

## Opiate of Christ; or, John’s Gospel and the Spectre of Class

ROBERT J. MYLES

UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND

r.myles@auckland.ac.nz

### ABSTRACT

This article applies a Libertarian Marxist lens to the Gospel of John. In doing so, it highlights the agrarian-aristocratic class struggle that is refracted in the text and also seeks to problematize hierarchical and authoritarian ideologies. Its point of departure is the recent political interpretations of John championed by Tom Thatcher (2009) and Warren Carter (2008), but it diverges significantly from these readings by observing how the gospel’s so-called “subversive” quality has often been overstated and/or simply taken for granted. By focusing on the problematic re-inscription of hierarchies of power, the reading advanced below argues that John’s heightening of imperial ideology in Jesus is at best unsubversive and at worst normalizing of a fascist-like impulse for racial and authoritarian purity.

### KEYWORDS

John’s Gospel, Marxist exegesis, class struggle, ideology, Jesus

The title of this article, “Opiate of Christ,” obviously contains an allusion to Karl Marx’s famous descriptor of religion as the opiate of the masses. The full quote reads: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (Marx 1843). Simply put, religion functions as an expression of oppression or alienation. It manifests as a social condition of economic exploitation, signifying both vexation and protest. The metaphor “opium” had several senses in the mid-nineteenth century when

Marx was writing, most of them not as negative as our modern-day associations like addiction, crime, or altered states of consciousness. Rather, opium was a household drug used for a range of ailments. While small doses were medicinally useful, moderate doses could lead to intoxication (Mckinnon 2005, 15–38). Roland Boer suggests this ambivalence of the opium metaphor catches the crux of Christianity as caught in a complex tension between reaction and revolution (Boer 2012, 225).

This article posits that John's gospel in many respects functions as a reactionary opium overdose. By providing an illusory spiritual salvation that has little basis in the material world, the Johannine text lulls the reader in with a profoundly other-worldly spiritual symbolism; a symbolism that distracts the reader from the class struggle masked beneath its surface. Even so, as will be observed, previous political interpretations of the Fourth Gospel have tended to take it for granted that the text *must* be on the side of the poor and oppressed (if not always then at least on the whole). The liberation mantra of God's "preferential option for the poor" is seen to apply equally to John as with other New Testament texts. But does the Fourth Gospel itself support such a reading? In this article, I will demonstrate that the situation is perhaps more complex than is often assumed.

My critical lens for reading John is informed by the political ideology of "Libertarian Marxism." While a Marxist approach typically focuses on categories like the class struggle, mode of production, and ideology, Libertarian Marxism emphasizes the anti-authoritarian aspects of Marxist thought. Formulated in opposition to Marxism-Leninism, it tends to have more in common with Anarchism than with Stalinism or Maoism. This is because it emphasizes the idea that the working class can forge its own destiny without the requirement of heavy-handed statist intervention.

Crudely put, the class struggle refracted in the New Testament writings refers to the small class of aristocratic city-based elite who, controlling the means of production, extracted surplus value from the work or labour-power of the remaining peasant population. Any radical reader of the Gospel of John should, therefore, start by asking him or herself: upon the peasant uprising, which side of the struggle would the text be found? More provocatively stated: would John's Jesus be the first against the wall? The gospel's heightened Christology, for instance, melds uneasily with a progressive-political agenda. John is often described as a "spiritual" gospel due to its abundance of metaphor and other-worldly concerns. Liberation theologians have also tended to avoid John (one exception is Miranda 1977), focusing instead on the synoptic gospels in which Jesus' political and social agenda is more pronounced.

Recently, however, a small number of readings have emerged which attempt to understand the theological claims of the Fourth Gospel against its socio-political milieu in first-century occupied Palestine (Carter 2008; Thatcher 2009; cf. Newton 2012; Richey 2012; for a critical assessment see Skinner 2013). Somewhat predictably, and drawing on a recent surge towards “anti-empire readings” in New Testament studies (see Moore 2012), these interpretations portray John as subversive to and/or in negotiation with Roman imperialism. In stark contrast, however, I want to place John’s gospel on the parasitical side of the class struggle. As I will argue, the spectre of aristocratic ruling class ideology looms large for the dissenting reader of John. Through the analysis of two texts in particular (Jn 2: 1–11; 13: 1–20), what emerges is a Jesus who, unlike in the synoptics, has come not to serve but to be served.

In addition to placing John on the parasitical side of the class struggle, I also seek to brand John a “reactionary text”. Within the Marxist tradition, the term *reactionary* is used to denote those people or groups who might on the surface appear to be progressive, but in essence function as a conduit for ruling class ideology. Even if John’s gospel has an embedded critique of Rome’s claim to rule, it seeks to neither abolish the logic of imperialism nor remove the landed elite from their ownership of the means of production. On the contrary, John’s gospel actually heightens hierarchical and imperial ideologies, and brazenly portrays Jesus as an exclusivist autocrat, albeit a purportedly benevolent one. While a Jesus greater than Caesar who advocates less accommodation to Rome might appear politically or culturally subversive, he is nonetheless economically complicit with the parasitical class in the ancient agrarian-aristocratic class struggle. As will be argued, from a Libertarian Marxist perspective, there is ultimately no redemption for the Johannine text. In addition to intensifying an autocratic and exclusivist agenda, John’s gospel errs on the reactionary fringe of the first century agrarian-aristocratic class struggle.

