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John's Gospel and the Roman Imperial Context

An Evaluation of Recent Proposals

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Today, travelers at airports throughout the United States are subjected to a number of security measures that were not in place just over a decade ago. For example, only those with boarding passes are permitted beyond security checkpoints. Everyone passing through security must remove their shoes and put them on a conveyor belt to send through screening. Occasionally a passenger will be selected randomly for extra screening and pulled aside for questioning. In previous years these measures would have been considered strange requirements for air travel, though today they are commonplace. In addition to these changes in air transport, the federal government has created an entire agency that oversees the safety of American citizens. It is known as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The stated mission of the DHS is to secure the nation from the many threats it faces. In the so-called "age of terror," there is an ever-present awareness of the potential harm that could come to American citizens and institutions. This awareness and all of the aforementioned precautions can be traced back to the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001—a day that

has arguably shaped the contemporary American psyche more than any other event in recent memory. Though the events of 9/11 have faded from the day-to-day consciousness of most Americans, there remains a ripple effect that continues to inform the daily American experience. Simply stated, it is impossible to live in America without feeling the impact of that fateful day in 2001. The threat of future terrorism and the memory of 9/11 together lie under the surface of everyday life in the United States.

While this is not a perfect illustration, it can be quite useful for helping us understand the Roman imperial context of the New Testament. Just as the United States in the twenty-first century cannot be separated from its experience on September 11, 2001, neither can first-century Palestine be extracted from its Roman context in particular, or from its experience of foreign subjugation in general.[1] The experience of Roman occupation was a lived reality from which those in the New Testament era could not escape. This does not mean that every element of Jewish and Christian expression, especially their sacred literature, was intended as a response to Roman imperialism, only that the specter of the Roman Empire cast its shadow over daily life in first-century Palestine in a way that cannot and should not be ignored.

While much of the New Testament has been subjected to the anti-imperial current of scholarship (notably the Gospels of Mathew and Luke, Paul's letters and Revelation), relatively little has been written about John's response to Rome until very recently. In recent years scholars have suggested that John, while clearly presenting a high Christology and a conflict with a group known as "the Jews," is also interested in Rome. This essay will examine some of the current scholarly proposals on the Johannine response to the Roman Empire. Before moving into our consideration of those proposals it will prove helpful to begin with a series of objections that have been offered against anti-imperial readings of the Fourth Gospel.

Objections to Consider

Objection 1: By comparison, the Gospel of John is less interested in Rome than the Synoptic Gospels. While it is true that the Fourth Gospel is less concerned with Rome than the Synoptics, this objection actually reveals

[1]Almost continuously from 605 BCE to 192 CE, Israel was under the rule of one of the following foreign empires: Babylonian (605 BCE-539 BCE), Persian (539 BCE-331 BCE), Greek (331 BCE-143 BCE), or Roman (63 BCE-192 CE). The only period in which the Jews had both religious and political autonomy was during the Hasmonean era (143 BCE-63 BCE). This series of foreign subjugations no doubt played an important part in Jewish self-identity during the first century CE.

very little about the Johannine view of Rome. Each Gospel is an autonomous narrative and should be treated as such before an attempt is made to compare the Gospels to one another. This means that we must read John's Gospel on its own terms without imposing emphases or categories from other New Testament texts. Thus, if we are going to evaluate John's view of Rome, we must look at the Fourth Gospel independently of its canonical counterparts.

Objection 2: Specific references to Rome and Roman political terms are largely absent from the Fourth Gospel. This objection also contains some truth, though it requires qualification. I like to remind my students that it is possible for a concept to be present even when the terms that denote that concept are absent. Take for example, the following statement: The Colts are going to the Super Bowl to face the Redskins in a battle of epic proportions.

For those "in the know," it would certainly be ridiculous to read this statement as if it were describing a literal battle between horses and redskinned people inside a large open container. Instead, anyone remotely familiar with the context and cultural scripts would immediately recognize that the statement refers to a major event in professional American football. Serious fans will know instinctively that it refers to the National Football League's championship game between the Indianapolis Colts and the Washington Redskins. However, the basic terms, *football*, *game*, *team*, *championship* and *NFL*, as well as the names of both cities, are absent from the sentence. Despite the omission of these terms, the statement is filled with enough culturally scripted information to allow the concept to be grasped by those familiar with the background. In the same way, those familiar with the setting of first-century Palestine would have possessed sensitivities to cultural scripts that contemporary readers may miss. This includes subtexts related to the Roman Empire. What makes this observation more important is that some scholars build their case for John's anti-imperial reading on the very omission of explicit references to Rome. Warren Carter refers to this, in part, as John's "rhetoric of distance."[2]

Objection 3: John's Gospel is inherently theological and is not interested in politics or in promoting a political ideology. The modern, mainly Western insistence on separating politics and religion would have been foreign in the context of first-century Palestinian culture. One's view of

[2]This phrase is found in Warren Carter's volume, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008). More will be said about this subject in the discussion that follows.

