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Quaestiones disputatae

Are John's Ethics Apolitical?

Following the introduction of a 'Quaestiones Disputatae' session at the 69th General Meeting of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas in Szeged, Hungary in 2014, a second such session was held at the 70th General Meeting at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam on 29 July 2015. The theme was proposed by the President of the Society, Prof. Judith Lieu.

HAROLD ATTRIDGE

In order to answer this *quaestio disputata* we should seek some clarity on what is meant by 'John's ethics' and what 'political ethics' might be. Whatever ethics the Fourth Gospel professes, they do not contain the typical topics found in other ancient sources. The Gospel offers no overarching or systematic framework for ethical reflection; it lists neither obligations nor prohibitions nor does it prescribe the virtues that disciples of Jesus should cultivate. It is nothing like Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* nor Cicero's *De officiis* or *De finibus*. Neither does it formally explore the controversial issues of first-century ethics, as does Seneca's *De ira*. Nor does the Gospel resemble Jewish sapiential texts, such as the *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides,* with its behavioural prescriptions.

The Fourth Gospel evidences little interest in the admonitions of Jesus that appear in other early Christian sources, the challenges to avoid retaliation (Matt 5.21–6), to speak only the truth (Matt 5.33–7), to be compassionate (Luke 10.37), to eschew oaths (Matt 5.43; Jas 5.12) or to forgive abundantly (Matt 18.22). Concern for ethical particulars is lacking and admonitions remain rather general. Disciples are to obey Jesus' commands, especially to love one another as he loved them (John 13.34), even to the point of death (15.13). Yet disciples are to do the deeds Jesus has done and even surpass them (14.12), whatever those deeds are.

Some interpreters have focused on the dearth of ethics beyond the explicit command to love.[1] More recently scholars have argued that beyond such explicit

1 See e.g. W. Meeks, 'The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist', *Exploring the Gospel of John: In honor of D. Moody Smith* (ed. R. A. Culpepper, C. Clifton Black; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 317–26.

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commands, yet coherent with them, are implicit ethical norms. Redefining Johannine ethics involves teasing out such implicit ethics.[2]

The Gospel's stories and discourses might suggest an 'ethos' that focuses on community, a sense of mission and a life of mutual service. Grounded in the communion of Father and Son, this ethos shares the Son's mission to bring humankind into that relationship. Within that framework the Gospel encourages love, humility, friendship, fidelity and a piety that worships God 'in spirit and in truth'.

Such an ethos might involve concrete acts, which would look like what Matthew's Son of Man says to the sheep and goats: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned (Matt 25.31–46). Encouragement to do these deeds might be embedded within Jesus' 'signs', which become not only the basis of Christological faith but pointers to what is expected of disciples. Jesus gives drink to the thirsty, on many levels, at Cana and in Samaria; Jesus feeds the hungry on the Galilean lakeshore; Jesus heals those who are lame or blind in Jerusalem: his disciples should try to do all these things as well. Jesus raises up one who is asleep in death: his disciples should, in some probably metaphorical sense, do the same thing. Particularly at the last supper Jesus' disciples are implicitly summoned to offer themselves in service, as he did in washing their feet.

The collection of implicit obligations might also include the requirement to forgive, even seventy times seven, although that is hard to find in the Fourth Gospel, outside the secondary 'pericope of the adulteress'. Some areas of ethical concern, such as sex and money, so far, also are difficult to detect in this roster of implicit virtues, values and obligations.

So far we have explored what a system of 'implicit ethics' and its limits might be. Before worrying about 'politics', it might be useful to note that there is at least one early reading of John that finds in it ethics of the kind we have described. The reading is found in the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth*, which in many ways interprets the Fourth Gospel. While much of the text develops theological and soteriological themes, one passage dwells on ethics:

> Say, then, from the heart, that you are the perfect day, and in you dwells the light that does not fail. Speak of the truth with those who search for it, and (of) knowledge to those who have committed sin in their error. Make firm the foot of those who have stumbled, and stretch out your hands to those who are ill. Feed those who are hungry, and give repose to those who are weary, and raise up those who wish to rise, and awaken those who sleep.

