD. Although there are some opinions proposing earlier or later dates, the majority of scholars agree that the Fourth Gospel was composed at the end of the first century as a response to the social and religious situation of that time.<sup>10</sup>

## Characterization

### *Nicodemus*

Nicodemus is portrayed as a learned Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish religious institution. He is a figure very devoted to the Torah and oral tradition, and has great social position and influence. However, despite having deep religious knowledge, Nicodemus shows doubt and ignorance of the spiritual dimension that Jesus teaches. His coming to Jesus at night symbolizes his inner struggle and longing for the light of truth amid spiritual darkness, as well as an open heart attitude to learn despite having to face social risks. Nicodemus represents humans trapped in the paradigm of externals and law, who have not understood that salvation is the work of the Holy Spirit that totally changes the heart.<sup>11</sup>

Nicodemus is insightful and captures the symbolic and psychological depth of his character. Nicodemus is indeed portrayed as a man of high religious

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1975), 94–95.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), 229.

status and learning, yet his nighttime visit to Jesus highlights his inner uncertainty and spiritual longing. His position as a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin underscores the contrast between his external authority and internal doubt. I agree that this portrayal emphasizes the Gospel's theme that even those deeply rooted in religious tradition may be spiritually blind and in need of the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. The author's depiction of Nicodemus as someone struggling between the security of tradition and the challenge of new spiritual realities is compelling and theologically rich.

### *Jesus*

Jesus appears as Teacher and Savior who reveals the secrets of the Kingdom of God personally to Nicodemus. Jesus affirms that to see and enter the Kingdom of God, one must experience new birth from water and Spirit, namely spiritual transformation that can only be done by the Holy Spirit. In this dialogue, Jesus criticizes the human tendency, including religious leaders like Nicodemus, to rely on knowledge, status, and rituals without experiencing true heart change. Jesus also reveals God's great love through the giving of His only Son so that everyone who believes may obtain eternal life (John 3:16). Thus, Jesus not only teaches new doctrine but also opens the way for humans to experience new life full of power and peace in relationship with God. This narrative presents the tension between the old world bound to law and the new world brought by the Holy Spirit, while inviting readers to enter a living and transformative faith experience.<sup>12</sup>

### *Setting*

#### *Place Setting*

The event of John 3:1-21 took place in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was not only the center of Jewish religious life but also the gathering place of religious leaders

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<sup>12</sup> Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 232–33.

like Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin (John 3:1). This city is laden with history and symbolism, witnessing various important events in the tradition of Abrahamic religions, including the existence of the Temple which was the center of Jewish worship and a highly honored location by Christians due to its connection with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Nicodemus's presence as a religious figure in Jerusalem confirms the complex social and religious context in which this dialogue occurred.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Time Setting*

The meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus took place at night (John 3:2). The choice of nighttime has profound symbolic meaning. Night symbolizes an atmosphere of spiritual darkness, uncertainty, and doubt experienced by Nicodemus as a religious leader who began to question old teachings and seek new light of truth brought by Jesus. Nicodemus's coming at night also shows a heart attitude full of caution and personal longing to discuss intimately without disturbance, as well as possibly fear of the reaction from fellow religious leaders who opposed Jesus. Nighttime strengthens the nuance of secrecy and depth of conversation that is personal and meaningful.<sup>14</sup>

Night is a powerful symbol in the Gospel of John, representing spiritual darkness, uncertainty, and the need for revelation. Nicodemus's nighttime meeting with Jesus not only underscores his caution and desire for privacy but also conveys the broader theme of seeking light in darkness. This nuance adds depth to the conversation, making it intimate and personal, while also highlighting the risks and secrecy involved for a prominent religious figure. The symbolic use of night in John's Gospel consistently points to the tension between revelation and concealment, knowledge and ignorance, which is central to the narrative's theological message.

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<sup>13</sup> Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 149.

<sup>14</sup> Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 149.

### *Atmospheric Setting*

The atmosphere of this meeting is very contrasting and full of spiritual and intellectual tension. Nicodemus is someone who holds to the Torah, tradition, and physical understanding, while Jesus introduces a new world through teaching about new birth that is spiritual and the work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8). This dialogue takes place in a serious and reflective atmosphere, where Jesus challenges the old paradigm with revolutionary concepts about birth from water and Spirit as an absolute requirement to enter God's Kingdom. This atmosphere also reflects the tension between established religious tradition and Jesus' teaching that brings radical change. Nicodemus is a Pharisee with an upright and faithful heart, showing a heart attitude full of doubt and slowly beginning to accept the new truth that Jesus conveys. This conversation becomes an important moment marking the shift in spiritual understanding from mere external obedience toward the experience of being born again by the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

### *Point of View*

In John 3:1-21, the point of view used is a third-person perspective that is narrative and descriptive. The narrator tells the event objectively from outside, showing the interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus. The narrator presents the dialogue and actions of the characters chronologically and clearly, so readers can follow the course of conversation and understand its context without subjective interpretation from the narrator. The third-person point of view in this narrative provides a balanced picture between the two main characters Jesus as teacher and Nicodemus as listener of Jesus' teaching focusing on what Jesus said.

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<sup>15</sup> Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, 150–51.

## **Interpretation**

### **Social Context and Nicodemus's Identity**

Nicodemus is a representation of the Jewish religious elite during Jesus' time, a law-abiding Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, the highest religious and legal governing body in Jerusalem (John 3:1). As a Pharisee, Nicodemus came from a group that strictly maintained obedience to the Law of Moses and strict oral tradition, so they often found it difficult to accept Jesus' teaching that emphasized new spiritual life and love that transcends formal ritual (Luke 11:37–54). Pharisees were known to pay great attention to external aspects of obedience, while Jesus called for inner transformation that can only occur through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Nicodemus's coming to Jesus at night (John 3:2) contains strong symbolic meaning. In Jewish and biblical tradition, night is often associated with darkness, ignorance, and unenlightened spiritual condition (John 1:5). Night can also symbolize fear, doubt, and isolation. Nicodemus's coming at night can be interpreted as a picture of his inner struggle and doubt. He sought the light of truth amid the spiritual darkness that had been binding him. This coming also shows courage and genuine longing to understand Jesus, even though he had to oppose social norms and pressure from his own group.<sup>17</sup>

Nicodemus represents the old world holding to the Torah and tradition, while Jesus brings a new world focusing on spiritual life, love, and the work of the Holy Spirit. In their conversation, Jesus affirms that to enter God's Kingdom, one must "be born again" (John 3:3). This concept of new birth is very foreign to Nicodemus who thinks physically and literally. He is still trapped in the paradigm of "flesh" and "law," while Jesus invites him to see spiritual reality that can only be experienced through the Holy Spirit. This marks a shift from external obedience toward total inner transformation.

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<sup>16</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody (Mass.): Hendrickson, 2003), 535–36.

<sup>17</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 536–38.

The new birth taught by Jesus is not merely a metaphor but a real spiritual experience where the Holy Spirit transforms the human heart. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6) affirms the duality between mortal physical life and eternal spiritual life. In this context, Nicodemus is invited to understand that salvation cannot be obtained through human effort or mere law obedience, but through God's grace working in the human heart through the Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

In Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus immediately affirms that to see the Kingdom of God, one must "be born again" a concept shocking to Nicodemus because it contradicts the physical understanding and Torah law he had held. This new birth is not physical birth but spiritual birth which is the work of the Holy Spirit in a person. Jesus affirms that only through this new birth can humans enter God's Kingdom and obtain eternal life.<sup>19</sup>

The Pharisees generally understood the Kingdom of God as a future, eschatological reality that would be established by God's direct intervention, often involving the restoration of Israel and the defeat of evil. For them, entry into the Kingdom was associated with strict adherence to the Torah and the hope for a Messiah who would fulfill God's promises. They did not expect a radical spiritual transformation in the present, but rather a future event marked by divine judgment and vindication. Jesus' teaching about being "born again" directly challenged this expectation, shifting the focus from external obedience and future hope to an immediate, internal, and spiritual rebirth that is possible only through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus also touches on God's great love for the world by giving His only Son so that everyone who believes will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). This marks a shift from the old understanding focused on law obedience toward

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<sup>18</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 552–55.

<sup>19</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, Reading the New Testament Series (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 98–100.

a living faith relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This conversation affirms that salvation cannot be obtained only through knowledge or religious obedience, but through faith and new birth by the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

#### Paradigm of New Birth

The concept of new birth introduced by Jesus in John 3:3-8 is a very revolutionary and profound spiritual paradigm that changes human perspective on salvation and relationship with God. When Jesus says that one must "be born of water and Spirit" to be able to see and enter God's Kingdom, He is not speaking about physical birth as commonly understood by Nicodemus, but about spiritual birth that touches the core of human existence, identity, heart, and soul.<sup>21</sup>

This new birth marks a fundamental transition from the darkness of sin toward the light of salvation. In the sinful human condition, humans experience spiritual death separated from God and entangled in the law of sin. However, through spiritual birth by the Holy Spirit, humans experience total renewal, a new life that enables them to live in God's love and righteousness. This is not merely behavioral or moral change but existential transformation that changes who someone truly is.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus uses the metaphor "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" to describe the mysterious yet real work of the Holy Spirit. Wind cannot be seen directly, but its impact can be felt and seen, this is the same with the Holy Spirit, who always works in human life. He moves, revives, and renews humans from within, without coercion, according to God's will. This work of the Spirit cannot be

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<sup>20</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 567–70.

<sup>21</sup> Marcus Doods, *The Expositor's Bible: The Gospel Of St. John* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 2010), 1:77–78.

<sup>22</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 366–69.

controlled or predicted by humans, but is divine power that shapes humans into new creatures in Christ.<sup>23</sup>

This new birth paradigm is very revolutionary because it challenges the old understanding focused on external obedience to law and tradition. Jesus teaches that salvation is not the result of human effort alone, but God's grace working through the Holy Spirit to revive and transform the human heart. Thus, new birth is the gateway into God's Kingdom, bringing humans from spiritual death to eternal life, from bondage to the world toward life filled by the Spirit and God's love. This concept also opens space for living and dynamic faith experience, where everyone is called to experience the work of the Holy Spirit personally and continuously in their spiritual journey. New birth is not merely a one-time event but a transformation process that continues throughout life, directing humans to become increasingly like Christ and bear fruit in love and righteousness.<sup>24</sup>

The relationship between the concept of new birth and water baptism is significant in Johannine theology. In John 3:5, Jesus explicitly connects being “born again” with being “born of water and the Spirit,” which is widely interpreted as a reference to Christian baptism. Water baptism symbolizes the cleansing and initiation into new life, while the Spirit represents the divine power that brings about spiritual transformation. Thus, baptism is not merely a ritual but the outward sign and means through which the new birth is enacted. The new birth, then, is both a spiritual reality and a sacramental event, marking the beginning of a life transformed by the Holy Spirit and lived in communion with God.

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<sup>23</sup> John Calvin, *John Calvin's Bible Commentaries On The Gospel Of John, 1 - 11* (Germany: Jazzybee Verlag, 2016), 98.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *John Calvin's Bible Commentaries On The Gospel Of John, 1 - 11*, 99–101.



