Finding data in unexpected places (or: From text linguistics to socio-rhetoric). Towards a socio-rhetorical reading of John's Gospel*

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ABSTRACT
Vernon Robbins in his *Tapestry of early Christian discourse* and in *Exploring the texture of texts* has argued that socio-rhetorical analysis is an interpretation of the interplay between various arenas of texture. Such an analysis makes use of data from various fields: linguistic (inner texture), literary comparative (intertexture), social and historical (social and cultural texture) and the ideology of the text (ideological texture). As a general statement of the method this is adequate, but it has to be recognised that 'data' is not a static entity with an objective existence. The reader's understanding of the interplay of the various textures and the reader's imaginative construction of the text's rhetorical situation can radically alter the way the 'data' for such a socio-rhetorical analysis is conceptualised, and dramatically changes the inferences made from the text. This is illustrated with reference to the Gospel of John. The language of the imperial cult pervades the text and its projection of the image of Jesus, once one re-imagines the connections of the various textures as well as the networks of significations surrounding the text.

1 INTRODUCTION: RHETORICAL READING IS ALL ABOUT WEBS OF DATA
The work of Vernon Robbins on the method of socio-rhetorical analysis of Scripture, especially his monographs *Tapestry of early Christian discourse* and *Exploring the texture of texts*, will remain for many years the benchmarks against which all applications of rhetorical method to biblical texts will be measured.

Following Robbins' approach, the rhetoric of the text as persuasive strategy can be identified from the interplay of the various arenas of textures. A rhetorical analysis is then the interpretation of how the interplay of textures aids or 'constructs' the persuasive strategy. A rhetorical analysis makes use of data from various fields, be it linguistic (inner texture), literary comparative (intertexture), social and historical (social and cultural texture) and the ideology of the text (ideological texture) (Robbins 1996:1–17, 237–240).
New Testament texts are not simply historical, theological or linguistic treatises. Rather, their written discourse is a highly interactive and complex environment. Interpreting a biblical text is an act of entering a world where body and mind, interacting with one another, create and evoke highly complex patterns and configurations of meanings in historical, social, cultural and ideological contexts of religious belief. Rhetorical argument, social act and religious belief interwine in them like threads and yarn in a richly textured tapestry (Robbins 1996:14).

On the most immediate level, from the perspective of the reader, the text is the interweaving of words, phrases, expressions, motifs and themes, and references to an ‘outside’ world which as an ensemble gives material voice to the vision of reality and the world espoused by the author and projected to the audience as an invitation to share in the vision (level 1). On another level the text is the nexus of rhetorical situation, audience and the complex world in which the communication event took place (level 2). On yet a third level, the text is also a nexus of all the above and the present reader, him/herself immersed in social settings and ideologies distinct from the world in which the textual communication originated (level 3). Textual communication implies a simultaneous movement—and interplay—of connotation and denotation. Thus a socio-rhetorical reading is a ‘conscious strategy of reading and rereading a text from different angles’ (Robbins 1996:3) or a challenge to interpreters ‘to explore human reality and religious belief and practice through multiple approaches to written discourse in texts’ (Robbins 1996:13). One has to keep in mind, however, that the ‘interplay of connotation and denotation’ is a ‘simul-play’, both simultaneously mutually determining, and furthermore that the ‘different angles’ or ‘multiple approaches’ do not describe successive stages in the reading process as in consecutive steps to be followed in the application of a method. Rather, the concerns of the present-day reader, informed and determined by his/her social location and ideology or vision of the world (level 3), determine how one imagines the rhetorical situation in which the textual communication had its place (level 2) and determine our selection of textual data to construct the rhetorical situation and communicative aim (level 1). All this happens simultaneously in the reading process.

While as a general statement of the method the introduction to socio-rhetorical method by Robbins (1996:1-17, 237-240) is adequate, it has to be recognised that ‘data’ is by no means a static entity with an objective existence. This is because it is much more difficult in the case of a complex narrative text (such as John’s Gospel which enjoys a reputation of being a notoriously dense text) to determine the relationship between textures such as recurring word or motif-patterns, intertextual ‘reminiscences’ of other/earlier texts, the social and historical context implied by the text and the perspective adopted by/in the text.

2 THE PROBLEM OF NARRATIVES

Presented the way it is, a socio-rhetorical method works well when the examples used are taken from argumentative material (the method is illustrated in The tapestry of early
Christian discourse with reference to 1 Corinthians 9). In an argumentative text the aim of the author, the rhetoric, is verbalised explicitly. It explicitly engages the obtaining situation, gives explicit instructions and comments explicitly on its own use of symbols (for example, relating the Christian epic, the narratives about Jesus Christ and other early Christian symbols, as well as the Hebrew epic, the narratives and symbols from the past to the present situation of the author-and-audience and thus showing their relevance to the situation). Being much more direct communication, argumentative material is more readily recognised as being rhetorical in character (witness the many studies on the rhetorical figures and tropes employed in, for example, New Testament letters).

A complex narrative on the other hand, only gives away its ideology and rhetorical aim very reluctantly ('... it is embedded in the totality of the text and ... is only verbalised in bits and pieces', Van Tilborg 1989:27). This is because of the unique characteristics of the communicative genre of narrative. Since Gérard Genette it has become commonplace to distinguish three aspects of narrative reality (Genette 1980:27). On the one hand one has the narrative content (story), then the narrative text itself as the story facts-as-presented (narrative or narrative text), and finally the act that produces the narrative including the situation in which the narrative action took place (narrating or narration). To understand what a narrative text tries to convey is also to understand the relationship between these three aspects. What complicates the matter further is the fact that we only have access to the story facts-as-presented, the narrative text, to ideologically 'distorted history'. The text is the material remains of the act of com-

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1 I made use of the terms from the English translation of Genette's work. The corresponding terms from Bal (1985) and Rimmon-Kenan (1983) are:

Genette: Bal: Rimmon-Kenan:

histoire/story fabula story
récit/narrative story text
narration/narrating text narration

