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Foreword to John's Gospel in New Perspective

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Foreword

By Paul N. Anderson

Over the last half century or more of Johannine scholarship, three issues have been of primary critical concern. One subject of interest has been the literary origin and composition of the Fourth Gospel. A second has been the application of new-literary analyses to the Johannine narrative, wherein the literary artistry and rhetorical design of the text is studied in order to discern how John's message is conveyed in the interest of better understanding what is being said. A third area of interest has been a sustained interest in the Johannine situation, seeking to learn more about the history of Johannine Christianity. This field of inquiry provides a means of coming to grips with what issues were being faced by the Johannine hearers and readers, helping interpreters better understand how John's story of Jesus was crafted as a means of addressing issues contemporary with the evangelist and his audience. It is within this third field of inquiry that Richard Cassidy's book, *John's Gospel in New Perspective*, makes an important contribution that is especially relevant to studies of empire and early Christianity.¹

Of course, reading John's Gospel against a Roman imperial backdrop is no foreign venture for Richard Cassidy. Before addressing Johannine Christianity, he had already published two important books on the imperial background of the Lukan tradition, and advances made toward understanding the political backdrop of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles find fruitful applications also within the Johannine tradition.² Since his monograph on John in 1992, Cassidy has also contributed volumes on the political setting of the New Testament writings overall, the Roman imprisonments of Paul, and the presentations of Peter in all

1. Richard J. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective; Christology and the Realities of Roman Power* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1992).

2. Richard J. Cassidy, *Jesus, Politics, and Society: A Study of Luke's Gospel* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1978); *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987).

four Gospels.³ Especially helpful in these works is the way Cassidy sets the realistic backdrop of the privileges and difficulties faced by Jews and Christians living under Roman imperial reign in the first century CE, casting also valuable light on the suffering of early believers for their faith and commitment to Christ.⁴ As a significant contribution to Johannine studies, Cassidy bolsters a fuller appreciation of the highly dialectical Johannine situation, involving several partners in dialogue with Johannine community members, not just one or two.

As a result, Cassidy's contribution to Johannine studies is significant along several lines. First, studies of the cultural, religious, and political milieu of the Johannine situation over the last century or more have explored a number of dialogical partners in the Johannine situation (comparisons with Qumran sectarians, Judean-Galilean tensions, Samaritan-Jewish relations, competition with followers of the Baptist, dialogues with diaspora-setting synagogue leaders, engagements of Jewish and Gentile believers among the mission churches, crypto-Christians within the synagogue, the problem of secession from the Johannine community, the threat of docetizing false prophets and traveling ministers, tensions with emerging episcopal leadership within the church, gnostic tendencies within early Christianity), but the political backdrop of the Roman Empire had gone relatively undeveloped in Johannine studies before Cassidy's work.⁵

A second contribution made by Cassidy is to highlight the fact of Roman suppression of the Jewish people during the Flavian dynasty (69-96 CE) lending valuable insight as to how members of the emerging Christian movement experienced Roman persecution in the light of ambivalent relations with parent Judaism. In particular, some modern historians have waned dismissive of claims regarding the persecution of Christians by the Romans in the first century because the mass-execution of Christians under Diocletian (two centuries or more later) has sometimes been confused with first-century realities.⁶ Likewise, the persecution of Christians

3. Richard J. Cassidy, *Christians and Roman Rule in the New Testament: New Perspectives* (New York: Crossroad, 2001); *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001); *Four Times Peter: Portrayals of Peter in the Four Gospels and at Philippi* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007).

4. Anthony J. Tambasco and Richard J. Cassidy, eds. *The Bible on Suffering: Social and Political Implications* (Maryknoll: Paulist, 2002).