### Tension Between Physical and Spiritual

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:1-21 sharply displays the deep tension between what is seen externally and what is truly real spiritually. Nicodemus, as a highly educated Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, was still very bound to the physical world and understanding that is physical or external. He tried to understand Jesus' teaching in the same way he understood the Torah and oral tradition, through intellectual knowledge, social status, and strict religious rituals. However, Jesus invites Nicodemus to see beyond what is visible to the naked eye and enter a deeper spiritual dimension, namely new birth by the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus affirms that only those born of the Spirit can experience true life, namely life that is eternal and full of God's presence. This birth from the Spirit is not merely external change but total transformation of heart and soul that brings humans out of the darkness of sin toward the light of salvation. This is a subtle yet sharp critique of the human tendency including religious leaders like Nicodemus to rely on intellectual knowledge, social status, or religious rituals as guarantee of salvation without experiencing true heart change and life renewed by the Holy Spirit.<sup>26</sup>

This tension also reflects the universal struggle experienced by many people in their faith journey, namely between belief in visible things and the need to experience spiritual reality that cannot always be seen or measured externally. Jesus invites everyone to open themselves to the work of the Holy Spirit that works mysteriously yet really, transforming life from within and bringing to living relationship with God.

The tension between belief in visible things and the need to experience spiritual reality is a central theme in Christian theology, especially in discussions about faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. "Belief in visible things" typically

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<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *John Calvin's Bible Commentaries On The Gospel Of John*, 1 - 11, 92.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *John Calvin's Bible Commentaries On The Gospel Of John*, 1 - 11, 92-94.

refers to reliance on empirical evidence, religious rituals, or material aspects of faith, while "spiritual reality" points to the invisible, transformative work of God in the inner life of believers, often experienced through the Holy Spirit. This dynamic is biblically grounded: Hebrews 11:1 describes faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," and 2 Corinthians 5:7 states, "We walk by faith, not by sight," highlighting the contrast between what can be observed and what must be trusted.

#### God's Love and the Grace of Salvation

John 3:16 is one of the most central verses in the Bible that biblically reveals the core of God's love and His saving work for humanity. This verse affirms that God's love is so great for the world which in Greek is called *kosmos*, referring to humanity in the context of salvation that He gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, as an atoning sacrifice for human sin (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). The giving of the Only Son is not a forced action but an expression of God's love full of joy and sovereignty, who sent Jesus to bear the punishment of sin so that humans could be freed from spiritual death and obtain eternal life (John 3:17; Rom. 8:32).<sup>27</sup>

Theologically, the salvation offered in this verse is grace that cannot be obtained through human effort, law obedience, or religious ritual, but through faith in Jesus as Savior and Son of God (John 3:16-18; Eph. 2:8-9). The word "believe" (*pisteuo*) in this context includes confession of faith encompassing conviction in Christ's identity, self-surrender, and obedience that produces new life (John 3:36; Matt. 7:24-27). Thus, salvation is the result of personal relationship with Christ that transforms life and brings humans from a state of perdition toward eternal life full of peace and hope (2 Cor. 5:17).

John 3:16 affirms that the purpose of Jesus' coming is not to judge the world but to save it (John 3:17). This shows that God's love is inclusive and universal, offering the opportunity of salvation to everyone without exception.

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<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *John Calvin's Bible Commentaries On The Gospel Of John*, 1 - 11, 104–7.

However, humans are given the responsibility to respond to this love with genuine faith and real obedience. By opening the way for humans to be at peace with God, Jesus provides new life that is not only eternal in the future but also meaningful in present life, life filled by the power of the Holy Spirit and real love (Rom. 6:4; Gal. 2:20). Therefore, John 3:16 reveals God's great love and Christ's redemptive work as the foundation of human salvation. This verse invites everyone to know God who is full of love, receive the grace of salvation through faith in Jesus, and live a new life that bears fruit in obedience and spiritual growth. This is not only a theological message but a life calling that transforms human existence comprehensively and brings to eternal hope in God's Kingdom.<sup>28</sup>

### **Born Again**

Being born again differs from physical birth, namely birth from mother's womb. However, the concept of being born again is the same as birth from mother's womb, where someone born from their mother's womb is certainly a figure who is still clean and innocent. This is the same with being born again, where what becomes innocent is the heart and life of someone from frequently committing sinful deeds to becoming someone obedient and not following their old nature that still lives in sin and wrongdoing. This is what Nicodemus misunderstood, not comprehending the concept of being born again. He assumed that being born again must mean being born again from his mother's womb, but Jesus emphasized that being born again is change by believing in Jesus so that he would not be condemned (John 3:18).

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<sup>28</sup> George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publ, 1987), 51.

## **New Life**

New birth and new life have a close relationship but differ theologically, because new birth is an instant spiritual event when someone receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, where the Holy Spirit revives humans who are dead in sin to become spiritually new creatures (John 3:3-8; 2 Cor. 5:17). Whereas new life is a continuous process where believers live a renewed life by leaving the old life pattern and centering on Christ (Eph. 4:22-24). New life demands active response to grow in faith, leave sin, and live according to God's will as an expression of gratitude for salvation (1 Pet. 2:2), so that true faith is not only about the status of new birth but also one's attitude in living life filled with love, righteousness, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

New Life is a transformative spiritual process to change everyone to better live the new birth that has been bestowed by the Holy Spirit. In Greek, this word comes from "γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν" where the word birth or born comes from "γεννηθῆναι" which is used 97 times in the New Testament, 49 times meaning to give birth, 39 times as born. This word comes from the root "γένος" which is the Aorist Passive Subjunctive form 3rd Singular meaning "He is Born again." Simply, this word means to reproduce, regenerate, descend.<sup>29</sup>

According to Paul in Ephesians 4:17-32, humans live in two parts: the old self that lives physically and externally, and people who always follow the desires of the flesh and do not obey the commands of the Spirit. Whereas new life is a form of someone willing to live guided by God's Spirit (2 Cor. 14:16).<sup>30</sup> Life led by the Spirit will live based on submitting their life's leadership to the Lord and confess and surrender and make their life under the Lord's control and willing to submit to all of Jesus' commands.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> W.E. Vine, *Vine's: Expository Commentary on Isaiah* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 31.

<sup>30</sup> Faoth, "Refleksi Pemaknaan Hidup Baru Dalam Pandangan Paulus," 107.

<sup>31</sup> Hendi Wijaya, "Pertobatan Di Dalam Philokalia: Artikel Ulasan," *DUNAMIS: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristiani* III, no. I (2018): 52.

In Pauline Theology, new life means growing and developing in Christ and must have a shield to fight against all temptations that come, but that doesn't mean someone who has been born again is already immune and resistant to sin. Rather, in their daily life they must ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to live in God's truth to be strengthened to fight against all forms of temptation that often tempt everyone.<sup>32</sup>

#### New Life with Pneumatology

In the New Testament, the idea of New Life is often associated with spiritual change driven by the power of the Holy Spirit. When someone believes in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit also works within them to produce transformation that touches heart and soul, changing it from hard to soft. This process is often called "new birth" or "new life" (John 3:3-8), highlighting the active role of the Holy Spirit in initiating and nurturing fundamental change in the life of someone who believes in Christ. In new life, the Holy Spirit guides so that everyone knows Christ and the moral teaching conveyed by Christ through the parables and teachings He delivered to everyone. Therefore, everyone who receives new life will also receive the Holy Spirit and live in the Spirit.<sup>33</sup>

Living in the Spirit is a process involving sanctification and renewal done by the Holy Spirit. This is not merely extraordinary change but also restoration of the broken relationship between humans and God. When someone experiences New Life in Christ, they not only become "new people" spiritually but also begin a new journey in knowing and serving God wholeheartedly.<sup>34</sup>

In this context, the role of the Holy Spirit is very important. The Holy Spirit not only acts as the initiator of change but also as a Companion who continuously leads and guides in new life. The Holy Spirit knows the secrets

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<sup>32</sup> Faoth, "Refleksi Pemaknaan Hidup Baru Dalam Pandangan Paulus," 108.

<sup>33</sup> Mohr Siebeck, *The Spirit and the Community of God* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 159.

<sup>34</sup> Siebeck, *The Spirit and the Community of God*, 159.

within God, and the Holy Spirit teaches them to people of faith. The Holy Spirit helps everyone to grow in holiness and obedience to God, and the Spirit provides the strength needed to live a life that glorifies Him. So, the concept of New Life in the New Testament not only shows the change that occurs in individuals but also highlights the close relationship between everyone and the Holy Spirit. This is a call to live in new obedience and faithfulness, which is only made possible through the power and strength of the Holy Spirit working in life.<sup>35</sup>

Pneumatology in the New Testament underscores the very important role of the Holy Spirit in equipping and empowering believers to live life according to God's will. The Holy Spirit gives various spiritual gifts to His people for self-renewal.<sup>36</sup> The Holy Spirit's role in mediating this tension is crucial. The Spirit works mysteriously and invisibly, yet produces tangible changes in believers' lives, such as the fruits described in Galatians 5:22-23. New Testament pneumatology emphasizes that the Spirit not only empowers and gifts believers but also transforms their character, shaping them to reflect Christ. This transformation is not merely personal but communal, as spiritual gifts are given for the edification of the body of Christ, not just individual renewal.

More than just giving gifts, the Holy Spirit also plays a role in providing the strength and guidance needed to overcome sin and challenges in life. This enables believers to live in victory over sin, overcome temptation, and live a life holy and faithful to Christ. Galatians 5:22-23 also records that the work of the Holy Spirit produces fruits of the Spirit in believers' lives, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Thus, New Testament Pneumatology describes how the Holy Spirit not only provides spiritual gifts and strength to His people but also transforms their character so they reflect Christ's character. This is a continuous process, where the Holy Spirit

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<sup>35</sup> S. Tandiassa, *Teologia Paulus* (Yogyakarta: Moriel Publishing House, 2008), 157.

<sup>36</sup> Tandiassa, *Teologia Paulus*, 157.

works in believers' lives to shape them to become more like Christ, producing fruit of the Spirit that shows His presence and power in their lives.<sup>37</sup>

The concept of New Life in the New Testament is also closely related to involvement in spiritual community, known as the church. The Holy Spirit is active in the body of Christ to build, guide, and unite God's people in love and fellowship, according to what is explained in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. More than just individuals experiencing spiritual transformation, believers are also called to be part of a spiritual community network connected to one another through their faith in Christ. In the church, the Holy Spirit works to strengthen, equip, and unite believers in one body, like different but important parts of the human body. This creates harmonious cooperation among God's people, where each member has a unique role and is empowered by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>38</sup>

Through the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, God's people are built into a solid and spirited unity, guided by mutual love and close fellowship. In this love and fellowship, they support, encourage, and assist one another in their spiritual life journey, and share burdens and joys together. So, new life in the New Testament not only emphasizes individual transformation but also active and meaningful involvement in spiritual community blessed by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. This is a call to live in healthy and fruitful relationships in service and faithfulness together in the church, as the living and developing body of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

The Holy Spirit serves as a Source of Comfort and Guide for God's people. He provides support and calm to them in difficult situations, provides guidance and wisdom to make wise decisions, and provides protection from temptation and persecution pressure they might face (see John 14:16-17; 1 Thess. 5:19; 1 Pet. 5:8). The presence of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives is a source of strength

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<sup>37</sup> George M. Flattery, *A Biblical Theology of the Holy Spirit Contemporary Issues in Pneumatology* (USA: Global University, 2009), 34.

