

Review Article
Warren Carter,
*John and Empire: Initial Explorations*¹

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THIS IS AN IMPORTANT BOOK that, if taken seriously, will generate a new paradigm for the interpretation of the Gospel of John. To put the matter more starkly: if the main thesis of Warren Carter's book *John and Empire* is correct, the bulk of Johannine studies over the past 150 years will have to be marginalised. The author has suggested that he merely wishes to continue the dialogue, but that is not the way the book reads. While repeatedly stating the religious, socioeconomic and socio-political context of Roman Ephesus to be *only one* of the factors that have influenced the Gospel of John, he nonetheless insists that Johannine scholarship is too docetic and "religious", removing a flesh and blood Christian community from its real-life setting: Roman Ephesus. Tracing the spiritual and theological forces that generated the Fourth Gospel, claims Carter, has been a post-Enlightenment enterprise. His study is an attempt to overcome the problem.

Despite the oft-repeated claim that what is argued here is but *one possible influence* that produced the final share of the Gospel, the book does not read that way. If you do not come to grips with it, Carter suggests, you miss one of the crucial elements that caused the Gospel of John to be what it is. For example, Qumran material, a rich and popular source for background to John provided by "sectarian Judaism",² receives five mentions (two in the notes) and all are dismissed.³ But if

1. Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York/London: T. & T. Clark, 2008).

2. See, for example, Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (ed. Francis J. Moloney; New York: Doubleday, 2003) 132-44.

3. See the rapid dismissal of contemporary scholarly suggestions for the development of the Johannine Christology in Carter, *John and Empire*, 349-50.

you discount Roman influence – so marginal in the view of almost all current Johannine scholarship – Carter would claim you are not working in the world that produced *the final form* of the Gospel at Ephesus. Indeed, in the appendix on the formative role of the Johannine response to Caligula's attempt to install his statue as Zeus/Jupiter in the Jerusalem temple in 40 CE, Carter argues that Johannine Christology developed – in part, at least – as a response to this dramatic moment.⁴ Again, he theoretically suggests that this might be only one element, but his detailed argument attempts to show that every element within the Johannine Christology can be traced back to a dialogue with the Caligula threat. Not only does the final form of the Gospel indicate a Christian community negotiating creatively with the Roman presence. This “negotiation” has been going on within the community through all the years of its development from 40 CE.

Let me attempt to outline the major thesis. Carter denies the long-standing view in Johannine scholarship that the text of the Gospel suggests a separation from or at least hostility between the Johannine Christians and the Synagogue (cf. the Synagogue passages [9:22; 12:42; 16:2] and the infamous negative use of the expression “the Jews”⁵). Something else is going on, and the hermeneutic used to argue the case is subtle indeed. The Fourth Gospel

is a “hidden transcript,” part of a debate among Jesus-believers over imperial negotiation, yet contestive of imperial power, whose rhetoric of distance tries to create lines between the empire and the faithful followers of Jesus, urging Jesus-believers to a less-accommodated and to a more-distinctive way of life as an anti-society or alternative community.⁶

The Johannine Christians are still in the Synagogue, but “accommodation” is going on between the Synagogue and its leaders, and the Roman religious, social, political and cultural traditions and practices in Ephesus. For Carter, the expression “the Jews” has lost its theological significance as a party that rejects the revelation of God given in Jesus. He argues that the phrase designates the privileged élite in the Ephesian synagogue (for which, I might add, there is no archeological evidence) who are over-accommodating to the ways of the Empire.

Carter deals with the literature surrounding this question well, but more detailed attention should be given to an explanation of the

4. See Carter, *John and Empire*, 343-84.

5. See Francis J. Moloney, “The Jews’ in the Fourth Gospel: Another Perspective”, in *The Gospel of John: Text and Context* (Biblical Interpretation Series 72; Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2005) 20-44. Originally in *Pacifica* 15 (2002) 16-36.

6. Carter, *John and Empire*, 82.

language of 9:22 and 12:42. The word ἀποσυνάγωγος (9:22; 12:42) is a *hapax* in the New Testament, and the use of ὁμολογέω also appears in both texts. What does that process represent in the “rhetoric of distancing”? Also, Carter claims that the Synagogue is never mentioned in John 9, but in 9:34 the reader is told καὶ ἐχέβαλον αὐτὸν ἔξω. The man is “cast out” from somewhere. Where might that be? I sense that post-colonial hermeneutical theory is replacing a close examination of the Johannine text; the text is being made to fit the theory.