2 In general, see M. Labahn, '"It's Only Love" – Is That All? Limits and Potentials of Johannine "Ethic": A Critical Evaluation of Research', *Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik / Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics*, vol. III: *Rethinking the Ethics of John: 'Implicit Ethics' in the Johannine Writings* (ed. J. van der Watt and R. Zimmermann; WUNT 291; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 3–43.

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The *Gospel of Truth* does not rely solely on the Fourth Gospel, but neither have the attempts to discern an 'implicit ethic' in John. It may be significant that the Valentinian text picks on most of the issues that we have found implicit in the Fourth Gospel and also ignores the issues of money and sex that are not obvious.

So, are there implicit ethics in the Fourth Gospel? Certainly. And might there be something else, such as an engagement with some of the foundational questions in the philosophy of ethics? No doubt.[3]

But what of the second part of the *quaestio disputata*: is the kind of ethics that is found in John 'apolitical'? The author of the *Gospel of Truth*, if he understood the question, probably would have answered 'Yes.' Tension with the Empire is hard to see in the Valentinian text. Several scholars in the last decade have answered 'No.' Prominent among them is Prof. Warren Carter, who has offered a powerful reading of the Fourth Gospel in a political context.[4]

Prof. Carter has proposed an implicit ethic in the Gospel that becomes clear when the text is read within a Roman imperial context, whether in Ephesus or in another Greco-Roman city. This implicit ethic involves a rhetoric of distancing, a discourse that shapes a community in opposition to the oppressive realities of Roman power. This rhetoric sometimes uses Roman language subversively. So the Father is not the *pater patriae* of Roman rhetoric; his Son, 'the one sent', is not some military legate. The abundant life that they promise is not the seeming prosperity of Rome that favours the elite and leaves the 99 per cent in need. The Gospel's realised eschatology challenges the *Res gestae divi Augusti* and similar imperial propaganda, while it gestures towards judgement to come. All this challenge to Rome is not implicit but as explicit as, if not far more explicit and forthright than, the rest of the Gospel tradition.[5] The declaration by Jesus before Pilate, that his (i.e. Jesus') kingdom is 'not of this world' does not proclaim spiritual otherness, but normative distinction. The kingdom over which Jesus rules, the 'house of his father' (14.2), is a community withdrawn from and in opposition to Rome's Empire. The kingdom over which Jesus rules embodies the values and norms implied by his actions and does so as a pointed contrast to what Rome offers. Such is Carter's reading.

What about ethics of sex and money, which are naturally associated with politics, at least in my part of the world? Are they to be found in John and do they have some political dimensions? As for money: there is no instance of someone selling all and giving the proceeds to the poor, nor even, like Zacchaeus, refunding

3 See e.g. H. W. Attridge, 'An Emotional Jesus and Stoic Traditions', *Stoicism in Early Christianity* (ed. T. Rasimus, T. Engberg-Pedersen, I. Dunderberg; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010) 77–92, repr. in *Essays on John and Hebrews* (WUNT 264; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 122–36.

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

5 See S. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008).

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illicit gains. The Gospel's only reference to money in the hands of Jesus and his followers is to their common purse. This situation is certainly compatible with a communitarian practice such as that described in Acts 2.44 and 4.32, but the notice that the holder of the purse was a thief might be an implicit, and useful, warning against this organisational structure. A brief allusion is susceptible to various readings.

Prof. Carter finds implicit attention to economic matters in the story of the 'cleansing' of the Temple, where the money changers recall the economic functions of temples such as that of Artemis at Ephesus, pillars of the ancient economic system. Money changing and commercial activity do not belong in the Temple of Jerusalem and if, as the Gospel suggests, Jesus and his followers constitute a New Temple, then monetary exchanges and commerce do not belong among them either. This reading of John sounds much like Revelation, which demonises the Empire and its local elite supporters and criticises the economic foundations of imperial rule, the coins that bear idolatrous images, the merchants who trade human cargo. Carter notes the similarity.