Two final notes on methodology: First, while the common practice of biblical scholarship is to view the Jesuses of the four gospels as pointing to the same unique, historical Jesus, George Aichele suggests that what we actually get are four distinct Jesus simulacra. If we begin to analyse each Jesus simulacrum independently and on its own terms, distinct meanings and reality effects begin to emerge (Aichele 2011, 34). For this reason it is crucial we put our preconceived assumptions regarding the historical Jesus’ class position momentarily to one side. While interpreters often read a lowly Jesus into John’s narrative, it is difficult to come to this construction from the Johannine text itself. Secondly, in employing a herme-

neutics of suspicion, the present article is not so much concerned with developing an overall reading strategy for the Gospel of John as it is to expose some of the underlying and unwarranted assumptions of conventional interpretations. By probing the text's ideological ruptures, contradictions, and refractions of the agrarian-aristocratic class struggle that are typically obscured or masked by conventional interpretations, the space for a more critical reading of John should hopefully emerge.

### **Overthrowing the trope of “subversion” in New Testament studies**

Before getting to our analysis of the Johannine text itself, however, we must first overthrow the rhetorical trope of subversion. Indeed, this trope seems to reverberate through a good deal of scholarship published in the field of New Testament studies in recent years. From revolutionary historical Jesuses to gospels which apparently subvert empire at every turn, even the apostle Paul is occasionally allowed to get in on the act: it would not be unthinkable to read an article or hear a paper in which Paul's command for women's silence in church (1 Cor. 14: 34) is regarded as subversive to patriarchy and gender binaries. Even banal activities like eating the Lord's Supper can now be thought of as subversive rituals of supposedly non-violent (albeit cannibalistic!) anti-imperial praxis (Streett 2013).

What lies behind New Testament scholars' yearning for the text to be subversive? One might suppose it is no longer fashionable to be loyal and obedient. Is it not then ironic that this rhetorical trope usually assumes some kind of loyalty and obedience to the biblical text itself? It is, after all, Jesus whose claim to messianic kingship is deemed subversive and not antagonistic characters like Satan, the Scribes and Pharisees, or the whore of Babylon. Is it not also intriguing that Jesus' adoption of imperialist language is frequently rendered subversive when this very same language has been utilized over the centuries of Christendom to subjugate and control the masses? By contrast, characters that might express concerns about Jesus' messianic pretensions are typically construed as backward-looking and lacking faith. There is a curious inability on the part of critical interpreters to perform the actual subversive act of reading against the grain of the text.

This trope of subversion has also, somewhat unsurprisingly, reached the relatively apolitical shores of scholarly discourse on the Gospel of John, probably the least subversive of all the canonical gospels. For example, in his book *Greater Than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel*, Tom Thatcher suggests that “the very fact of writing a Jesus book may be viewed as a subversive act, and the specific contents of John's Gospel may

be viewed as a specific counter to the claims of imperial power” (Thatcher 2009, 4). Thatcher’s book makes the case that John’s heightened imperial Christology is his subversive response to Rome. Since Roman rule was the horizon of all life, it is, we are led to believe, always present when John is speaking of Christ. Thatcher contends that John’s claims about Jesus represent a “fundamental rejection and subversion of Caesar’s power” and that “John believed that Christ is in every way superior to Caesar” (IX).

Such a thesis leaves unanswered the awkward question: if Caesar is an imperialist dictator, and John’s Jesus is even “greater than Caesar”, then just how much of an imperialist dictator is Jesus? It appears that even when intensifying the rhetoric of subversion, Thatcher cannot so easily escape from Jesus’ use of authoritarian language (Crossley 2015, 88). Indeed, in his book on postcolonialism and the New Testament, Stephen D. Moore notes that because, unlike in the synoptic gospels and the book of Revelation, “no end to Caesar’s reign is prophesied or threatened,” the Fourth Gospel enabled later interpreters like Constantine to pave the way for orthodox Christianity to transition from persecuted sect to official state religion. Moore contends that “the Fourth Gospel does not depict the Roman Empire as destined to be destroyed or replaced by the new Christian Empire from without.... Instead, by implication,...[it] depicts the Roman Empire as destined to be transformed from within” (Moore 2006, 73).