God (or the gods) had immediate implications and practical relevance for the development of one's political views and vice versa. Thus, terms such as *king*, *kingdom*, *son of God*, *Lord* and so forth often had important political implications in light of the Roman occupation, as well as religious implications for Jews and Jewish followers of Jesus. Therefore, we must be careful to avoid hastily dismissing the potential political significance behind explicitly theological terms in John.

Having considered and offered some necessary qualifications to these objections, we are now in a position to look at John in light of recent proposals that suggest a focus on Rome. The next portion of this essay will examine and critique core elements of contemporary anti-imperial readings of John's Gospel. Because of space limitations we will focus on the three recent book-length studies on the subject: Tom Thatcher's *Greater Than Caesar*, Warren Carter's *John and Empire* and Lance Byron Richey's *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*. Our discussion will examine important elements of each work and will proceed thematically rather than chronologically. This brief essay will not be able to provide a comprehensive interaction with each book. Instead, what follows is a broad-strokes analysis and should not be regarded as a substitute for reading the works themselves.

Negative Christology and Anti-Roman Rhetoric

One of the universally recognized and theologically significant elements of the Gospel of John is its high Christology. The narrative begins with an in-your-face flourish that openly declares the equality shared by God and the Logos ("the Word was God" [Jn 1:1]). The remaining verses of John's prologue (Jn 1:2-18) go on to provide a detailed description of the incarnate Logos (i.e., Jesus, cf. Jn 1:17): he is the agent of all creation (v. 3), the light of humanity which enlightens those in the world (vv. 4, 9), the purveyor of authority to appoint God's children (v. 12), the possessor of God's glory (v. 14), and, most important, the one who reveals the Father to humanity (v. 18). This comprehensive Christological presentation prepares the reader of John's Gospel for all that will follow in the narrative. It sets the stage by providing the audience with enough information to evaluate every character's response to Jesus, and thereby becomes the interpretive grid through which the audience can understand the Gospel's main purpose—to engender belief in those who hear the story (cf. Jn 20:31).

Whereas in previous decades there was much speculation about the sup-

posed Hellenistic or Gnostic backgrounds of John, most scholars today are convinced that the Fourth Gospel is rooted in a thoroughly Jewish way of thinking. The Gospel's Jewish character is clear from the outset of the narrative, which harkens back to the opening lines of Genesis with the intertextual echo, "In the beginning . . ." (Gen 1:1; Jn 1:1). There is also the interplay between God speaking and creating light and life (Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29) with the activity of God's "Word" (Jn 1:1, 14), particularly in relationship to life (Jn 1:4) and light (Jn 1:5, 9). Further, as the story progresses the audience learns that great Jewish feasts (e.g., Passover) and memorialized events (e.g., God's provision of manna in the wilderness) find their ultimate significance in the life and ministry of the Johannine Jesus. A close reading of the narrative reveals that the Fourth Evangelist has carefully constructed a complex Christology that is rooted in Jewish monotheism but which also moves beyond prominent Jewish figures and established messianic categories. To put it plainly, John's Christology presents a detailed portrait of a figure that both lies within and transcends Jewish expectation.

In his book *Greater Than Caesar*, Tom Thatcher argues that John's Christology, while comprehensive in its scope, is largely negative and is presented in comparative rather than absolute terms. This, he argues, is a key component to John's anti-Roman rhetoric. He writes:

> John's Christology is "negative" in that it tells us less about who Christ *is* than about who he *is not* or what he is *greater than*. . . . John's response to Roman power is so wrapped up in his Christology, and vice versa, that the two cannot be separated. I do not believe, in other words, that John held an abstract set of beliefs about Christ that he pulled out of his mind and packaged in imperial terms to illustrate what he was talking about. I believe, rather, that imperial terms and images were foundational to John's Christology, and that his thinking about Christ was always informed by the premise that Jesus is greater than Caesar.[3]

