

Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John

BY

Lance Byron Richey

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Preface

An earlier version of this book was conceived and written as a dissertation under the direction of Dr. Julian V. Hills and presented to Marquette University in 2004 under the title, *Truly This is the Savior of the World: Christ and Caesar in the Gospel of John*. I had long been interested in how the political contexts of the gospels helped shape their content, but had previously thought the best way to conceive of this relationship was by using materialist categories, such as those employed by Fernando Belo in his treatment of Mark. While I was casting about for a way to connect the political context of the Fourth Gospel to its theology, my director gently suggested that the approach employed here, rather than the standard tools of materialist exegesis, might perhaps permit me to say something of interest to the scholarly community. While researching and writing, I came to see not only the practical wisdom of his advice but, even more importantly, the relevance of this subject for contemporary political theology (which, however, I have left undeveloped in the present work) and for understanding the unparalleled complexity of Johannine theology.

I wish to express here my gratitude (such an inadequate word in this case) to Julian Hills, for the many years of instruction, moral support, professional guidance, and friendship I have enjoyed from him. Without his example as a teacher and mentor, his constant support (usually unknown to me) behind the scenes pleading my case for financial assistance, and his careful editing and assistance at every stage, this project could never have come to completion.

Special thanks is also due him for the simple reason that it was at his suggestion and encouragement that I submitted my work to the *Catholic*

Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series. My thanks therefore extend as well to Dr. Mark S. Smith and Fr. Joseph Jensen, O.S.B., of the Catholic Biblical Association of America, and to the anonymous reviewers who recommended my work for inclusion in this series. I would also like to thank Fr. William S. Kurz, S.J., Fr. Alexander Golitzin, Dr. Pol Vandevelde, and Dr. Donald J. Rappé for the excellent advice and direction given to this work in its original dissertation format. The comments, corrections, and suggestions of all these individuals have greatly improved both the form and matter of this study. Any errors or defects, of course, are entirely the responsibility of the author.

For the generous financial assistance in the form of tuition scholarships which have enabled me to pursue and complete my studies I am also deeply indebted to the Marquette University Graduate School and its Department of Theology. Fr. Thaddeus Burch, S.J., Fr. Philip Rossi, S.J., Mr. Thomas Marek, Ms. Cheryl Nelson (formerly of the Graduate School), and Ms. Gale Prusinski have shown a special solicitude towards me over many years, and I am most grateful to all of them. In addition, the staff of the library at my former employer, Conception Seminary College, especially Mrs. Carolyn Fischer, was invaluable in helping locate countless articles and books. This monograph could not have been completed without their assistance.

My children, Emma, Madeleine, Karl, Louis, and Zoë, who may often have wondered whether they would finish their educations before I completed mine, deserve special mention here, both for the joy they have provided and the incentive they have given for me to complete this project in order to devote more time and energy to them. Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Carol, for the great patience she has shown and the immeasurable love and support she has given me through so many years of graduate education and beyond. To her, with my love, this work is dedicated.

List of Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
BDAG	F. W. Danker (3d ed.), <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the NT</i>
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum theologiarum Lovaniensium
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BNTC	Black's NT Commentaries
BR	<i>Biblical Research</i>
CPJ	<i>Corpus papyrorum Judaicarum</i>
EPROER	Etudes Préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FB	Forschung zur Bibel
HUT	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
IBS	<i>Irish Biblical Studies</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JHS	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to <i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
JSNTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i> , Supplement Series

JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i> , Supplement Series
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	Liddell-Scott-Jones, <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i>
NCB	New Century Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NJBC	R. E. Brown et al. (eds.), <i>New Jerome Biblical Commentary</i>
NovTSup	<i>Novum Testamentum</i> , Supplements
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
SBLEJL	Society of Biblical Literature, Early Judaism and Its Literature
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBS	Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
VCSup	Supplements to <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

Introduction

We reject the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.
—Barmen Declaration, 1934¹

Jesus of Nazareth, although abandoned by his closest followers and executed as a criminal by Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem during the reign of Tiberius, was proclaimed by the author of the Fourth Gospel as nothing less than σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου, Savior of the world (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14: all Scriptural quotations RSV, unless otherwise indicated). So successful were John's efforts to spread this belief in Christ as the Savior of the world (John 20:31) that now, some 2000 years later, it is largely forgotten how throughout the entire first century that same title "with sundry variations" was bestowed upon a group of men considerably less fondly remembered by Christ's followers: the Roman emperors.² Considering the infamy of certain of these men (e.g., Nero and Domitian) among both Christians and pagans, John's decision to attribute this particular imperial title to Jesus is remarkable and can scarcely have

¹ Robert McAfee Brown, ed., *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 157.

² Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan; 1927; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 364. For a fuller discussion of the currency of this title (and its variations) within the Imperial Cult, see Craig Koester, "The Savior of the World (John 4:42)," *JBL* 109 (1990) 665-80.

been accidental.³ In fact, it has frequently been suggested that the relatively late appearance of this title in Christian texts is due precisely to its association with the Roman emperor.⁴ The connotation of that title would have been well-known across the Roman Empire, as would have been its implications for understanding Jesus Christ: “like Caesar he was a figure of universal significance.”⁵

This appropriation by John of a title drawn from Roman political culture is not unique. Indeed, a number of titles in the Gospel of John were previously or contemporaneously applied to various Roman emperors, deceased or living. In addition to σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου, Richard J. Cassidy lists ὁ κύριος and ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ θεός as titles central to both the Imperial Cult and Johannine Christology.⁶ Dio Cassius relates how the Emperor Domitian “took a tremendous pride in the titles of ‘lord’ and ‘god’” (67.5.7), while Suetonius reports Domitian’s practice of beginning at least some of his circular letters with the phrase *Dominus et deus noster hoc fieri iubet*, “Our Lord and God orders the follow-