2 In line with this view of the threefold distinction of aspects of narrative, one should locate the rhetorical situation outside the text, in the act of narration and not at the level of the narrative text (but note: the rhetorical situation is not itself a static object 'out there', it is created in presenting a state of affairs obtaining as this or that, imbued with values to see it like this or that, and demanding a response in this or that way). In a narrative the words and actions of actors are not themselves the rhetoric of the text but are imbedded, as narrative, in the encompassing act of narration, being selected and manipulated to be useful in the act of communication between author and audience, much like a present-day minister would select the parts of the Scripture reading to highlight, expound and apply in a sermon. But of course, the whole process is guided and determined by the way the preacher constructs in his or her own mind what the situation of the audience, the congregation, is and what should be of use to them in that situation to hear. An interesting example of such a double reading of a biblical text in terms of the rhetorical situation outside it, can be found in Loscalzo (1992), a reading of Luke 24:13–35, the Emmaus episode. Loscalzo also provides a brief but good characterisation of Burkeian rhetorical criticism (1992:105–107, 114–123).

3 Behind the term 'distorted history' lies the distinction between story and discourse, between
munication and the historical situation of author-and-audience, of the act of narration. But it is the situation (now gone) that would furnish the clues as to what was 'distorted' and how. Are we to take the 'facts' of the story to be 'true', representative of 'how things really were'? Are we, in other words, to take an author at his word?¹

Consider the Gospel of John: on the surface it is about what happened in Palestine 60 years before (if one accepts the conventional dating), the history, the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth and the public around him. Yet it is conceded in the introduction to all commentaries on the gospel that it had a purpose relevant to its original place of composition, whether that be Western Asia Minor (Ephesus), Syria, even Egypt, or Palestina, in any case a purpose aimed at a situation different in time and place to the events narrated in the gospel. And now the question, how does one determine the narrative's address to a situation when it is not explicitly about that situation? What counts as data is determined by the reader's understanding of the interplay of the various textures and the reader's imaginative construction of the text's rhetorical situation and that, in turn, can radically alter the way the 'data' for such a socio-rhetorical analysis is conceptualised, and dramatically changes the inferences made from the text.

How do we imagine the relation between biblical texts and the world of which they were part and to which they refer? And how do we imagine the 'message' of the biblical text, that is, what it tries to accomplish as an act of communication in a certain, specific context? These questions touch on some of the most fundamental assumptions governing our interaction with biblical texts, assumptions that will determine fundamentally the way we construe the 'meaning' of the texts.

All along it is implied that, regardless of the claims made in a text about itself or by others (claims, for example, that characterise the text under discussion as of a revelatory nature), all texts are 'texts in contexts, specific acts of communication between specified individuals, at specific points in time and space, about specifiable subjects' (Smith 1982:xxiii). In the context Jonathan Smith referred to 'myth or other religious materials' which, after Kenneth Burke's definition of a proverb, should be story facts and how they are presented, imbued with value, interpreted through metaphorical juxtapositions and so on. The distinction is derived from Chatman 1978. See also the discussion of this twofold distinction with regard to literary readings of the gospels and its relation to rhetorical criticism of narrative in Moore 1989:56-68.

¹ In the case of modern literary works we have the advantage of large corpuses of texts extraneous to a narrative which can be used to measure the mimetic faithfulness of a work (which in turn could help determine the genre, and thereby aids the decoding process—what we as readers should do with the text), texts about the world the narrative purports to describe (histories, travelogues, etc), biographical and autobiographical texts about the author and his/her social location, situation of writing and even about the process of writing itself. Very inconveniently all this is absent in the case of the gospel narratives. How trustworthy are the later identifications of authorship and situation of writing (for example, the Papias fragments, the Muratorian canon and the like)? That's anybody's guess.
understood as 'strategies for dealing with situations'. With these words the programmatic starting point of the present study is formulated. Religious texts have to do with human life-worlds, human contexts, human social contexts—somewhere at some point in time—and because of their nature as acts of communication they essentially imply a relationship between partners in communication, but a relationship which is not static, rather it is a two-way interaction structured by input, cybernetic feedback, revised input, et cetera. Furthermore, communicative interaction is much more than the transfer of idea content. It entails communication of world-view as well as guidelines on how to live according to the world-view... but in the act of communicating religion and world-view are themselves 'created' or 'conserved' depending on the communication situation. While the ancient world and its lived experiences have disappeared in the ongoing march of history, things—'stuff', artifacts—have remained. The challenge is to interpret these artifacts in order to imagine the ancient world as well as the inner workings of the ancient world and world-view. Ancient texts, like the biblical documents, are special kinds of artifacts. Unlike other artifacts, ancient texts (from literary works to inscriptions) quite consciously speak about the world of which they were part. And in the case of the biblical texts the Christian religious tradition has kept them alive and in use as a canonised source of spirituality, that is as a source of present-day world-view construction (or religious life, if you wish). Ancient texts, then, need to be interpreted. One aspect of interpretation is to enter into the world projected by the text and to imagine the fit between the text and the world-view contemporaneous to it. This 'fit' between text-as-artifact and world-view has to be imagined and constructed and one does so by linking the text and what it says to as many other texts and artifactual remains as possible, in so doing, constructing the web of meaning giving relations of which the text was part.

Another important element of this 'ancient world construction' is the use of appropriate and relevant methods of inquiry (fields of study such as cultural anthropology, sociology, and so on, and to this we may add text linguistics and socio-rhetorical analysis, for the use of the text as a 'window' on how a group visualised its place and preferred way of living in the ancient world is explored here). Since our focus here is on a text, the Gospel of John, we will have to ask ourselves in what way this text reflects the world of the partners in communication. How does it speak about the world? What type of world is projected and constructed? The answers we give to questions such as these allow us to make inferences as to the communicative situation or historical context in which the text was produced as act of communication between the historical partners of that communication event.  