What about sexual ethics, a subject that Carter does not treat, but which also looms large in Revelation? There is no prohibition of divorce in John, no praise for kingdom-inspired eunuchs. Explicit sexual ethics are not on the table. The Gospel portrays a Jesus who is cordial to, but not sexually involved with, women: the unnamed Samaritan, Martha and Mary, and, of course, Mary Magdalene, whose appearances are tinged with a sublimated eroticism. Then there is the Beloved Disciple, who shares a rare degree of physical intimacy with Jesus. All of this can be construed in various ways as an implicit sexual ethic challenging the conventions of patriarchal, heterocentric imperial society, perhaps by advocating loves that may not be named,[6] or, more likely, the kind of celibate lifestyle attested in various early Christian communities. How far, and in what direction, can a search for *implicit* ethics go?

Are John's implicit ethics then 'political'? They do not begin to prescribe a mode of behaviour for citizens of the 'polis', nor do they worry about what a well-organised polis might look like. They do not present the kind of political ethics encountered in Aristotle's *Politics* or the various *Republics* written by ancient philosophers from Plato through Augustine. The ethics of the Fourth Gospel would be ethics, implicit but real, that *respond* to and *offer a way of dealing with* an inimical political reality. They do not formally sketch the alternative. Yet the Gospel also resists the submissive stance of other Christians, like Paul perhaps, at least in Romans 13, and of the Pauline tradition that insists on respectability. So, in a nutshell, John's ethics are not "political" in a classical sense, but they can be understood as responsive to political reality.

6 See e.g. T. Jennings, *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003).

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The conclusion to Carter's *John and Empire* reminds us that these implicit ethics of resistance are couched in terms that ironically mimic the system they resist. This fact raises other hermeneutical questions. If we are concerned not simply to describe but somehow to translate an ironic rhetoric of resistance into contemporary terms, what is the best mode of doing so? Is ironic mimicry still a good device for political ethics or does it lead to the kind of a-political reading of Johannine ethics found in the *Gospel of Truth*?

Does the hermeneutical endeavour need to keep in view the fact that the programme attributed to the Fourth Gospel has not generally been successful? The community of the Beloved Disciple has all too often linked up with oppressive imperial power. Was the evangelist's strategy a failure?

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Two assumptions frame this discussion of John's political ethic. First, a political ethic concerns actions in, interactions with, and structures of, the body politic.[7] Second, to engage John's narrative is to engage in a meaning-making process that might (or might not) shape a particular identity, character and practices. Accordingly, I propose that John's Gospel yields a political ethic that comprises multivalent and ambivalent engagements with the Roman imperialised–colonised world marked by domination and subjugation.[8]

Current scholarly approaches predominantly locate John's Gospel in a religious conflict with another religious community, a synagogue, from which the Gospel community has been supposedly excluded. Recent discussions have challenged the adequacy of this scenario on various grounds including countering its construction of synagogues as exclusively religious and societally introverted communities[9] with the recognition that Jewish Diaspora communities were 'part of the social networks of the city and shared in many of the characteristics of daily life'.[10]

7 John's Gospel does not approach ethics as systematic reflection on or theoretical examination of the codes, norms, values etc. of human behaviour.

8 Neglected in van der Watt and Zimmermann, eds., *Rethinking the Ethics of John*.

9 W. Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008) 7–11, 19–26; C. Conway, 'The Production of the Johannine Community: A New Historicist Perspective', *JBL* 121 (2002) 479–95.

10 P. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (SNTSM 186; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 186; Carter, *John and Empire*, 30–6.

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While this synagogue-expulsion theory has sustained the view that Johannine ethics are apolitical, it has also, perhaps surprisingly, spawned a political ethic. Building on sectarian approaches, Wayne Meeks argued that the Gospel shapes 'attitudes ... and a pattern of behavior' that resist a hostile and hateful world and is 'sharply sectarian, and culturally and politically subversive'.[11] Meeks claims that this countercultural stance has 'quite definite political and social implications',[12] evident, for example, in the passion narrative where confession of Jesus is dangerous.

I agree with Meeks that John's Gospel yields a political ethic, but his formulation is inadequate. It is too monolithic, too sectarian, and neglectful of the Gospel's colonised context.

My argument is that John's Gospel emerges from a colonised context structured by Roman imperial power that the Gospel text negotiates 'from below' with a multivalent political ethic. Imperial–critical and post-colonial perspectives point to a political ethic that comprises not an all-encompassing binary of monolithic opposition but polyvalent and ambivalent strategies constituting multiple and simultaneous interactions.