³ Deissmann (*Light*, 364) noted this fact over seventy-five years ago: “Another fact, the great importance of the Emperor Nero in the establishment of the idea of a Saviour of the world, has only recently come before me in due clearness. On his accession Nero was venerated in the East as ‘saviour of the world.’ This was no mere isolated excess of adulation; it points to the institution of a cult, as suggested by the fact that this cult of Nero as ‘saviour of the world’ left its creative mark on language.” Koester (“Savior,” 666), while admitting the use of this title more broadly in the ancient world, concludes: “Nevertheless, in the first century, the title ‘Savior of the world’ had striking imperial connotations.”

⁴ This view is explicitly argued by Vincent Taylor (*The Names of Jesus* [New York: St. Martin’s, 1953] 108-9) and implied by C. H. Dodd (*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953] 238-39). Dominique Cuss (*Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament* [Fribourg: Fribourg University Press, 1974] 71) follows Taylor closely, suggesting in addition that the popularity and theological sufficiency of the term κύριος in the primitive Church may temporarily have alleviated the need for additional titles for Christ. On the other hand, while Oscar Cullman (*The Christology of the New Testament* [trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. Hall; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959] 241) emphasizes the non-Hellenistic character of the term σωτήρ as used in the NT, he admits that “perhaps non-Christian usage did in fact *further* [emphasis added] its Christian utilization—just as the non-Christian use of *Kyrios* contributed to the spread of the concept *Kyrios Jesus Christos*.” Cullman ignores the fact that, while John’s use of σωτήρ may well have been influenced by the OT, the term itself would clearly have connoted the emperor to many of his readers.

⁵ Koester, “Savior,” 668.

⁶ Richard J. Cassidy, *John’s Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) 13-16, 33-39.

ing . . .” (*Dom.* 13.4; cf. Thomas’ exclamation “My Lord and my God!” in John 20:28).⁷

What makes the appearance of these titles in the Fourth Gospel so significant is the exclusive sense in which they are applied to Jesus—so exclusive in fact as practically to invite the notice of Roman authorities.⁸ Such titles would have the potential to provoke persecution, especially during the reign of Domitian (81-96 C.E.), which overlapped with the period when the Fourth Gospel began to receive its final form. The appearance in the Gospel of titular duplications such as these suggests a conscious effort on the part of John to address issues which would unavoidably have been raised for his community by the Roman Imperial Ideology, or, as it is more commonly called, Augustan Ideology.

Toward a Definition of “Augustan Ideology”

While this topic will receive extended treatment in Chapter Two, it is necessary here to give a brief definition of what the Augustan Ideology was—and was not. What is called here the Augustan Ideology must be distinguished from the Imperial Cult *per se*. The former is more inclusive and involved a wide variety of political, social and literary practices (e.g., Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue* and *Aeneid*) which placed the emperor at the center of Roman society, in addition to its “strictly religious” manifestations in the worship and practices of the Imperial Cult. The Augustan Ideology developed after Octavian’s ascension to power in 31 B.C.E., which marked the end of the Roman Republic, and effectively re-ordered the conceptual landscape of the Roman world by establishing the person of the emperor at its new center. Karl Christ writes of this sea-change in Roman society:

⁷ Cited by Cuss (*Imperial Cult*, 57), following Alfred Robert Theodore Finckle, *De appellationibus Caesarum honorificis et adulatoriis usque ad Hadriani aetatem apud scriptores Romanos obviis* (Königsberg: Gruber and Longrien, 1867) nos. 28 and 31.

⁸ Cassidy (*Perspective*, 34) asks: “Is the emphasis upon Jesus’ saving power here and in the Gospel as a whole such as to preclude that an emperor such as Nero or a pagan god of healing might also appropriately be given such acclaim? . . . Patently it is absurd to hold that within the perspective of John’s Gospel such a title could also be attributed to any god or mythic force. And surely it cannot be conceived that the Gospel of John attributes any real role in the ‘saving’ of the world to the power of a Roman emperor.”

In the establishment and consolidation of the new political system, we must not underestimate the importance of the Augustan ideology. From the very beginning it helped to justify and legitimate [Augustus'] own claims, and to make propaganda for his own achievements. It was thus in line with ancient traditions of the Roman governing class, who had always been obliged to make a parade of the grounds on which they based their own social prestige. . . . What was new, however, in Augustan propaganda, was the size of the 'tool kit,' the scale of manipulation of views, the monopolisation of public opinion, and the gradual identification of one man and his family with the sovereignty of the state, the *maiestas rei publicae*. But it was not only the claims and achievements which the Augustan ideology indoctrinated. Its slogans also preached integration; they helped to strengthen the system and make it fast; they gave prominence to the chosen successors of Augustus, and were a decisive factor in identifying the family of the *princeps* with the state.⁹

This ideology was not monolithic, of course, nor incapable of considerable adaptation to the special circumstances of different regions and social classes throughout the empire. Rather, it was a complex and considerably varied set of beliefs, practices and claims about the nature and source of temporal power in imperial Rome. It presented the emperor or *princeps* as the central figure of the empire on whom the continued peace and prosperity brought by the *Pax Romana* depended.¹⁰

⁹ Karl Christ, *The Romans: An Introduction to Their History and Civilisation* (trans. Christopher Holme; Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985) 51.