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5 All along I have assumed an identity between rhetoric and communication. Historically rhetoric is synonymous with communication events, after all rhetoric had its place in dialogue and public, interpersonal oratory: 'how to speak well and move the audience'. In many modern text theories there is again a confluence between the two strands of rhetoric and communication. Many studies in the Burkeian tradition of rhetorical criticism appeared in journals such as
Let me draw one important conclusion from these considerations. When we study history, as in this study when we attempt to enter the Mediterranean world of the late
first century CE, we only have the texts that survived. In order to 'have' the ancient world, we have to make these texts say more than they do on the surface. In this regard I want to draw attention to the distinction made by Norwood Hanson (Braun

ter sense, rhetoric becomes synonymous with textuality' (176). What has become clear is the convergence of different theoretical approaches. Broadly speaking, all tend to focus on the relationships between (a) the act of communication in its context, (b) the agent of the act of communication, (c) the addressees of the communication, (d) the medium of the act of communication (how language is used) and (e) the purpose of the communication. This coheres with the Burkeian pentad of act (what happens, or what is being done), scene (where it happens, the context in time and place), agent (who acts), agency (the medium through which is acted) and purpose (what is the intended result or achievement). One should, however, keep in mind that while the pentad creates the impression of unilinear communication, there very definitely exists a cybernetic feedback relation between the process of text planning and production and the process of text reception, between what an author wants to convey and the audience as he/she imagines them to be, which determines how the message is clothed and the language moulded to suit their situation.

The Burkean dramaturgical perspective on rhetorical criticism seems to me most suited to a description of the rhetoric of a narrative as it consistently keeps within the purview other and extratextual levels in the communication process. It focuses the attention to text acts as vehicles of interaction between people connected in some way or another in time and place. In a way this is how we should see (even) religious texts, as dissolved into the process of interacting. For too long theology as an exegetical enterprise saw its purpose in the extraction of doctrinal statements from the material text. And so sight was lost of the fact that religion is also world creation, rhetorical vision—a verb, not a noun. God-talk is a discursive practice, a battle for a way of seeing the world. How else does one explain the fight for the position of truth, the stress on church discipline and the drawing of boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy in early Christian literature? And note, the mere mention of boundaries between orthodox and heterodox positions implies social realities, those who are inside and those who are outside, boundaries created by speech acts. Within the Burkeian dramaturgical perspective I followed two more specific approaches, namely a dramatistic approach (see Brock 1989:183-195) and a fantasy theme approach (Bormann 1989:210–222). Broadly speaking, Brock theomatises the use of the pentad to illustrate how a conceptualisation of the 'ratio' between the pentadic elements serves to interpret the rhetorical tendencies of an utterance or text. Bormann illustrates with the fantasy theme approach how small groups build up through communication a shared vision of the world (a 'fantasy'), how this vision is legitimated when members of the group lock into it ('fantasy chain') and how this becomes a larger rhetorical vision when more groups lock into this shared vision of how things are, 'how the world is'. One need hardly point out the relevance of these approaches to an understanding of a gospel narrative text. The dramatistic approach furnishes the conceptual tools with which to imagine the interrelatedness of 'John'-as-author and Ephesian audience, the gospel text as deliberate configuration of text elements, selected and manipulated to fit the imagined context, and the possible aim of this narrative text-communication. In my view, a fantasy theme analysis expands the view to an outlook on the wider effects of the process. What comes into view is how a singular communicative event (the gospel narrative as communication in a specific time and place) broadened out to become a rhetorical vision encapsulating an early Christian utopian vision as against the Roman imperium (or imperial ideology) as a utopian vision. The early distribution and circulation of the Gospel of John (according to the manuscript evidence) attests to its power to involve readers/audiences in its alternative view of the world. One should constantly be aware that we do not deal with an exact science in such a rhetorical reading. Birdsell (1989) sounds a few cautionary statements in
between 'sense-datum' words or 'data-words' and 'theory-loaded' words. Although the context in which Braun refers to Hanson deals with concept formation in religious studies scholarship, the issue is relevant here as well. Hanson illustrates the difference between 'sense-datum' words/‘data-words’ and ‘theory-loaded’ words with the following illuminating example. Consider the two words 'hole' and ‘crater’. In Hanson’s example ‘hole’ (as 'spatial concavity') is a data-word, that is its minimal lexical meaning can be ascertained by observation, and let us assume for the moment that something like objective observation is possible. In contrast to this, to label a certain spatial concavity a ‘crater’ is already expressive of a commitment to an interpretation as to its origin, namely that its creation was quick, violent and explosive. But note, the formation of the ‘hole’ is not a given, only the absence of matter in the concavity. How this effect was produced and how we should name the phenomenon is the result of assumptions and interpretations. The ‘crater’ is therefore produced by our assumptions and interpretations. In general, concepts ‘are products of scholars’ cognitive operations to be put to work in the service of scholars’ theoretical interest in the objects of their research. Concepts are not given off by the objects or our interests’ (Braun 2000:9). This holds true for the data scholars use for the construction of the ancient Mediterranean world and for the interpretation of ancient texts within the

this regard: “The implication for the practice of pentadic criticism is that a critic must consciously choose among the charts available, and pursue the implications of that chart in mapping the motives in a text. No one chart is intrinsically more “objective” than another, each is valuable in the context of a given critic’s needs (204) ... Failure to consider actively and adjust to the variety of possibilities within a text can produce problems between the pentad as a device and a text as an expression of motive. Whatever term the critic decides to use will influence the nature of the criticism as surely as the pentadic alignment characterizes the subject under study. To produce conclusions that are unique to a rooted pentadic perspective, a pentadic analysis must conform to its own logic. Since in large part that logic is evolved by the critic, this requires that the critic arrive at the most complete and consistent explanation for a text, and then lay the logic out for inspection (205) ... A great deal of the pentad’s explanatory power rests upon the assumption that the terms in fact are ambiguous, that there is no consistent rule for applying the terms across situations, and that there is not necessarily a single, “correct” rule for applying the terms in any particular situation (208) ... This means that the critic who would make the fullest use of the pentad must experiment with the ratios between the terms in order to find the most consistent or the most illuminating explanation for a given text or event (209).” In essence, different readers will imagine the interplay of textures and components of the rhetorical act differently.