<sup>38</sup> Flattery, *A Biblical Theology of the Holy Spirit Contemporary Issues in Pneumatology*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Flattery, *A Biblical Theology of the Holy Spirit Contemporary Issues in Pneumatology*, 36.

and calm in difficult times. When they feel tired, burdened, or hurt, the Holy Spirit provides deep comfort, strengthening their hearts and comforting them with His faithful promises. In difficult situations, the Holy Spirit provides wisdom and inner enlightenment, guiding them in making wise decisions according to God's will.

Moreover, the Holy Spirit also acts as protector for God's people. He watches their every step, protecting them from tempting temptations and bringing them to the path of truth. The Holy Spirit gives believers strength to persevere in faith and face world pressures that might intimidate or threaten. Thus, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives not only provides support and calm but also provides the direction and protection needed in every aspect of life. Believers are invited to rely on the Holy Spirit as a faithful Guide and Protector, always ready to help them through every challenge and struggle in their spiritual life journey.<sup>40</sup>

### **Implications of New Life**

Humans who have lived a new life must play a role in showing greater care for the environment. Humans who have lived a new life must be able to take steps to reduce the negative impact of human activities on earth's ecosystems, land, and sea. Human attitudes should limit themselves to taking only what is necessary according to basic human needs.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, humans who have lived a new life are expected to be actively involved in various efforts to preserve and protect the environment. This attitude of environmental care is based on awareness of the close relationship between humans and natural ecosystems, and understanding of moral responsibility to maintain environmental sustainability for future generations. In this effort, humans who have lived a new life must change their way of thinking

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<sup>40</sup> Flattery, *A Biblical Theology of the Holy Spirit Contemporary Issues in Pneumatology*, 36.

<sup>41</sup> Larry L. Rasmussen, *Komunitas Bumi : Etika Bumi* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2010), 403.



and behavior, by adopting a more environmentally friendly and sustainable lifestyle. These steps can include wise use of natural resources, reduction of waste and pollution, and participation in environmental restoration activities such as tree planting, beach cleaning, and supporting animal and plant conservation programs. Thus, humans who have lived a new life are expected to become agents of change contributing positively to maintaining the balance of natural ecosystems and maintaining biodiversity for the common good. Humans who have lived a new life must be able to control themselves and live avoiding actions that damage truth for personal interests that cause pollution and damage.<sup>42</sup>

The duties and responsibilities of humans who have lived a new life include:

#### 1.Environmental Responsibility

With increasing awareness of the urgency of nature preservation, humans who have lived a new life must be able to show greater care for the environment. Humans who have lived a new life must be able to take responsibility for the earth, and must strive to reduce the harmful impact of human activities on earth's ecosystems, land, and sea, and actively participate in environmental preservation efforts.<sup>43</sup>

Environmental care includes understanding the importance of maintaining natural balance and protecting biodiversity. Humans who have lived a new life must play a role in caring for the earth as a precious heritage that must be preserved for future generations. Humans who have lived a new life must adopt environmentally friendly behaviors, such as reducing energy consumption, optimizing the use of natural resources, and supporting sustainable policies. Additionally, active participation in environmental preservation activities, such as tree planting programs, waste management, and beach cleaning, is a concrete manifestation of social and moral responsibility toward the environment. Thus,

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<sup>42</sup> Rasmussen, *Komunitas Bumi : Etika Bumi*, 32.

<sup>43</sup> Rasmussen, *Komunitas Bumi : Etika Bumi*, 535.

humans who have lived a new life are expected to carry out their role as responsible earth stewards, taking concrete steps to maintain environmental sustainability for common welfare.

In the context of environmental stewardship, the “new life” in Christ refers to spiritual rebirth, which should be explicitly linked to biblical passages like 2 Corinthians 5:17 (“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation”) and Romans 8:19–23 (creation’s groaning for redemption). This theological grounding shows that caring for creation is not just an ethical imperative but a manifestation of living out the new life in Christ, reflecting the Spirit’s transformative work in both personal and communal spheres. To strengthen academic rigor, clarify terms like “visible things” and “spiritual reality” by referencing specific biblical texts and theological concepts. Explicitly connect the Spirit’s work to resolving the tension between the visible and invisible, and root environmental stewardship in Christian soteriology and eschatology for deeper theological integration

## 2. Attention to Social and Ecological Conditions

Humans who have lived a new life have a moral responsibility to fight for social and ecological justice by protecting the rights of individuals affected by environmental degradation and playing an active role in the restoration and rehabilitation of earth, land, and sea. They are expected to become voices for the weak, maintain the environment to remain healthy and sustainable, and prevent further damage through participation in various nature restoration initiatives. This attitude reflects commitment to caring for God's creation and environmental sustainability for future generations.

## 3. Preserving and Maintaining the Beauty of Nature

The born-again person is called to appreciate the beauty and diversity of nature created by God. The integrity of creation must be actively preserved and

protected to maintain the balance of the natural ecosystem.<sup>44</sup> The born-again person is called to respect every form of life, whether on land, sea, or in the air, as an expression of the greatness and wisdom of the Creator. The presence and diversity of nature are signs of God's majesty and demonstrate His wisdom in creating all things. The born-again person is invited to see nature as tangible evidence of God's greatness and the beauty of His creation, as well as the perfection of His plan for this world. By valuing and respecting life in all its forms, the born-again person can express gratitude and obedience to God.

The born-again person is called to respect and protect every form of life on land, sea, and air as an expression of appreciation for God's greatness and wisdom in His creation. They are invited to view nature as proof of God's majesty and to express gratitude and obedience through loving protection of biodiversity. Led by the Holy Spirit, the born-again person is empowered with strength and wisdom to manage natural resources wisely, becoming active agents of change in environmental restoration and conservation. Thus, they fulfill their moral responsibility as stewards on earth, maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature for the glory of God and the common good.<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that this study affirms that the concept of rebirth (being born again) in John 3:1-21 is the core of spiritual transformation that can only occur through the work of the Holy Spirit. The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, a learned Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, illustrates the inner struggle between the old paradigm based on external obedience and the new paradigm demanding spiritual birth as an absolute requirement to enter the Kingdom of God. The narrative interpretive method used treats the text as a complete literary work, highlighting characters,

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<sup>44</sup> Rasmussen, *Komunitas Bumi : Etika Bumi*, 172.

<sup>45</sup> Rasmussen, *Komunitas Bumi : Etika Bumi*, 423.

plot, and narrator's perspective, thus enabling a deep understanding of the theological and moral message in the dialogue.

The research findings reveal that being born again is the work of the Holy Spirit who revives a person from spiritual death, totally transforms heart and soul, and empowers believers to live in love, truth, and obedience to Christ. The new life is not merely an external change but a continuous process involving character renewal, sanctification, and growth in faith producing the fruit of the Spirit such as love, joy, peace, and self-control. New Testament Pneumatology affirms the central role of the Holy Spirit as initiator, companion, protector, and empowerer in the journey of new life, as well as the builder of a united and fruitful church community.

The new life brings holistic social and ecological responsibility. A practical step for the born-again person is to show care and responsibility for environmental preservation, social justice, and the maintenance of the beauty of God's creation. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the born-again person can continually upgrade their quality by actively being agents of change, especially in current ecological issues. Thus, the new birth and new life in John 3:1-21 are not merely theological doctrines but calls for total transformation changing lifestyle, relationship with God, others, and the surrounding environment. The experience of being born again must be manifested in concrete actions reflecting the fruit of the Spirit, guiding believers to live in truth, love, and the power of the Holy Spirit sustainably and to be living witnesses for God's Kingdom in this world.

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*Being Born Again: A Narrative Interpretation of John 3:1–21 and Its Implications for New Life*

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***"Inbetweenness" in Hevel, Meaning, Absurdity, and Faith: An Analysis of the Meaning of Human Existence based on Ecclesiastes 2:17, 12:13-14 and Søren Kierkegaard's Thoughts Directed to "Death toward Life" through the Grace of Jesus Christ***

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**Abstract:**

Human life is often faced with the reality of *hevel* (הֶבֶל)—vanity, absurdity, and pain as described in the Book of Ecclesiastes. This seemingly meaningless existence is also highlighted in the thinking of Søren Kierkegaard, who asserts that humans, when they cling only to the aesthetic and ethical realms, remain in a state of hidden *despair*. However, he offers a way out through a "*leap of faith*" that transcends beyond rationality and brings humans into an existential relationship with God (the religious realm). In addition to discussing Kierkegaard's thinking, this paper also focuses on examining Ecclesiastes 2:17 and 12:13-14 in relation to Kierkegaard's thinking, highlighting how faith in God and recognition of His existence become a way to transcend the absurdity of life. Furthermore, the concept of "*death toward life*" by leaving all our lives behind to follow God in the teachings of Jesus Christ can be understood as a grace that redeems humans from despair and directs them to true life in relationship with God. With this, life is not merely a meaningless experience of suffering, but an existential call to realize the Kingdom of God in the midst of transience. In essence, this paper seeks to emphasize that faith is not only an answer to *hevel*, but also a means to bring God's love, truth, and justice into a world that seems meaningless. Through the grace of Christ, human life is no longer trapped in emptiness, but is directed toward a true fullness, namely, a life that transcends *hevel* and centers God in all aspects of existence.

**Keywords:**

Absurdity; Death toward Life; Despair (*Fortvilelse*); Ecclesiastes; Grace in Faith; Hevel; Leap of Faith; Søren Kierkegaard.

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## INTRODUCTION

Humans are creatures who constantly struggle with transience. Awareness of the limitations of life causes deep anxiety and drives a never-ending search for meaning. In their efforts to understand existence, humans can explore various experiences—whether happiness, suffering, or achievement—in the hope of finding something that can provide certainty. However, every effort ultimately faces the reality of death, which obscures the meaning of everything that has been gained. This raises a fundamental question: does life have meaning, or is everything just *hevel*—futility and inevitable pain?

*Qōhelet* קְהֵלֶת (Ecclesiastes) in the Book of Ecclesiastes states that without God, life under the sun is merely an effort to catch the wind. Everything, whether goodness, wisdom, or wealth obtained through hard work, will ultimately not provide true satisfaction. Even when humans strive to build goodness and justice, they still have to face the reality that peace is temporary and can be destroyed in the blink of an eye by chaos. Humans seek meaning in wisdom and hard work, but it all ends in futility. Death awaits all individuals without distinguishing between the wise and the foolish.<sup>1</sup>

*Qōhelet*'s thoughts can be compared to existential reflections that recognize the absurdity of human life when faced with mortality. Søren Kierkegaard, in his existential philosophy, asserts that human existence without a relationship with God will end in despair. He argues that true meaning can only be found in submission to God through *a leap of faith*, where humans face the absurdity of life not with resignation because of its futility, but with the courage to believe and live out the faith that individuals hold.

This paper examines the concept of *hevel* in the Book of Ecclesiastes in relation to Kierkegaard's existential thinking, specifically how faith leads humans to salvation. The grace of Jesus Christ is the answer to the futility of the world and provides meaning that transcends worldly transience.<sup>2</sup> More than just

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:14-17, 3:16

<sup>2</sup> John 3:16

salvation, this grace forms a new reality, where true life is found through death to self, and surrendering oneself completely to a life centered on God. Humans are called to live in fear of God—not as passive fear, but as evidence of a deep relationship with Him. This message frees humans from despair and brings them into true life with God, and this must be manifested by a world that surrenders itself and centers everything in the world on God.