¹⁰ At the same time, it must be said that the Augustan Ideology was not a totalitarian one—at least in the modern sense—which dominated and defined every aspect of private and public life within the empire. Such a conception of it runs the risk of emptying the Augustan Ideology of any specific content whatsoever by identifying it with imperial Roman culture in general. While clearly acknowledging the pervasive influence of the Augustan Ideology on all levels of Roman life, it is equally important to define it carefully enough that it does not become, as it has for some scholars, an omnipresent feature of life within the empire. For example, Karl Galinsky (*Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996]) offers a discussion of the broad range of meanings *auctoritas* possessed and the utility of its conceptual elasticity to Augustus' rule which, while quite useful, is perhaps too ambitious (see Chapter Two below). In his review of Galinsky, Joseph B. Solodow criticizes his efforts to locate traces of *auctoritas* "outside the political sphere, . . . [where he] runs into the

This translated on a practical level into a large set of demands on the population of the empire that were both religio-ideological—involving the “mythic” or “imaginative” space claimed by the emperor from his subjects—and socio-legal—pertaining to his more mundane social and political powers.¹¹ As we will see, both sets of claims are addressed by John.

Given the centrality of the Augustan Ideology to the social and political organization of the Roman Empire, Richard J. Cassidy’s claim that in its final form the Gospel of John is preoccupied with the authority (both religious and secular—if such a sharp distinction can be made in the first century) of the Roman emperor seems eminently plausible.¹² When one examines the recent theories of Raymond E. Brown and J. Louis Martyn concerning the history and development of the Johannine community, the geographical and demographic reasons for supposing such a preoccupation with the emperor make this claim even more compelling.¹³ First, there is no plausible locale or timeline for the composition of the Fourth Gospel in which the author(s) would not have been confronted at every turn by the images, practices, and beliefs of the Augustan Ideology. Moreover, by the 80s, when the final redaction of the Gospel had begun, the Johannine community had absorbed a large

problem of giving it so expansive a definition that it may be comparable to virtually any quality” (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 9 [2000] 322). In light of this, I will limit my treatment of the Augustan Ideology to its most commonly accepted political, religious, and literary manifestations.

¹¹ To illustrate: the *Weltanschauung* involved in proclaiming Augustus Caesar σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου, and the resulting hierarchical conception of both society and the universe, as well as of the place of believers within them, would be “religio-ideological.” On the other hand, any social or political sanctions for the refusal to do so (e.g., execution, punishment, social ostracization) are “socio-legal.”

¹² Cassidy, *Perspective*, 5. Of course, the religious/secular dichotomy is in many ways anachronistic in any discussion of first-century society—which is not to say it does not have a limited usefulness. For a very intelligent discussion of the way in which it has distorted historical thinking about the Imperial Cult, see Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 15–16.

¹³ See especially the reconstructions of the Johannine community found in Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1979); Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1978) and *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (3d ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

number of non-Jewish converts who presumably would have had personal knowledge of, and perhaps even had participated in, the Imperial Cult. Thus, while Christians may (or may not) have been able to escape direct participation in the religious practices of the Imperial Cult, the pervasiveness of the Augustan Ideology in the first-century empire would still have confronted them at every turn. Many Johannine Christians' personal experience overlapped with the larger ideology of the surrounding culture. As a result, there was a pressing need to distinguish the nature and role of the emperor within Roman society from that of Christ within the Johannine community.

Preliminary Investigations of the Problem

Given the near universal penetration of the Augustan Ideology into Roman society in the first century, no Christian community could have entirely escaped or ignored it. Accordingly, one would expect to find an abundance of secondary literature on this theme in John's Gospel. When reviewing to the research done on the Fourth Gospel over the last century, though, we find relatively little has been produced.¹⁴ Despite the

¹⁴ The treatment of the imperial title *σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου* clearly illustrates this neglect. Among the major commentators, Walter Bauer (*Das Johannesevangelium* [3d ed.; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) 1933] 75-76) traces out its Roman parallels most fully but does not utilize them in his comment upon John 4:42. Dodd (*Interpretation*, 238-39), while not connecting John's use of the title to the Imperial Cult, does note that "in the Hellenistic world it was a very common attribute of pagan gods (and of emperors), and it seems likely that it was in Hellenistic circles that it gained currency." Rudolf Bultmann (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary* [introduction by Walter Schmithals; trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray et al.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971] 201 n. 4) limits his discussion to a single note which does not even mention the Roman use of the title, an omission repeated in Barnabas Lindars (*The Gospel of John* [NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972] 198). Raymond E. Brown (*The Gospel According to John* [2 vols.; AB 29-29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966-70] 1. 175 n. 42) makes only a passing mention of its application in the Greek world "to gods, emperors (Hadrian was called 'Saviour of the world'), and heroes." Rudolf Schnackenburg (*The Gospel According to Saint John* [3 vols.; trans. Kevin Smyth et al.; New York: Crossroad, 1980-90] 1. 458) does acknowledge the provenance of this title in the Imperial Cult but only to deny that it implies any polemic against it on the rather curious grounds that the title does not appear in the book of Revelation. Similarly, Cullman (*Christology*, 244) is reluctant to acknowledge this influence, despite the titular overlap: "This application of *Soter* [in John 4:42 and 1 John 4:14] formally sounds quite like Hellenistic ruler worship—indeed, it sounds exactly like the formulas applied, for instance, to Hadrian. But one can by no means decide with cer-