At any rate, by way of a lengthy conclusion, given that the keyword is ‘relationships’ or ‘interrelatedness’, a rhetorical reading cannot be built solely on a consideration of the explicit text base. But once the implicit text base (imagined or constructed by the reader) is juxtaposed onto the explicit text base in the reading process, and once the pentadic elements are imagined in their interrelatedness, and once the gospel narrative is read as ‘distorted history’, then the way is paved for different configurations of meanings to emerge from readings of the same text. The significance of the same text elements within the overall ideology of the text will not be the same for every reader. More pointedly, the text elements, the structure of the text as meaning being-built-up will not be the same for every reader. But that is part of the adventure of reading,
context of that world. Therefore, in a very real sense, interpretation creates data.

3 DIFFERENT KINDS OF DATA

This means that we have two kinds of data to work with in our reconstruction of the life world of the persons involved in the production (i.e. the author) and reception (i.e. the reader) of the text. First, we have explicit data (or to use the term from our example above, sense-datum words or data-words). The text mentions places, names of characters or historical figures, or refers to historical events. We can correlate this with other texts or inscriptions which also refer to the same personae, customs or events, or with archaeological remains like buildings, temples or iconographic depictions such as mural paintings or coins. Second, we also deal with implicit data (again, in the parlance of our example, theory-loaded words). The values espoused by the author, the outlook on life propagated, how the inner workings of their world were conceived, all this is rarely spelled out explicitly in a text, at least not in complex narratives such as the Gospel of John. Much of it has to be inferred from the way the text manipulates historical references to project its world. It is thus from the rhetoric or the art or patterns of persuasion in a text, that is from the way it ‘distorts’ reality in order to create a new perspective on the world for the readers (as if to say ‘this is how you should think the world works’), that we can infer somewhat about the historical situation and this in turn creates historical data to use in our reconstruction of the ancient life-world and endeavour to understand the ancient world-view.

It is in this context that aspects of text linguistics (such as text pragmatics, but more specifically, script or frame theories) can enrich our understanding of the rhetoric of a complex narrative (as I have indicated in note 5 above). Not only should the focus be on the ‘base story’ (Genette’s histoire/story, Bal’s geschiedenis/fabula or Rimmon-Kenan’s story) but also on the discourse, or the way the story is told (Genette’s récit/narrative, Bal’s verhaal/story, or Rimmon-Kenan’s text). This distinction makes it possible to see the juxtaposition of other ‘languages’ to a base story through which evocations of other meanings are transported into the narrative as subtle guides provided by the author to steer the readers’ reaction to the narrative.

There is one last complicating factor to be considered and this has to do with the special character of the Gospel of John. The narrative is shot through with metaphors. From expressions which are out and out metaphorical (like the I am-sayings and the imagery connected to the discourse in which the sayings appear, and the root metaphor of life around which all the other metaphors are organised), to all the other expressions which in such a text organisation become metaphorical (that is, which come to say more than and differently from what is explicitly stated; see Wein-

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rich 1976:328–341 for a description of the movement from micro-metaphorics to macro- or text metaphorics to the text-as-metaphor) the focus should shift to how the text itself as text-in-function becomes a metaphor in the widest sense: ‘a metaphor is a text in a counter-determining situation’ (Weinrich 1976:341, my translation). Words receive their meanings from the context of use. This is an elementary linguistic insight. The same goes for texts as larger configurations of catenae of words. They too receive their meaning from the situation, the situation being the context in which the text is communicated. This is where the ‘Streit um Metaphern’ (Weinrich) becomes relevant: no two readers will imagine the counter-determining situation exactly the same, therefore the meaning of the text will not be constructed identically. No matter how explicit a text is, the counter-determining context is not a given in the material sense.

4 IMAGINED SITUATION AND IMAGINED PURPOSE.

None of the above is possible without a presupposition on the part of the interpreter as to the rhetorical situation (or context) which gave rise to the Gospel of John. Indeed, the very term ‘socio-rhetoric’ implies an intimate and indispensable relation between the text as communicative act and its historical context.

It is time to proceed to a few examples. Three examples are to be discussed. The first example is derived from a ‘traditional’, theological reading of the gospel and I refer here to the introductory sections to some commentaries on John’s gospel where the ‘theology’ or ‘purpose’ is set out and I want to draw attention to how the specific construction of the ‘theology’ or ‘purpose’ is constructed and justified with reference to text phenomena.

In the past three decades it has become somewhat of a communis opinio that the Gospel of John evidences the separation of church and synagogue (one can point to the seminal works of Meeks 1972, Martyn 1968 and Neyrey 1988). In this second example I will discuss the arguments of Meeks (1985) and Cassidy (1992).

Finally, I will present my own reading of the gospel. In identifying in John a utopian ‘language of the anti-imperium’ I do not wish to give the impression that this is the totality of the ideology or rhetoric of the narrative. The narrative is far too complex for that, but at least, and that is my contention, it gives direction to a plausible reading of the narrative in its supposed context.

4.1 Traditional theological readings of John’s purpose

In his recent commentary Morris discusses, without going into much detail, a few possible aims of the Gospel: a supplement to the Synoptic Gospels, a polemic against

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7 Time and space constraints do not allow me a full, detailed and in-depth discussion of all the possible readings of the Gospel of John. That will have to wait for a later opportunity.
Gnosticism, a polemic against docetism, against unbelieving Jews, opposing the continued following of John the Baptist, opposing Christian teachers who either lay too much or too little stress on the sacraments, and as a presentation to the world of a kind of "Hellenised Christianity." Finally, Morris elects (as most commentators on the purpose of John's Gospel do) to be led by the author's own verbalisation of his purpose, namely John 20:30, 31. John shows his audience that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Through this showing they are brought into the sphere of belief and new life and in telling this story, the audience is confronted with a challenge to accept the message and so enter the domain of light or remain in darkness if they should not commit themselves to this message and the person who is the content of the message (Morris 1995:30-34).