5. On the dialectical character of the Johannine situation, see Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," pages 169-205 in John Ashton, ed. *The Interpretation of John*, 2nd ed., Studies in NT Interpretation (orig. *JBL* 91, 1972, 141-173; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997). Nearly all of the crises here mentioned are described in Brown's analysis of Johannine Christianity except the Roman-imperial backdrop: Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John: Edited, Updated, Introduced, and Concluded by Francis J. Moloney*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

6. See, for instance, Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians*

in Rome under Nero (64-68 CE) was not an empire-wide hunting down of the faithful, so interpreters have sometimes generalized the issue wrongly. Good points. Nonetheless, being a Jewish Christian, or even a Gentile Christian coming to be associated with followers of a Galilean prophet during the reign of Domitian (81-96 CE) would have borne political costs. Further, just because Trajan later advises Pliny not to hunt down Christians, this does not mean that Christians did not suffer under empire, or that they felt no persecution. Cassidy makes clear the sorts of issues that were faced by Jews and Christians in Ephesus and its environs around this time, and Trajan himself follows those earlier moderate points with an incisive one: if the subject is indeed guilty of being a Christian and does not deny it, or if one is unwilling to reverence Roman gods, that one must be punished, perhaps capitally so. Therefore, Cassidy's work challenges the staid view that Christians refusing to bow down to Rome suffered little hardship; such is a modern myth, and it is also false.

A third contribution made by Cassidy is that his work prepares the way for engaging the overall Johannine corpus, as well as the history of late first-century Christianity, in a comprehensive and situated way. This allows insights from one aspect of New Testament studies to impact others, whether or not aspects of authorship or literary connectedness are firm. In particular, while Empire studies have been the main fare in understanding the backdrop of Revelation, given the difficulties of establishing an exact connection between the Johannine Apocalypse and the Johannine Gospel and Epistles, these fields of study have been kept apart in the last century or so of biblical studies. However, these five writings also cohere in terms of general themes and situation, so they also cannot be divorced from each other entirely, despite questions of authorship, form, and provenance. Therefore, while this was not Cassidy's intent, the fact that he has provided a Roman-Empire backdrop for interpreting the Johannine Gospel allows bridges to be built, connecting studies between the Gospel and the Apocalypse, and these studies, in turn, enlighten a socio-historical analysis of the Johannine Epistles. After all, in the light of an imperial backdrop, the last word of the first Johannine Epistle may indeed be the first word: *Little children, stay away from idols!* (1 Jn 5:21).⁷ And, with

Invented a Story of Martyrdom (New York: HarperOne, 2013), who sees the embellishment of some martyrological as indicative of a general pattern. See also William H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965); Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

7. Paul N. Anderson, "Discernment-Oriented Leadership in the Johannine Situation—Abiding in the Truth versus Lesser Alternatives," pages 290-318 in *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*; WUNT 291; Contexts and Norms of

his added essay on slavery in this volume, these are just a few ways in which Cassidy's work makes a difference.

JOHANNINE CHRISTIANITY

The study of Johannine Christianity has been a longstanding interest in New Testament studies, and this subject is of special importance because of the five books within the Johannine writings and their relations to virtually all other books in the New Testament. The Gospel of John, of course, gets studied alongside the Synoptic Gospels, and the Epistles and Apocalypse of John are of special interest for understanding the history of early Christianity as it individuated from Judaism and moved into the larger Greco-Roman world of the second century. Therefore, the history of Johannine Christianity is inextricable from the emerging history of the early church, so developments early and later will have implications in both directions. One of the pivotal contributions of Bultmann's commentary on John, for instance, sketches the place of the Fourth Gospel as marking the pivot into Gentile Christianity, including some of its Gnosticizing tendencies. Barrett, on the other hand, sees John as thoroughly Jewish—even the most Jewish of the Gospels, as well as posing a challenge to institutionalizing Christianity.⁸ In his own treatment of Johannine Christianity, W. F. Howard sees the Johannine witness as holding in tension the poles of Jewish eschatology and Pauline mysticism,⁹ but the Johannine situation must have involved at least three major phases.¹⁰

New Testament Ethics, Vol. 3., Jan van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, eds. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014).

8. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Johannine Monograph Series 1 (trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray et al. 1971; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014); C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel of John and Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1986).

9. W. H. Howard, *Christianity According to St. John* (London: Duckworth, 1943); R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools*, SBLDS 26 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975); D. Moody Smith, *Johannine Christianity: Essays on Its Setting, Sources, and Theology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984).

10. While their lists of phases are slightly different, with Brown also developing the post-Johannine phase as a fourth, Brown and Martyn also include three general phases of the Johannine situation: Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979); J. Louis Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York: Paulist, 1978). Here I follow my own analyses, cf. Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 134–141; “Bakhtin’s Dialogism and the Corrective Rhetoric of the Johannine Misunderstanding Dialogue: Exposing Seven Crises in the Johannine Situation,” pages 133–159 in *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, Semeia Studies 63, Roland Boer, ed.