wealth of studies on the background of the Gospel of John in the modern era, the Roman context of Johannine theology has not attracted the sustained attention that it deserves. Only a very few scholars have taken seriously the possibility that John was aware of and responding to the claims of the Augustan Ideology. Perhaps the most direct effort to read the Gospel of John within its Roman context is Cassidy's *John's Gospel in New Perspective*. Cassidy's claim that, "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," seems essentially correct.¹⁵ However, Cassidy's work lacks the sort of detailed and tightly-focused discussion of the Augustan Ideology necessary to establish a thesis that the author concedes is perhaps "startling for many readers and students of the Gospel of John."¹⁶ Without a careful investigation of the practices and literature of the Augustan Ideology, Cassidy's broad, thematic study is

tainty whether the author was conscious of a parallel to these formulas, or whether here also he was only unconsciously influenced by them." Warren Carter (*The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2006] 83-99), in his otherwise useful study of Rome's "Imperial Theology," discusses the Roman connotations of the title "savior" in Philippians 3:20 and Luke 2:11, but makes no reference to John 4:42. The one notable exception to this neglect is the article by Koester ("Savior") already mentioned.

¹⁵ Cassidy, *Perspective*, 1. Cassidy's "political" reading of the Fourth Gospel should be clearly distinguished from the "liberationist" readings offered by David Rensberger (*Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988]) and José Porfirio Miranda (*Being and the Messiah: The Message of St. John* [trans. John Eagleson; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973]). These latter works are much more efforts to draw a political theology from the Fourth Gospel (not an unworthy task in and of itself) than to relate Johannine theology to its specific historical-political context. For example, Rensberger (*Johannine Faith*, 96-98, 116-18), in his often very fine book, makes almost no reference at all to the extra-biblical sources at our disposal in his discussion of the relationship of Christ to Caesar. The idiosyncratic study of Miranda (*Being*, 175), preferring to find John's enemy in capitalism rather than Caesarism, fails to mention the Imperial Cult at all and even goes so far as to accuse John of "self-indulgence" for placing the theological emphasis upon "savior" instead of "the world." For an example of more fruitful method of bringing one's contemporary political concerns to bear on the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, see Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (WUNT 31; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1988).

¹⁶ Cassidy, *Perspective*, 1. For instance, his (*ibid.*, 10-16) brief discussion of the Imperial Cult makes little reference to the enormous body of classical (as opposed to biblical) scholarship on the topic.

ultimately more suggestive than demonstrative of a Roman imperial influence on the Fourth Gospel.¹⁷

Craig Koester's article, "The Savior of the World (John 4:42)," is in general an excellent attempt to interpret the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4 in light of the Imperial Cult. After presenting the relevant inscriptional and literary evidence, Koester reconstructs the attitudes towards the Roman emperor that members of the Johannine community would likely have held (especially the Samaritan members symbolized by the woman at the well in John 4). He concludes that John 4 is intended to draw the Samaritans away from their national religion and into the Christian community by presenting Christ as the true alternative to Caesar—and belief in Christ as the true alternative to armed resistance against Rome. This study is both original and compellingly argued. Unhappily, the literary evidence of the Imperial Cult Koester offers, while very useful so far as it goes, offers an incomplete portrait of the Augustan Ideology. Furthermore, he makes no attempt here or elsewhere (to my knowledge) to integrate the Imperial motifs into an interpretation of the Gospel as a whole. Because of its limitations and despite its potential to contribute to a fresh understanding of John's Gospel, Koester's article has attracted considerably less notice than it deserves.

More typical of Johannine research into the Imperial Cult is Dominique Cuss's *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament*. Her attempt to trace the titular linkages between the NT and the Imperial Cult has a very solid and well-documented foundation in the literary, numismatic and inscriptional evidence of the first and second centuries. Cuss deploys her knowledge quite effectively in an attempt to identify the Roman provenance of numerous christological titles. However, Cuss applies her researches to the book of Revelation

¹⁷ This may also account for its lack of notice within the literature. In fact, I have so far located only two critical notices on the book. While Paul Anderson (*JBL* 113 [1994] 731-33), in a generally positive review of Cassidy, considers many of his theses "at least arguable, if not convincing," on the very important topic of the Johannine employment of Imperial titles Anderson overlooks the clear temporal priority of these titles in the Imperial Cult. At least part of the blame for this misunderstanding lies with Cassidy who, as stated above, does not provide a detailed study of the Augustan Ideology before interpreting the Gospel itself. The favorable review of John Mitchell Scholer (*Int* 48 [1994] 210) is limited to a single paragraph and offers no critical engagement with the book.

and provides only passing treatment to the impact of the Imperial Cult upon the Fourth Gospel. Similar objections can be raised regarding Klaus Wengst's study of the political, economic, and social effects of the ideology of the Pax Romana and their presence in the New Testament.¹⁸ Indeed, research into the influence of the Augustan Ideology on primitive Christianity occurs commonly in discussions of Revelation and rarely in relation to the Fourth Gospel.¹⁹

The Purpose and Structure of this Study

Despite the widespread neglect of the Roman context of the Fourth Gospel in contemporary scholarship, the current situation is promising. As the work of the scholars mentioned above clearly show, all the tools necessary for a fresh reading of this Gospel are ready at hand, waiting to be put to work. Building on the work of several scholars, I will argue in this monograph that, in matters both of grand design and of minor detail, and on both a structural and a lexical level, the final redactor(s) of the Fourth Gospel made a conscious effort to address issues raised for the Johannine community by the Augustan Ideology.