## **METHODS**

This article employs a literature-based qualitative theological-philosophical approach, using textual and existential analysis as its primary method. The main goal is to explore the meaning of human existence within the tension between *hevel* as expressed in the Book Ecclesiastes and the concept of despair (*fortvilelse*) and faith (*tro*) in Søren Kierkegaard's thought. In brief, this method integrates biblical hermeneutics and interpretation, existential phenomenology, and constructive theology to provide an understanding of life's tension between futility, absurdity, and faith.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Life and Wisdom in the Book of Ecclesiastes**

The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the wisdom books in the Old Testament. In Hebrew, this book is titled *Qōhelet*, which is considered to be the name or title of its author. This name has been transliterated in various Greek sources as *kōeleth* and in Latin as *Coeleth*. In English, this book is called *Ecclesiastes*, which comes from Latin based on the Greek translation *ekklēsiastēs*, meaning member of the people's assembly.<sup>3</sup>

The opening of the book begins with an attribution to *Qōhelet*, a "son of David" and "king in Jerusalem"<sup>4</sup> Tradition connects this book to Solomon

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<sup>3</sup> Choon-Leon Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:1

because of its connection to wisdom, which was the defining characteristic of King Solomon.<sup>5</sup> However, the language of this book contains Persian loanwords (*pardēsîm* meaning "garden"),<sup>6</sup> which indicates that this book was written at the earliest in the middle of the 5th century BCE, long after Solomon's time. In addition, after chapter 2, the author's point of view is more that of an observer than a king. He gives advice on how to behave before the king<sup>7</sup> and criticizes the social injustices committed by those in power,<sup>8</sup> something that is unusual for a king. The epilogue also refers to the author as a *ḥākām* חָכָם (wise man), not a king.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, although the author states several things about his identity, his social background remains unclear.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the Book of Ecclesiastes still contains very profound wisdom. The philosophical views in this book deepen the spiritual meaning of human existence and challenge traditional wisdom such as the pursuit of wealth and happiness.

There is one important word emphasized by the author of this book, namely that everything in this world is *hevel*. This word means mist or futility.<sup>11</sup> The word *hevel* is mentioned 37 times in this book with one repetition.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the distinctive phrase "under the sun," which indicates the reality that this happens to humans in this world, is written 29 times. This is emphasized by the awareness that in the end, everyone will die, without distinction between the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the wicked.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Kings 4:32-34

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:25

<sup>7</sup> Ecclesiastes 8:1-6

<sup>8</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:1-2

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the epilogue, see Ecclesiastes 12:9

<sup>10</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 37-9.

<sup>11</sup> Barry L. Bandstra, *Reading The Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth 2009), 428-9.

<sup>12</sup> Elias P. Pohan, "Semua Sia-sia?": Penelitian Makna Semantik Hevel di dalam Kitab *Qōhelet* dalam Rangka Memahami Jalan Pikiran dan Ajaran *Qōhelet* yang Sesungguhnya (M.Th. Thesis, STFT Jakarta, 1998), 288; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Bandstra, *Reading The Old Testament*, 429; Ecclesiastes 2:16

The Book of Ecclesiastes was written by someone who did not want to avoid the realities of life, but rather to face and question them honestly. *Qōhelet* intended to stir his readers not to be lulled into an absurd life. With a realistic and radical approach, he explored and perhaps already experienced various aspects of life that have become part of human identity, whether beneficial or detrimental. However, all of that will end in futility.<sup>14</sup>

The emphasis on the absurdity of life and the cycle of nature highlighted in this book creates an understanding that everything humans do is a futile effort. Humans try to find meaning through wisdom, pleasure, wealth, and hard work. However, in the end, none of these things will provide true satisfaction, serving only as a spark for eternal despair. Uniquely, amid this pessimism, *Qōhelet* still acknowledges the existence of God and encourages humans to continue to follow God's will. He also advises humans to enjoy life as much as possible within their limitations, but to still fear God.<sup>15</sup>

Although the author of this book remains a mystery, the potential presence of Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes is interesting to explore. *Qōhelet* seems to use the figure of Solomon as the most extreme example of a man who has everything but still feels empty. As the author of this article, I reflect that this serves as a kind of affirmation that the search for meaning cannot be resolved solely through worldly achievements.

Another interesting point is that in the tradition of Israeli wisdom literature, this book stands out for its highly realistic approach, far from the theological optimism that often characterizes other books.<sup>16</sup> If Job and Jeremiah still show faith in the midst of their suffering, *Qōhelet* presents a more radical perspective, a kind of skepticism that invites us to question all the orders of life

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<sup>14</sup> Derek Tidball, *Menjaring Angin: Realisme dan Pengharapan Masa Kini berdasarkan Kitab Pengkhotbah*, Translated by Oloria Situmorang and Gita (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1992), 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Bandstra, *Reading The Old Testament*, 430-1.

<sup>16</sup> Tidball, *Menjaring Angin*, 3-5.

before arriving at a deeper conclusion, which, according to the author, is God, the Most Righteous.

### **The Emphasis on the Meaning of *Hevel* and Its Relationship to the Absurdity of Life**

The use of *hevel* in this book describes not only futility or transience, but also the irregularity of the system of life itself. *Qōhelet* highlights how this system seems unreasonable. He criticizes certain actions, but questions why human efforts, whether seeking wisdom or working hard, often produce unfair consequences. This uncertainty makes human existence feel absurd and, more than that, painful.<sup>17</sup>

Etymologically, the Hebrew word *hevel* has the basic meaning of "vapor," "breath," or "wind," which indicates something that is temporary and elusive. In the Bible, the word *hevel* is often used as a metaphor for things that are fleeting, insubstantial, or unreliable, such as physical beauty and human words.<sup>18</sup>

However, further research shows that in Ecclesiastes, *hevel* does not always mean futility. Michael V. Fox links this word to the concept of absurdity as proposed by Albert Camus.<sup>19</sup> However, semantic analysis shows that the meaning of *hevel* is more complex than just absurdity. In some contexts, its meaning is closer to *ra'* ("painful"). In other words, *Qōhelet* not only highlights the absurdity of life, but also the suffering and injustice experienced by humans. Therefore, the translation of the word *hevel* as "vanity" (*vanitas*) in various versions of the Bible is considered inaccurate because it does not fully reflect *Qōhelet's* intention.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Michael V. "The Meaning of *Hevel* for *Qōhelet*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 3 (September 1986): 425-7.

<sup>18</sup> Fox, 425-7; Bnd, Proverbs 31:30 and Job 21:34

<sup>19</sup> The absurdity of life is the discrepancy between the search for meaning and an uncertain reality. Camus emphasizes rebellion against absurdity. Meanwhile, Fox interprets it as living life with courage and enjoying small moments amid absurdity.

<sup>20</sup> Pohan, "Semua Sia-sia?", 288-93.

This awareness of transience brings us to one main reality: without God, life is not only absurd but also has no bright spot. Death becomes the main spear that confirms all human futility if he lives without God. A life filled with hard work, achievements, and even wisdom cannot overcome the reality of death. *Qōhelet* understood that without a relationship with God, human existence is merely a journey that ends in emptiness. However, on the other hand, the fear of God gives humans something to hold on to in the midst of absurdity, because only God gives true meaning behind all the mysteries of life and death.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Absurdity of Life and the Fear of God based on Ecclesiastes 2:17 and 12:13-14**

All the emphasis on *hevel* in the book of Ecclesiastes shows that human life seems to have no significant meaning. Human existence becomes an incomprehensible absurdity, and everything about moral goodness becomes mysterious. Then questions arise such as, "Why do humans do everything in this world?" This reality then closes off all moral teachings, both good and bad. Human vision is opened by understanding that everything in this world is futile. It is no longer important to mingle, no longer important to love, no longer important to be wise, and so on.

From the beginning of the Book of Ecclesiastes, *Qōhelet* has stated the reality of life that is full of futility. He asserts,

"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity."<sup>22</sup>

He then describes how all human endeavors under the sun do not provide eternal meaning. The cycle of nature repeats itself without fundamental change,<sup>23</sup> wisdom and foolishness both lead to the same death,<sup>24</sup> and worldly

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<sup>21</sup> Anthony Y.F. Loke, *Ecclesiastes Made Simple* (Selangor: SUFES, 2010), 104-7.

<sup>22</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:2

<sup>23</sup> Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison, eds. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: Vol II*. Translated by Hananiel Nugroho, Paulus Adiwijaya, Yerima Suhadi, Erna Letik, and Nani Hasiel (Malang: Gandum Mas, 2009), 373; Ecclesiastes 1:3-11

<sup>24</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:12-16

pleasures such as wine, women, song, and wealth will not satisfy anything.<sup>25</sup> The search for meaning through hard work and abundant wealth also ends in exhaustion, because all of that is left to the next generation who may not appreciate it.<sup>26</sup> The conclusion of all this lies in Ecclesiastes 2:17, which states,

"Therefore, I hate life, because what is done under the sun is grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after the wind."<sup>27</sup>

This view is similar to the concept of absurdity in Albert Camus's thinking, which was mentioned briefly earlier. He defines absurdity as the awareness that life has no objective meaning or absolute ultimate goal. Camus rejects despair and instead encourages humans to accept absurdity and create their own meaning. He uses the myth of Sisyphus as a metaphor, in which Sisyphus continuously pushes a rock to the top of a mountain only to see it fall back down. Even though his efforts will never be completed, Sisyphus continues to do so with full awareness and rebels against the absurd reality itself.<sup>28</sup>

Although at first glance they appear similar, the absurdity in Ecclesiastes differs from Camus' absurdity. Camus emphasizes human rebellion against absurdity by creating meaning independently, while *Qōhelet* invites humans to transcend absurdity by fearing God. The world remains *hevel*, the routine of life continues to repeat itself without answers to the question "why." This is interesting considering that *Qōhelet* was a man of wealth, status, and wisdom, yet he still felt that it was empty.<sup>29</sup> The solution he offered was not to accept absurdity with existential courage alone, but with the awareness that beyond all uncertainty there is divine wisdom that controls everything.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Pfeiffer and Harrison, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 374-5; Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

<sup>26</sup> Pfeiffer and Harrison, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 374-6; Ecclesiastes 2:18-23

<sup>27</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:17

<sup>28</sup> Albert Camus, *Mite Sisifus: Pergulatan dengan Absurditas*. Translated by Apsanti D. (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1999), 153-9.

<sup>29</sup> Pfeiffer and Harrison, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 374; Ecclesiastes 1:16-18

<sup>30</sup> N. Verbin, "Faith and the Absurd: Kierkegaard, Camus and Job's Religious Protest," *Harvard Theological Review* 113, no. 2 (February 2024): 295-6.



Returning to the concept of *the hevel* of the world, this did not only happen to someone like *Qōhelet*, but also to Job in his story. He experienced extreme suffering with the loss of his wealth, social status, children, and health. In addition, we cannot forget the story of when his friends came to him and blamed him for everything that had happened. Job questioned God to explain his suffering.<sup>31</sup> Absurdity arises because the world does not answer his expectations of justice and meaning, a reality that Ecclesiastes also sees as futile and painful. The meaning of life continues to be questioned without a clear answer.<sup>32</sup>

However, the Book of Ecclesiastes does not simply conclude that everything is futile. In the final section, *Qōhelet* provides a true existential answer:

"The end of the matter, when all has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it is good or evil."<sup>33</sup>

This answer provides a different perspective from the absurdity of the world. If we only look at life from the perspective "under the sun," as *Qōhelet* says, then everything does seem futile. However, when humans fear God and live their lives with the awareness that their existence is answered by God, The Existence Itself, then life regains its meaning.