PHASE I—THE PALESTINIAN PHASE OF THE JOHANNINE SITUATION (30-70 CE)

Within the Galilean and Judean phase of Johannine Christianity, several features are notable. First, Aramaic and Hebrew terms are translated into Greek, and Jewish customs are explained for non-Jewish audiences, demonstrating the cross-cultural history of the Johannine tradition. Likewise, John has more topographical and archaeologically referenced material than all the other Gospels combined, and names of places and persons, as well as location-oriented commentary, show that the Johannine tradition had as its origin a Palestinian phase of its development, although its finalization was in a diaspora, Hellenistic setting.¹¹ Within its first phase, assuming that the Johannine evangelist moved to one of the Gentile-mission settings after or during the Roman invasion of the region (66-73 CE), several inter-group dialogical features are evident within the Johannine narrative.

First, north-south tensions between the Galilean prophet from Nazareth and Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (the *Ioudaioi*) appear acute and sustained. This is not a factor of anti-Semitism or even anti-Judaism; Jesus was a Jew (and, salvation is of the Jews—Jn 4:22). And, so are all of his followers in John, including the evangelist. Rather, it reflects historic centralization-versus-periphery tensions between religious leaders of the Jewish nation and challenges of the charismatic prophet, who questioned their authority as well as their practices. Therefore, the beginnings of Johannine Christianity must be seen as engaging the tensions between revelation and religion, wherein access to authentic spiritual encounter and divine instruction posed a challenge to guardians of religious operations, with both parties claiming scriptural legitimation and divine authorization.¹² Likewise, the Johannine movement would have had numerous sympathies with Samaritans in their dialectical relations with Judean leadership (as well as with Galileans), and the embracing of a Mosaic-prophet view of the Messiah rooted in Deuteronomy 18:15-22 would have challenged Davidic-king

(Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007).

11. Paul N. Anderson, "Aspects of Historicity in John: Implications for Archaeological and Jesus Studies," pages 587–618 in *Jesus and Archaeology*, James H. Charlesworth, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

12. Note the work of Sean Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus Story* (London, New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004) as sketching the Galilean-Judean backdrop of the early Jesus movement; cf. *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, Reimund Bieringer et al, eds. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2001). Urban C. Von Wahlde believes that differing names for Jewish authorities might provide a means of distinguishing earlier and later layers within the Johannine tradition, *The Gospel and Letters of John, 3 Vols.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

typologies centered upon the royal (and aristocratic) legacy of David (cf. Jn 4:1-45; 7:40-42).¹³

A second source of dialogical tension within the early Johannine situation is evident in the presentation of John the Baptist as de-emphasizing his being the Messiah and pointing instead to Jesus as the Christ. What is interesting in John 1 is that the first followers of Jesus are presented as having been followers of the Baptist, which may inform something of the Fourth Gospel's distinctive character. As John the Baptist was associated with some later Mandaean Gnostic groups, Bultmann inferred that the Johannine I-Am sayings and revelational thrust may have been influenced by the evangelist's experience with these spirit-based groups. Then again, if John the Baptist was connected in some way with the Qumran community, as analyses of the Dead Sea Scrolls since 1947 might suggest, might corollaries with the dualistic sectarianism of the Dead Sea Scrolls inform the character and origin of Johannine Christianity?¹⁴ John Ashton certainly thought so, but however the connections developed, one thing is certain. John the Baptist is presented as the prime witness in the Fourth Gospel, and his pointing to Jesus as the true Messiah is likely performed as a means of pointing subsequent followers of the Baptist to Jesus.

PHASE II—ASIA MINOR I—THE EARLY PHASE OF THE JOHANNINE DIASPORA SITUATION (70-85 CE)

According to Eusebius, following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, surviving apostles and Christian leaders fled Palestine and resettled among other sectors of the Christian movement. According to most second-century traditions, John the Apostle moved to Ephesus in Asia Minor, and although other settings have been proposed (Alexandria, trans-Jordan, Antioch, etc.), there is no setting more adequate than Asia Minor for identifying the context in which the Johannine tradition developed in its written forms—the formative center of Johannine Christianity.¹⁵ Within

13. Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, SupNovT 14 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967); George Wesley Buchanan, *The Samaritan Origin of the Gospel of John* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968); Brown, *An Introduction*; Paul N. Anderson, "The Having-Sent-Me Father—Aspects of Agency, Encounter, and Irony in the Johannine Father-Son Relationship," *Semeia* 85, edited by Adele Reinhartz (1999): 33–57.

14. Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, SNTSMS 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); *John, Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sixty Years of Discovery and Debate*, Mary Coloe PBVM and Tom Thatcher, eds. (Atlanta: SBL Press 2011).

15. Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Brown, *Community*. For glimpses of Phases II and III through the lens of John 6, cf. "The *Sitz im Leben* of the Johannine Bread of Life Discourse and its Evolving

that setting, two leaders named “John” (John the Apostle and John the Elder) are said to have been buried, although modern scholars have debated the particulars of their identities and roles. What is clearly evident, as informed by considering the Johannine writings together, is that here we have a developing Johannine community, featuring a number of dialogical relationships with other groups, including neighboring Christian ones. This reflects the realities of the second phase of the Johannine situation, as Johannine Christianity becomes defined by community life and its evolving relationships in its new setting.

The first crisis within this setting involved dialogues with the local Jewish presence in this diaspora context.¹⁶ One can imagine that the Johannine evangelist and others resettling in the area would have sought fellowship first among Jewish communities in the region. It also is likely that in sharing convictions of Jesus’ being the Messiah/Christ, some members of the synagogue might have become convinced and others might not have been. The sharing of the gospel among the Pauline mission churches (or elsewhere, if Asia Minor is not the site) had developed any number of tensions between Gentile believers in Jesus and the more conservative members of the Jewish community. Add to that the increasingly higher christological developments among believers, and the Jewish concern to preserve Jewish monotheism and other Jewish values, and a disparaging of the followers of the Nazarene is an understandable development, as codified in the *Birkat ha-Minim* (the blessing against heretics). This led to the evangelist and some among his number being distanced from the synagogue, although some apparently were drawn back into the synagogue and its cultural-religious benefits if they would deny Jesus’ being the Messiah/Christ (1 Jn 2:18-25). A primary thrust of the first edition of the Johannine Gospel thus aimed to convince Jews and Gentiles alike that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of God, that they might have life in his name (Jn 20:31).¹⁷

A second crisis during this phase of the Johannine situation was a factor of the raised expectation of emperor worship during the reign of Domitian (81-96 CE), and this is where Cassidy’s work makes its primary contribution.¹⁸ When viewing John’s story of Jesus in the light of imperial domina-

Context,” pages 1-59 in *Critical Readings of John 6*, R. Alan Culpepper, ed., BINS 22 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997).

16. See the work of J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd edn. (orig. 1968; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) and alternative perspectives by Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (London: Continuum, 2002).

17. Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*, WUNT 2:78 (1996; third printing, Eugene: Cascade books, 2010).

18. In addition to Cassidy’s work, see David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988); Paul S. Minear, *John, the Martyr’s*

tion, several features seem acute in their situational relevance. Given that the Jewish zealots and their messianic leaders had been one of the most obstreperous challenges in the entire Roman Empire, after destroying the temple in Jerusalem, Vespasian levied a tax upon the Jews throughout the empire, requiring the payment of two drachmas per year to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. This had been the same amount as the Jerusalem temple tax paid by all Jews—effectively forcing expressions of their loyalty toward Rome. Vespasian’s son, Domitian, stepped up the pressure on inhabitants of the Empire, and required emperor worship of all subjects, requiring them to regard him as “savior of the world” and “lord and god.” Within the Johannine narrative these titles are used with reference to Jesus (Jn 4:42; 20:28), and in Cassidy’s view, they cannot not have been construed as a direct challenge to Roman imperial domination around the time John was written. In that light, showing the trial of Jesus (whose reign is one of truth) before the bumbling Pilate (who exposes his inauthenticity by asking, “What is truth?”) would have bolstered the Johannine witness in inviting audiences to believe in Jesus as the Christ—the Son of God. During Domitian’s reign, subjects of the Empire either had to pay the Jewish tax to Rome (even if they were simply accused of being Jews by others, or if they had become Jews—i.e. Jesus adherents). Nerva (96-98 CE) reduced the tax requirement to only those who kept faithful to the outward signs of Judaism. By some measures, this tax also played a role in the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity, although being expected to worship Caesar as non-Jews also created additional crises. According to Cassidy, here the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan is key (*Letters*, 10:96-97). A longstanding practice of expecting all subjects to worship the emperor and to deny loyalty to Christ seemed to go back to Domitian’s era, and this factor must play a role in understanding the political and socio-religious backdrop of Johannine Christianity.

