John 4:1-42: Towards a Postcolonial Reading 'from the centre'

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Abstract

This dissertation offers a postcolonial reading of John 4:1-42 undertaken 'from the centre'. 'From the centre' means from a position formed by Western theological, ecclesial, and academic traditions, and therefore potentially shaped by the legacy of colonialism. Prompted by the hermeneutical disorientation produced by Musa W. Dube's influential essay 'Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42)' (2002), this study seeks to engage her interpretation seriously while resisting the reduction of the Johannine narrative to a single ideological lens. The central research question explores how John 4:1-42 may be interpreted in a way that attends both to imperial dynamics within and around the text and to the theological aims of the Fourth Gospel (FG), particularly its proclamation of life in Christ (John 20:31). This study argues that a reflexive, theologically engaged postcolonial reading 'from the centre' can hold critique, confession, and transformation together. Such an approach enables all interpreters to read John 4:1-42 with attentiveness to power, sensitivity to marginalised voices, and faithfulness to the text's theological richness.

Introduction

1. A moment of disorientation

The first encounter with Musa W. Dube's 'Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42)' can be profoundly disorienting.[1] A reader shaped within Western theological, ecclesial and academic traditions might approach the Samaritan narrative as a story of revelation, coming to faith and witness. Dube's interpretation disrupts this with force: instead of an account of personal revelation and transformation, she reads the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman as the location of territorial expansion.[2] Jesus' journey to Samaria (John 4:3&4) becomes an act of territorial intrusion in which the Samaritan woman stands at the crossroads of various forms of oppression and as such stands as a representation of her people and their land's violation by Jesus and his movement.[3]

The effect of Dube's reading is unsettling not because imperial dynamics are unexpected—the Fourth Gospel (FG) is widely recognised as a text produced in and portraying a world shaped by Roman imperial expansion—but because Dube's reading seems to conflate this context with the FG's reproduction and endorsement of imperial structures. Furthermore, a tension is created because Dube's reading seems at odd with the FG's life-giving, liberative, theological aim (20:31).

2. The response

This deep hermeneutical disorientation brought to the surface the need to develop a hermeneutic approach to John 4:1-42 that neither retreats into theological comfort zones nor

[1] Musa W. Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42)', in Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey Staley, *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space, and Power* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), pp. 51–75.
[2] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 71.
[3] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 71.

limits the reading of the text to one single ideological lens. At the same time, a reading 'from the centre' must also be willing to challenge interpretive claims emerging from the margins when these risk flattening the text's theological depth or reducing its narrative complexity. Postcolonial critique should not only expose the blind spots of the centre, it should also scrutinise the margins: both locations require reflexive accountability. An approach is needed that holds the insights of ideological criticism, the hope of religious confession, and the possibility of transformation (for all parties) together.

3. The research question

The interpretive tensions raised by Dube's reading raise a central concern for this study: how John 4:1-42 can be approached in a way that is both attentive to the presence of imperial structures within the text itself and to the ongoing legacies of colonialism in the world, while also being responsive to the theological depth of FG and its stated aim 'that through believing you may have life in [Jesus'] name' (20:31). A reading 'from the centre' must acknowledge inherited interpretive privilege, recognise the way in which imperial forces shape history, and remain open to the insights of postcolonial criticism, while at the same time resisting the reduction of the reading of the text to a single ideological framework.

The guiding question then becomes how a reflexive, theologically engaged post-critical hermeneutic can approach John 4:1-42 in a way that honours its historical context, the ways in which it can be received and its own theological witness. This dissertation explores how such a reading can be articulated and what interpretive possibilities it may open for those situated in contexts shaped by colonial powers but also those who emanate from contexts that have benefitted from colonialism.