According to Beasley-Murray John writes to 'provide an authoritative interpretation of the traditions concerning Jesus current in his own communities ... in so doing he is concerned above all to impart an adequate understanding of the person, words and deeds of Jesus the Christ and Son of God' (1987:xxxviii). This again proceeds from a consideration of John 20:30, 31. Taking the cue from text critical considerations regarding the tense of the verb (aorist or imperfect) 'to believe' in John 20:30, 31, Beasley-Murray takes the gospel to be both catechetical and missionary in nature. In so far as the narrative instructs believers it also combats false and inadequate beliefs. So the gospel has both an evangelistic and didactic aim. The perceived polemics in the narrative combat the 'new winds of doctrine' challenged by the author of the gospel, albeit not the main aim of the gospel. Some of these include: a polemic against views of John the Baptist and his movement, a polemic against the 'Jews,' and finally an anti-Gnostic and anti-docetic polemic.

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8 Hence the references to the Word coming in the flesh (e.g. 1:14).
9 Referring to the (mainly) negative use of the term 'Jews' in the Gospel.
10 Depending on whether one accepts chapters 3 and 6 to be veiled references to baptism and the eucharist respectively. This illustrates the problem with regard to the reading of narratives. The spirits will always be divided, especially if a text is not resolutely read in terms of its communicative context and not as disembodied theological treatises. Symptomatic is Morris' judgement on the issue: 'Since precisely opposite conclusions have been drawn from this evidence, the argument clearly rests on no certain basis?' (1995:33; my emphasis).
11 With reference to the occurrence of philosophical terms such as 'Logos.' However, Morris argues that the gospel is to be understood as stemming from a thoroughly Jewish and not Hellenistic way of thinking. Compare also the many Aramaisms in the language of the text.
12 References to Jesus and his movement and teaching replacing that of John the Baptist, e.g. 1:8, 1:19-23, 29-31; 3:25-30; with Acts 19:1-7 providing the context.
13 The term 'the Jews' is used mainly in a pejorative sense and refers to the Jewish leaders. The Johannine narrative serves to encourage Christians persecuted by Jewish leaders as well to call on Jews to heed to witness to Jesus from their own tradition (e.g. 5:19-47).
14 Of importance are the references to the Word becoming flesh, and the stress on incarnation in the narrative, for example chapter 6 especially 6:51-58 and 19:34 the water and blood coming from Jesus' pierced body.
The last example in this group is taken from Brown’s commentary (1966:1.XVII–1.XXIX). Because he understands the gospel to be a heavily redacted text, Brown allows for the possibility that text parts supporting or suggesting certain aims may actually be indicative of the aim of the text at a certain stage of its dissemination and redaction. However, the ‘main’ aim of the gospel is to strengthen the faith of Christian believers. Jn 20:31 is thus understood not to indicate a missionary purpose.15 All the theological emphases are ‘directed to crises in the believing Church’ (1.XXVIII). The believing Church encompasses both Jew and Gentile.16 Further apologetic aims of the gospel include a polemic against the sectarians of John the Baptist, a polemic against the Jews (with a justification of Christian claims against Jewish unbelief as well an appeal to Jewish Christians in the diaspora), and it may contain a polemic against Christian heretics (such as Gnostics, Ebionites and Docetics).

The presupposition chiefly responsible for this line of interpretation is a theological presupposition which causes early Christian writings to be seen as unique and early Christianity as a revealed, unique movement growing out of Second Temple Judaism over against which the Graeco-Roman world and its ‘religious languages’ are collapsed into ‘background’. This is seen clearly in the way both Beasley-Murray and Brown list the other possible languages echoed in the language of John (following Dodd in referring to Gnosticism, Mandaism, Hellenistic thought—Greek philosophy, Philo and Hermeticism, Qumran, Palestinian Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism). After listing the parallels, they remain just parallels since the gospel is insulated from the wider contemporary world.

Another presupposition deals with the place of the Old Testament and the overtly (anti-)Jewish polemics in the text. The many references to the Old Testament in the context of Jewish polemics cause scholars to construe the rhetorical situation of John’s Gospel as one of the separation of church and synagogue.

4.2 Readings with a view to John’s context

Meeks (1985) and Cassidy (1992) both take the gospel to express social realities pertaining to the gospel’s place of communication first and foremost. This is the value of these approaches, namely to read the text as a way of engaging in social realities and struggles.

According to Cassidy ‘John was concerned to present elements and themes that were especially significant for Christian readers facing Roman imperial claims and for

15 In this view, chapters 10 and 13 to 17 have the life of the Christian believer within the community in focus.

16 See the universalist perspective of the author with his emphasis on the world: 1:9, 1:29, 3:17; 12:32—the ‘Greeks’ in the latter episode should be taken to mean Gentiles, not Greek-speaking Jews, according to Brown.
any who faced Roman persecution ... [with reference to the variously identified backgrounds of the gospel—GvdH] may it not be the case that the gospel consciously responds to significant developments within the Roman world? (:1). The realities to which Cassidy refers, are the Jewish temple tax and the cult of the Roman emperor with its attendant denunciations and persecution. The reality of the temple tax instituted by Vespasian as punishment for the Jewish War and rigorously enforced by Domitian forced the issue of deciding who were Jews. This created the conditions under which many Christians could eventually expect to be denounced and led to trial. The purported aim of these treason trials was to enforce loyalty to the emperor. According to Cassidy this situation is reflected in the way the gospel portrays Jesus as sovereign with titles such as ‘saviour of the world’, ‘Lord’ and ‘Lord and God’, all titles also used for the emperors in their cult. Even the trial narrative becomes an opportunity to portray the trial and crucifixion as manifestation of Jesus’ sovereignty. In the farewell discourses these contemporary issues and the situation of the readers are thematised in the many warnings about persecution, warnings against apostasy (which we know from Pliny’s letters to Trajan did happen), encouragement of the faithful to stay closely bonded to his name, to mutually encourage and support each other in this time of persecution and finally, to accept and live in the light of Jesus’ assurances that he has final sovereignty over the world.