PHASE III—ASIA MINOR II—THE LATER PHASE OF THE JOHANNINE DIASPORA SITUATION (85-100 CE)

While the move to Asia Minor posed an abrupt change in the Johannine situation, the transition between the second and third phases was more permeable and gradual. Features of this change involved the move from a largely singular community to clusters of communities as the Christian

Gospel (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984); Tom Thatcher, *Greater than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); Lance B. Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, CBQMS 43 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 2007); Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (London: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2008); Stephen J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia, and the Cult of the Imperial Flavian Family*, RGRW 116 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993).

movement grew. While the former partners in dialogue continued in their influence—local Jewish communities and individuals, and the imperial presence in the area—new partners in dialogue also arose. These involved engagements with fellow believers among the other Gentile-mission churches, and rising tensions reflected the need to determine normative standards of Christian faith and practice, as well as the need to hold groups and individuals accountable in terms of discipline. Here the Beloved Disciple and the Johannine Elder seem to have played similar-yet-distinctive roles: the former as an authoritative teaching figure, and the latter as regulatory organizer of the community. And yet, the multiplicity of communities also raised questions as to whose authority was respected, and these issues can be seen especially in the Johannine Epistles.

The first crisis during this phase of the Johannine situation is signaled by the Elder's warning about a second Antichristic threat. In contrast to the first references to Antichrists (1 Jn 2:18-25), where fellow believers have left the Johannine community, seeking to preserve their loyalty to the Father at the expense of denying Jesus as the Messiah/Christ (and perhaps rejoining the synagogue), this challenging of the second Antichristic threat warns of false prophets who teach that Jesus did not come in the flesh (1 Jn 4:1-3; 2 Jn 7). If Gentile believers resisted a human and a suffering Lord, it is likely the implications of the Incarnation that scandalized their interests. As some Gentile believers resisted some of the more stringent norms of Jewish faith and practice, they also might not have felt compelled to refuse participating in the imperial cult or local civic festivals and their practices. Therefore, if believers are saved by grace and not Jewish works of the law, so members of the second-generation Pauline mission might have reasoned, some Christian teachers might have affirmed assimilation with the world, arguing that if Jesus did not suffer, neither need his followers do so. Therefore, in the light of Cassidy's contribution, the primary issue behind the appeal of Docetism (probably not Gnosticism at this point)¹⁹ is that it allowed an easier path of discipleship rather than calling for the willingness to suffer under expectations of Emperor worship. Thus, the Incarnation of the Word (Jn 1:14), the exhortation to ingest the flesh and blood of Jesus (6:51-58), and the reminder that water and blood poured forth from the side of Jesus (19:34-35) emphasized the way of the cross. To teach otherwise is to be just as guilty as the earlier Antichristic secessionists rejoining the synagogue, or simply abandoning the community of faith.²⁰

19. Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo*; NovTSupp 10, 2nd edn. (1965; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981); Udo Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John: An Investigation of the Place of the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine School* (Linda A. Maloney, trans.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

20. Anderson, *Christology*; cf. also "Antichristic Errors—Flawed Interpretations

The second crisis during this period is pointedly alluded to in the Elder's addressing the actions and words of Diotrephes the primacy-lover (3 Jn 9-10). Just as Peter was appointed "first" among the twelve in Matthew 10:2, a local church leader who "loves to be first" has apparently been saying bad things about the brothers and forbidding their coming to his church. He even casts out members of his own community who take them in, and the Elder promises to pay him a visit, having written to "the church" whence Diotrephes derives his episcopal authority.²¹ To be fair to Diotrephes, given the divisions and false teachers among local churches, clarifying structures of authority was important to establish. Around this time, Ignatius of Antioch wrote to churches in the region and called for the appointing of one bishop in every church—this episcopal leader would oversee the congregation and hold people accountable to standards of faith and practice. Given that Ignatius seems to build upon Peter's having received the keys to the kingdom (Matt 16:17-19) it is likely that Diotrephes saw himself as appropriating those keys in keeping order within his church situation. In addition to confronting Diotrephes personally, the Johannine Elder thus have finalized and circulated the witness of the Beloved Disciple as an appeal for intimacy with the Lord, the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and the ministry of every believer, furthering the Johannine understanding of the original vision of Christ for the church as a corrective to rising institutionalism in the late first-century Christian situation.