Another challenge for so-called subversive readings of John is that the text frequently attempts to discourage the very politicization of its narrative. For example, John’s Jesus is adamant that his “Kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36). Such moves towards de-politicization are perfectly illustrated by the text’s distinctive placement of the cleansing of the Jerusalem temple near the beginning of the narrative (Jn 2: 13–25), instead of near the end where it fits more naturally as the reason for Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion (cf. Mt. 21: 12–17; Mk 11: 15–19; Lk. 19: 45–48). The Johannine text instead fixates on Jesus’ performance of miraculous “signs” and, in particular, the raising of Lazarus as the primary cause behind his arrest and execution (Jn 11: 38–57). Moore observes that “John is at once the most—and the least—political of the canonical gospels...[for it] seems to place Jesus’ kingship front and center only in order to depoliticize it” (Moore 2006, 51). Despite these tendencies towards de-politicization, Thatcher detects a “hidden transcript” of imperial resistance. For the dissenting reader, however, the Johannine text’s aversion to politicization is part and parcel of its reactionary quality.

Appearing a year earlier than Thatcher’s book, Warren Carter’s *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*, is slightly more cautious about its claims of imperial subversion. Carter argues that through its “rhetoric of distance”

the Gospel of John is in constant “negotiation” with imperial Rome (Carter 2008). We might deem Carter’s view of imperial negotiation as the softer counterpart to Thatcher’s hard anti-imperialism. Whereas Carter’s earlier pioneering work on the Gospel of Matthew (Carter 2001) read the text as straightforward resistance literature, this book argues that John contains a complex assortment of empire-resistant and empire-complicit elements. The point, however, is to bring the Roman Empire from the background and very much into the foreground. While neither Thatcher nor Carter draw explicitly on a Marxist methodology, Carter in particular is in dialogue with Marxist critics (e.g. Karl Kautsky) and expounds the agrarian-aristocratic class struggle as a pivotal factor in determining the complex power dynamics of Rome’s empire (Carter 2008, 53–55).

However, Carter mistakenly assumes that John’s Jesus is—like his synoptic counterparts—a member of the broad peasant strata rather than a member of the aristocratic ruling class. As noted above, however, there is little in John to classify Jesus as an artisan or peasant. The parallel text that identifies Jesus as a carpenter (Mk 6: 3) or the son of a carpenter (Mt. 13: 55) omits any reference to Jesus’ occupation in John, shifting the controversy instead to his divine/human status: “They were saying, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, “I have come down from heaven?”’” (Jn 6: 42). Moreover, part of the Johannine text’s reactionary predisposition is found in its attempt to cover up the lowly agrarian origins of competing Jesus simulacra. The loaded question, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (Jn 1: 46), for instance, implies the contemptuous point of view of the urban based elite (cf. Sir. 38: 24–34). While John is forced to admit that Jesus has some connection to the countryside, the text immediately overcompensates by having Nathanael declare Jesus “a true Israelite” in whom “nothing is false” (1: 47), and further, that he is the “Son of God” and “the King of Israel” (1: 49). As we will see below, John’s Jesus not only has elite Christological titles attributed to him, but he also acts in ways that solidify, rather than subvert, aristocratic values and culture.

The importation of a revolutionary Jesus, who is on the side of the poor and oppressed, does not fit neatly with the aristocratic class interests of the Johannine text. Rather, John’s Jesus simulacrum is predominantly constructed akin to an aristocratic ruler who, for the most part, normalizes imperial hierarchies of power. Within a Marxist framework, political or state power is regarded as the mere expression of the economic system that underlies it. From this perspective, the opposition to or overthrowing of a political system does not in and of itself modify the underlying

dynamics of the class struggle or economic mode of production. This is why Jesus, and especially John's Jesus, is not a revolutionary figure in the Marxist sense of the term. On the contrary, John's gospel—if read as a political text—misdiagnoses the situation within the existing social order by blaming antagonists like “the Jews.” In fact, the heightening of power and authority in Jesus is a classic reactionary move: Rome's problem is that it does not have a tight enough grip on the world, but Jesus' authority and influence is claimed to stretch to the furthest reaches of the universe (e.g. Jn 3: 16; 18: 36). The implication is that Caesar is not quite as successful at being an authoritarian dictator as is Jesus.

In one sense, then, the label “reactionary text” is an indication of John's (political) genre, which articulates dissatisfaction with the status quo, but is nonetheless infused with ruling class ideology. As Fredric Jameson notes, “[g]enres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact” (Jameson 1983, 106). As is further expounded below, John's Jesus is repeatedly characterized as a member of the ruling elite. In fact, the Johannine text normalizes a class ideology that is more at home in aristocratic circles than among the peasant classes. To put it bluntly: if John's Jesus looks like an aristocratic ruler, and John's Jesus behaves like an aristocratic ruler, then perhaps John's Jesus might in fact be an aristocratic ruler.

### Jesus' exploitation of servant labour (Jn 2: 1–11)

In Jn 10: 11–13, Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. He then contrasts his own role as shepherd with that of the “hired hand” (μισθωτός) who, instead of helping sheep under threat from ravenous wolves, “runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.” The Johannine metaphor rests on the assumption that, because he has less investment in the owner's property, the hired hand has less incentive to save the sheep. This betrays the actual relations of agrarian production in which the hired hand's motivation stems not from potential lost revenue (as with the shepherd and owner) but from his very survival—for he is dependent upon the sheep's wellbeing to secure his meagre subsistence wage. In fact, being further down the economic food chain, the hired hand arguably has an even greater incentive to save the sheep than does the shepherd who lives a relatively comfortable existence.<sup>1</sup> This obfuscation of the relations of production is a spectre of aristocratic ruling class ideology that resurfaces from time to time within the Johannine text.