We have already established that the New Testament writings are intertwined with the cultural realities of Roman imperial rule. However, it is an overstatement to assert that Roman terms and images are "foundational" to the Christology of the Fourth Gospel. There can be little doubt though that John presents Jesus in comparative terms. For instance, the audience learns

[3]Tom Thatcher, *Greater Than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), p. 11.

very early in the narrative that the revelatory work of Jesus is superior to that of Moses (Jn 1:17). In another scene replete with Christological significance, Jesus comments, "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jn 8:58 NRSV). John's Jesus also exemplifies the very best of the personified wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible. The list could go on. It would not be a stretch to argue, along with Thatcher, that Jesus is "greater than Caesar." According to the Fourth Evangelist Jesus is greater than Caesar, but he is also greater than all other symbols of human power—religious, political or otherwise.

For Thatcher, it is not problematic that John's Jesus is so connected with Jewish religious culture, mainly because he regards the Jewish authorities as a central symbol of Roman power. He writes, "In the Gospel of John the Jewish authorities essentially act like Roman prefects, or at least like a puppet aristocracy that serves as an interface between the procurator and the masses and thereby attempts to maintain the imperial status quo."[4] Thus, Thatcher ultimately regards the Jewishness of John's Gospel as a handmaiden to its Roman focus. Thatcher's novel thesis is creative and well articulated, but I believe it goes too far in identifying the Jewish leaders as a symbol of Roman power. Yes, the Jewish authorities collude with Roman officials to bring about the death of Jesus (cf. Jn 18:1-11), but by and large they represent their own interests quite well throughout the rest of the Gospel (cf. e.g., Jn 1:19-28; 2:18-20; 5:9-18; 7:32-52; 8:12-58). In fact, many Johannine characters approach Jesus on the basis of their own interests, and their sectarian concerns, both religious and ethnic, are consistently identified by the Evangelist. Jewish characters discuss Jesus in terms that reflect their personal beliefs (e.g., "Behold the Lamb of God" [Jn 1:29, 36]; "We have found the Messiah" [Jn 1:41]; "We have found the one about whom Moses wrote in the Law, and the prophets also" [Jn 1:45]; "You are the son of God, the King of Israel" [Jn 1:49]); the Samaritan woman struggles to come to terms with Jesus on the basis of her own preconditioned cultural and religious understandings (Jn 4:4-30); Pontius Pilate, the key Roman figure in John, lords his authority over Jesus and eventually responds to him with the question "What is truth?" (Jn 18:33-40); there are even Greeks who come looking for Jesus (Jn 12:20-21), though the substance and significance of their encounter with him is never elaborated.

The depth and complexity of John's presentation of various characters are significantly flattened out by viewing the narrative through the grid of

[4]Ibid., p. 52.

anti-Roman rhetoric. Further, it seems inadvisable to downplay the significance of Jewish elements in John, while placing pronounced emphasis on the Roman context. As stated earlier, readers should assume that Rome is lurking in the background of the narrative. To give Rome too much attention, though, is to major on a minor issue. It is too reductionistic to focus on John's meager presentation of Rome, while neglecting more explicit and seemingly more important points of emphasis. Apart from Jesus' trial and interaction with Pilate, Rome is present mostly in signs and shadows, not on a neon billboard. Even as a subtext Rome should not be accorded the narrative or theological significance Thatcher proposes. At the end of the day, Thatcher's discussion of John's "negative" and "comparative" Christology provides insights that make Rome necessarily visible within the story. However, he overreaches both in his assertion that Roman images are foundational to John's Christology and in his attempt to establish "the Jews" as symbols of Roman power.

John's Historical Context and Rhetoric of Distance

Since the publication of J. L. Martyn's groundbreaking work *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1968), Johannine scholars have relied heavily on the thesis that John's Gospel provides a two-level story concerned with Jesus and with the struggles of the Johannine community.[5] In other words, the conflicts and concerns of John's community have been read back into the life of Jesus with the result that the two stories have become intertwined. There is not space here to critique Martyn's proposal or rehearse the history of its reception among scholars. Suffice it to say that, while some of his original thesis has been qualified or discarded, many scholars still operate under the basic assumption that the Fourth Gospel tells the interrelated stories of Jesus and the Johannine community. Scholars commonly agree that the Gospel's three references to believers being expelled from the synagogue (Jn 9:22; 12:42; 16:2) represent evidence of a conflict within the Johannine community. Since Christ followers were not being expelled from the synagogue during Jesus' lifetime, this appears to represent a concern for John's religious community. Among scholars this element of the narrative remains one key to locating the struggles of John's community in the Gospel story.