Persecution is not the name of the game. Evidence for a Domitianic persecution is lacking, and the Pliny–Trajan correspondence is too late and geographically distant from a likely Johannine provenance. Nor does the approach focus myopically on 11.48 (the Romans are coming) or on Pilate. Rather, it recognises that the whole Gospel emerges from and engages Roman imperial power even when a verse does not specifically mention it. Roman imperial power is not a backdrop. It comprises the 'world' of 1.10, the realm of imperially constituted human interactions marked by domination and subjugation that rejects God's purposes and agents. It is depicted throughout the Gospel, and demonstrated supremely in the crucifixion of Jesus by the alliance of Jerusalem-based and Roman elites.[13]

An imperial-critical strategy foregrounds Roman imperial structures and personnel that embrace four interrelated spheres: political control, military domination, economic reach and ideological/religious sanction.[14] It decentres, but does not eliminate, synagogues since synagogues, including Jesus-believers, also participated in and negotiated imperial networks of power. Imperial networks exerted vertical pressure and control that commonly caused fractures, and

11 Meeks, 'The Ethics', 317–26, esp. 318–24.

12 Meeks, 'The Ethics', 322.

13 Also S. Moore, '"The Romans Will Come and Destroy our Holy Place and our Nation": Representing Empire in John', in S. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006) 45–74, esp. 73.

14 M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. I: *A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 10–28.

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physical and/or verbal conflicts, polemic and violence among colonised groups as they negotiated native traditions, practices, identities and access to imperial favours.[15]

Frantz Fanon identifies three dynamics in these violent horizontal struggles.[16] Subjugated peoples are hemmed in by imperial controls and restriction. They mimic the competitiveness and violent domination of their oppressors, yearning for the power that they simultaneously and angrily resist. And finally, they avoid direct confrontation with the oppressor through horizontal violence, attacking other subjugated groups that substitute for direct confrontation with the oppressor. Horizontal violence attests the restricting pressure of overwhelming imperial power, its imitation, and its engagement by avoidance through violent attacks on rival groups.

The conflicts over Jewish traditions that pervade John's Gospel (wisdom, revealers, temple, exodus, Sabbath, Moses, tabernacles, Abraham etc.) reflect and inscribe this colonial dynamic of horizontal violence and verbal polemic against other Jewish figures and groups. These entexted conflicts attest the vertical pressure of Roman power post-70 in the gospel's colonised context wherever that might be. The text in a context of imperial rule constitutes a site of contested power.

This imperial framing, also replicated in Jesus' imperialising dominance over all others,[17] immediately clarifies the identity of the *Ioudaioi.* The term initially identifies a group of powerful figures (priests, Levites, Pharisees) based in the Jerusalem temple (1.19; 2.18, 20; 3.1). The Gospel reinscribes a common colonised power structure whereby native leaders govern in tensive alliance with Roman representatives. They are, as Josephus recognises (*Ant.* 20.251), client rulers of Judea, retainers, members of an alliance between colonisers and colonised, ambivalently loyal to Caesar: 'everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor … we have no king but Caesar', (19.12, 15). Members of this alliance uphold a status quo from which they benefit at the expense of non-elites, even while they constantly contest power with each other.

In this context, it is impossible to style Jesus' healing of the paralysed man (5.1–18) as a religious act leading to a religious dispute over Sabbath observance.[18] The paralysed man belongs with the oft-neglected 'multitude of invalids,

15 See also M. Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1–42)', *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power* (ed. M. Dube and J. L. Staley; London: Sheffield Academic, 2002) 51–5, esp. 61–71.

16 F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963) 52–4.

17 See also M. W. Dube, 'Savior of the World but Not of This World: A Post-Colonial Reading of Spatial Construction in John', *The Postcolonial Bible* (ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 118–35, esp. 124–9.

18 For socio-political and economic Sabbath traditions, see Deut 5.12–15 (release from slavery) and Lev 25 (land, slaves, debt).

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blind, lame, and paralyzed' (5.3).[19] Frantz Fanon[20] and the classical scholar Peter Garnsey[21] have examined the presence of the diseased in colonised contexts where, Garnsey argues, food resources are accessed along lines of power. While elites eat well in imperial structures, many non-elites do not. Diseases of deficiency and contagion run rife. Deficiencies of vitamins, minerals and calories produce a 'multitude of invalids, blind, lame and paralyzed'. Imperial power makes people sick.