Carter maintains that the Fourth Gospel is a narrative presentation of Jesus, using other figures from Israel’s past to develop a “rhetoric of distancing”. This rhetoric shows that Jesus and other figures from the past are “like”...yet transcend and challenge all that the Roman presence and its religious, social and cultural traditions have to offer. Thus, through a reading of the Jesus-story within Roman Ephesus, the Johannine Christians are to recognise that they have the “true life”, the true King/Emperor, the true Father. They have a sacred identity; the mystery of Jesus’ ascension transcends all imperial apotheoses; and believers are associated with Jesus’ return to the Father.

It must be admitted that the analysis of Johannine scholarship in this excellently researched and passionately written book is well informed. Likewise, Carter’s rich treatment of the Roman material is well-researched and enlightening. Methodologically, Carter places major Johannine issues side by side with Roman treatments of parallel or similar themes. I am aware that we all tend to do this when drawing cultural, religious and literary parallels, but the approach has its weaknesses. Hans-Joseph Klauck has recently warned against this approach, and Carter would do well to attend to the matters he raises.⁷

Despite Carter’s oft-repeated rider that he is only suggesting one element in the puzzle, the cardinal point remains the insistence that unless you read the Gospel as a process of negotiating with and distancing from the Roman imperial presence in Ephesus, then you will not understand the Gospel. Leaving to others more qualified the assessment of the Roman material used to make the case, I should now like to address the many exegetical questions that bothered me as I read the book in the light of this insistence.

Some questions are obvious, but need to be asked. Revelation, 1 Peter and Acts are used as contemporary examples, but an apologetic with Rome has long been recognised in these documents.⁸ But why is there no link between the Letter to the Ephesians and the Gospel of John? I am

7. Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Greco-Roman Religions* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2003) 1-11.

8. See Carter, *John and Empire*, 39-43.

aware of the textual issue around “who are at Ephesus” in Ephesians 1:1, but this is a document – along with Colossians – directed to Asia Minor late in the first century. Is a similar “rhetoric of distancing” to be found? If so, it is not mentioned.

The exegetical difficulties are myriad, and conclusions are drawn on crucial matters far too rapidly. Let me just throw in a few, at random.

- The discussion of the Johannine use of the expression “the Son of Man” is poor, and devotes no attention to the current lively discussion that surrounds this matter.⁹
- Carter simply affirms that for John “lifting up” means the Cross, but it also means ascension.¹⁰ If that is the case, what does he make of 3:14: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so also the Son of Man must be lifted up”? If Carter is correct, the “just as...so also” means that the serpent from the desert episode detached itself from the stake and took off into heaven. Indeed, this is claimed by third century Orphic Gnosticism, but not by John. Jesus tells “the Jews” that they will lift him up in 8:28. Does that mean that “the Jews” are the agents of ascension? What does he make of the use of “lifting up” in 12:32: “And I, when I am lifted up, I will draw everyone to myself”, immediately followed by a comment from the author in v. 33: “He said this to show by what death he was to die.” In the light of v. 33, the crowds wonder what the “lifting up” of the Son of Man can mean in v. 34. There are only five lifting up sayings in the Gospel (3:14 [twice], 8:28, 12:32, 34). They all refer to the physical “lifting up” of Jesus in cross and resurrection, his moment of exaltation as he makes God known in a consummate revelation of love (see 15:13). This was argued conclusively by Wilhelm Thüsing in 1959, but no mention is made of this work.¹¹
- Indeed, although there is an omnipresent “return to the Father”, there is no parallel to the Lucan ascension in John. Carter knows this but insists that it is hinted at, in dialogue with the Roman apotheoses.¹² Whatever one makes of the hints – especially in John 20 – they disappear in John 21. Carter take no stance on the

9. Carter, *John and Empire*, 112-15, 183-85. For a summary of the contemporary discussion, see Francis J. Moloney, “The Johannine Son of Man Revisited”, in *The Gospel of John. Text and Context*, 66-92. Originally in Gilbert van Belle and Jan Van der Watt (eds.), *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel. Essays by Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminar* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005) 125-150.

10. Carter, *John and Empire*, 315-16.

11. Wilhelm Thüsing, *Die Erhöhung und Verherrlichung Jesu im Johannesevangelium* (2nd ed.; Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen XXI, 2/1; Münster: Aschendorf, 1970).