1. I owe this particular insight to Richard Goode.

The clearest example of this spectre occurs during Jesus' miraculous performance of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana (2: 1–11). This text is framed as the first of seven "signs" by which Jesus is able to attest to his divine status. In resisting moves to interpret this miracle as subversive in some sense, the reading below emphasizes the gaps in the text which conceal the normalization of imperial institutions of power. The text describes what appears to be a lavish wedding banquet, including guests, servants (*διακόνους*), a chief steward or head slave responsible for managing the banquet (*ἀρχιτρίκλινος*), and copious amounts of wine. In contrast to the cheap vinegar (*ὄξος*) served to Jesus from the foot of the cross (Mt. 27: 48), the Greek term used here, *οἶνος*, refers to wine of exuberant quality and contains strong connotations of class. The quality of wine was a clear social marker across the ancient Mediterranean in the first century. Pliny the Younger, for instance, describes a ceremonial occasion on which different kinds of wine were served to different ranks (*Ep.* 2.6.2). It is unclear who is hosting the wedding, although the text identifies Jesus, his disciples, and his mother as guests (1–2).<sup>2</sup>

Within this text Jesus holds authority, is flippant, gives commands to subordinates without hesitation, and is, through the proxy of the narrator, given credit for the manual labour of others. When the wine "gave out" (*ὑστερήσαντος*), a potentially shameful incident for the host, Jesus is informed by his mother. However, a curious abstruseness emerges from the gaps and ellipses in the logic of the conversation that follows. At first, Jesus shrugs her off with the flippant response: "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" (4). Yet, she turns anyway to the servants and instructs them to do as Jesus commands. Jesus subsequently orders the servants to fill six stone jars with water and take it to the chief steward. From the perspective of the aristocracy, such a menial domestic task was fitting for slaves in the ancient world (Hezser 2005, 140). The assumption shared by Jesus and his mother is that these servants exist to serve them at their beckoning. The text normalizes hierarchical institutions of power by having the servants willingly obey Jesus and his mother's commands. Even as guests, Jesus and his mother are of sufficient rank or prestige to give orders to the servants of another household. We might infer from this passage that, in stark contrast to the synoptics, John's Jesus has come not to serve but to be served (cf. Mk. 10: 45).

2. Cana, a small village of Galilee, is not mentioned in the other gospels but recurs in Jn 4: 46 when Jesus returns and is asked to heal the son of a Royal official. It is mentioned a final time in 21: 2 where the disciple Nathanael is said to come from the village.



Jesus. Note that this miracle is underscored above all as a bold spectacle attesting to Jesus' own greatness and not as an act of servitude: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (11). The main benefactor of Jesus' miraculous performance, aside from Jesus himself, is the unnamed host—wealthy enough to possess a stockpile of slaves—who is saved from the embarrassment of a dry reception. The servants remain servile and the elite remain in charge. Power is not overturned.

### **Subversion or Submission? The Gospel of John as Fascist Propaganda**

So given this infusion of aristocratic ruling class ideology in the text's construction of Jesus, in what other ways is the Gospel of John a reactionary text? Not unlike the reactionary political ideology of Nazism, the Johannine text similarly insists that Jesus' followers must have a pure bloodline (i.e. be born of the correct Father, Jn 3: 1–15), exhibits a curious polemic against "the Jews" (see esp. Jn 5: 45–47; 8: 39–44), and, if political interpretations discussed above are to be believed, glorifies the Roman Empire and seeks to bring about a new social order based on the solidification of feudalistic economics. It should come as little surprise, then, that John's gospel in particular has historically fuelled a disturbing legacy of anti-Semitism in both Nazi biblical scholarship and beyond (Casey 1996, 116–127, 223–228; 1999, 280–291).

In probing some of the Fourth Gospel's authoritarian and fascist-like impulses, I want to draw on Theodor Adorno's essay "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" (Adorno 1991, 132–157). A German critical theorist writing in the 1950s and 1960s, Adorno was concerned with understanding the inner-workings of fascism that had given rise to National Socialism in the preceding decades. In *The Authoritarian Personality*, for example, Adorno invented a set of criteria by which to define personality traits against an "F scale" that determined just how "fascist" an individual's personality-type really was. These traits included conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intellectualism, anti-intraception, superstition, and a liking for power (Adorno 1950). At first glance, it is not difficult to see how many of these traits are present in the characterization of John's Jesus. Indeed, as a reactionary text, John's gospel exploits a psychological zone identified by Freud that promotes non-psychological reasons for self-interest. Drawing on Adorno's later work, I identify at least three convergences between fascist thought and the Johannine text.