This context and perspective frame Jesus' healing as a polyvalent act of imperial negotiation. The man's healing exposes and critiques the Empire's death-bringing power and repairs its damage. It is an act of opposition or resistance, a somatic sign of God's life-giving purposes, an alternative to destructive imperial structures. God's non-military empire is at work.

The healing also participates in the Gospel's eschatology evident in Jesus' talk in the following verses about somatic resurrection and life of the age (5.19–30). Eschatological traditions commonly envision physical healing and wholeness, abundant food and fertility.[22] Such scenes reimagine Rome's imperial world, restructured to ensure life for all. Jesus as healer and supplier of abundant food (6.1–15) reveals, contra Bultmann, divine purposes that oppose, contrast, transform and terminate Rome's world.

While antithesis, critique, rejection, alternative, dominance and replacement constitute this political ethic, so too do survival and accommodation. The scene takes place as Jesus visits Jerusalem again,[23] at a pool near the Sheep Gate, at a festival, on the Sabbath. Jesus moves among common folks and frequents synagogues (Capernaum, 6.59) and temple (18.20). He is at home in his first-century world. This is no 'stranger from heaven' or sectarian-advocate. Rather, the narrative constructs Jesus accommodating to, aligning with, surviving in, native cultural structures in a colonised context.

He articulates similar accommodation for his followers: 'they are in the world … I am not asking you to take them out of the world …' (17.11, 15). He gives them a mission comprising greater works than his (14.12), more healings and feedings, and 'reaping' (4.39). Love sustains it (13.31–3).

Antithesis; critique; rejection; accommodation; survival; transformation; mutual support; mission – another dynamic contributes to the ambivalence of this political ethic, mimicry. Jesus is not the only agent of healing. Numerous

19 W. Carter, '"The blind, lame and paralyzed" (John 5:3): John's Gospel, Disability Studies, and Postcolonial Perspectives', *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (ed. C. Moss and J. Schipper; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) 129–50.

20 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 39–45, 289–93.

21 P. Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1999) 24–42.

22 Carter, *John and Empire*, 204–34; Carter, 'The Blind', 144.

23 Moore, 'The Romans', 70 sees Jesus' itinerancy as 'a reconquest of the Holy Land'.

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authors construct Rome and/or its emperors as effecting healing and fertility through Roman rule.[24] The Gospel's eschatological scenarios and signs mimic, even as they contest, imperial fantasies of a transformed world.

Mimicry pervades the Gospel. Jesus comes from afar to assert domination in Judea, a familiar imperial story. His ascension mimics and reinscribes apotheosis traditions concerning post-mortem heavenly ascents of emperors and vindication among the gods.[25] The exalted or 'lifted up' Jesus, the soon-to-return Son of Man, will be enthroned with God, drawing all people to himself (12.32), effecting God's dominion over the nations as a cosmic all-ruling emperor (evoking Dan 7.13–14).[26] Other imperially imitative terms identify Jesus – shepherd, saviour of the world, king of the Jews, son of God. The pervasive term 'father' for God mimics a common designation for emperors.[27] These relexifications are catachresis, language that the colonised share with the coloniser but redefine.

Similar multivalent dynamics appear in the whip-wielding Pilate and crucifixion scenes. Much discussion of Pilate does not take seriously that he is a Roman governor who exercises enormous Roman power in contestive alliance with local elites.[28] The narrative constructs Pilate as the 'head torturer' of a torturing system.[29] He crucifies Jesus as a provincial rebel, an unsanctioned local king claiming an alternative kingdom in rebellion against the emperor's authority. Scholars have explored the scene's ironies as both the end of such delusions and an ironic enthronement, a coronation, a contestive scene that destabilises ruling power even while it asserts it. As much as Rome crucifies Jesus, Jesus gives himself to die. At his arrest, he declares his identity with the theophanic *ego eimi* 'I am he', and the approaching cohort of some 600 arresting soldiers falls down.[30] Mockery joins mimicry – as it does when Jesus reveals himself alive at the Sea of the apparently impotent emperor Tiberius (21.1).[31]

In this unstable and complex context of colonised–coloniser, the Gospel offers a polyvalent, ambivalent, political ethic that includes opposition, accommodation, survival, transformation, mimicry, reinscription, catachresis, relexification, termination, mockery, expectations of triumph, mutual support. Such strategies

24 Carter, 'The Blind', 134–5.

25 Carter, *John and Empire*, 315–34.

26 5.28–9; 6.39–40, 44, 54; 12.48; 14.3. Carter, *John and Empire*, 336–42, contra Moore, 'The Romans'.