This final set of dialogues reflects a larger set of engagements between the Johannine tradition and other Christian traditions—including the Synoptics—regarding what Jesus taught and what it meant to be his followers. Johannine-Synoptic dialogues extended from the earliest to the latest stages of their respective traditions, and those dialogues continue to this day. Rather than assuming a singular type of engagement, however, these were likely many and various, requiring particular analysis for understanding the character of each set of relationships. And, for each of the above six crises, while they were largely sequential, they were also overlapping. As in real life, a crisis or concern rarely completely disappears; it simply is displaced by more acute and troubling ones, while older concerns still linger.

Regarding the Johannine Antichrists," and "Antichristic Crises: Proselytization Back into Jewish Religious Certainty—The Threat of Schismatic Abandonment," pages 196–216 and 217–240 in Vol. 1 of *Text and Community: Essays in Memory of Bruce M. Metzger*, J. Harold Ellens, ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007).

21. Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (trans. G. Krodel; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968); Paul N. Anderson, "'You Have the Words of Eternal Life!' Is Peter Presented as *Returning* the Keys of the Kingdom to Jesus in John 6:68?" *Neotestamentica* 41:1 (2007): 6–41.

CASSIDY'S CONTRIBUTION: READING JOHN AGAINST AN IMPERIAL BACKDROP

Given the fact that the Roman imperial backdrop now cannot be ignored when studying the Johannine writings, reading the Gospel of John against an imperial backdrop has several implications, and Cassidy's contribution along these lines is significant. First, Cassidy contributes to a fuller sense of the multiplicity of crises and dialogical partners within the larger Johannine situation. Therefore, while engagements with synagogue leaders continued into its third phase, this is not to say that there was not also a panoply of tensions and dialogues with docetizing Christian teachers, hierarchical aspirants within the church, and culture-specific issues, such as seeking to adhere faithfully to Jewish-Christian values within the Mediterranean world under the influence of the Roman Empire during the Flavian dynasty. That being the case, in seeking to resist the temptations of loving "the world" and its enticements, views that Johannine Christianity in Asia Minor or elsewhere was a sectarian enclave, motivated by keeping things together in-house, it totally wrong. The tensions in the Johannine and other Christian communities in its region were not factors of sectarianism, they were factors of cosmopolitanism. It is precisely because especially some Gentile-Christian members had little objection to civic festivals and honoring rulers (whoever they might have been) that individuation from the Jewish synagogue created new sets of challenges—staying faithful to the way of Christ within the larger Greco-Roman society.²²

Second, Cassidy restores a highly significant feature in understanding early Christianity overall, and Johannine Christianity in particular: living under the oppression of the Roman imperial cult produced considerable hardships for believers in Christ, and the cost of discipleship was indeed high for those refusing to deny Christ or to offer emperor laud. When looking at the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan, it is apparent that some Christians, such as the two young women who resisted pressure either to worship Caesar or to deny Christ, were willing to suffer for their faith—some even paying the ultimate price, such as Polycarp several decades later. Others, however, claimed to be "innocent" of the charge of being Christians; they only met with such groups, meeting before dawn on a given day and singing a hymn to Christ "as though he were a god." However, they were willing to worship Caesar and reverence pagan images, and they even cursed Christ before the authorities. The Governor admits that such persons *cannot* be considered guilty of being named as Christians, so what would happen if such persons betrayed Christian values

22. Kåre Fugsleth, *Johannine Sectarianism in Perspective: A Sociological, Historical, and Comparative Analysis of Temple and Social Relationships in the Gospel of John, Philo and Qumran*, SupNovT 119 (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 2005); Rensberger, *Johannine Faith*.

publicly but then sought to retain fellowship with Christians? That would have presented grave sets of problems for others Christians seeking to live faithfully within community, but also in the world.