4. The roadmap

This dissertation is composed of four chapters. Chapter 1 establishes the methodological foundations for a postcolonial reading 'from the centre'. It draws on key postcolonial scholars and more recent discussions of normativity, reflexivity, as well as Paul Ricœur's hermeneutical circle, to shape the interpretive positions that will underpin this study. Chapter 2 applies these positions to a close engagement with Dube's 'Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42),' which examines her exegesis and considers how her approach to the text both sharpens awareness of imperial dynamics and raises questions about how such a lens interacts with the theological and literary contours of the narrative. Chapter 3 turns to a central Christological title within the narrative—Saviour of the world (4:42)—and explores how its imperial echoes function within the wider theological and literary framework of the FG. Chapter 4 focusses on the Samaritan woman's role as a witness within the narrative and considers how her portrayal contributes to a reading that is attentive to postcolonial concerns, as well as to the FG's theological vision. Held together, chapters 3 and 4 seek to demonstrate how a reflexive, theologically engaged postcolonial reading 'from the centre' can approach John 4:1-42 with attentiveness to the exertion of power, contexts, as well as the text's own narrative dynamics and theological aims.

Chapter 1: Methodological positions for a postcolonial hermeneutic 'from the centre'

Introduction

This chapter will outline the methodological positions that will shape postcolonial readings of John 4:1-42 'from the centre' in subsequent chapters of this dissertation. The phrase 'from the centre' acknowledges this interpreter's location within a context shaped by historical privilege, whether theological, institutional, ecclesial, racial, or geopolitical. It refers to reading Scripture from within traditions and structures that have often benefited from colonial legacies and claimed interpretive normativity. However, this position 'from the centre' does not presume objectivity; rather, it seeks to read with reflexive integrity, aware of inherited advantages and committed to standing in solidarity with those shaped by being marginalised through colonial and imperial movements. A postcolonial hermeneutic 'from the centre' is therefore not a claim to authority, but a commitment to accountability, mutual transformation, and theological faithfulness.

This chapter begins with Fernando Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah, who expose how power shapes biblical interpretation and challenge Western claims to normativity. It then engages with whiteness studies to question objectivity. Reflexivity follows, with Andrew Rogers insisting that no reading is neutral and that positionality must be disclosed; not just for transparency, but for accountability. Finally, the chapter explores tensions between critical and theological readings, advocating a balanced approach.[4]

[4] These positions prepare for Chapter 2's engagement with Dube and for postcolonial readings 'from the centre' in later chapters.

1. Postcolonial criticism and its transformative potential

1.1. Segovia and postcolonial dualism (2000)

For Segovia, postcolonial hermeneutics is founded on ideology rather than methodology.[5] This ideology is encapsulated in his oft-repeated formulation that imperialism and colonialism are 'an omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming reality in the world'.[6] At the heart of Segovia's understanding of biblical interpretation is the impact of colonialism and imperialism, whether at the time of the text's composition or the reader's reception. Segovia's analysis of colonialism and imperialism leads him to view the world in binary terms. From this, inevitably Segovia might argue, an unequal balance of power is established between 'civilized/uncivilized; advanced/primitive; cultured/barbarian; progressive/backward; developed/undeveloped-underdeveloped'.[7] The crudeness of this quote is striking but seems to reflect the oppressive reality of the relationship between coloniser and colonised, regardless of their position in history. Consequently, formerly colonised people must emancipate themselves from this power struggle. Biblical interpretation is affected by these power plays, especially given both the Church's and academy's Western centrism. For this reason, Segovia maintains that the Bible, formed within 'the interests, concerns, and perspectives of the Euro-American world', requires interpretation that actively resists the imperial ideologies embedded in its traditional Western readings.[8] Consequently, all critics, but Western/white ones especially, must challenge the normativity and claims to objectivity of the Western tradition. This is why Segovia concludes that the aim of postcolonial criticism transcends liberation to lead to transformation.[9]

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[5] Fernando F. Segovia, 'Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Towards a Postcolonial Optic', in Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Orbis Books, 2000).
[6] Segovia, 'Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies', p. 125.
[7] Segovia, 'Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies', p. 126.
[8] Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 28–29.
[9] Segovia, 'Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies', p. 132.