First, the Johannine text exhibits a totalitarian quality in its Christology. More than any other gospel, John makes exclusivist claims about Jesus. John depicts Jesus as the ruler of the universe and, at times, is even equated with God: "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10.30). The narrative initiates boundaries between true believers and outsiders. Those who do not consent to John's assessment of Jesus are "left out in the dark, deprived of light and direction (12: 35–36c). They will remain in the 'world' below, and die in their sins (8: 23–24). In contrast, members of the community are destined to move up" (Liew 2002, 208–209). In the purest of totalitarian language, Jesus dictates "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14: 6). He also refers to himself as "the gate" (10: 9), judging which of his sheep gets access to the divine. The text requires total submission of followers; there is no room for any possibility of question or dissent.

Secondly, John's Jesus is constructed as a narcissist who is not only in love with himself but is of the striking opinion that everybody else should love him too. Adorno writes that in order to allow identification, the leader himself has to appear as absolutely narcissistic. This allows the members, who all field the leader's all-embracing love, to unite around him. In addition to the Christological claims found in the synoptics, like Christ, Lord, Saviour, Teacher, Son of God, Son of Man, King of the Jews, and King of Israel, John's Jesus simulacrum makes even bolder claims about himself, for example: that he is the light of the world (Jn 9: 5; cf. 1: 1–18); the one who comes from above (3: 31; 8: 23); the lamb of God (1: 29, 36); equal to God (5: 18); and equal to the Father (10.30). Moreover, as we saw above in the case of the transforming of water into wine, each of Jesus' seven miraculous "signs" (Jn. 2: 1–11; 4: 46–54; 5: 1–18; 6: 5–14; 6: 16–24; 9: 1–7; 11: 1–45) are constructed not so much as a service to others, but rather as testifying to Jesus' divine greatness. Whereas in the synoptics, Jesus is regularly characterized as having "compassion" (*σπλαγχνίζομαι*) for the beneficiaries of his healings and miracles (e.g. Mk 1: 41; 6: 34; 8: 2; Mt. 9: 36; 14: 14; 15: 32; 20: 34; Lk. 7: 13) such explanations are noticeably absent from John. Indeed, because the Johannine text focuses almost exclusively on the identity and mission of Christ, very little is revealed about Jesus' social program and ethical vision. Adorno suggests that "the narcissistic gain provided by fascist propaganda is obvious. It suggests continuously and sometimes in rather devious ways, that the follower, simply through belonging to the in-group, is better, higher and purer than those who are excluded" (Adorno 1991, 145).

Thirdly, by prioritizing the “spiritual purity” of his followers, John’s Jesus relies on a peculiar kind of racial logic: the text replaces Jewish ethnicity with a new form of divine ethnicity in which all must be “born again” of the same Father. The narrator declares near the beginning of the gospel that “to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (Jn 1: 12–13). Jesus’ exchange with Nicodemus (3: 1–21) is probably the best elucidation of this crypto-racialism. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of “the Jews”, comes to Jesus “by night” (a symbol of evil and ignorance) and converses with Jesus over what it means to be “born again”. Jesus declares that “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3: 5). In other words, since God is above, the only way to enter his kingdom is to be begotten from above through the mediation of Jesus, which is the purest line of descent. The key verb *ἄνωθεν* (3) has the double meaning of “from above” and “again”. Nicodemus, not born of the right Father, misunderstands Jesus to simply mean “again”, which leads to impossibility (Brown 1988, 32). The dialogue soon becomes a monologue and Nicodemus appears to slip off into the night from whence he came. Jesus uses this opportunity to reaffirm his own sonship and partake in further narcissistic oration: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world [κόσμον] to condemn the world [κόσμον], but in order that the world [κόσμος] might be saved through him” (3: 17). The term *κόσμος*, intensified by its threefold repetition, refers not just to the world but the entire universe. Jesus effectively decrees himself as the mediator and saviour to existence itself.

### “The Jews” and the Johannine class struggle

Another chilling convergence with fascist-like thought is the Johannine text’s one-dimensional characterization of “the Jews” as fanatical opponents intent on undermining, persecuting, and murdering Jesus. The narrator differentiates “the Jews” from the people of Jerusalem (Jn 7: 25), the Pharisees (7: 32–35; 9: 13, 18), Ephraimites (11: 54), and Galileans (4: 43–45). Rather, “the Jews” are constructed as the undifferentiated masses of the population who resist Jesus’ autocratic leadership style and claims of divine sonship. The label typically refers to outsiders from Jesus’ exclusivist community, although they are occasionally presented as neutral inquirers or even admirers (7: 15; 10: 24; 11: 36; 12: 9) and sometimes even believe in him (8: 31, 11: 45, 12: 11). Nevertheless, within the Johannine text, “the Jews” are condemned by Jesus (5: 37–47; 8: 21–26, 44–47;

10: 24–26), complain about Jesus (6: 41–42, 52; 7: 14–15, 35–36; 8: 22, 27), persecute Jesus (5: 16; 9: 18–22; 19:38), and seek to kill Jesus (5: 18; 7: 1; 8: 57–59; 10: 31–33; 19: 7).