If humans only see life from a worldly perspective, then everything does seem absurd. However, when humans live with the awareness that there is divine judgment, then true meaning is found. The fear of God in the Book of Ecclesiastes is not just a sense of respect, but an existential awareness that human wisdom is limited and can only understand divine plans when connected to Him. In this case, Ecclesiastes emphasizes that the concept of "fearing God" is actually the end point of the search and the starting point of a personal

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<sup>31</sup> Verbin, 296-7.

<sup>32</sup> Verbin, 296-7.

<sup>33</sup> Pfeiffer and Harrison, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 393-4; Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

encounter with God, that is, after humans realize their limitations and enjoy their lives together with God.<sup>34</sup>

The Book of Sirach also states that "*Those who fear God seek to please Him; those who love Him are filled with His wisdom.*"<sup>35</sup> This confirms that the attitude of fearing God is not merely blind obedience to moral rules, but a response to the limited existence of humans and an awareness of the greatness of God, who understands the value of good and evil in His creation better than humans. In facing an absurd world, humans can choose to be trapped in despair or accept that behind limitations there is a greater wisdom that cannot be reached by human reason.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, absurdity is not the end, but a path to deeper faith. Life is indeed full of uncertainty, but amid ignorance and mystery, there is certainty in the nature of fearing God. This is what gives true meaning amid the absurdity of the world.

### **Integration on the "*Hevel* of Life within Faith" based on Søren Kierkegaard's Existential Understanding**

The author sees a dimension between the concepts of *hevel*, absurdity, and faith that can be fully integrated, a kind of "*Inbetweenness*" (*Metaxy*) that we can explore further, and the author raises the philosophical understanding developed by a philosopher, theologian, and writer who has been dubbed the Father of Existentialism, namely Søren Aabye Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard was born on May 5, 1813, in Copenhagen, Denmark, and died in 1855 at the age of 42. His life was full of suffering, which shaped his melancholic and harsh personality. His father, Michael Kierkegaard, a religious and dominant figure, greatly influenced his thoughts and inner conflicts. Kierkegaard's education fostered criticism of a society that emphasized external

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<sup>34</sup> Tidball, *Menjaring Angin*, 243-6; Proverbs 1:7

<sup>35</sup> Interpreted from Sirach 2:16

<sup>36</sup> Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, *Pengkhhotbah: Tafsir Alkitab Kontekstual-Oikumenis*. (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2023), 285-6.

norms over inner experiences. His complex relationship with his father created a mixture of respect and psychological burden, which was later reflected in his thoughts on despair and faith. His intellectual sensitivity and solitude, including his decision to break off his engagement to Regina Olsen, deepened his reflections on freedom, responsibility, and faith as existential decisions that demanded personal involvement.<sup>37</sup>

Initially, Kierkegaard was interested in Hegel's philosophy, but later rejected it because he considered Hegel's systematic approach to ignore concrete life experiences. Hegel saw human life as part of the development of rational ideas, but for Kierkegaard, life was a unique individual struggle. There is no universal principle that can answer a person's existential questions, because each individual has their own struggles. Thus, it is not only rational and purely communal, but also subjective.<sup>38</sup>

For him, human existence is not something static, but rather "becoming," that is, the transition from possibility to reality through free choice. Thus, life is a subjective journey that must be lived authentically. This is why Kierkegaard criticized the church of his time for losing its true meaning and only emphasizing the social aspects of Christianity, without emphasizing personal involvement with God.<sup>39</sup>

Kierkegaard emphasized that,

"The essence of subjectivity is that in solving problems and making choices, a person takes risks. Every decision, especially those related to faith, is an "absolute decision" that involves uncertainty. This risk is universal, applying to "people of the present and to those of the future."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-6; J. L. Ch. Abineno, *Søren Kierkegaard: Filsuf, Religius dan Teolog* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1994), 1-9; The term "despair" used by Kierkegaard can also be juxtaposed with the term *hevel*.

<sup>38</sup> Harun Hadiwijono, *Sari Sejarah Filsafat Barat 2* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2016), 124.

<sup>39</sup> Hadiwijono, *Sari Sejarah Filsafat Barat 2*, 124.

<sup>40</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments: Volume II*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 47; The term "uncertainty" is juxtaposed with the concept of *hevel* (futility and pain), see pp. 5-6.

Therefore, decisions of faith, although they can be communal, also have a dimension of subjectivity that is important to recognize. In this dimension, faith is taken with full awareness, not merely because of traditional heritage or external pressure. This understanding can be the first step that leads individuals to dive into faith, which can be the answer to the absurdity (*hevel*) in human life.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard distinguishes three forms of human existence: **aesthetic, ethical, and religious**. In **aesthetic existence**, a person lives for pleasure and sensory experiences, avoiding decisive moral decisions. However, awareness of human limitations ultimately leads individuals to despair. In **ethical existence**, humans begin to search for inner meaning, striving to live according to higher moral values. However, at this stage, humans remain aware of their limitations in achieving true piety. Finally, in **religious existence**, a person must make a subjective decision, namely *a leap of faith*, to accept God as the sole support for their existence.<sup>41</sup>

Regarding *the leap of faith*, Kierkegaard wrote in his book *Fear and Trembling*, under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, about the story of Abraham as a prime example of "*faith with the virtue of the absurd*," which is a concept that demands a teleological understanding of ethics for a personal relationship with God. In the story of Isaac, whom God commanded to be sacrificed,<sup>42</sup> Abraham is portrayed as the Father of Faith who wholeheartedly embraced the paradox of faith.<sup>43</sup>

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard describes Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah as a journey of faith filled with inner suffering. During the journey, Abraham did not tell Isaac about the true purpose of their journey. Abraham experienced a deep existential dilemma, in which he had to choose between

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<sup>41</sup> Hadiwijono, *Sari Sejarah Filsafat Barat 2*, 125-6.

<sup>42</sup> Teleology is a philosophical doctrine that explains a purpose, intention, and end, even beyond human objective reasoning; Genesis 22:1-24

<sup>43</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Repetition*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 10-3; John Lippit, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 197-9.

obeying God's command or maintaining his love for the son he had long awaited with Sarah, his wife. In this story, Abraham did not act according to universal ethical understanding, but based on his personal relationship with God. He faced what Kierkegaard called "paradoxical theology," in which faith demands belief in absurdity. Thus, Abraham had to take *a leap of faith*, entrusting himself completely to God even though it made no sense.<sup>44</sup>

In one of Kierkegaard's interpretations, Abraham even had to make Isaac believe that he was no longer his father, but an *idolater*, so that Isaac would not lose his faith in God. Abraham chose to bear the burden of destroying his relationship with his son in order to maintain his relationship with God. This story seems to show that true faith is the total sacrifice of human will and understanding in the face of God's mystery.<sup>45</sup>

However, *the leap of faith* referred to here is not an irrational or fanatical act. This term should be understood as an effort to integrate the spiritual and the natural, as described in the figures of *the "knight of infinite resignation"* and *the "knight of faith."* *The "knight of infinite resignation"* is someone who leaves this world in search of a higher spiritual reality. He renounces the world and lives in a form of resignation from reality. In contrast, *the knight of faith* does not renounce the world, but rather lives out his faith in everyday reality. This demonstrates extraordinary surrender to God's wisdom and will, which seems absurd. However, it has a purpose beyond human understanding.<sup>46</sup>

Delving deeper into the purpose of human existence, Kierkegaard begins with a fundamental question:

"How many people have an idea of their eternal happiness?" This question implies that understanding eternal happiness is not something that is easily achieved. It takes extraordinary "perseverance of energy" to maintain the idea, especially when one is "wrestling alone with God" and facing the risk of "diminishing it." This

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<sup>44</sup> Lippit, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, 197-9.

<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 14-5.

<sup>46</sup> Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, eds. *The Essential Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 93-101.

struggle illustrates how difficult it is to keep faith pure and intact amid the doubts and challenges of life.<sup>47</sup>

Most people live in worldly sorrow and joy without involving faith. *The knight of infinite resignation* constantly elevates himself to a higher plane but is unable to integrate faith with this world. However, *the knight of faith* is able to live a life full of faith amid absurd realities and remain steadfast in his existence. Kierkegaard asserts that only the *knight of faith* is capable of expressing the highest and truest form of faith.<sup>48</sup>

Kierkegaard emphasizes that absolute faith transcends love for the world (whether it be family, goals, or even oneself), but rather for God and His truth first and foremost. Sometimes faith also requires pain that can distract humans from their confusion about God's existence. Humans are trapped in a search for meaning in a *hevel* world, where good and evil in the world can always be used as a paradox. However, the most important thing is faith in the truth of God's will, which is beyond human objectivity. This is an answer to transcend existential despair and find the true meaning of existence by getting rid of *hevel*.

In his other book, *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard describes despair as "*sickness unto death*"—a spiritual illness that does not bring physical death, but spiritual death. Despair (*fortvilelse*) is an existential contradiction in which a person is constantly "dying" but never truly disappearing. This sickness occurs when a person rejects themselves or tries to become something they are not.<sup>49</sup>

Despair can also be understood as an imbalance within oneself, between *infinitude* (infinity) and *finitude* (finiteness). Kierkegaard divides despair into two main forms: (1) ***Despair of Infinitude***. This state occurs when a person loses themselves because they are too immersed in an infinite world. Such people live in fantasy, are obsessed with empty intellectualism, or have ambitions that have no basis in reality. They avoid their limitations and ultimately lose their true

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<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, 87.

<sup>48</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, 77-9.

<sup>49</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 11-29.

identity. (2) **Despair of Finitude**. This state occurs when a person loses themselves because they are too trapped in worldly limitations. They become just "one of many," living passively and conforming to social norms without ever realizing their existence before God. Such people may appear successful in the eyes of the world, but in a spiritual sense, they have lost themselves.<sup>50</sup>

Kierkegaard emphasizes that without awareness of sin, true Christianity is impossible. For him, a church that has lost this awareness is nothing more than an empty building that can be closed and turned into a dance hall. He sees that true faith is not merely intellectual belief or cultural heritage, but a deep personal involvement, a leap into uncertainty that is full of risk.<sup>51</sup>

Faith, according to Kierkegaard, is not the result of cold rational inquiry, but an existential decision that involves one's entire being before a holy God. Without an awareness of sin and the need for grace, faith becomes mere formality, losing its vitality and becoming trapped in the shallowness of Christianity in name only.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Kierkegaard states:

"Without risk, there is no faith." Faith is not a comfortable certainty, but a leap into uncertainty. "If I want to maintain myself in faith, I must constantly strive to hold on to objective uncertainty, to remain in the deep sea, above seventy thousand fathoms of water, while maintaining my faith." The metaphors of "deep sea" and "seventy thousand fathoms of water" describe the depth of uncertainty that must be faced by believers.<sup>53</sup>

Without absurdity, there is no *leap of faith*. Human life is full of uncertainty, suffering, and contradictions, but it is precisely in these circumstances that faith becomes possible. Faith is "objective uncertainty held tightly in the most passionate process of inner acquisition." This means that faith always has an element of uncertainty, but it is precisely in that uncertainty that the passion of faith reaches its peak. Therefore, one cannot come to God through

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<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 29-35.