1.2. Sugirtharajah and plurality (1999)

Sugirtharajah would agree with Segovia's conclusion, but he does offer more nuance.[10] Overall, Sugirtharajah broadly agrees with Segovia: postcolonial exegetes must seek out signs of colonialism contained within biblical texts and in the context of their composition.[11] Interpreters should be aware of the impact of lingering vestiges as well as new forms of colonialism that shape their readings. Ultimately, contemporary readings should offer a vision of contestation and liberation. However, Sugirtharajah warns against too unsophisticated an understanding of the dualism outlined by Segovia. Quite crucially, and going further than Segovia, Sugirtharajah rejects a simple equation in which the colonised are viewed as inherently good and the coloniser irredeemably evil.[12] Nevertheless, Sugirtharajah challenges scholars who emanate from the Western historical-critical tradition to step out of their 'ghetto' and move on from their benign attitude towards colonialism, its legacy, and its contemporary manifestations.[13] This is a further challenge to the claimed objectivity and perceived normativity of Western biblical criticism. Sugirtharajah offers a nuanced argument by rejecting an overly simplistic dichotomy. It seems that Sugirtharajah envisions an interpretative arena in which all voices can be heard. Crucially, however, Western interpreters must not be naïve: colonialism and their heritage as descendants of colonisers shape their outlook. In a sense, Sugirtharajah might suggest that Western interpreters can be liberated and transformed too.

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[10] R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'A Brief Memorandum on Postcolonialism and Biblical Studies', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 21.73 (1999), pp. 3–5 (p. 3), doi:10.1177/0142064X9902107301.
[11] Sugirtharajah, 'A Brief Memorandum on Postcolonialism and Biblical Studies', p. 4.
[12] Sugirtharajah, 'A Brief Memorandum on Postcolonialism and Biblical Studies', p. 3.
[13] R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Introduction: The Bible, Empires, and Postcolonial Criticism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, ed. by R. S. Sugirtharajah (Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 16–19, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190888459.013.37.

1.3. Towards a reflexive methodology

Segovia and Sugirtharajah are foundational voices in postcolonial biblical criticism, and they are important voices in developing the ideological and methodological basis on which this dissertation will proceed. Segovia insists that postcolonialism criticism is grounded in ideology exposes the pervasive reach of colonial power and the impossibility of neutral interpretation. At the same time, Sugirtharajah emphasises that plurality resists reductive binaries and insists on the complexity of the entanglement between coloniser and colonised. Their combined insights frame the interpretative task as one of ethical responsibility, attentiveness to power, and quite crucially, an openness to the possibility of transformation, for both the colonised and the coloniser, past or present, irrespective of whether one has endured the consequences of imperialism or benefitted from its results.

This chapter will appeal to more recent scholarship to build on these foundations. David Horrell (2017) interrogates the normativity of whiteness[14] and Rogers (2023) encourages the cultivation of reflexive practice.[15] The contributions of these scholars provide Western interpreters with the conceptual tools necessary to recognise their own positionality and the privileges inherited (wittingly or unwittingly) from colonial histories. The following sections will trace this trajectory, from foundational postcolonial critique to contemporary reflexive approaches, to establish the methodological positions that will guide the analysis of John 4:1-42 in subsequent chapters.

[14] David G. Horrell, 'Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness: Particularizing Interpretation', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 40.2 (2017), pp. 123–47, doi:10.1177/0142064X17739204.
[15] Andrew P. Rogers, 'Looking into the Mirror: The Bible, Normativity and Reflexivity', *Practical Theology*, 16.4 (2023), pp. 462–88, doi:10.1080/1756073x.2023.2194113.

2. Normativity in biblical interpretation

Postcolonial criticism as outlined by Segovia and Sugirtharajah does not merely draw attention to power dynamics contained within biblical texts; it also presents a challenge to the reader to identify their power. As such, especially for a reader such as this writer, it involves approaching the biblical text with an awareness of biases, inherited privilege and the possibility of transformation. This observation naturally leads to a discussion of the concept of normativity.