27 Carter, *John and Empire*, 69–72, 185–203, 235–55.

28 Carter, *John and Empire*, 289–314.

29 Moore, 'The Romans', 56–63.

30 Moore, 'The Romans', 53.

31 W. Carter, 'Masters of the Sea? Ephesian Fishermen, John 6:16–21, and John 21', *But These Are Written … Essays on Johannine Literature in Honor of Professor Benny C. Akers* (ed. C. S. Keener, J. S. Crenshaw, J. D. May (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014) 65–79.

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constitute the Gospel's shifting political ethic of numerous simultaneous means for negotiating Roman imperialising–colonising power.

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In the time allowed I will make five statements that focus on three aspects of the topic, namely: firstly, ethics in the Gospel and Letters (from here just John); secondly, the political dynamics in John; and thirdly, the relationship between ethics and politics in John.

My first statement is that in developing his ethics, John's focus is not primarily on specifically political concepts but rather he focuses on filial or friendship relations using filial or agrarian conceptual material. At first sight and on surface level it does not seem as if he is developing a political ethics. However, there is more to the story.

A few examples will have to suffice to support this statement.

(a) In a central ethical section in John 8.12–59 the crux of the argument is based on the shared social and filial convention that a child behaves like his father (8.38–41) – behaviour is determined by identity and identity is *inter alia* based on filial realities. By also embedding the filial arguments in Jewish history, in referring to his hearers as children of Abraham and of God, a hint is given of the political relevance of the argument. Similar filial concepts are used for ethical purposes in, for instance, 1 John 3.1–18, where brother (namely, Cain) kills brother or where ethical space is filled with brotherly (and sisterly) love (1 John 4).

(b) Within the ethically dense section of John 15.1–17, love is described in terms of friendship – namely, being willing to die for one's friend, especially in face of the hatred of the world (John 15.18–16.2). This envisages a situation where one might suffer under political power, yet the ethical metaphor is not developed in terms of conflict with such a power, but rather with an inner perspective of reciprocal love for one another (15.9–10).

(c) The cross or death as political event plays a consistent role in the ethical dynamics of John. The question is whether this political action is conceptually developed as an ethic of politics against the Roman Empire. Evidently not. Where the cross is used to motivate ethics, it is used in terms of service (12.24–6), care, loyalty and love in relation to, for instance, one's own (sheep) (10.11–18) or poor

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fellow believers (1 John 3.16–17), or in terms of love within the ambit of friendship (15.13).

In sum, it seems as if John does not develop his metaphorical ethics in terms of direct confrontation with the Roman Empire, but rather with an inner perspective focusing on the well-being of the group being addressed.

My second statement is that John's narrative reflects a complex multi-layered political system, according to which the Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire, as well as the cosmic and transcendental reality, are politically interrelated and integrated.

Norman Gottwald[32] gives a broad but acceptable description of the concept of politics 'as the public exercise of power, coupled with the legitimation of its use, within a given social and territorial space', and I may add that, according to ancient philosophers, politics is also to the benefit of the people without signs of self-interest. Often in empire studies the texts are read as if the overarching Roman rule was the only real political factor in operation. Without denying its importance, the political reality seems to have been more complex. Gottwald[33] reminds us that 'where political power is centralized, political power struggles do not cease in the other (lower-level) networks. The state seldom has the interest, or indeed the means, to intervene in all those lower-level political activities … [as far as it was] at least non-threatening, to its overarching sovereignty.' The Roman Empire allowed local authorities with their councils to attended to lower-level political matters, of course subservient to their centralised power.