Third, understanding a common backdrop of expectations of emperor worship among the five Johannine writings, an appreciation for similarities of thrust between these different pieces is facilitated. If Cassidy's work were to be expanded, the relevance for understanding the political backdrop of Revelation would be bolstered, but even more significant would be a new window into the issues faced by believers represented in the Johannine Epistles. In particular, what if the last verse of 1 John (1 Jn 5:21) pointed to the first and primary theological and ethical concern of Johannine Christianity of the day? Moving backwards through the other issues, the death-producing sin (mortal versus venial sins) would have related to the idolatry of Emperor worship, accompanied by associative practices characteristic of pagan festivals (5:16-20). In response to complaints that one need not suffer if Jesus did not suffer (4:1-3), the water and the blood of Jesus on the cross serve as reminders of his suffering humanity—to which the Spirit also testifies (5:1-8). Jesus Christ is “the Savior of the World” (*not* Domitian, 4:14), and to believe in him is to receive the gift of eternal life (1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11-13). Believers are called to love one another (3:11-14, 23; 4:7-12) and to not love the world with all of its enticements (2:12-17). Therefore, given profound disagreement over what was permissible for believers and what was not, the challenge to those claiming to be “without sin” was not a challenge to proto-Gnostic perfectionism; it likely involved some claiming that a particular activity, or clusters of practices, were not sinful for believers (1:4-10; 5:18). This is one of the reasons the Elder writes his circular letter to churches in the region; he is writing to keep them from sinning (2:1-2), although Christ also provides atonement for one's sins. After all, so the rhetoric goes, those who abide in Christ cannot sin (3:3-9). Therefore, the acute challenge facing the recipients of 1 and 2 John was likely assimilative sets of temptations revolving around the imperial presence and its enticements to garner loyalty and support from its subjects.²³ To love one another, therefore, involved prioritizing concern and care for others in community over the esteem of others and enticements in worldly, Greco-Roman society.

Fourth, Cassidy's work helps us appreciate the origin, character, and function of the rhetorical features underlying high and low aspects of John's Christology. While both of these aspects of John's Christology developed early in the Johannine tradition, they also display later features in the light of the imperial presence. Memories of transformative spiritual

23. For a state-of-the-art discussion of issues faced by members of the Johannine situation as represented in the Johannine Epistles, see *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson, eds. ECL (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

encounter in the presence of Jesus of Nazareth reflect early-traditional epiphanic experiences, and the rife references to mundane, topographical, and archaeologically attested details—including memories of Jesus’ pathos (groaning, weeping, being troubled, etc.)—affirm to his humanity. As a challenge to the imperial presence in the Flavian era, however, it is emphasized that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the World, and Thomas’ confession of Jesus as “My Lord and my God!” would clearly have been taken as a political statement in the late first-century situation. Especially the Johannine Prologue (showing similarities with 1 Jn 1:1-3) represents Johannine Christianity’s worship-based confession of Jesus as the anointed Son of God, and parallel to the political statement in Revelation 4, that God alone is on the throne, such confessions bore within themselves powerful anti-imperial thrusts. Therefore, in these and other ways, reading John against an imperial backdrop is greatly assisted by Cassidy’s contribution, providing a great service toward addressing and interpreting the Johannine Riddles: theological, historical, and literary.²⁴

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

The publication of this book in the Johannine monograph series furthers our goal in bringing back into clear view some of the most significant Johannine monographs written over the last several decades. As one can see, Empire studies have caught the imagination of New Testament scholars in general, and especially those interested in the socio-religious character of the Johannine situation. As Johannine Christians were called to embrace a crucified victim as a sign of triumph and hope, not only were they helped to make sense of their historic past as followers of the Galilean; they were also inspired to engage the realities of their historic present, as they sought to live faithfully under the imperial presence of Rome. In that sense, God’s love for the world was revealed in the sacrificial love of the Lord, and yet his followers were called to love not the world or its enticements, as the way of Christ called for faithfulness in retaining Jewish-Christian values within a multicultural and cosmopolitan setting. Of pivotal significance here is the way such an analysis illumines the Johannine writings when viewed in new perspective. As that happens, a transformed love for the world is born, as darkness gives way to light, and truth is embraced as king. Not only is slavery as an institution within society challenged, but Jesus invites all followers to be his partners—his friends. And, reading John’s Gospel within this new perspective opens one to the truth, and the truth is always liberating.

24. Cf. Anderson, *Riddles*, 25-90.