2.1. Interrogating normativity

Postcolonialism is not the main topic of Horrell's Pauline Studies focused article, but the subject matter of race and ethnicity in biblical interpretation make his work relevant to this project. Horrell uses the recently developed discipline of whiteness studies to challenge the way in which 'whiteness' is seen as an 'unsituated, non-specific, universal human perspective'.[16] For Horrell, this attitude finds its roots in European colonial expansionism.[17] As such, white western perspectives can be seen, not only as dominant but also as universally normative. The natural consequence of this, as Horrell demonstrates, is that the perspective of people of varying ethnicities and genders are devalued.[18] Horrell's response is to call on white Western interpreter to recognize the way in which their readings are also 'particularized' by their context.[19] Horrell concludes:

> Part of the force of whiteness studies is to insist that if we find it reasonable to think that, say, African-American interpreters, or other interpreters raced as non-white, might find their identity and experience relevant in shaping their reading of the New Testament, so too those of us raced as white should equally expect that our ethnic or racial identity constitutes part of the package of factors that shapes our reading.[20]

[16] Horrell, 'Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness', p. 132.
[17] Horrell, 'Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness', p. 132.
[18] Horrell, 'Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness', p. 139.
[19] Horrell, 'Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness', p. 140.
[20] Horrell, 'Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness', p. 141.

Horrell's insight is critical to a postcolonial hermeneutic 'from the centre': whiteness is not a neutral position; it has a formative role—like any other standpoint—in the interpretive process. In this way, Horrell's argument aligns with postcolonial concerns. As early as 2000, Segovia called for the need for Western scholars to be self-conscious.[21] Nearly two decades later, Horrell echoes the call and urges all interpreters—even those who profess objectivity—to 'acknowledge' the particularity of their context.[22] In the context of a postcolonial world, it seems almost impossible for Western scholars to ignore the influence of colonialism on their backgrounds. Furthermore, Horrell's argument, transposed to postcolonialism, might encourage Western scholars to view their perspective as one among others, equally shaped by the legacy of colonialism, as well as its current manifestations.

3. Reflexivity as an interpretive discipline

If the privileges of whiteness and the illusion of normativity have come to shape the field of biblical interpretation, reflexivity—deep reflexion on how one's positionality shapes one's reading—becomes an imperative. The following section explores how reflexivity can help better understand the impact of one's positionality on how biblical texts are approached but also how commitments brought to the interpretation of texts can be recalibrated.

While acknowledging positionality is important, it is only the first step. Rogers invites reflexivity not just on unacknowledged biases but on the layered tensions that underlie them.[23] Interrogating how positionality shapes interpretive choices, ethical commitments and scholarly voice is of critical importance. Where positionality aims for awareness, reflexivity calls for accountability. For this writer, reflexivity requires constantly asking how race, gender,

[21] Segovia, 'Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies', p. 131.
[22] Horrell, 'Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness', p. 133.
[23] Rogers, 'Looking into the Mirror'.

geography, institutional belonging, theological tradition as well as education impact his interpretation, especially where they might reinforce or resist colonial paradigms. In doing so, he seeks to adopt a posture humility, openness and integrity.

As Rogers observes, reflexivity within biblical interpretation—particularly in practical theology—often sidelines Scripture itself.[24] His critique speaks compellingly to hermeneutics more broadly. He notes, perhaps with a sense of irony, that researchers often 'take a detour through Scripture to eventually say what [they were] going to say anyway'.[25] In his call for 'biblical mirrors', Rogers critiques the tendency to foreground social location while sidelining the biblical text.[26] This omission, he argues, risks turning reflexivity into a purely sociological exercise, detached from theological accountability. For this writer, Rogers' insight affirms the need to reintegrate Scripture into reflexive formation—not as a neutral authority, but as a dialogical partner that confronts, disrupts, and reorients the interpreter. Reflexivity must not merely be methodological, it must also be theological, and it can serve to recalibrate ideological commitments that interpreters inevitably bring to the Biblical text.

4. Holding tensions: ideology, history and theological integrity

Postcolonial criticism rightly exposes the claims to objectivity that underpin much biblical interpretation. However, the rigour of the historical-critical approach must not be rejected. On the contrary, its value must be affirmed: careful attention must be given to the historical context of composition, to the unfolding of textual layers, as well as to the theological intent of the text's authors. But such rigour must be exercised reflexively. It must not become the gatekeeper of normativity. In a postcolonial world, the tools of historical criticism must be held with

[24] Rogers, 'Looking into the Mirror', p. 463.
[25] Rogers, 'Looking into the Mirror', p. 463.
[26] Rogers, 'Looking into the Mirror', p. 467.

humility, aware of the colonial legacies that shaped their development and the interpretive privileges they continue to afford.