The Jewish situation in John displays all the qualities of such a 'lower-level' well-organised political group. The Jews had distinct leaders, with a council (συνέδριον, 11.47) organising or ordering their people (11.48–50; 9.22; 11.53, 57); moreover, they had their own laws with the clear jurisdiction, granted by the Roman Empire, to apply and execute these laws (18.29–31). They display an attitude of subjection towards the Roman Empire, acknowledging the Empire's superior power (11.48) up to the point of proclaiming Caesar as their king (19.15).

A clear picture emerges: the Roman Empire is the overarching political power, but embedded in this imperial power structure is the 'lower-level' political system of the Jews. Two other realities should also be reckoned with, namely, the more universal *kosmos* and the transcendental fictional power space of the devil, 'the ruler of this world' (12.31; cf. 14.30), which is most probably used in a double sense, referring to Pilate, but also to the devil in a broader sense, both of whom Jesus confronts at the cross. The political power game is thus further described in terms of a cosmic transcendental conflict.

32 N. K. Gottwald, *The Politics of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011) 9; cf. M. I. Findley, *Politics in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 2.

33 Gottwald, *The Politics of Ancient Israel*, 9.

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My third statement is that according to their self-understanding, Johannine believers also saw themselves as part of a separate political structure, namely, of the true prophesied Kingdom of God that was now present in this world as God's eschatological reality.

Gottwald[34] has pointed out that 'societies without specialized governmental organs also practice politics ... In short, the absence of a differentiated political network does not mean the absence of politics, but rather the dispersal and diffusion of politics into the existing economic, social, cultural and ideological networks.' If one takes this perspective seriously, the Johannine group must be regarded as a political entity, as the Kingdom of God, and this indeed seems to have been the self-understanding of the Johannine believers. Due to time restrictions only a brief overview of this political self-consciousness must suffice.

Ulrich Busse[35] aptly described the centrality of the kingship and kingdom metaphor in John, identifying the Johannine group as part of the kingdom with Jesus as the Messiah, king of Israel/Jews. This kingdom imagery serves as a vehicle to describe symbolically the presence of the transcendental Kingdom of God in this world. As the Messiah, Jesus displays the qualities of a true king: all power is given to him (3.35; 5.20) to fulfil the tasks of an ideal (vassal) king such as caring (ch. 6), shepherding and protecting his own (10.28–30), giving and interpreting the law, as well as judging the world (5.19–24, 30; cf. also 10.17–18; 9.31–4; 8:16), ensuring the presence of God, the King, in this world. The 'national identity' of the members of the kingdom is linked to the national history of Israel (chs. 5 and 8) requiring absolute loyalty and obedience towards the God of Israel, through faith, trust in and acceptance of the Messiah-King (6.28). The promised Kingdom of God is now present as eschatological reality in this world, and becoming part of the family of God makes a person a member of this Kingdom. This is whom the Johannine believers regard themselves to be. Which brings me to my fourth statement.

My fourth statement is that part of the self-perception of the believers was that they were not of this world, but were nevertheless in this world as members of this powerful and victorious eschatological Kingdom of God. Being in but not of this world requires a clear understanding of the significance of this Kingdom in relation to the opposing political powers.

In John the promised Messiah-King (1.41, 45) confronts the world with the reality of the incarnated eschatological Kingdom of God of which he is the king. He challenges the Jewish opponents who are convinced that they are the authoritative and legal representatives of God's people with the message of the arrival of

34 Gottwald, *The Politics of Ancient Israel*, 9.

35 U. Busse, 'Metaphorik und Rhetorik im Johannesevangelium: Das Bildfeld vom König', *Imagery in the Gospel according to John / Bildersprache im Johannesevangelium* (WUNT 200; ed. J. Frey, J. G. van der Watt, R. Zimmermann; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 279–317.

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the promised eschatological Kingdom that may be entered through spiritual birth, receiving eternal life (3.1–8). Given their embeddedness in the Roman rule, this also presents a challenge to the Romans, but even more, it challenges the cosmic and transcendental powers that stand in opposition to the eternal Kingdom. Tension is created in that according to normal human criteria the presence of this Kingdom is not politically or physically evident. People are invited to a kingdom that humanly speaking is evidently without power, since the King dies on the cross and members of the Kingdom will be persecuted, murdered and hated (15.18–16.4; 17.14). This is not a very likely perspective on a group who claims to be the political victor representing the most powerful kingdom in existence. There must be an additional perspective on how such a victorious kingdom is negotiated in this world of hatred.