At the same time, it should be noted that the influence of the Augustan Ideology on the Fourth Gospel that I am proposing is a relatively indirect one. There was no body of documents constituting the essence of the Augustan Ideology upon which the evangelist drew (though Virgil's texts perhaps approximate this description). Instead, I suggest that the Roman documents and inscriptions related to the Augustan Ideology express a fundamental way of conceiving the world in the first century that John felt compelled to challenge through his Gospel. No direct literary dependence of the Gospel of John upon particular texts was involved. The Augustan Ideology was less a set of texts confronting the

¹⁸ Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

¹⁹ See, e.g., David E. Aune, "The Influence of the Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," *BR* 28 (1983) 5-26; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 192-99; Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 158-67. This preference has been reciprocated by classicists employing the NT as a source: see, for example, Price, *Rituals and Power*, 196-98.

evangelist than the intellectual atmosphere that he and his readers breathed in every day, identifiable through a careful study of relevant texts. The underlying conceptual structure of the Augustan Ideology is found in the Gospel especially when it is being denied or criticized by the author.

By carefully examining the function of the Augustan Ideology in first-century Roman society, particularly but not exclusively as mediated through the Imperial Cult in the provinces of Asia Minor, we can find in the Fourth Gospel substantive parallels and allusions that would have clearly connoted the person of the emperor to John's audience. These parallels and allusions, in turn, are pervasive and systematic enough to suggest the existence of a polemic governing the final redaction of John and directed at least in part against the Augustan Ideology and the grave theological and practical dangers that it posed for the Johannine community.²⁰ In short, the final redactor(s) of the Gospel wanted to distinguish clearly the nature of Christ's divinity and power from the religious and political authority of the emperor.

In order to establish this thesis, it is necessary first to situate the Fourth Gospel temporally, geographically and demographically in order to show how the Augustan Ideology influenced its authors and their community and placed them at odds with the surrounding Roman society. Thus, Chapter One summarizes the results of modern efforts to reconstruct the history of the Fourth Gospel and of the community that produced it. I will pay special attention to theories that link the development of the Gospel to increasing conflicts between the community and the synagogue. These conflicts, I argue, ultimately resulted in the Johannine community being pronounced ἀποσυνάγωγος (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2).

Chapter Two reconstructs the Roman context of the Gospel, in particular the Augustan Ideology established during Augustus' reign to legitimate and perpetuate the emperor's supremacy within his newly founded imperial government. This discussion is not limited to the religious aspects of the Augustan Ideology found in the Imperial Cult.

²⁰ It should be stressed, however, that any polemic against the Augustan Ideology constitutes only the last layer of the Fourth Gospel's literary and polemic sediment. It neither erases nor invalidates the literary vestiges of earlier models of Jesus' messiahship (and described at great length by Bultmann, Brown, Martyn, and others) which may have survived in the text.

Rather, it also includes the political relationships involved in the Augustan Ideology, some of the broader cultural and literary manifestations of it, and the legal and social demands and expectations that this ideology placed on subjects of the empire. This is particularly important since the Johannine community, once declared ἀποσυνάγωγος, would have lost the exemption from participation in the Imperial Cult enjoyed by Judaism. In this context, the social, legal, and ideological challenges offered by the Augustan Ideology to the Johannine community (in part as a weapon wielded against it by opponents within the synagogue) will become more clear.

Chapter Three turns to the vocabulary employed by the Imperial Cult to express and defend the divinity and authority of the Roman emperor. If the Johannine community in the final redaction of the Gospel attempted to address the Augustan Ideology as a real threat to the proper understanding and worship of Christ, it is likely some lexical evidence for this concern should be present in the text. Therefore, I isolate relevant “pools” of vocabulary associated with both political and divine authority in Roman society and explore how the Gospel of John also contains and critiques these notions of authority.

Following the examination of the historical context and lexical template in support of this approach, the exegesis of the text begins. In Chapter Four, John’s Prologue and the initial testimony of the Baptist are interpreted as attempts to contrast Christ with Caesar—an approach to the Prologue to my knowledge as yet untried. The Prologue makes clear from the very beginning of the Gospel that Christ is totally unlike the worshiped Caesar, both by what it affirms (for instance, the pre-existence of Christ as the Logos) and by what it omits (a birth narrative which might be misconstrued as the sort of “miraculous sign” motifs employed by the Imperial Cult in recounting the births of emperors).

Chapter Five examines the Johannine Passion Narrative. Particularly close attention is paid to three key verses: (1) 18:36, where Christ tells Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world”; (2) 19:12, where “the Jews” tell Pilate, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend”; and (3) 19:15, where the chief priests declare that “We have no king but Caesar.” It is my contention that in these verses John attempts to differentiate clearly the authority claimed by Christ and the rule exercised by Pilate on behalf of the emperor. Rather than interpreting the Passion

Narrative as an anti-Semitic diatribe, I suggest that the main opponent is the Roman emperor.

The Conclusion provides a general assessment of the Gospel of John based on my research in order to suggest it should be read as a challenge not only to the synagogue but also to the Augustan Ideology that posed a serious theological and political threat to the Johannine community's understanding both of Christ and of itself. In short, the Johannine community's encounter with large numbers of Gentile converts unavoidably brought it into contact with the Augustan Ideology. This encounter in turn demanded some clarification of the duties and prescriptions that membership in the community placed upon these converts. It also demanded that the Christology of the community be clearly distinguished from the portrait of Caesar that suffused everyday life in the empire. Thus, it is hardly surprising to find the Augustan Ideology in John, especially where it is used to convey the superiority of Christ to Caesar.