<sup>51</sup> Jerry H. Gill, "Rethinking Kierkegaard's 'Leap of Faith,'" *Encounter* 78, no. 1 (November 2018): 75.

<sup>52</sup> Tony Lane, *Runtut Pijar: Tokoh dan Pemikiran Kristen dari Masa ke Masa*. Translated by Conny Item-Corputy (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2016), 234.

<sup>53</sup> Jostein Gaarder, *Dunia Sophie: Sebuah Novel Filsafat*. Translated by Rahmani Astuti (Bandung: Mizan, 2024), 594; Gill, 75-6.

rational or historical evidence, but only through a *leap of faith*, in which the person accepts Christ as the Savior of mankind.<sup>54</sup>

Faith requires a continuous struggle within the subjectivity of one's relationship with God. This is certainly done with God's truth. With an awareness of despair and the need for God's grace, a person can escape the paradoxical dilemma of *hevel* (good or bad is futile) by becoming their true self in a relationship with God, who creates the true meaning of existence and releases the chains of pain and futility.<sup>55</sup>

### **Christ's Grace as "Death toward Life" to *Hevel* and the Absurdity of Human Life**

The Book of Ecclesiastes describes human life as *hevel*—transience, absurdity, futility, and inevitable pain. All efforts ultimately lead to transience, which raises questions about the meaning of existence. However, the core wisdom of Ecclesiastes distinguishes between two types of life: wickedness and righteousness that does not fear God. Righteousness that does not fear God is merely piety that seeks personal gain without understanding the uncertainty of life. In contrast, true righteousness does not demand reward, but lives in fear of God, in line with the New Testament teaching on faith. In God, life is no longer *hevel*, but finds true meaning in remembering the Giver of Life.<sup>56</sup>

This understanding is in line with Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy of existentialism. He saw that humans are often trapped in **a hidden despair** that leads to existential emptiness. This despair appears in two forms: ***despair of finitude***—where a person feels oppressed by worldly reality, and ***despair of infinitude***—where a person escapes into fantasy without facing the reality of

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<sup>54</sup> David Tracy, "Kierkegaard's Concept of the Act of Faith: Its Structure and Its Significance," *The Dunwoodie Review* 4, no. 2 (1964): 204-11.

<sup>55</sup> Lane, *Runtut Pijar*, 235-6.

<sup>56</sup> Eric Ortlund, "The Gospel in the Book of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 4 (December 2013): 704-6; Loke, *Ecclesiastes Made Simple*, 106-7; Pohan, "Semua Sia-sia?," 290.



their existence. Kierkegaard asserts that the only way out of this absurdity is **faith**, not merely intellectual belief, but a radical act, namely *the leap of faith*. With faith, humans dare to face the paradoxes of life and surrender themselves completely in a personal relationship with God.<sup>57</sup>

Faith is not comfort, but a call to **die to one's own desires** and live in **true obedience** to God.<sup>58</sup> In faith, humans accept that God is a truth that transcends reason, but can be understood through love and total surrender. It is this faith that lifts humans out of despair, making them part of a reality greater than themselves, so that their existence *is* no longer *meaningless*, but full of grace and an existential relationship with the living God.

John Stott, in his book, *The Radical Discipleship*, emphasizes that true discipleship is a "death" to oneself that opens the way to true life (*born again*). This concept of new birth is the core of the Gospel where a person not only leaves sin behind, but is born of the Holy Spirit to a new life that is full in Christ. This new birth is a total transformation, not just a change in the essence of life, from the old man who is controlled by sin and far away and full of *hevel* to a new man who lives fully in God and allows God to have every part of his life. More than that, salvation from Jesus Christ has removed the core of the futility of the world, namely sin itself, for every human being who is pleasing to Him.<sup>59</sup> This is in line with Kierkegaard's thinking that faith is not comfort, but a call to die to one's own desires and surrender one's life completely to God who brings meaning in uncertainty.

This salvation is often represented in terms of "**life**." The Apostle Paul wrote that the gift of God is eternal life (Rom. 6:23), while the Gospel of John

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<sup>57</sup> Peter McEnhill and George Newlands, *Fifty Key Christian Thinkers* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 168-73.

<sup>58</sup> Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 145-6; 159-60; 162.

<sup>59</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Radical Disciple (Murid yang Radikal): Delapan Aspek Utama dari Pemuridan Kristen yang Sejati*. Translated by Perdian K.M. Tumanan (Surabaya: Perkantas, 2018), 100.

states that those who have the Son have life (1 John 5:12). However, the path to this life can only be traveled by **putting sin to death**. Sin separates humans from God, for the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Therefore, Christ came to bear the burden of human sin and died in their place. Thus, salvation can only be obtained through **the death of Christ, which brings life to humanity**.<sup>60</sup>

Returning to its existential meaning, every human being must face mortality. Death is the last enemy (cf. 1 Cor. 15:26), but in Christ, death has been defeated and sin has been erased. Not only that, the hope of Christianity is also in the promise of resurrection and eternal life. The apostle John describes God's people as having their names written in the book of life (cf. Rev. 3:5, 21:27), and enjoying the tree of life and the water of life (cf. Rev. 22:1, 17). Paul uses the analogy of seeds and flowers to explain resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15:35-44). Just as a seed dies and then grows into something more beautiful, so too will the human body be replaced with a glorious body. The new heavens and earth will also be renewed (cf. Matt. 19:28 and Rom. 8:18-25), so that all creation will be freed from destruction.<sup>61</sup>

This resurrection is **the foundation of eternal salvation** and the basis of courageous faith in facing this world. Death no longer has power, so believers can live **without fear of loss**.<sup>62</sup> It is precisely in the courage to face absurdity and *hevel* that **faith becomes real** and the reality of God's kingdom is increasingly manifested in His love, justice, and truth. **By understanding God**, humans can live in submission to Him and relate to all of His creation correctly.

The implication of this understanding in real life is that **faith is not merely a theological concept, but an existential call to live courageously in submission to Christ**. In facing a world full of uncertainty, suffering, and absurdity, everyone is called to hold fast to **God's truth**.<sup>63</sup> **Living in Christ means rejecting *the vanity of the world*** by living a life oriented toward **God's**

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<sup>60</sup> Stott, *The Radical Disciple*, 101-2.

<sup>61</sup> Stott, *The Radical Disciple*, 112-7.

<sup>62</sup> Stott, *The Radical Disciple*, 112-7.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew 23:23

**love and truth.** This is manifested in **a life that does not seek self-glory**, but one that **surrenders itself to serving and loving others**, just as Christ gave His life for humanity.<sup>64</sup>

In a world that often encourages people to seek meaning in **wealth, power, and worldly success**, believers are called to emulate Christ by turning away from transience and placing God at the center of their existence. Thus, the struggle toward Christ is not only about waiting and receiving eternal life, but also **about realizing the values of God's kingdom** in the midst of a world that *is hevel*, absurd, and full of despair. Faith in Christ brings **true hope** that transcends transience and leads humanity to a life full of meaning in the living God.

## CONCLUSION

Through our discussion, we know that human life is full of *hevel*—transience, absurdity, and futility—as conveyed in Ecclesiastes 2:17 and 12:13-14. This existential struggle raises profound questions about the meaning of life amid human uncertainty and limitations. In Søren Kierkegaard's thinking, this reality leads humans to *despair*, which can only be overcome through **faith**. However, faith is not merely an intellectual understanding of the answer to *hevel*, but an **existential leap (*leap of faith*)** that brings humans into a true relationship with God.

Christ has saved His people from all futility. However, the answer to *hevel* is not enough to be understood only theoretically and normatively, but must be realized in life. The reality *of hevel is still present*, especially in the form of evil, injustice, and suffering. Many people live in greed, indifference, and moral emptiness, pursuing temporary worldly pleasures, such as exploiting others for wealth, dishonesty in leadership, and social division due to selfishness, etc., even though all of these things are futile. In a world like this, faith in Christ demands

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<sup>64</sup> Matthew 22:37, 39; John 3:16

concrete action, not merely passively accepting salvation, but **becoming agents of transformation** who bring God's love, justice, and truth to the world.

With this understanding, salvation in Christ is not only the answer to personal absurdity and transience (individual), but also a call to **fight against the reality of hevel** that many people still face (communal). Believers are called to emulate Christ, with honesty, sincerity, fighting against injustice for the sake of truth, becoming a light for a world still filled with sin. *Faith* is not merely an existential answer for individuals, but also a power that renews the world, brings hope, and manifests the essence of God's Kingdom in the midst of *a hevel*, absurd, and sick world.

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## **The Healing Meal by Jesus: Analysis of Luke 24:30-35 from the Lens of Trauma**

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### **Abstract:**

The Emmaus journey narrative (Luke 24:13–35) is often interpreted as a post-resurrection story affirming faith and providing a liturgical framework. Yet many readings under-explore the traumatic dimension experienced by the disciples after Jesus' crucifixion. This study examines Luke 24:30–35 through the lens of trauma theology, focusing on the meal by Jesus at Emmaus as an act of divine restoration. Drawing on Shelly Rambo's concepts of the middle and witnessing, this study interprets the meal as Jesus' act of hospitality that heals the disciples from their liminal state between suffering and resurrection. The narrative analysis reveals that the breaking of bread serves as the structural and theological center of the text, marking the disciples' transformation from despair to renewed recognition of Christ. The Emmaus meal thus functions not merely as a liturgical event but as a restorative encounter, in which Jesus reawakens memory, restores identity, and reintegrates the wounded into their calling as witnesses. This study highlights the Emmaus narrative as a paradigm for pastoral and liturgical theology, showing that faith recovery after trauma occurs through the living presence of Christ manifested in shared meal and healing community.

### **Keywords:**

Healing; Hospitality;  
Luke 24:30-35; Meal;  
The Middle; Trauma

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## INTRODUCTION

The narrative of Jesus' two disciples' journey to Emmaus is often read as a post-resurrection narrative that affirms faith and hope. This narrative is also read as a liturgical framework containing four liturgical spaces: gathering, Word, table, and sending.<sup>1</sup> However, this reading often overlooks the emotional and spiritual complexities of the disciples, who were in a traumatic state following Jesus' crucifixion. Even though Jesus had risen, the disciples still experienced doubts about their hope in the Messiah.

In this paper, I read the narrative of the journey to Emmaus through the lens of trauma, taking the meal as the main focus. I use Shelly Rambo's theory of *the middle* and *witnessing* to see how Jesus, through His hospitality, restores the disciples. The meal He provides reveals the disciples' memories of Jesus and allows them to reintegrate into their lives. I also note similarities in Shelly Rambo's concept of liminal space *with* Jesus' meal, which opened the disciples' eyes. This approach allows us to see how the narrative affirms the trauma experienced by the disciples. It also demonstrates the importance of the meal as an act of healing by Jesus for the two disciples.

## METHODS

This paper uses qualitative approach with a literature review. I utilize various biblical literature related to the texts I discuss and relate them to trauma theology. The primary theory of trauma I utilize is Shelly Rambo's theory, which posits trauma as the middle ground. Building on the relationship between these two studies, I want to demonstrate that the meal Jesus shared on the Road to Emmaus was a healing meal. This study can provide input for trauma theology, demonstrating that the Eucharist, or the practice of breaking bread, is a means of healing, including healing for trauma.