John makes sure that no misunderstanding exists – Jesus' Kingdom should not be confused with the expected earthly kingdom or measured against those criteria: that is why he withdrew when the crowd wanted to make him king (6.13). Neither should the power of the Kingdom be confused with ordinary earthly power. He explains that his Kingdom is not of this world, and therefore does not use the force and power associated with this world (18.36; Jesus prohibits Peter to use his sword, 18.10–11). The power of his Kingdom should rather be sought elsewhere, in aspects such as love, care, creating life, but ultimately in the final and powerful judgement of God for those who did not want to accept the reality of this Kingdom. This does not put the two opposing political groups on a physical collision course, but rather on the path of existential and ethical confrontation. Pilate asks what the truth is, while the Truth (14.6) is standing in front of him. Pilate claims power, while talking to the One who has all power.

John indeed describes the contact and interface between this Kingdom and the opposing powers in clear terms. Victorious language expresses the outcome of the encounter between the Kingdom of God and the other political realities. In spite of the tribulation his followers will experience in this world (16.33), Jesus encourages them with the words that he has overcome the world (ἐγὼ νενίκηκα τὸν κόσμον). This victorious language is even more common in 1 John (2.13, 14; 4.4; 5.4, 5). In the cross and resurrection narrative (chs. 18-20) the superiority of Jesus is expressed by means of political concepts such as kingdom (18.36–7), Caesar (19.12), power (19.10–11), judgement (18.31; 19.10–11). The aim of crucifixion in Roman history was to destroy the crucified one totally, physically and otherwise. In Jesus' case he thwarted this aim by rising from death, which stands as victory over the worst the Roman powers could present. Apart from, but also based on, the titles used for Jesus, such as Lord, God, King of Israel/Jews etc., he proclaims, reveals and occupies the moral high ground with moral power. In the contact between Jesus and his people and the opposing world, the true King and his Kingdom occupy a superior and victorious position towards these opposing political powers, and from this position the contact and

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interrelations are negotiated. The question follows: how should this 'confrontation that is not really a confrontation' be negotiated? Which brings me to my fifth statement.

My fifth statement is that the political agenda of John is for the Johannine believers to negotiate actively the incarnation of God's superior and victorious eschatological Kingdom in this world in opposition to the other political powers. In this context the explicit ethics of John aim at preserving the Kingdom of God to the inside through love, but opens it up to the outside by offering life to all in the family and Kingdom of God through faith.

Although some try to solve this tension of the members of the Kingdom of God who are not of this world by arguing that the Johannine group is sectarian, this cannot be true of the family of the King. John indicates how this eschatological family of the King should be negotiated in this world.

In the first place, to the *inside*, care should be taken to protect and sustain the Kingdom through love, loyalty, commitment, obedience to commandments and friendship to the point of giving one's own life, living a life of honesty, righteousness and purity (1 John), and protecting the inside group's tradition and ethos (14.26; 1 John 2.20–5; 2 John 10–11). This all serves to the honour of God the true King (15.1–17). Such attitudes seem to have been expected of any ancient kingdom, including that of the Romans. To preserve and sustain any kingdom such inner ethical focus is necessary and to be expected. It should therefore not be confused with sectarianism.

In the second place, because God loves the world (3.16), Jesus was sent to this world to bring eternal life, making it possible for all people to see and enter the Kingdom (3.3, 5) through faith. Within John's political perspective this missional love becomes the means by which the power and existence of the other political powers are confronted, challenged and indeed subverted. In this way the transcendental Kingdom is 'incarnated' into this world. The ethical argument is that once a person becomes part of the family of the King he or she shares in the ethos of the love and life of this Kingdom, guided by the Spirit on the basis of a mimetic relationship with Jesus (14.26). The emphasis in this narrative is therefore not on smaller details, but on how the eschatological family of the King should negotiate their lives within this *kosmos* that is still opposing their claim of Jesus being the King.

Are John's ethics apolitical? – No, not insofar as Jesus is the King of the Jews, the Messiah of God.

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