Neither Jew nor Roman: Reconstructing the History of the Johannine Community

Over the last forty years Johannine scholarship has seen a renewed interest in the Jewish roots of the Gospel of John, after a generation of studies preoccupied with its Hellenistic and philosophical background.¹ This movement found expression in the efforts of important scholars such as Barnabas Lindars, Wayne Meeks, Oscar Cullmann, Rudolf Schnackenburg, and Marie-Émile Boismard.² However, it is the attempts of Raymond E. Brown, J. Louis Martyn, and, to a lesser extent, Georg Richter to reconstruct the history of the community behind the Fourth

¹ Rensberger (*Johannine Faith*, 15-36) offers a detailed reconstruction of the history of Johannine scholarship in the twentieth century, including the seminal works of the first half of the century by Bultmann (*John*) and Dodd (*Interpretation*). To some extent, through his later research Dodd (*Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963]) serves as a transitional figure between these two periods.

² Lindars, *John*; Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (NovTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967); Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); Schnackenburg, *Saint John*; Boismard, *L'Évangile de Jean: Commentaire* (vol. 3 of ed. idem, and Pierre Benoit, *Synopse des Quatres Évangiles en français*; 4 vols.; Paris: Cerf, 1977). In this chapter I pass over with minimal comment the works of Lindars, Meeks, and Schnackenburg because their studies do not provide a detailed discussion of the history of the *community* which produced the Fourth Gospel. The thesis of Cullmann (*Johannine Circle*) that the Johannine community had extensive and early contact with “Christian Hellenists” and other heterodox Jews, while it does address the historical issue directly, has met with such mixed reception that I have chosen not to examine it in detail. Robert Kysar (“Community and Gospel: Vectors in Fourth Gospel Criticism,” *Int* 34 [1977] 355-66, esp. 356) offers a fuller criticism of this thesis. Similarly, Boismard (*L'Évangile*) relies on a highly complex

Gospel that have attracted probably the most attention of any work in recent Johannine scholarship.³ Indeed, their efforts to reconstruct the origins of the Fourth Gospel within a social matrix dominated at first by conflict with the synagogue and (excepting Martyn) later by internal divisions over Christology have supplanted Bultmann's multiple-source theory of Johannine composition as the preferred exegetical framework. As D. M. Smith observes, this new approach "goes a long way towards explaining the distinctive character of the Fourth Gospel, if it does not answer every question about its provenance and purpose."⁴

The key insight distinguishing the work of Brown, Martyn, and Richter from previous scholarship is that the text of the Fourth Gospel can and should be read as a multi-layered narrative that "tells us the story both of Jesus and of the community that believed in him."⁵ Brown, recalling the great breakthroughs in Gospel criticism at the beginning of the twentieth century by Julius Wellhausen and Rudolf Bultmann, notes that they shared the assumption that "the Gospels tell us primarily about the church situation in which they were written, and only sec-

literary theory that has not received widespread acceptance. My decision not to treat them at length should not, however, obscure the fact that these scholars illuminate the historical models under consideration in important ways, e.g., Meeks's work on Mosaic Christology intersects with, and advances, key elements of the work of Georg Richter ("Präsentische und futurische Eschatologie im 4. Evangelium," in *Studien zum Johannesevangelium* [ed. J. Hainz; Biblische Untersuchungen 13; Regensburg: Pustet, 1977]) 346-82). Likewise, Brown (*Community, 176-78*) admits multiple points of agreement with Cullmann's work.

³ Brown, *Community and John*; Martyn, *History and Theology and Gospel of John*; Richter, "Präsentische." Richter's theory is summarized and assessed by A. J. Mattill ("Johannine Communities Behind the Fourth Gospel: Georg Richter's Analysis," *TS* 38 [1977] 294-315). In an important article, Brown ("Johannine Ecclesiology—The Community's Origin," *Int* 34 [1977] 379-93) offers his fullest assessment of Martyn and Richter.

⁴ Smith, "The Presentation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," in idem, *Johannine Christianity: Essays on its Setting, Sources, and Theology* ([Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1984] 175-89, here 181-82). Smith's original article takes into account Brown's 1977 *Interpretation* article ("Johannine Ecclesiology") but predates *Community* by two years. As a result, Smith inadequately appreciates the major contribution of Brown to the development of this theory. Likewise, the otherwise useful discussion of Kysar ("The Fourth Gospel: A Report on Recent Research," *ANRW* II 25, 3. 2391-480, esp. 2426-35), although published in 1985, was apparently composed no later than 1978 as it makes no reference to Brown's fully developed theory.

⁵ Brown, *Community*, 17.

ondarily about the situation of Jesus which *prima facie* they describe.”⁶ Building upon and extending this methodological principle, Brown suggests that the Fourth Gospel, if carefully read, can tell us more. It can reveal not only “how the evangelist conceived of and presented Jesus to a Christian community in the last third of the first century” but also “something about the pre-Gospel history of the evangelist’s christological views . . . [and] about the community’s history earlier in the century.”⁷ Somewhat more poetically, Martyn compares the text of the Gospel “to what archeologists call a ‘tell’ . . . [in which] there are numerous literary strata, and to some extent these strata may be differentiated from one another . . . [while] much of the substance of the ‘material’ in the strata is of such a character as to reflect communal interests, concerns and experiences.”⁸

Brown, Martyn, and Richter recognize the difficulties and uncertainties in any attempted reconstruction of the community’s history from a text that is largely theological in its intent.⁹ Nevertheless, Brown rightly considers the postwar debates over the possible theological trajectories of the Fourth Gospel necessarily inconclusive in the absence of at least a tentative historical framework that can contextualize and arguably adjudicate them.¹⁰ It is this interest in the *history* of the community—

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Martyn, “Glimpses into the History of the Johannine Community,” in idem, *History and Theology*, 145-67, here 145.