Meeks argues that the Gospel text is the material remains of a schism within Judaism.17 The party or sect of Samaritans and Galileans is defined over against the ‘Jews’ and the narrative is produced from their perspective. Samaritans and Galileans occupy a special and positive place in the gospel narrative. Several aspects of the way the narrative is represented lead to this reading. First, the importance of locale in the narrative and the presence of local traditions in the gospel would suggest that it assumes a situation where Samaritans, Galileans and ‘Jews’ (= Jewish leaders) are interacting (possibly in Galilee—Meeks). Second, the many references to apōsynagōgoi et cetera attest to the fact that the Johannine community is no longer part of the Jewish communities centred in synagogues. Third, the many references to Jewish traditions, feasts, religion and so on, would suggest a polis setting (‘urbanized and hellenized’—so Meeks 1985:101) with a relatively large population of Jews, Samaritans and Galilean immigrants, and among them the Johannine community. At any rate, this section of the population of such a setting would be dominated by the Jews and Jewish leaders. John’s ‘world’ (in the negative sense) is this world from which the community con-

17 “The rupture between the followers of Jesus and “the Jews” is as the center of attention; it has manifestly shaped the Johannine groups’ language and their perception of the world” (: 94). Also “[T]here is a broad consensus that many aspects of the confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities are projections into the narrative from the experience of the Johannine community ... Consequently, we can use the dialogues and stories in John to learn something about the separation sometime in the last quarter of the first century between these particular Christian groups and the Jewish communities” (95).
ceptually dissociates itself. The trauma of the divorce from the synagogue forces the emerging Johannine Christian community to organise itself into a new social structure (so well-known from the organisation of other migratory cults, namely the household) just like Jews and Samaritans had done in diasporic centres where they had a presence. The implication of this for an understanding of the gospel is that we see more than just the history of Jesus of Nazareth. We also read in the narrative the history of the Johannine group’s separation from the dominant form of Judaism as well as the laying down of the ground rules for the future existence of the new household community.

4.3 John and the language of imperium

I should state at the outset that my own reading (which is here only represented in bits and parts) has much in common with those of Meeks and Cassidy. My focus is wider than that of Meeks, and here I am inclined to agree with Cassidy in reading John in the setting of a large Graeco-Roman city and then in Western Asia Minor. I do not attempt to prove that John originated in Ephesus, although I do believe its language use eminently makes sense in such a setting. The form in which we have the narrative now (the latest edition?) shows definite similarities to the language of religious and political reality in the world of a city like Ephesus. Since I have argued all along that identifying the rhetorical situation and the rhetorical reading of the text mutually determine each other, one should still pay attention to the early church tradition which identified a bond between the Johannine tradition and the city of Ephesus (in any case, with the Roman province of Asia) as an important indicator of how Johannine language was appropriated by and resonated in the minds of an Ephesian audience. Shifting the perspective to a more religio-historical approach, an attempt is made here to read the Gospel of John as a Graeco-Roman (Ephesian) narrative, embedded in the life of urban Ephesus. Within this perspective the Johannine appropriation of ‘other languages’ is considered, specifically the language of imperium (the language of the imperial cult). It is shown how John’s Gospel narrates key episodes in the very terms of the imperial cult.

4.4 The triumphal entry

It has already been argued that the portrayal of Jesus' triumphal entry in the gospel

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19. I have been fundamentally influenced by the work of Sjef van Tilborg (1996) in this regard. In this monograph, which is not a systematic interpretation of John’s Gospel, but rather an imbedding of the narrative in the social reality of the city, much detail is unearthed to give an idea of the possible relationship between the reality imagined in the text and the social reality of the city that can be historically constructed.
tradition corresponds with the Roman triumphus or adventus.\textsuperscript{29} The adventus as acclamatory and honour ritual would involve the city’s population who would, in decorated and festive procession, hail the dignitary into the city with songs and praises. In the case of the emperors, there was often a meeting between the emperor and the local senate, during which requests were made and granted, and here, in a very real sense, the emperor could be the benefactor and saviour of his subjects (MacCormack 1972:723).

In a short cameo scene John narrates Jesus’ adventus thus: when it was announced that Jesus was coming to the city, the crowds went out to meet him carrying palm branches, acclaiming him as ‘the king of Israel’ (12:12–19). In this account John uses the technical term for the reception of a ruler—\textit{hypantesis}—which regularly appears in Hellenistic sources describing an adventus. ‘The use of this term indicates that Christ’s arrival in Jerusalem can be considered in the context of arrivals of Hellenistic rulers and their successors’ (MacCormack 1972:725). I want to add another consideration, namely that the point of an imperial triumphal entry would not have been lost on an Ephesian audience. Given the origins of the ritual in the cult of Dionysus (as conquering god), an imperial triumphal entry would very definitely carry religious overtones, ever since the first entry (for the period I am interested in) of Mark Antony as ‘New Dionysus’ in 38 BCE (an event which was of momentous significance for Ephesus, since they had earlier backed the wrong horse—one could surmise that the later clamour for a \textit{neokorate} was not only an attempt to curry favour with the emperor but also to undo the damage of an earlier wrong alliance) and the adventus of Hadrian again as ‘New Dionysus’ in 129 CE. In John’s narrative it is also clear that a god is entering the city.

This line is taken up again in 18:28ff with the passion narrative. The scenes following from 19:1ff have a significance that derives from their interference with the reality of the Roman imperium. One could label the trial scenes an installation of an imperial pretender, for these scenes described by John are situations that typically occurred with each usurpation of power by an imperial pretender (cf Van Tilborg 1992:110–111).

John portrays this in the following fashion:


19:4–7: the epiphany before the people. Pilate shows him to the assembled people. Pilate is Jesus’ herald who goes out before him to let the people hear who Jesus is.

19:8–12: the discussion about power with a member of the senate. God is the source of power and Jesus as Son of God has a unique relation to the source of power. The people, Pilate and even the emperor are subject to it.