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<sup>1</sup> Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2010), 72–74.



## DISCUSSION

### Two Students' Rewind Journey

In my opinion, this journey was a "return" for the two disciples because they went from Jerusalem to Emmaus and then back (Luke 24:13-35). In fact, the two disciples had not yet arrived at Emmaus and returned after meeting Jesus. According to Luke, the distance from Jerusalem to Emmaus was 60 *stadia*, or eleven kilometers.<sup>2</sup>

This narrative of a detour begins with two disciples (one of whom is Cleopas) who are troubled by everything that has happened (24:24). The setting of the story is the first day as the sun is about to set (24:29). In the conversation, Jesus is present among them, but they do not recognize Him because something is blocking their way (24:16). The story continues with their conversation, where Cleopas, one of the disciples with a gloomy face, questions Jesus' identity. Cleopas identifies Him as a foreigner because Jesus questions about the topic of their conversation, which everyone in Jerusalem knows (24:17-18). The two disciples then recount what happened, and Jesus responds to them. In the conversation, they also discuss their dashed hopes after Jesus was handed over to be crucified and the stories surrounding the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus responds by explaining about Him according to what is written in the Scriptures (24:27).

This traveling narrative continues until they are almost at their destination, and Jesus seems to want them to stay. At this point, it is apparent that Jesus pretended twice before opening the disciples' eyes: once he was a stranger and once he wanted to continue on his journey.<sup>3</sup> The disciples, knowing that it was almost nighttime, offered to let Jesus stay with them. When Jesus sat down to eat with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to the

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<sup>2</sup> Bambang Subandrijo and Rasid Rachman, *Lukas Peliturgi: Menarasikan Yesus Dalam Peziarahan Gereja Dengan Tradisi Dan Kaum Marginal* (Jakarta: Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Theologi Jakarta, 2021), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Pancha W. Yahya, "Jesus, the Prophet, the Messiah, and the Host: An Interpretation of Luke 24:13-35," *Veritas* 17, no. 2 (December): 138.

disciples. This sequence of actions is the same as what Jesus did at the Last Supper with his disciples in Luke 22:19-20. At the supper, the disciples' eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus. Immediately, Jesus disappeared from their midst.

After the meal, they realized that Jesus was their companion on the road to Emmaus, and their hearts burned within them as they listened to Jesus' explanation. They then got up and returned to Jerusalem, bearing witness and telling the other disciples that they recognized Jesus by His act of breaking the bread. The verb διηνοιχθησαν is the aorist passive indicative form of διανοίγω ("to open fully"). This divine passive form implies that the subject (the disciples) did not open their own eyes, but rather God acted as the hidden agent. In the biblical tradition, the opening of the eyes often refers to an act of divine revelation, not merely physical sight (cf. Gen. 3:7; 2 Kgs. 6:17).

Luke attempts to demonstrate several things from Jesus' actions on the road to Emmaus. Arthur Just analyzes this narrative by viewing it as a text with a ring structure. The meal serves as the central circle or axis of the text.<sup>4</sup> Ring structure analysis is conducted by examining the correspondence between events in the text to identify the axis of the text being analyzed. The correspondence between these events can be seen as follows:

1. The outermost or fifth circle is verse 13 which is connected to verse 33, namely "That same day they set out from Jerusalem" and "Then they got up and returned to Jerusalem."<sup>5</sup>
2. The fourth circle is verse 14 which is connected to verse 32, namely, "... and they talked..." and "They said one to another..."
3. The third circle is verse 15 which is connected with verse 31b, namely, "Jesus himself approached them..." and "He disappeared from their midst."

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur A. Just, *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, n.d.), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Just, *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus*, 31.

4. The fourth circle is verses 16 and 31a, namely, “Their eyes were caught so that they did not recognize him” and “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.”
5. The center circle is verses 17-30, their conversation and Jesus' breaking of the bread. The text concludes in verses 34-35, which show that they witnessed what happened and how they identified Jesus through the act of breaking the bread.<sup>6</sup>

The structure of this text shows that the focus of the text is Jesus' conversation and the meal he gave them. At the conclusion or anticlimax of the story, two disciples return to their lives as witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. A crucial aspect of this text that should not be overlooked is the emotional shift experienced by the disciples. Before they recognized Jesus through the meal, they were desperate, disappointed, and suffering. After the meal, they became joyful disciples and realized the fire burning within their hearts.<sup>7</sup>

This text leads me to see the importance of Jesus' meal for his disciples. Luke intends to state that everything contained in verses 13-27 is accomplished or concluded in the breaking of the bread.<sup>8</sup> This includes Jesus' interpretation of His life, death, and resurrection, as related to the prophecies of Moses and the prophets, which are legitimized at the meal. This conclusion is indicated when Jesus is recognized through the meal, then He disappears (24:31). This meal marks the climax of Jesus' presence in the narrative of the journey to Emmaus. Joseph Vempala clarifies this with the following statement:

Scriptures bear witness to the Risen Christ, but the Eucharist makes the Risen Christ himself present in living form.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Just, *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Yahya, “Jesus, the Prophet, the Messiah, and the Host: An Interpretation of Luke 24:13-35,” 140.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Vempala, “An Exegetical Study on the Emmaus Narrative in Luke 24:13-35” (Thesis, Paurasatya Vidyapitham University, 2023), 67.

<sup>9</sup> Vempala, “An Exegetical Study on the Emmaus Narrative in Luke 24:13-35,” 71-72.

The trip back and forth from Jerusalem led me to a new idea about the meal and its significance. The meal not only revealed the revelation that had blinded the disciples, but more than that, it was a legitimation that concluded all of Jesus' actions in this narrative. Jesus, previously known as a stranger, affirmed His identity through the meal. The disciples, previously anxious and doubtful, were affirmed through the meal.

### **Banquets as Jesus' Hospitality**

For the Jews, eating was essential.<sup>10</sup> Eating was not simply an act of fulfilling needs. It encompassed how the food was served, what they ate, and with whom they ate. Andrzej Sobczyk argues that Luke conceptualized eating as a form of hospitality in Jewish culture. Eating was also *an event* and a celebration of God's providence.<sup>11</sup> Arthur A. Just states that Luke positioned the meal as the perfect setting for teaching.<sup>12</sup> Subandrijo and Rachman suggest that for Luke, the meal was a vehicle for Jesus to convey his teachings and the ethics of life for his followers.<sup>13</sup>

The fellowship of the dining table is not just about the food served. It also involves the participants and what they hope to achieve through the meal.<sup>14</sup> Rasid Rachman views the meal as a symbol of community identity.<sup>15</sup> In the meals typically shared by the early church in Corinth, Paul pointed out the social inequality.<sup>16</sup> Those who participated in the early meal were usually wealthy and

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<sup>10</sup> Andrzej Sobczyk, "Luke the Evangelizer: Identifying Luke's Themes in the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13-35), an Exercise in Narrative Criticism," Education, Santa Clara University, June 13, 8, <https://webpages.scu.edu/ftp/cmurphy/courses/all/writing/archive/ilm-sobczyk-s06.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Sobczyk, "Luke the Evangelizer: Identifying Luke's Themes in the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13-35), an Exercise in Narrative Criticism," 8.

<sup>12</sup> Just, *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus*, 130.

<sup>13</sup> Subandrijo and Rachman, *Lukas Peliturgi: Menarasikan Yesus Dalam Peziarahan Gereja Dengan Tradisi Dan Kaum Marginal*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> Just, *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus*, 129.

<sup>15</sup> Rasid Rachman, *Perjamuan Awal Jemaat Korintus: Deipnon, Poterion, Symposion* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2018), 179.

<sup>16</sup> Rachman, *Perjamuan Awal Jemaat Korintus: Deipnon, Poterion, Symposion*, 140.

indulged in excessive drinking, leading to intoxication. The purpose of the meal was also to foster social intimacy among those who participated.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus' role as a guest at a meal demonstrates the widespread acceptance of Christian fellowship. Luke's Gospel records several meals, such as the feeding of the five thousand (9:16) and the Last Supper (22:19). David Lertis Matson, citing Robert J. Karris, notes that eating was an important act of Jesus's life because it is repeated several times in the Gospels.<sup>18</sup> Jesus would go to the meal, attend the meal, and return from the meal.

Eating was a crucial activity in Jesus' journey. This activity also demonstrates how Jesus received and provided hospitality, including those who were outcast.<sup>19</sup> The meal became a means of welcoming Jesus to those who were marginalized, outcast, and suffering.<sup>20</sup> The meal was immortalized as a memorial that evoked the memory of Jesus.

The repetition of the meal scene is not done unless it is essential. This action indicates that the meal needs to be remembered. Luke sees that Jesus' identity is revealed through the meal, especially in the act of breaking bread or the Eucharist.<sup>21</sup> As recorded in the Gospels, carrying out the breaking of bread as head of the household/host is an act of Jesus that links bread with His death.<sup>22</sup> In this act, Jesus shows the eschatological meaning that in His death there is God's work of salvation. The meal, for those who receive it, is a means of God's hospitality to His creation, and an entry into victory in Christ.<sup>23</sup> Binsar J. Pakpahan sees the meal as an act that reminds us of God.<sup>24</sup> The meal embodies

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<sup>17</sup> Rachman, *Perjamuan Awal Jemaat Korintus: Deipnon, Poterion, Symposion*, 180.

<sup>18</sup> David Lertis Matson, "Breaking the Bread, Breaking the Veil: Recognition of Jesus at Emmaus," *Leaven* 3, no. 3 (January): 3.

<sup>19</sup> Matson, "Breaking the Bread, Breaking the Veil: Recognition of Jesus at Emmaus," 3.

<sup>20</sup> Just, *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus*, 131.

<sup>21</sup> Matson, "Breaking the Bread, Breaking the Veil: Recognition of Jesus at Emmaus," 3.

<sup>22</sup> Matson, "Breaking the Bread, Breaking the Veil: Recognition of Jesus at Emmaus," 1.

<sup>23</sup> Just, *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus*, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Binsar Jonathan Pakpahan, *Allah Mengingat: Teologi Ingatan sebagai Dasar Rekonsiliasi dalam Konflik Komunal*, Cetakan ke-1, trans. Alvian Apriano and Hizkia Anugrah Gunawan (Jakarta, Indonesia: BPK Gunung Mulia : Unit Publikasi dan Informasi Sekolah Tinggi Teologia Jakarta, 2017), 284.

the surrender of memory in the knowledge that God remembers His people. Coming to the table means remembering what happened in the past with the hope of God's embrace to live in the present. Coming to God's table means receiving the hospitality of God who remembers His people.

### **Trauma as a Destructive Liminal Space**

Trauma is a condition of physical and psychological overwhelm characterized by feelings of terror, loss of control over the mind and body, and total helplessness.<sup>25</sup> Trauma distorts a person's assumptions about the world, leading to feelings of insecurity and a need for protection. Trauma not only impacts how people think and perceive the world but also reduces brain capacity and function.<sup>26</sup>

Trauma causes destruction, resulting in visions that the brain cannot control and lead to instability within a person.<sup>27</sup> The essence of trauma lies not in the event itself, but in how a person responds to the experience and the extent to which that experience impacts their ability to respond.<sup>28</sup> This is why each person responds differently to traumatic events and experiences varying degrees of trauma. Trauma also refers to a blockage of the traumatic event, preventing a person from encountering or remembering the traumatic event.