12. Carter, *John and Empire*, 315-18.

apparent contradiction between the final words of Jesus in 20:29, “hinting” that he is going away and that there will be generations who believe without seeing, and his return in John 21, where there is no hint that Jesus is going away, certainly not by means of an ascension. The exegetical problem of John 20-21 must not be ignored, as it is in this book.¹³

- The reading of the Johannine passion story, and especially the involvement of Pilate in it, misses the point.¹⁴ Whatever might be established about Pilate as a historical figure, typical of the callous and ruthless Roman authorities in the provinces, the Johannine use of the character is downplayed. Carter has been a fine reader-response and narrative critic. This expertise is little evident in the postcolonial, hermeneutically driven historical criticism developed here. Sensitivity to the inner dynamics of a narrative – in whole or in part – is weak. This weakness is most evident in the chapter on the plot of the Gospel, but appears also in many of the detailed analyses. For example, in Pilate’s final appearance (19:19-22) Carter sees him ironically proclaiming Jesus as King, but “He remains the tough and efficient Roman governor who subjugates his Jewish allies, and who does not ‘see’ God’s purposes at work.”¹⁵ But what is the reader to make of Pilate’s, “What I have written, I have written” (v. 22)? No comment is made on that statement within the narrative context of the encounter between Pilate and the Jewish leaders. Is it relevant? If not, why is it the last thing Pilate says?¹⁶
- We are told that the Johannine community at Ephesus would have little interest at the end of the century in a Jerusalem temple that was destroyed in 70. Thus, the temple imagery and its application to the community are to be understood in association with the Greek and Roman temples at Ephesus.¹⁷ Were there any Jews in the Johannine community? Had they forgotten about the destruction of the Jerusalem temple? If this was the case, they

13. See Francis J. Moloney, “John 21 and the Johannine Story”, in Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Anatomies of the Fourth Gospel: The Past, Present and Futures of Narrative Criticism* (Resources for Biblical Studies; Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2008) 237-51.

14. Carter, *John and Empire*, 299-311.

15. Carter, *John and Empire*, 310.

16. See Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina 4; Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1998) 502-503, and the discussion of 19:22 on p. 507. See especially Robert Kysar, *John* (Augsburg Commentaries on the New Testament; Minneapolis MN: Augsburg, 1986) 287: “John has the unwilling Pilate proclaim the fulfilment of the redemptive act of God, which can never be changed now that it is done.”

17. Carter, *John and Empire*, 257-64.

were strange Jews indeed. Much Jewish literature, written contemporaneously with the Fourth Gospel (and I think especially of *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*) is still lamenting the loss of the temple and – more importantly – wondering about how it will be replaced. Interestingly, *2 Baruch* uses the images of light, water and good shepherd to speak of the Torah that must replace the temple, just as Johannine Christians applied the same expressions to Jesus (see *2 Baruch* 77:11, 13-16; John 7:1-10:18). Much can be learnt about the Gospel of John from a study of late first century Jewish documents that lament the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.¹⁸

The list could go on. There were other socio-political and religious cultural forces in play at Ephesus beside the Roman – particularly prognostic Gnosticism which, to my mind, played a large role in the development of the Gospel. Here Ephesians and Colossians need to be considered once more. It is not enough to say that Gnostic documents are too late.¹⁹ Did they come out of thin air? Maybe John is our first written evidence of such Gnostic ideas as ascent and descent, the revealing “word”, salvation through knowledge, and so many other themes that emerge in full-blown Gnosticism only fifty years into the second century.²⁰ Why, granted Roman influence, is there no evidence of latinisms in the Gospel of John?²¹

Despite the salutary instruction I have received from reading this book, it has not dissuaded me from the view that the Gospel of John is basically Jewish, and that its author(s) regarded it as the culmination of the Jewish Scriptures.²² Carter’s work has indeed highlighted elements in the Gospel that show an awareness, in those who have produced the final edition, of the *Greco-Roman* world into which the text must be taken and read. This will compel the Johannine guild to look more carefully at the world that produced the Gospel, even if Ephesus was not the location of that world. There were very few places where Christianity first settled and developed that were beyond the realm of the Roman Empire. But I am not convinced that this world has generated the driving hermeneutical principles that produced the final form of the Fourth Gospel. Nor is Caligula the father of Johannine Christology.

18. See Rekha M. Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2006) 180-211.

19. As does Carter, *John and Empire*, 349.

20. See Klauck, *Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 429-503, especially 455-61 on the “origins” of Gnosticism. This important study is not mentioned by Carter. It exposes the weaknesses found in Carter’s combination of historical criticism with a postcolonial hermeneutic. See especially Klauck, *The Religious Context*, 5-7.

21. See Brown, *Introduction*, 278-81.

22. See Francis J. Moloney, “The Gospel of John as Scripture”, in *The Gospel of John: Text and Context*, 333-47. Originally in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005) 454-68.