\textsuperscript{29} See MacCormack 1972; Kinman 1995—with some reservations; see also Schmidt 1995 with reference to the gospel of Mark; for the history of the ritual, cf Versnel 1974.
And now one can interpret the significance of these scenes. Jesus is received into the city as 'King of Israel'. He is acclaimed by the citizens but the leaders are absent—to them he is not their king. For this reason he is delivered over to the Roman governor by the Jewish leaders on the charge that he started a sedition vying to be king in the emperor's place. Jesus' defence is that he is not that type of king (18:36). Nevertheless the Romans make him king (see the inscription on the cross 19:19-22), but the Jews refuse to have him foisted on them, instead they demand his execution for he made himself a son of God which is tantamount to saying the designated person is emperor, for they shout that they have no king except Caesar.

The short career of Jesus as king represented in the narrative is symptomatic of Rome's dealings with its client kings and Jewish reactions to this phenomenon is well illustrated by the episode on the deliberations of the Council in 11:45-53. The relationship with Rome determines the relative freedom they enjoy. While this was true of other situations as well, it was especially true for client kingdoms. Perceived loyalty to Rome could bring many benefits, a typical benefit regularly praised in inscriptions was 'restored freedom and independence', alleviation of tax burdens and so forth. It is in this context that the phrase 'being a friend of Caesar' becomes relevant. The Romans made kings and deposed kings. According to the perspective of the text the Jews here buy into the Roman imperial ideology. They opt for loyalty to the Roman emperor.

4.5 Benefactions, benefactors and saviours

From this point one can now approach the narrative from back to front, from the end to the beginning. One nexus between the reality of the imperium and public life in Ephesus (and thus the Johannine narrative) can be seen in the phenomenon of public benefactions (cf Danker 1982; Kearsley 1994). In an inscription from Kyme (not too far from Ephesus) a Kleonax is honoured for his generous dispensing of food and wine (Kearsley 1994:233-241). Apart from public building works, funding games and so on, feasting counted as one of the important expressions of evergetism. The Romans, and especially since Augustus, the emperors took this clamour for honour to new levels. Thus one finds returning with chronic regularity honorific titles such as 'Benefactor', 'Saviour' and the combination 'Saviour and benefactor', and also (in a slightly different semantic domain) 'Founder'. The narratives in John 2 and 6 not only evoke the political reality of benefactions, they also evoke other associations: the combination of the episodes of dispensing wine and bread finds its counterpart in the combination of the cultic associations of Dionysus and Demeter in Ephesus. Again the language of political reality is interwoven with 'religious language'. It is, however, important to note how the 'eucharistic' discourse of chapter 6 is narrated. Accounts of the cultic meals of religious associations in the Graeco-Roman world show that the usual fare consists of bread and fish (as in John 6), which accords with the earliest pictorial depictions of the eucharist. The narrative effect of this is to place the divine
benefaction not in the public sphere but in the 'private' domain where the Christian (Johannine) cult community gathers, withdrawn from participating in civic life.

In the context of the culture of benefaction we find honorific titles heaped on benefactors. Thus we have Augustus labelled 'the one and only', 'first and foremost'—this is the language of panegyric and exaggeration. But functionally it is not too far removed from epithets for Jesus in John like monogenes, unique, the one and only, an appellation that harmonises with the description of the bread as divine food, the wine of the Cana miracle as unsurpassed wine.

4.6 The names of Jesus
A very important feature of John's narrative is the portrayal of Jesus via nomenclature. It has often been remarked that the identity of Jesus is of paramount importance in the gospel. This is borne out by the many epithets for Jesus. The narrative starts with the question of identity (1:19–23). With the Andrew/Simon and Nathaniel scene the first pole of the programmatic naming closure occurs (Jesus identified as Messiah=Christ, Son of God and King of Israel). The other pole of the naming closure occurs at the (original) end of the narrative (20:30, 31) with Jesus again named Son of God and Christ (=Messiah). In between Jesus dies as King of Israel/King of the Jews and is acclaimed Lord and God. The net effect of this naming system is to portray the main character of the narrative as someone embodying political ideals and as having a special relationship with God. This practice of relating emperors/kings to gods was of course not new. In the Roman province of Asia (Western Asia Minor) this had special significance for the first century CE. Arguably, the cult of the emperor took off here in the Greek-speaking Eastern provinces of the empire and was promoted here to levels previously unknown as a way (according to Price) of dealing with the new phenomenon (for the Greeks) of Roman imperial power. As a first century papyrus says: 'What is a god? Ti kratoun—that which exercises power. And what is a king? To be like a god—isostheos.' From the first tentative appropriations of the title 'god' its recipients grew bolder and more and more uninhibited so that by the end of the century Domitian could insist on being addressed as dominus et deus, lord and god. From Nero onwards the use of the title kyrios escalates (from 43 times with reference to Nero, to 115 with reference to Domitian, 280 with reference to Trajan and 492

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21 One finds: Lamb of God (and if one accepts that this refers to the apocalyptic ram, then one should place in the same domain: Son of Man), God's chosen One, Rabbi, Messiah (= Christ), Son of God, King of Israel/King of the Jews, Prophet, Lord, Teacher and Lord, Lord and God, God's Holy One. In the course of the narrative all of these titles at some point overlap and/or are connected as mutually illuminating terms.

with reference to Hadrian, counting the papyrus evidence). 'Lord' thus becomes an important indication of the divine character of the emperor (Van Tilborg 1996:47). The apotheosis, or divinisation, of the emperor was an important religious and political issue in Ephesus. The main altar of the Antonines in Ephesus depicts in a frieze the apotheosis of Trajan and his wife Plotina (described in Van Tilborg 1996:41). In a world where emperors became gods, is there an implicit criticism of this practice in John's narrative of a god-king who descended and ascended again?