While scholars have largely focused on the religious contours of the conflict between the Johannine community and “the Jews,” I want to explore how this character group is constructed negatively as Jesus’ *political* antagonists. Such a reading does not necessarily replace the dominant sectarian-synagogal hypothesis that pits John’s marginal community against the synagogue authorities, but rather seeks to qualify how the conflict might also be rooted in the class struggle and economics.

The sectarian-synagogal hypothesis focuses on the communal dimensions of the gospel to go about forming a historical reconstruction of the community that likely produced the Johannine text. It suggests that the sense of alienation promulgated by the expulsion and separation of John’s Jesus-believers from a synagogue community is the primarily reason behind John’s vitriol against “the Jews.” In *John and Empire*, Carter rightly contends that the sectarian-synagogal approach renders the political dimension largely invisible. He observes, “the sectarian model is limited in focusing almost exclusively on one community, a synagogue, and on religious ideas” (Carter 2008, 9). Carter goes on to suppose that accommodation to Roman power in some Jewish communities was problematic for “the writer/s of John’s Gospel and their supporters” and that “[t]he Gospel’s rhetoric of distance presents claims about Jesus that are troubling for the synagogue’s accommodation, and thereby attempts not only to separate Jesus-believers from the synagogue, but also to create a more antithetical relationship between Jesus-believers and the empire” (Carter 2008, 20). Carter’s argument relies on a circular logic: because, according to Carter, Jesus is in constant negotiation with Roman imperialism, and “the Jews” are constructed negatively, then John’s issue must be that they are too accommodating of Roman power.

If read as a “reactionary text”, however, John’s conflict with “the Jews” could stem from a variety of political possibilities; needless to say, the gospel’s “rhetoric of distance” features as part of the process of identity formation in reaction to rival or possibly progressive political factions. In what follows I briefly outline a couple of scenarios in which “the Jews” are constructed as potentially progressive characters, in contrast to John’s aristocratic Jesus. This is followed by a consideration of the economic role of Judas who comes under similar vitriolic denigration within John’s text. I do not intend this as a totalizing narrative claim about the purpose or role of “the Jews” in John; I merely seek to explore this feature as one

dimension of their “negative” portrayal that remains relatively under-explored.

Interpretations of “the Jews” as potentially progressive characters actually has an interesting precedent in the postcolonial reception of John. Mary Huie-Jolly, for example, observes that a group of Māori (the indigenous population of Aotearoa/New Zealand) started to identify as “Jews” rather than Christians as a means of political resistance following the Anglo-Māori land wars in the 1960s and 1970s (Huie-Jolly 2002, 94). Indeed, for Huie-Jolly, the Johannine text’s imperial Christology “has affinities with the universalizing claims of later colonialist Christianity”. The decision to identify with “the Jews” was thus part of “a decision to ‘leave the way of the Son’ and to resist colonial domination” (Huie-Jolly 2002, 95–96).

This is not surprising once we observe that “the Jews” objections to Jesus are often of a political nature, in opposition to Jesus’ more reactionary actions and sayings. For example, in Jn 5: 1–18, when Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, “the Jews” object and, according to John, start “persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath” (John 5: 16). While the synoptic parallel (Mk 2: 23–28) associates the conflict over Sabbath observance with the priority of human need (the disciples pluck grain, and Jesus defends them against the Pharisees by arguing that their hunger takes precedence), this rationalization is entirely absent from John. Instead, Jesus defends himself by claiming his healing of the lame constitutes “work”, and that he is allowed to transgress the Sabbath because he is equal in status to God. In Jn 5: 17 Jesus ripostes: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too, am working.” In other words, “the Jews” seek to defend the Sabbath day as a sacrosanct break from the working week. Within the Johannine text, Jesus’ disregard for the Sabbath is not about promoting human need above religious legalism. Rather, the text asserts Jesus’ supremacy over everything, including peasants’ right to rest. John’s Jesus has already normalized the parasitical economic function of the aristocratic classes when he proudly proclaimed he sent disciples to reap the surplus of others’ labour (4: 31–38). Jesus’ metaphorical use of grain as “the crop of eternal life” rests on the assumption that “others” (i.e. peasants) do the productive work, but all (the peasants and the elite) share in the rewards. What’s more, such arrangements are willed by his Father in heaven.

Another example of “the Jews” functioning as political antagonists is found in their criticizing of Jesus shortly after his miraculous feeding of 5,000 people (Jn 6: 1–15). While Jesus’ magical provision of an abundance of food to the masses—thereby “subverting” the strictures of the agrarian mode of production—could be interpreted as an act of imperial resist-

ance, two peculiar features of John's version counter such a reading. First, immediately following the miracle in Jn 6: 14–15, the crowds declare that Jesus is “the prophet who is coming into the world” and they immediately seek to make him king. Jesus, however, withdraws to a mountain. Thatcher acknowledges that this material in particular is presented in a way that discourages any political interpretation. He curiously suggests that Jesus “has no interest in political aspirations and immediately withdraws to a mountain until the Jews' nationalistic fervor cools off, a move that seems calculated to correct any notion that his ministry would disrupt the status quo” (Thatcher 2009, 21). This does appear to complicate Jesus' fascist-like political aspirations and his ascension to the imperial throne as ultimate leader. Second, the miracle is closely followed by Jesus' declaration that he himself is “the bread of life” (6: 35)—a spiritualization of the feeding miracle and de-materialization of hunger. Interestingly, “the Jews” are said to have grumbled once more, implying they are more concerned with the political ramifications of feeding than with Jesus' narcissistic glorification (John 6: 41). Their disbelief causes them to argue among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6: 52). Jesus offers himself as the opiate of the masses, but “the Jews” demand more tangible nutrition.