⁹ Brown (*Community*, 7) modestly claims that “if sixty percent of my detective work is accepted, I shall be happy indeed.” In a similar spirit, Martyn (“Glimpses,” 146) suggests that “it would be a valuable practice for the historian to rise each morning saying to himself three times slowly and with emphasis, ‘I do not know.’”

¹⁰ Regarding the numerous debates over the theological character (e.g., docetist or anti-docetist, sacramentalist or anti-sacramentalist, Petrine or anti-Petrine) of the Fourth Gospel which dominated Johannine studies throughout the middle third of the twentieth century, Brown (*Community*, 16-17) writes: “While there is always some basis in the Johannine writings for such radical interpretations, there is enough evidence on the other side of the issue to make them unconvincing and to point towards a more nuanced interpretation of Johannine christology and ecclesiology. At any rate, there is little to be gained by debating once more such points.” Smith (“The Contribution of J. Louis Martyn to the Understanding of the Gospel of John,” in *History and Theology*, 1-19, here 5) acknowledges the significance of this approach for the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel: “Just when the stage might have been set for a battle royal between [Ernst] Käsemann and his allies and the more orthodox position represented by [Edwyn] Hoskyns,

as opposed to earlier concerns focused almost exclusively on the gospel's *theological* location within a spectrum of possible positions—that makes this approach so potentially fruitful. Indeed, it is just this specifically *historical* context that is required to understand the Roman influence upon the Johannine community and its Gospel.

Accordingly, in this chapter I attempt to situate the Johannine community within its historical context. I focus in particular on the work of Brown and Martyn, and draw out the most secure results of their researches, especially those that might indicate potential sources of conflict between the community and the surrounding Roman society. Only by consolidating the most secure results from the work of these three scholars can a stable foundation be laid for the present research into the Roman influence on the Fourth Gospel.

Toward a History of the Johannine Community

Adele Reinhartz is undoubtedly correct when she writes that the “ecclesiological tale” that Brown and Martyn drew from the Gospel of John “has since become virtually axiomatic in New Testament studies.”¹¹ These scholars agree that the origin of the community that produced the Fourth Gospel was situated firmly within the synagogue. They also hold that the gospel's subsequent history (and to a large degree the development of its distinctive theology) was determined by the conflicts with and eventual separation from the synagogue. This insight has been one of the decisive factors in the shift from a Hellenistic to a Jewish framework for Johannine scholarship in the latter half of the last century. Given the importance of their work (and Richter's research to a lesser extent), and its influence upon an entire generation of scholars, a detailed reconstruction of their individual theories is unnecessary here and is available elsewhere.¹² For our purposes, a basic outline of the

the terms on which such a discussion could go forward were radically questioned by the original, insightful, provocative contribution of J. Louis Martyn.”

¹¹ Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 2003) 37.

¹² Richter's theory is contained in his “Präsentische,” and most thoroughly analyzed by Mattill, “Johannine Communities” (upon which both Brown and Martyn depend heavily). The impediment posed by the lack of translations in the spread and acceptance

broad features and stages of the history of the Johannine community generally shared by their theories is sufficient to provide a plausible framework for exploring the possible influence of the Augustan Ideology upon the community. Thus, in this section I will offer a very brief sketch of the “consensus” picture, which can be divided into three main stages in the history of the life of the community.¹³

The Early Period: As noted above, all three writers share an assumption that the origin of the Johannine community lies in a sectarian Jesus-movement within first-century Judaism, although the precise location and date are disputed. Richter locates the earliest stages of Johannine Christianity’s development within a largely Jewish Johannine community, possibly already in conflict with followers of John the Baptist over the identity of the Messiah. The community, characterized theologically by a Mosaic understanding of Jesus as a divinely chosen prophet (e.g., John 1:29-34; 6:14), settled in Syria, northern Palestine and eastern Jordan.¹⁴ Brown shares this basic assumption about temporal and geographical setting, but instead posits a group of mid-first century Palestinian Jews within the synagogue, accompanied by some followers

of Richter’s work is recognized and lamented by Smith (*John Among the Gospels: The Relationship in Twentieth Century Research* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992] 77). Martyn’s theory is presented most fully in his *History and Theology*; for an extended analysis and assessment, see Smith, “Contribution.” Brown’s reconstruction is presented most fully in his *Community*; however, despite its exceeding importance for contemporary scholarship, I am unaware of any full-length treatment of Brown’s reconstruction of the history of the Johannine community. Gilbert Van Belle’s massive *Johannine Bibliography, 1966-1985: A Cumulative Bibliography on the Fourth Gospel* (Collectanea Biblica et Religiosa Antiqua 1; Brussels: Wetenschappelijk Comité Voor Godsdienswetenschappen Koninklijke Academie Voor Wetenschappen, Letteren En Schone Kunsten Van België, 1988) does not list even a single major critical notice for Brown’s *Community*. However, Smith (“Contribution”) does a good job of situating Brown’s work in relation to the research of Martyn.

¹³ The periodization used here is drawn primarily from Martyn (*History and Theology*), and shared (with adaptations) by John Ashton (*Understanding the Fourth Gospel* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1991] 166-74) in his discussion of the Johannine community’s history.