That we have in this terminology not only 'political' reality is demonstrated by the fact that at least two Graeco-Roman deities were known as conquering gods. I have already referred to Dionysus, who according to myth trekked across Asia Minor into Greece in a mythical anabasis, which ideologically served as the basis and origin of the Roman ritual of the triumph (Versnel 1974). The other deity was the Hellenised Egyptian goddess Isis (for a detailed discussion of the line I am following here, cf Versnel 1990:35-95). In the most complete Isis aretalogy, that is self-advertising in 'I am' saying format, namely, that found in Kyme, Asia Minor, first century BCE to first century CE, we read:

1.1: I am Isis, tyrant of every land...
1.25: I broke down the governments of tyrants...
1.40: I am the Queen of war...
1.48: I set free those in bonds...\(^{23}\)

Isis is portrayed as a conquering as well as a liberating goddess. In this she embodies an old Greek idea of the gods as destroyers of tyrants. However, Isis is simultaneously 'tyrant of every land' and it is this double play on Isis as tyrant and destroyer of tyrants which reflect accurately the double role of Rome as conquering empire and its self-promotion as upholder and restorer of early freedoms and constitutions (cf Magie 1950). After an inauspicious start to her career as deity in the Roman empire (her cult being proscribed at Rome several times in the course of the second and first centuries BCE), by a strange reversal of fate she endeared herself to the Flavians to eventually become the representation of Roman power at the borders of the empire in Europe from the second century onward (cf Takacs 1995).

The significant point about both Dionysus and Isis is that, as conquering deities, they demand complete loyalty. Regularly occurring acclamations like heis Dionysos (Dionysus is one!) or Isis, una quae es omnia (Isis you are the one and only) provide an insight into the mentality in operation in the Roman imperial ideology. Total allegiance is what is at stake.

\(^{23}\) It is to these 'I am' sayings of the Isis aretalogies that we should look to as parallels for the I am-sayings of the Gospel of John.
4.7 John against the 'Jews'.

Slowly a pattern becomes visible in John’s narrative. John uses the language of uniqueness of the emperors and the gods Dionysus and Isis to achieve the opposite, namely to dissociate from the symbolic universe evoked by this language. The Gospel is a narrative of the coming into the world of a god as Logos, who does what emperors do, who is enthroned in a way as king and is acclaimed with the same metaphysical epithets as was used to express the divine character of the emperors. But he is unique, monogenēs, one of a kind (1:18). No-one else has had the contact with God he had, he is the only image of God and the only way into contact and mutual indwelling between humans and God (14:6–14; 15:1–10). Even the metaphors in John point to this polemic which is nothing less than a total reorientation of life (Van den Heever 1992).

But there is no denying that there is also a polemic against the Jews. How should this be understood in the light of the foregoing? If one may summarise very broadly, the polemic in chapters 7 to 11 centre on two issues, namely the question as to who represents the true Jewish/Israelite tradition. And, are the Jews really free? Concerning the first question, it can be said that there were groups roughly contemporaneous to the writing of John’s gospel who saw themselves as the ‘true Israel’. This is the sense I make of inscriptions found at the synagogue of the Samaritans at Delos, who consistently called themselves ‘Israelites’ (Llewelyn 1997:148–151). Given the positive evaluation of the term Israel in the gospel as well as the fact that Samaritan interests were known in Ephesus and the interest in Samaria as locale in the narrative, might one not surmise that the Johannine community stood in close relationship with Samaritans (but possibly not Samaritans by religious affiliation themselves)?

The second question touches on the place or at-home-ness of Jews in the Graeco-Roman world. In the narrated debate between Jesus and his Jewish opponents, their retort to his accusation that they are slaves, is that they have never been slaves, being children of Abraham. This could not have been true for Jews in Palestine. However, it is not far off the mark with regard to first century Asia Minor. Magie (1950:478–479) describes the role Herod (later ‘the Great’) played in Asia Minor in securing favours for the Jews (and especially for Ephesus) from the emperor when he accompanied Agrippa, the son-in-law of Augustus, on a ‘triumphal tour’ of the eastern Roman provinces. The Herodian clan had a presence in the Roman world which extended far beyond the boundaries of Palestine (for the following, cf Hengel & Schwemer 1997:229ff). A large clan of Herodians were living in Rome as well as in Antioch. But even more, the Herodian family was linked by blood to all the client kingdoms in the region, from Armenia, Pontus, Commagene, Emesa, Galatia and Parthia, to minor

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24 Witness the inscription erected ±129 CE in honour of the proconsul Falco by Samaritans from Neapolis (Sebaste) (Van Tilborg 1992:105).

25 Note that Herod is called ‘King of the Jews’ by Josephus AJ 16.311, the same form as the accusation against Jesus.
TOWARDS A SOCIO-RHETORICAL READING OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

aristocratic houses in Arabia and west to Pergamon and Ephesus (Hengel & Schwemer 1997:454 n 1178). The Herodians as extensive clan was thus politically open towards Roman rule and the Gentile client princes of the East (Hengel & Schwemer 1997:229 n 1184). They viewed the rule of Rome as ordained by God’s will, just as Josephus too considered the Roman power as God-given. The polemic against the Jews, when read against this counter-determining context, is aimed at values such as these portrayed above.

5 CONCLUSION

Read in this way, John's Gospel is a narrative that creates a new utopia in opposition to the utopia implied by the language of the imperium. One can read it as a text that resists totalising language and at-home-ness in totalitarian utopias and forges a new community on the margins of society.

Such a construal of the interplay between the various textures makes it possible to understand the rhetoric of John's Gospel as the construction of an 'anti-Caesar' with the main character of the narrative (Jesus) as the foundation for a small(-ish) group opting out of civil society, but the narrative simultaneously serves as a critique of the at-home-ness in contemporary civil society of other adherents of the hellenistic Judaic tradition. This interpretation is made possible by 'reifying' subtle evocations, wordings and terminologies into 'soft artifacts' (inferences as 'objects') over against 'hard artifacts' which are objects, words or other texts.

Finally, when one pursues a (dare I say?) creative and multertextual reading such as the one suggested here, albeit in a very truncated form, an old and famously familiar text like the Gospel of John attains a sudden and surprising new relevance. Even though John's Gospel undergirds ecclesiastical authority and orthodoxy, it simultaneously unleashes unsettling, undermining and revolutionary impulses. It is when read 'from underneath' so to speak, in the light of newly, differently constructed webs of data that such a reading makes it possible to apply the Gospel of John to similar present day situations where adherents of Christianity are faced with totalising claims to ultimate loyalty.

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