This blocking creates gaps in the flow of time and memory located in the brain. In the brain, this gives rise to flashbacks, hallucinations and dreams for trauma sufferers. After that, those who suffer from trauma will experience cognitive destruction specifically in terms of language and communication.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> David Farina Turnbloom, "Liturgy in the Shadow of Trauma," *Religions* 13 (July 2022): 588, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070583>.

<sup>26</sup> Turnbloom, "Liturgy in the Shadow of Trauma," 590.

<sup>27</sup> Karen O'Donnell, "Eucharist and Trauma Healing in the Body," in *Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma*, 1st ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 185.

<sup>28</sup> Hilary Ison, "Working with an Embodied and Systematic Approach to Trauma and Tragedy," in *Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma*, ed. Christopher Southgate et al. (London: Routledge, 2020), 50.

<sup>29</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 21.

Rambo states that trauma sufferers tend to have painful imaginations about the world and these imaginations often haunt them. Those who have experienced trauma tend not to be able to talk about the trauma they have experienced. Those who experience trauma cannot express what happened and how they feel about the traumatic event that happened to them.<sup>30</sup>

It's important to emphasize that trauma is more than just grief due to loss or sorrow. Trauma stems from an event so profound that it transcends the limits of what can be perceived or understood. Trauma is distinguished from other experiences of suffering. Trauma disrupts a person's capacity to respond to or integrate experiences related to the traumatic event.<sup>31</sup> Those who suffer from trauma are shackled by the shadows of the past. Their memories are colonized, despite their best efforts to forget the event. They are no longer able to live their lives normally. Rambo argues that trauma shatters the sufferer's construction of the world and all that operates within it. Trauma shifts the meaning of truth and distorts the supremacy of human life.<sup>32</sup> Discussing trauma is about what remains and remains.<sup>33</sup>

Regarding trauma, Shelly Rambo begins with the story of Holy Saturday, which states that trauma is a neglected wound.<sup>34</sup> To understand the experience of unresolved suffering, Rambo describes it in *the middle*. *The middle* refers to the liminal state between suffering and healing, between death and resurrection. Holy Saturday is a symbol of *the middle*, as on that day, the disciples' wounds are neglected because Christianity tends to prioritize the events of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Yet, on that day, the wounds experienced by Jesus' followers were still raw and the suffering still very real. Rambo rejects the practical leap from Jesus' death to His resurrection, focusing instead on the space between the

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<sup>30</sup> Martina Karels, "Staging Remembrance and Trauma at the 9/11 Memorial," in *Ruptured Voices*, ed. Karen O'Donnell (New York: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2020), 8.

<sup>31</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 15-17.

two events, a space that emphasizes the presence of unacknowledged and neglected wounds. Holy Saturday, as *the middle*, becomes a space that fosters Rambo's trauma theory, stating that on Holy Saturday, God feels silent, the suffering is not over, and the resurrection has not yet arrived.<sup>35</sup>

Trauma studies focuses on exposing theological errors related to suffering. Various theological dialogues about "everything will be okay" actually prevent survivors from healing their own emotional wounds. In another article, Rambo explains that acknowledging wounds is the gateway to trauma healing, just as Jesus showed his wounds to Thomas in the Gospel of John.<sup>36</sup> Trauma studies is about uncovering wounds through remembering, then healing them by replacing destructive assumptions with new perspectives on the wounds.

Regarding healing the remaining suffering, Rambo emphasized that trauma studies means discussing how survivors can survive.<sup>37</sup> Surviving the constant replay of painful memories caused by trauma is no easy feat. Theology engages in dialogue with trauma with the aim of presenting God's presence in this suffering. The ultimate goal is to reexamine how Christianity should respond to suffering and articulate it. In practice, *witnessing* means witnessing those who are wounded, acknowledging it, and being present with them. Communities that engage in dialogue with trauma open up opportunities for survivors to heal. With a healthy community, survivors can build assumptions about a new world imbued with God's love.

Rambo also provides another illustration to explain trauma: that trauma is the intersection of life and death.<sup>38</sup> Trauma becomes a liminal corner within a person because they are alive but no longer able to live their lives. Rambo states that recovery does not mean erasing the negative memories experienced by survivors. On the contrary, recovery begins with the act of remembering and

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<sup>35</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 15–17.

<sup>36</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco: Baylor University Press., 2017), 106.

<sup>37</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 45.



bringing survivors back to the past, breaking down the assumptions of the old world and framing a new one.<sup>39</sup>

The new life is lived with the love of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that they interpret the trauma as a new frame for living life in joyful challenges.<sup>40</sup> This process and journey is a story of God's love for humans which is also linked to the story of God's truth in the resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup> This true story of God's love is also manifested in the Spirit of God which alights within humans so that they can survive and be entertained.

Trauma recovery, then, means reconnecting or reintegrating survivors into their lives.<sup>42</sup> Trauma recovery is filled with God's truth that transcends the tragedy in their lives. This truth and God's love endure in the new lives they rebuild. Trauma recovery doesn't mean erasing the hurt, freeing oneself from past memories, or forgetting painful memories. Recovery is about living alongside the wounds that remain.<sup>43</sup>

### **Jesus' Banquets as Restorative Hospitality**

In the narrative of the journey to Emmaus, the meal occupies a crucial position. Just considers the meal on the road to Emmaus significant because it was the first meal after Jesus' resurrection.<sup>44</sup> Matson observes that Luke emphasizes the meal as a way for the disciples to know the risen Jesus.<sup>45</sup> The meal on the road to Emmaus is reminiscent of the Last Supper, with its sequence of actions: Jesus took the bread, blessed/gives thanksgiving, broke it, and gave it to them. This emphasis on the breaking of the bread demonstrates that the act of breaking the bread is a characteristic act of Jesus according to Luke's Gospel. The

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<sup>39</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma* , 26.

<sup>40</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma* , 26.

<sup>41</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma* , 45.

<sup>42</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma* , 163.

<sup>43</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* , 172.

<sup>44</sup> Just, *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus* , 27.

<sup>45</sup> David Lertis Matson, "Breaking the Bread, Breaking the Veil: Recognition of Jesus at Emmaus," 2.

recognition of Christ begins with the word. Jesus communicates it through His words, and then His self-knowledge is confirmed through the breaking of the bread.<sup>46</sup>

The narrative of the journey to Emmaus contains two contrasting scenes related to the banquet. The scene consists of disciples in the dark who did not know Jesus before eating, and disciples who knew Jesus after the banquet was held. The meal revealed who Jesus was talking to them about. The banquet was a transition or entry point for the two disciples towards knowing Jesus, and when they came to that knowledge, Jesus disappeared. Jesus disappears after the disciples recognize him which indicates that the climax of the story is reached when Jesus is finally recognized through a banquet. Without the disciple's invitation to eat, without Jesus' acceptance of the invitation, the climax would not have arrived.<sup>47</sup>

When compared to Rambo's writings on the theory of *the middle*, the disciples are the object of the theory in question. Jesus' followers lost their teacher and witnessed the sacrifice of their faith in Jesus on the cross. This incident not only shattered their hopes for the Messiah but also left them deeply wounded. Before they knew that Jesus had risen, the women who came to Jesus' tomb did not find His body, causing trauma.<sup>48</sup> They had heard the news of Jesus' resurrection, but they still doubted it. They were frustrated, confused, disappointed, and hurt by their teacher's departure. They thought there was nothing left to do in Jerusalem, so they decided to leave.

Those in this middle space decided to abandon their calling because of the pain of neglect. Even though time had moved from *the middle space* to the resurrection, they remained in that liminal state. Although they had heard that

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<sup>46</sup> Paul Sciberras, "Recognizing the Rising Lord through Scripture: The Apostle Paul as an Ideal Match for Two Disciples on the Way to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35," *Verbum Vitae*, November, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Anthony J. Godzieba, "Five Looks at Emmaus: Revelation, Resonance, and the Sacramental Imagination," *Religious*, July, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 17.

Jesus had risen, they doubted it and misinterpreted the message of salvation. So, Jesus came to them with His hospitality to reaffirm what had been written in prophecy. He came, He taught, and He offered a meal as the climax of His presence. With this meal that opened the disciples' eyes, He drew them out of *the middle space* and into the salvation that God had woven together. With this meal, Jesus restored the disciples, awakened them, and reintegrated them into their calling. This meal made the disciples witnesses, not only of Jesus' resurrection, but also of the revelation of their memory of Jesus. This memory contained a wound that disappointed them, but it was then strengthened by His presence that enkindled their hearts.

This is consistent with Luke's account, which states that the act of communion is closely linked to memory. Communion was Jesus' way of recalling their time together. The phrase "eyes were opened" (24:31) indicates that whatever triggered their memory was divine, that God was working to open their minds. It was this memory that restored them and restored their calling, leading them to return to Jerusalem.

Matson states that the meal at Emmaus was communion with the risen Lord, given its similarities to the Last Supper.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, this meal is a healing meal. Rambo states that healing is achieved through God's accompaniment through the Holy Spirit. This meal implies that Jesus is present with and accompanies the wounded.<sup>50</sup> Through the breaking of bread, the wounded encounter Jesus and receive salvation from Him. Through the breaking of bread, the wounded are connected in memory, and the memory of the wound is given new meaning so that it can be healed.

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<sup>49</sup> David Lertis Matson, "Breaking the Bread, Breaking the Veil: Recognition of Jesus at Emmaus," 5.

<sup>50</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 45.

## CONCLUSION

Jesus' supper at Emmaus is the gateway or initiation into knowing the true Christ. Rasid Rachman, citing Eugene LaVerdiere, observes that this supper is a Eucharistic liturgy in accordance with its characteristics.<sup>51</sup> The food called the Eucharist may only be consumed by believers who have received forgiveness and rebirth, and live according to Christian teachings.<sup>52</sup> God, the host of the Eucharist, makes it fitting for the people to receive His supper, and so God also makes it fitting for the disciples to receive Jesus' supper on the road to Emmaus. As Rasid Rachman points out, the supper was a liminal period for the Corinthian congregation<sup>53</sup>, so in my opinion, the supper at Emmaus is the disciples' liminal period from darkness (when they did not yet know Jesus) to light. The supper shifts them from *the middle* to recovery, so they arrive at the anticlimax of the Emmaus narrative, where they are reconnected to their calling and become witnesses. The supper enables them to become *witnesses* who live alongside their wounds and interpret them as God's saving work in their lives. They moved from helplessness to a burning heart. With greater speed than when they left Jerusalem, they set out again to finish what they had begun. Thus, through the lens of trauma, the meal in Luke 24:30-35 is an act of healing performed by Jesus. Through it, those in the darkness of *the middle space* can be enlightened, strengthened, and restored by Jesus.

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<sup>51</sup> Bambang Subandrijo and Rasid Rachman, *Lukas Peliturgi: Menarasikan Yesus Dalam Peziarahan Gereja Dengan Tradisi Dan Kaum Marginal*, 84.

<sup>52</sup> Rasid Rachman, "Menyiarkan Teologi, Menyairkan Nyanyian Jemaat," in *Liturgi Di Ruang Publik: Sakralitas, Ritual Dan Transformasi*, ed. Hans A. Harmakaputra et al. (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2023), 16–17.

<sup>53</sup> Rasid Rachman, *Perjamuan Awal Jemaat Korintus: Deipnon, Poterion, Symposion*, 186.

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