A final example of the Johannine text's refraction of the agrarian-aristocratic class struggle does not concern “the Jews” but rather the character of Judas—who operates as another antagonist of Jesus. Thatcher argues that Judas functions as “a pawn of imperial power” in John (Thatcher 2009, xviii). The reputation of Judas arguably comes off much worse than in the synoptics: Judas is not only the one who betrays Jesus (Jn 6: 70–71), but is also accused by the narrator of embezzling from the group's finances (12: 6). The very identification of Judas as the possessor of the “moneybox” (γλωσσόκομον) suggests that John's Jesus has enough accumulated wealth to require a subordinate to manage it.

Interestingly, in John's version of the anointing of Jesus (Jn 12: 1–8) Judas is the one singled out as objecting to Mary's pious act of pouring oil on Jesus' feet. It is he alone who complains, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” (Jn 12: 5). Jesus commands Judas to leave the woman alone. The pericope concludes with the famous, albeit chilling epithet: “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (Jn 12: 8). This is a difficult text to interpret for anybody who envisages Jesus on the side of the poor and oppressed. The synoptic parallels are no less scathing of the poor (cf. Mt. 26: 6–13; Mk 14: 3–9; Lk. 7: 36–50). The pint of pure nard “an expensive perfume” might also indicate closeness of a wealthy individual to Jesus.

Uniquely interjected into John's version, between Judas' inquisition and Jesus' response, is a curious remark from the narrator: "He [Judas] said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it" (Jn 6: 6). One might suppose that such a remark is *ad hominem* and offensive. Rather than provide a justification for not selling the nard and distributing the money to the poor, the Johannine text instead engages in the character assassination of Judas. This deflective denigration of Judas' objection, however, does not nullify its validity. Rather, it features as a moment of deflection and distraction from the underlying class struggle that is refracted within the narrative.

### **A man of the people! Totalitarian foot washing as subversive anti-imperial imperialism (Jn 13: 1–20)**

There is a final text worth looking at in more depth given that, in contrast to the miracle of transforming water into wine analysed above, it seems to suggest that John's Jesus has, in fact, come to Earth to serve others. Shortly before his death, Jesus strips down into a towel, kneels before his disciples, and washes their feet (Jn 13: 1–20). Such an act echoes another menial task of domestic slaves in the ancient world (Hezser 2005, 140). What we appear to have here, then, is an example of Jesus momentarily descending his exalted throne to become a man (or even slave) of the people. A closer examination of the text, however, reveals that once again hierarchies of power are not, in fact, overturned. Rather, John's aristocratic Jesus explicitly reinforces the subordination of slaves and the "natural" authority of masters.

Since the earliest Christian centuries, this text has been interpreted as a demonstration of Jesus' humility, but also, as containing strong allusions to the rite and function of baptism (Edwards 2004, 131). Indeed, the Greek word used for "bathing" (λούω) is a standard New Testament term for immersion (e.g. Acts 16: 33; Heb. 10: 22). The text itself appears to provide two different explanations for Jesus' actions: the first, as a rite of initiation into the Christian community, is generally associated with vv. 4–5. The second, as an example of Christian humility and servitude, is usually attributed to vv. 12–20. However, interpreters have variously placed emphasis on one or the other, and it has often been difficult to keep them in dialectical tension (Segovia 1982). For example, drawing on distinctions in the field of cultural anthropology between *ritual* and *ceremony*, Jerome H. Neyrey reads the episode as a combination of both a ritual *and* a ceremony of foot washing. In the former, the act of foot washing serves as an entrance ritual of cleansing

and status transformation and is part of John's insistence upon purification and spiritual rebirth (Neyrey 1995, 202–205). In the latter, foot washing is regarded as a ceremonial observance that is intended to take place regularly at Christian meetings (205–206). Such a distinction certainly enables Neyrey to have his cake and to eat it too. But given my previous analysis in which John's Jesus appears to have come not to serve but to be served, I am tempted to read against the grain of these dominant interpretations. While a reading that emphasizes Jesus' humility is aided by themes from the synoptic tradition which, unlike John, stress the reversal of hierarchies (cg. Mk 10: 45; Mt. 19: 30; 20: 16), such themes are entirely absent from the Johannine text. Indeed, a number of ruptures within this particular text undermine the notion that Jesus' actions are about humility at all.

