

12-1994

## Cassidy's "John's Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power" - Book Review

Paul N. Anderson

*George Fox University*, [panderso@georgefox.edu](mailto:panderso@georgefox.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Previously published in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, December 1994, 113(4), pp. 731-733 [http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/journals\\_jbl\\_nologin.aspx](http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/journals_jbl_nologin.aspx)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Theology at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - George Fox School of Theology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

*John's Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power*, by Richard J. Cassidy. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992. Pp. xii + 132. \$39.95/\$18.95.

Richard Cassidy's latest book builds on some of the previous work he has done regarding the socio-political background of Luke/Acts, but now he applies his historical investigation into the policies of Roman authorities—as enacted toward Christians around the turn of the first century CE—to an understanding of various motifs and emphases in the Gospel of John. His thesis is stated succinctly at the outset: "In depicting Jesus' identity and mission within his Gospel, the evangelist John was concerned to present elements and themes that were especially significant for Christian readers facing Roman imperial claims and for any who faced Roman persecution" (p. 1).

In his investigation, Cassidy builds centrally upon the correspondence between Pliny's letter to Trajan (*Letters X.96*; ca. 110 CE) and Trajan's rescript (*Letters X.97*) and draws in other primary sources and secondary opinions in constructing his socio-religious context. He correctly dates Johannine Christianity in the 90s (spanning partially the reigns of Domitian and Trajan) and locates it in the vicinity of Bythnia/Pontus, which could include Asia Minor or Syria. For Cassidy's purposes, the *general* character of the locale (*some* province under Roman rule, thus being subject to Rome's policies) is the significant issue, and he believes even Palestine or Egypt would qualify as relevant for his political and religious investigations.

In particular, Cassidy emphasizes the facts that: Vespasian (69–79 CE) levied a didrachma tax on all adult male Jews as an attempt to crush Jewish cultic loyalties (that was the exact amount of the required Jewish Temple "tithes"); Christians were probably associated with Jews for some time, with such a tax required of them as well; Domitian enforced this tax even more vigorously than did his father and brother (81–96 CE; apparently Nerva and the Roman Senate abolished this tax as an attempt to correct Domitian's excessive abuses); one may detect an evolution of the veneration of the Roman emperor as suprahuman (Augustus) to the harnessing of such practices for political purposes during the reigns of Domitian and Trajan; and, such titles as "Savior of the World," "Lord," and "Lord and God" were used with reference to Roman emperors. In doing so, he constructs a backdrop in front of which various themes from the Gospel of John stand out in sharp relief. He also explores the significance of "the earliest pagan communication regarding the new Christian movement" (p. 18; that is, Pliny's and Trajan's correspondence) and infers for consideration the following points: an anti-Christian pamphlet had been circulated (apparently motivated by their adverse affect upon pagan worship enterprises) accusing Christians of criminal activities—although their primary culpability was bearing the name *Christian*; whereupon, Pliny's central question to Trajan regards to what extent they should be "punished for *being Christian* even if they were not engaging in other forms of unacceptable behavior"; (p. 18; italics added) these trials presumably preceded at least part of Pliny's career (probably going back at least to the reign of Domitian) and may have been held largely

in Rome; and finally, Pliny's action has thus far been to torture two women (seeking to extract information from them), to execute a number of Christians who remained steadfast, and to devise a procedure for judging Christians. In Pliny's own words:

For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians; and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and a third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. *If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution.* (*Letters X.96,3; italics added*)

To adjudicate such cases (and also to allow the possibility of their being "reformed") Pliny devised a two-fold test: he calls on the accused to revile the name of Christ, and he commands them to reverence the statue of the emperor. Trajan commends him for this measured response but also declares that if the accused are found guilty of the charge (of bearing the name "Christian"), "*they must be punished*" (*Letters X.97; italics added*). The implications of these points for interpreting the Gospel of John (and other Johannine writings, for that matter) are highly significant. While many scholars have held that the dearth of non-Christian references to Roman persecution of Christians (until the third century CE) calls for an agnostic regarding its occurrence in the New Testament era, Cassidy's investigation seems compelling. Given the authenticity of Pliny's and Trajan's correspondence, Cassidy's reconstruction of a religious and political backdrop behind the Fourth Gospel throws into sharp relief several motifs that may otherwise have gone unnoticed or have been misunderstood.

For one thing, some of the names attributed to the Johannine Jesus are identical to those used with reference to Roman emperors: "Savior of the World," "Lord," and "Lord and God." Cassidy believes that Jesus' sovereignty in John reflects the evangelist's conscious choice of exalted christological titles and motifs for the purpose of bolstering Christian commitment to their faith in the light of such Roman persecution. Cassidy further believes that this intentional mode of narrative construction may be observed in the Johannine portrayal of the Roman trial of Jesus, Jesus' farewell discourses, the interactions between the risen Lord and his followers, and the overall purpose of the evangelist's writing—the latter being to strengthen Johannine Christians' resolve to abide with Jesus and his worship community in the face of Roman persecution.

While these applications are at least arguable, if not convincing, several questions remain: (1) To what extent may the exalted Christology of John be attributed to factors of later persecution as opposed to earlier traditional beliefs? While divine titles may indeed have been claimed by later Roman emperors for themselves, and while Thomas's confession must have had the effect of bolstering one's loyalty to Christ as "*my Lord and my God*," it is impossible to demonstrate that these appellations were later innovations rather than intrinsic to the Johannine independent (and possibly early) tradition.

(2) As a help for Christians facing persecution, might the suffering and incarnational motifs in John's Christology not have been just as inspiring for Johannine Christians as the sovereign ones? Cassidy does little with the fleshly side of John's richly dialectical Christology. And, it is precisely the flesh wounds of Jesus that evoke Thomas's confession—which Cassidy believes is climactic.

(3) Can one infer a background of persecution within the later material incorporated into John's Gospel? For instance, Lindars's view that the supplementary material

added to an earlier Gospel (Prologue and Epilogue, John 6, the Farewell Discourse [chaps. 15–17], Lazarus material and Beloved Disciple references) actually corroborates many of Cassidy's claims. More could be done, however, in exploring what Lindars calls the "anti-docetic" thrust of this material as well as the exalted motifs.

(4) How does the persecution alluded to in chaps. 15–16 relate to dialectical tensions with the Synagogue alluded to especially in chaps. 9 and 12? While Cassidy acknowledges that there may well have been two main sources of persecution for Johannine Christians, one wonders if there may have also been a chronological difference between these two threats. It is indeed telling that the material attributed to the earlier rendition of John's Gospel (Lindars) reflects tensions with the Synagogue being more acute. Were these two threats sequential, albeit somewhat overlapping?

While these and other questions push Cassidy's work a bit further than he has gone, none of them challenge the essence of his thesis that one will better understand the evangelistic and existential thrust of John if it is read against a backdrop of Roman persecution. This would have especially been the case regarding the material finally redacted during the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE). While not all of Cassidy's exegetical moves are conclusive, his provocative treatment of Roman and other sources places the burden of proof back in the laps of those who claim that Christian allusions to Roman persecution are insufficient to convince that such realities were at all extensive or factors in the everyday lives of ordinary Christians. In the light of Cassidy's work, they must have been, to at least some degree. One would like to see him eventually address the Johannine epistles and apocalypse, as well as the Marcan apocalypse and some of the other NT literature as well. Cassidy's book is readable and worth reading.

Paul N. Anderson  
George Fox College, Newberg, OR 97132