¹⁴ Richter, “Präsentische,” 126 (= Mattill, “Johannine,” 297). Richter gives no defense of this original geographic location but appears to base it upon similarities between the most primitive Johannine community and the low Christology of the Ebionitic Christianity which was found in Northern Palestine in the first century. For more on Ebionitic Christianity, see Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament: Volume 2. History and Literature of Early Christianity* (2d ed.; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2000) 208-9.

of John the Baptist (e.g., John 1:6-8, 19-36), who came to accept Jesus as the *Davidic* Messiah.¹⁵ This group, he suggests, was quickly joined by a group of Samaritans who interpreted Jesus against a Mosaic background as the Messiah sent from God. As a result of this union, there was a heightening of the community's Christology (e.g., John 4; 6:32-35). Martyn avoids committing to any particular geographic location or christological framework. Instead, he speaks of a group of Christian Jews who were "clearly living within the theological, social, and cultural security of the synagogue" while accepting Jesus as the Messiah.¹⁶ Even while evangelizing other Jews with considerable success (e.g., the calling of the disciples in John 1:35-49), Martyn insists, this community of believers originally remained "wholly within the bosom of the synagogue."¹⁷

During this early period the most primitive literary strata of the gospel perhaps began to develop, although the exact form of this process is the subject of disagreement. Martyn argues that, because of its success evangelizing other Jews, the community soon collected the homilies used in this activity and developed them into a primitive "Signs Source or Signs Gospel," which served as the foundation for further preaching and missionary work.¹⁸ Richter, on the other hand, sees the community having slowly developed a *Grundschrift* that portrayed Jesus as the prophet-Messiah promised by Moses as a result of conflicts with the synagogue. Brown is noncommittal whether these Johannine traditions assumed literary form during this early stage. However, he posits an increasing missionary effort among Gentiles as an impetus

¹⁵ Brown, *Community*, 29-31. Brown (*ibid.*, 39) bases his decision for this location (Palestine, the Transjordan and adjacent Syria) on the known or likely locale of anti-temple Jews, partisans of the Baptist, and Samaritans in the mid-first century.

¹⁶ Martyn, "Glimpses," 152.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 150-51. Martyn is unclear about the exact character of this foundational document within the community. It may have been simply a collection of miracle stories that evidenced the messianic character of Jesus (e.g., Rudolf Bultmann's σημεῖα source) or a more fully developed proto-Gospel with a passion narrative attached and a more elaborate Christology (e.g., Robert T. Fortna's *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel* [SNTSMS 11; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970], based on his dissertation directed by Martyn). Martyn appears to favor a fuller version of the document along the lines of Fortna's reconstruction. See further Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

behind both the heightening of the community's Christology and the deepening of its division with the synagogue.

The Middle Period: As a result of these theological and possibly ethnic changes among Johannine Christians, peaceful existence within the synagogue became increasingly difficult. Because of the conflicts with Jewish monotheism inherent in a rapidly escalating Christology, Martyn argues that, by the late 80s, a crisis occurred in the Johannine community that forced them into open schism with the synagogue. The introduction of the *Birkat ha-Minim* (the Curses upon Heretics supposedly promulgated by the Council of Jamnia) into the synagogue service resulted in the excommunication (being made ἀποσυνάγωγος [9:22]) of some Johannine Christians from the synagogue (e.g., the healing of the blind man in John 9). It may also have occasioned the apostasy and return to the synagogue of others.¹⁹ Similarly, Brown also sees increased

¹⁹ Martyn, "Glimpses," 152-53. Martyn gives an extended discussion of John 9 and its reflection of events in the life of the Johannine community in *History and Theology*, 35-66. Martyn has come under sustained criticism for linking the excommunication of the Johannine community from the synagogue at the beginning of the Middle Period with the *Birkat ha-Minim* supposedly issued by the Council of Jamnia. The linkage of the *Birkat ha-Minim* to the Johannine usage of ἀποσυνάγωγος is one of the most troubled steps in his argument and has not been accepted by some scholars. Some have suggested that the Benedictions should not be dated to Jamnia but rather to the early second century under Gamaliel, and that they are only indicative of the issues which originally separated Jews and Christians rather than the actual cause of this separation. This view, which Martyn (*History and Theology*, 61 n. 75) attributes to Morton Smith, is later advanced and developed by W. Hornburg in his "The Benediction of the Minim and Early Jewish-Christian Conflict" (*JTS* 33 [1982] 19-61). Meeks ("Breaking Away: Three New Testament Pictures of Christianity's Separation from the Jewish Communities," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity* [ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernst S. Frerichs; Studies in the Humanities 9; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985] 93-115, here 102), while very sympathetic with the positing of a Jewish milieu for the Fourth Gospel, is quite skeptical of the value of the Benedictions for reconstruction the history of the Johannine community and believes it has been a red-herring for the study of the Gospel. This supposed link between the *Birkat ha-Minim* and the Johannine use of ἀποσυνάγωγος is also strongly criticized by Reuben Kimmelman, "Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Antiquity," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (3 vols.; ed. E. P. Sanders; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980-83) 2. 226-44.

In Martyn's defense, Smith ("Contribution," 8 n. 17) points out the connection and mutual support between this identification by Martyn and the work of his colleague W. D. Davies on the Twelfth Benediction in his *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) 275-86. For a discussion of the more recent scholarship, see Pieter W. Van der Horst, "The Birkat Ha-minim in Recent Research," *ExpTim* 105 (1994) 363-68.