The first rupture occurs in Jn 13: 9 with Jesus' surprise insistence that only Simon Peter's feet need to be washed. Assuming Jesus' actions are done out of humility, it is odd that Jesus has a fetish for feet in particular. Surely, a thorough act of humility would also involve washing his other body parts as instructed by his master. Indeed, while admittedly attempting to harmonize both interpretative trajectories, Raymond E. Brown observes that Simon Peter's request for a thorough washing ("Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jn 13: 9) and Jesus' rebuke does not really work "if we rely on only a humility interpretation of the washing" (Brown 1988, 72). But if we place the passage in the context of Christian catechesis and understand Jesus' action as a symbol of baptism, then Jesus is saying that he who is baptized needs no re-baptism. Jesus also explains to Peter (a character differentiated from Simon Peter) that "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me" (8). Moreover, upon instructing his disciples to do the same for one another, he clarifies that "I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen" (18).

The second and perhaps most damning rupture is found in Jn 13: 13–16 in which Jesus lays out a fuller explanation of his foot washing activity in terms that underscore, rather than subvert, imperial hierarchies of authority:

You call me Teacher [διδάσκαλος] and Lord [κύριος]—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants [δοῦλος] are not greater than their master [κυρίου], nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. (Jn 13: 13–16)

Perplexed by what is going on, the disciples require an explanation from Jesus. Rather than affirm the notion that he has come to serve, how-

ever, Jesus' explanation entrenches the spectre of aristocratic ruling class ideology by restating in crystal clarity the "natural" mandate and order of authority (cf. Jn 15: 15–20 in which the Johannine text elevates Jesus' vanguard of disciples from servants to friends, before once again reaffirming the natural order of hierarchies as they now apply to the disciples' newly elevated status). Jesus claims the title of Lord (κύριος) and instructs his disciples that because they are inferior (δοῦλος, lit. slaves), they should do as he commands. The Greek term used for "Teacher" (διδάσκαλος) also implies authority over subordinates. In other words, the disciples are expected to wash one another's feet because Jesus, their superior and master, has set the example, and not because the activity has any intrinsic ethical worth. This is a typical argument *a fortiori*: what the person of higher status has done must also be practised by the one of lower status. The notion that this instruction is somehow congruent with the reversal of hierarchical power that is commonly found in the synoptic tradition is entirely absent from both this text and from the Johannine text more generally. In fact, the exact opposite is the case: the disciples are expected to wash one another's feet precisely because the one of higher authority (i.e. Jesus) has instructed them to do so.

One final remark is that if the foot washing pericope is intended as a display of humility, then it is curious that it takes place behind closed doors. Jesus' apparent "servitude" is reserved only for the elite vanguard of disciples, the innermost group of Jesus' followers. Is this demonstration of servitude a disingenuous construction on the part of the Johannine text to portray Jesus as a "man of the people"? In reality, the instruction to wash "one another's" (ἀλλήλων) feet entails a reciprocal and mutual service among themselves. This is hardly a sending out (cf. Mk 6: 7) or great commission (Mt. 28: 20) but rather an act of initiation and solidarity among like-minded compatriots who already occupy "insider" territory. Such a reading is, of course, more congruent with the fascist-like and reactionary ideological texture of the overall gospel.

So is Jesus' great example of foot washing a genuine act of selfless servitude or just another opiate-like conduit for aristocratic ruling class ideology? Given this text underscores, rather than subverts, Jesus' affinity for imperial forms of authority, it is somewhat ironic that Thatcher singles it out as an example of John calling "his readers to reject the logic of imperial culture and to show the possibility of living a different way" (Thatcher 2009, 137). The text, by its own admissions, simply does not support this reading, unless, of course, one regards one form of imperialism as anti-imperial and subversive to another form of imperialism.

## Conclusions

This article has uncovered the spectre of aristocratic ruling class ideology in the Gospel of John. It has also sought to interpret the Fourth Gospel as a “reactionary text”, first by exposing its fascist-like impulses, and secondly, by unearthing the ways in which the text reifies imperial hierarchies of power through its characterization of Jesus. If John's Jesus is constructed as greater than Caesar, then we ought to take such notions through to their logical conclusion. If Caesar is an imperialist dictator, and John's Jesus is even greater, then John's Jesus has some serious issues of power and control that need to be addressed. Indeed, Jesus is repeatedly constructed as an autocrat, has narcissistic personality traits, establishes an exclusivist community, and engages in a vitriolic campaign against his Jewish antagonists. Moreover, from the analysis of the wedding at Cana, it appears as though John's Jesus has come to Earth not to serve but to be served. He is an active exploiter of servant labour. While the foot washing episode might appear to depict Jesus as a man of the people, the text nonetheless re-inscribes and naturalizes the master-slave chain of command.

In his provocatively titled book *Is John's Gospel True?*, Maurice Casey sought to make the case that John is profoundly untrue both as a historical text, but also as a theological text for the simple fact that it is “vigorously anti-Jewish” (1996. 3). Given the above analysis, it might also be appropriate to deem John untrue with respect of claims to its subversive quality. While I think it is entirely appropriate to read the Fourth Gospel as a political text (as is appropriate for any text), John is noticeably not as undermining of hierarchical institutions of power as some interpreters would like to think.

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