[5]See the recently revised and expanded edition: J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

In his book *John and Empire*, Warren Carter challenges this dominant scholarly opinion, referring to it as the "sectarian-synagogal reading." He finds it to be an inadequate interpretive framework that ignores the Gospel's historical context and renders Rome invisible in the process. His basic argument is that those in the Jewish world had learned how to live within the confines of Roman rule while finding ways to resume their life, including their way of worship. The Fourth Evangelist regarded this way of life as too accommodating toward Rome and sought to address this lifestyle by demonstrating how the crucified and resurrected Jesus necessarily challenges Rome's power and theopolitical claims. John accomplishes the challenge to Rome not overtly, but through subtle subtexts as part of a larger "rhetoric of distance." Carter writes:

> With its rhetoric of distance and differentiation, the Gospel seeks to disturb cozy interactions and ready participation in Rome's world by emphasizing Jesus' challenge to and conflict with the Roman world, by delineating an either/or dualistic worldview, and by emphasizing the alternative world created by God's life-giving purposes manifested in Jesus. The Gospel's rhetoric of distance should not, though, mislead us into thinking that such a differentiated way of life already exists. The Gospel works so hard to create it precisely because levels of accommodation are so high.[6]

In addition, Carter states that the major problem for the sectarian-synagogal reading is that there is little historical evidence outside the Gospel to support it. He examines the historical context—primarily that of Ephesus—to provide a plausible scenario for the use of the Gospel and asserts that "John's rhetoric of distance seeks in part to disturb the Jesus-believers' general sense of at-homeness in late first-century Ephesus and impose greater distance."[7]

Carter's historical reconstruction includes discussions of Revelation, 1 Peter and Acts 19, after which he concludes that

> *The synagogue community in Ephesus in which John's Jesus-believers participated* was in all likelihood reasonably at home in and accommodated to Roman power. . . . The Gospel presents claims about Jesus as troubling for the synagogue's accommodation, thereby attempting not only to separate Jesus-believers from the synagogue, but also to create a more antithetical relationship between Jesus-believers and the empire.[8]

[6]Carter, *John and Empire*, p. 14.
[7]Ibid., p. 43.
[8]Ibid., p. 45, emphasis added.

From there, Carter engages in a lengthy and complex argument in which he attempts to demonstrate Rome's importance to an effective reading of the Gospel.

Students and scholars of the Fourth Gospel should feel indebted to Carter for making Rome visible in the narrative in a way that reflects the realities of life under Roman rule. He is correct in his assertion that Johannine scholars have long overlooked Rome's presence in the narrative. Further, his argument is immersed in a strong awareness of Roman political and societal issues as well as a breadth of secondary literature, and these strengths will surely open new vistas for those interested in Rome as it relates to New Testament studies. Nevertheless, despite the valuable contributions that can be mined from the margins of his work, Carter's main thesis is problematic for several reasons.

First, I do not believe Carter has provided sufficient reasons to justify a wholesale abandonment of the sectarian-synagogal reading of John. He superficially addresses concerns about synagogue expulsion and intra-community conflict, and seemingly only as a means to dismissing it to provide his own interpretive grid. In every generation the majority opinions of scholarship need to be reexamined, if only to remind scholars why those opinions have been so influential. Carter is to be applauded for his attempt to question the consensus, though his alternative to the two-level reading is not convincing.

Second, Carter's use of Ephesus as the basis for his historical context is also problematic and is one reason why his alternative to the sectarian-synagogal reading is so difficult to accept. His reconstruction focuses solely on the role his reading of John would have played in Roman Ephesus, irrespective of where and under what circumstances the Fourth Gospel actually emerged. As a historical reconstruction his argument coheres, but it is not self-evident that John's Gospel arose out of an Ephesian context. Carter uses as a foundation for his argument, evidence that cannot be demonstrated clearly within or outside the Fourth Gospel. Much historical scholarship is speculative, and if the Ephesian context was part of an ancillary point supported by other, more secure historical evidence, Carter's overall thesis might prove to be more convincing. As it stands, Carter tries to do too much history with too little evidence.

Third, like Thatcher, Carter places heavy emphasis on less prominent features of the narrative in order to draw out a political reading while paying

insufficient attention to the wider Jewish context of the narrative. This raises a much larger hermeneutical question: Should we pay attention primarily (or only) to the subtleties of a given text while glossing over repeated literary and theological motifs? Perhaps I am opening myself up to the charge of being an unsophisticated reader of the narrative, but my answer to that question is "surely not." Subtexts are an important means of textual communication and they should not be overlooked. However, neither should we abandon clear points of emphasis for elements that, frankly, may not even be present in the text. Warren Carter has been one of the leading figures in moving New Testament research into the field of empire studies. In particular, his work on Matthew has been influential for showing that Gospel's interest in Roman issues. However, as is the case with anyone doing research in the related fields of biblical and early Christian studies, there is a strong temptation to see our own interests in the texts we examine. Because of his research interests, Carter is conditioned to look for Roman images and themes, and in some of his other published works he has proven particularly adept at it. It seems to me that in the case of John's Gospel—at least as it relates to his main thesis—Carter has found what he was looking for rather than what is actually in (or behind) the text.

Augustan Ideology, the Son of God and John's Prologue

Unlike Warren Carter, Lance Byron Richey begins his book *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John* by affirming the validity of the two-level reading of John's Gospel; this affirmation subsequently becomes a foundational element of his reconstruction. Richey explains that the "Augustan Ideology" established under Caesar Augustus was a way of legitimating and perpetuating the emperor's supremacy within and over his government.[9] Once this ideology was firmly in place throughout the Roman Empire, all sectors of society would have been affected. This, argues Richey, would have included the Johannine community of believers.

If indeed the Johannine believers were expelled from the synagogue, that event would have rendered them vulnerable to external social and religious pressures. Under Roman law, Jews were exempt from participation in the imperial cult. Following their break with Judaism the Johannine Christians would have been exposed, resulting in an increasingly intensified pressure

[9]This is the ideology that would have lauded both the greatness of Caesar and his power over all of Rome.

to participate in the imperial cult. Against this backdrop, Richey argues that the Fourth Gospel, presumably in its final redactional layer, includes a polemic against the Augustan ideology. Specifically, the Johannine polemic is communicated through special vocabulary such as "the Savior of the world" (*ho sōtēr tou kosmou* [Jn 4:42]), and "the Son of God" (*ho huios tou theou* [Jn 1:34, 49; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31]). The attentive audience would have been aware that the use of each phrase affirmed something about Jesus while also making strong counterimperial assertions. In Rome, the power and titles belonged to Caesar; in John's Gospel they belong to Jesus.

For the most part Richey presents a compelling case for how readers should understand Rome's function in the Fourth Gospel. He highlights Rome's presence in the narrative and helpfully posits John's polemic against the Augustan ideology as a relatively late development in the Gospel's formation, thereby providing a plausible case for Roman themes in John without suggesting that these were in view during the substantial periods of the Gospel's composition and redactional development. However, in the fourth chapter of the book, Richey's argument runs into a huge problem. There he attempts to read the Johannine prologue as an explicit polemic against Rome. Richey acknowledges that any interpretation of John must plausibly attend to the Gospel's Christology, especially as it is expressed in the prologue. To his credit, Richey admits that his reading of the prologue is new inasmuch as it breaks from any dominant strand of scholarly interpretation.[10] He also admits that references to the preexistent Logos have no parallel in Roman imperial thought. On the other hand, he finds it possible to contrast the witness of John the Baptist (Jn 1:6-8) with the testimonies of pagan prophets who supported the imperial cult. Richey also reads the material related to the children of God (Jn 1:9-13) in contrast to clients of the imperial cult. Finally, the Johannine doxology (Jn 1:14-18), which exalts Jesus as the unique Son of God, is thought to offer a counterpart to claims of divine ancestry made by Julius Caesar and subsequent emperors.

It is widely recognized that the prologue sets the literary and theological agendas for the remainder of the Gospel, and while Richey's reading is not

[10]He writes, "In this chapter *I will offer a new reading of the Prologue* as the evangelist's attempt to respond to the Augustan ideology and the figure of emperor that it presented to Roman society" (Lance Byron Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly—Monograph Series 43 [Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2007], p. 107, emphasis added).

without its merits, it is difficult to accept that the Evangelist intended the prologue to be read *primarily* as a response to Roman imperial ideology. Had the anti-imperial polemic been a primary thrust of the prologue, one would expect Roman themes and images to appear more explicitly throughout the remainder of the story. Such is the case with theological themes such as life (*zōē*, [Jn 1:4]),[11] light (*phōs* [Jn 1:4, 5, 7, 8, 9]),[12] witness (*martyria* [Jn 1:7, 8, 15]),[13] the world (*kosmos* [Jn 1:9, 10]),[14] truth (*alētheia* [Jn 1:9, 14, 17]),[15] and glory (*doxa* [Jn 1:14]).[16] While these specific Johannine themes appear in the prologue and reappear throughout the narrative, Richey does not successfully connect the appearance of his proposed Roman themes in the wider Gospel story to their supposed appearance in the prologue. That, coupled with his failure to address the presence of explicitly Jewish ideas in the Gospel's opening verses, makes his reading of the prologue unconvincing.

Apart from his exegesis of the prologue, Richey's argument is balanced and makes a plausible case for John's response to Rome while still situating the Gospel in a Jewish context that includes a break with the synagogue. He has provided the groundwork for future discussions of John's response to Rome without having to jettison some of the foundational starting points in Johannine scholarship.

Conclusion

Is Rome anywhere in view in John's Gospel? In light of the foregoing discussion, the answer to this question must necessarily be yes. There is no doubt that the Gospel was written in a Roman context and contains some Roman images and characters. In that light, perhaps the more important question is, To what degree is Rome in view in John's Gospel? There are places in John that show contact with the Roman world. For example, the title Savior of the world is not a distinctly Jewish or Samaritan phrase and therefore is likely meant to serve as a vehicle for

[11]The term also occurs in Jn 3:15-16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 26, 29, 39, 40; 6:27, 33, 35, 40, 47, 48, 51, 53, 54, 63; 8:12; 10:10, 28; 11:25; 12:25, 50; 14:6; 17:2, 3; 20:31.

[12]See also Jn 5:35; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35, 36, 46.

[13]See also Jn 1:19; 3:11, 32, 33; 5:31, 32, 34, 36; 8:13, 14, 17; 19:35; 21:24.

[14]See also Jn 1:29; 3:16, 17, 19; 4:42; 6:14, 33, 51; 7:4, 7; 8:12, 23, 26; 9:5, 39; 10:36; 11:9, 27; 12:19, 25, 31, 46, 47; 13:1; 14:17, 19, 22, 27, 30, 31; 15:18, 19; 16:8, 11, 20, 21, 28, 33; 17:5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24, 25; 18:20, 36, 37; 21:25.

[15]See also Jn 3:21; 4:23, 24; 5:33; 8:32, 40, 44, 45, 46; 14:6, 17; 15:26; 16:7, 13; 17:17, 19; 18:37, 38.

[16]See also Jn 2:11; 5:41, 44; 7:18; 8:50, 54; 9:24; 11:4, 40; 12:41, 43; 17:5, 22, 24.

some kind of counterimperial sentiment. That example is debatable, but there are a few places where Rome is clearly visible. The audience learns that Rome is complicit in the death of Jesus (Jn 18:1-11). Also Jesus has a lengthy interaction with Pilate (Jn 18:28–19:16) in a scene which provides this essay's conversation partners with an unassailable example of Rome's place in the narrative. In short, Rome is not completely absent from the Fourth Gospel, and we are indebted to Thatcher, Carter and Richey for pointing out some of the ways John intends Rome to be visible to the literary audience. Even in the face of evidence that John's Gospel contains some interest in Rome, interpreters must proceed with hermeneutical and exegetical caution.

In all types of literature, secular and sacred, ancillary features of a narrative are often used to make a point loosely related to the main thrust(s) of the story. The presence of secondary or tertiary themes need not detain the exegete to the same degree as the story's plotline, character development and recurring motifs. No one familiar with James Joyce's *Ulysses* would assume that bar patrons in the town of Dublin constitute a major area of interest for the story. The bar patrons, along with the other residents of Dublin, help to create a realistic picture of the physical setting in which the story takes place. To spend too much time focusing on these ancillary elements of the story would be to badly misread Joyce's intent. Joyce is concerned to a much greater degree with issues like sexual desire, anti-Semitism and death. The authenticity of the Dublin scenery merely serves as a backdrop to the story.

In the same way, the Fourth Gospel is largely concerned with the incarnate Logos who has come down from above. The Johannine Jesus steps down into a specifically Jewish context which is admittedly within a wider Roman context, but his conversations, discourses and signs are all related to distinctly Jewish concerns. Jesus has come to fulfill and transcend Jewish expectations. The Roman scenery serves as the realistic backdrop to the wider story, but it is not the story and should not be confused with the story. The studies of Thatcher, Carter and Richey insist that we pay attention to Roman concerns and remain open to the fruit of future research in this area. While we must ultimately recognize that Rome is present in John, specific points of contact with Roman characters and images are minimal and do not constitute a major emphasis for the Fourth Gospel.

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