4.1. Theological interpretation

Theological interpretation proceeds from within the lived traditions of the Church—not in opposition to the historical context in which the text was written, but in conversation with it.[27] Jonathan Rowlands argues that the tension between historical-critical and theological readings is not a failure of rigour, but evidence of divergent hermeneutical positions and aims.[28] The reading of John 4:1-42 this dissertation will develop does not seek to evade history, nor the lived experience of oppressed people (who, often, belong to the Church), but also to engage with Scripture as an ongoing, living witness to Christ's action in the world. The theological message of John 4:1-42 must play a part in its interpretation, whether read through a historical-critical or ideological lens.

4.2. Truth claims

In a similar vein, C. Kavin Rowe insists that serious readings of the New Testament must reckon with its truth claims.[29] Drawing on Gadamer, Kierkegaard, and Cavell, Rowe critiques the deflection of theological questions in mainstream, objective scholarship—an attitude that avoids the existential challenge posed by the Bible, understood as Scripture.[30] Rowe's insistence that interpretation is a dialogical encounter with possible truth resonates deeply. For example, the interpretive possibilities of the Christological title 'Saviour of the world' (John 4:42) must be held in tension: it can be both a proclamation of life in Christ *and* a phrase laden

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[27] Jonathan Rowlands, 'In Defence of "Theological" Readings of the New Testament', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 45.3 (2023), pp. 243–63 (p. 260), doi:10.1177/0142064X221136265.
[28] Rowlands, 'In Defence of "Theological" Readings of the New Testament', p. 246.
[29] C. Kavin Rowe, 'What If It Were True? Why Study the New Testament', *New Testament Studies*, 68.2 (2022), pp. 144–55, doi:10.1017/S002868852100031X.
[30] Rowe, 'What If It Were True?', p. 145.

with imperial echoes.[31] Reflexive, theological interpretation allows for both critique and faith: resisting colonial and imperial triumphalism while affirming a hopeful theological vision.

4.3. Belief and understanding

The hermeneutic developed by Ricœur allows the identification of a conceptual bridge to navigate the tension between criticism and trust that this chapter has begun to highlight. His well-known assertion that 'beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again'[32] crystalises both the necessity and the insufficiency of critique. Postcolonial interpretation rightly exposes the ideological distortions that can cling to texts and their reception; however, Ricœur warns that suspicion alone risks becoming arid by reducing interpretation to the continual unmasking of power without allowing the text to disclose its surplus of meaning.[33] His account of the symbol's generative power is critical to this dissertation's aims: symbols 'give rise to thought' because meaning always exceeds any single ideological lens, whether Western, postcolonial, or theological.[34]

Ricoeur's hermeneutics therefore resists both naïve trust and reductive suspicion. He describes interpretation as a movement within a 'circle' in which believing and understanding shape each other.[35] This circularity is a condition of real engagement with a text, because interpreters inevitably bring prior knowledge and experience to their reading of it. It allows the encounter to lead to transformation. This dynamic resonates with the reflexive position this dissertation seeks to take; it acknowledges the insights of postcolonial critique while remaining receptive to the text's theological and symbolic depth.

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[31] A detailed discussion of this title will take place in Chapter 3.
[32] Paul Ricœur, 'The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought', in *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. by Emerson Buchanan, 1st Beacon Paperback (Beacon Press, 1969), p. 349.
[33] Ricœur, 'The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought', pp. 350–51.
[34] Ricœur, 'The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought', p. 348.
[35] Ricœur, 'The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought', pp. 351–52.

Ricoeur's notion of a 'second naïveté' brings further clarity to this circular approach.[36] Contemporary readers cannot return to a pre-critical reception of the text; at the same time, criticism cannot have the final word. Instead, a Ricoeurian post-critical approach allows interpreters to move 'in and through' critique towards a renewed capacity to hear the text.[37] This is a critical insight for a reading 'from the centre': such a reading respects the demythologising work of suspicion,[38] but refuses to make suspicion the sole lens through which texts can be interpreted. By holding critique and trust in creative tension, reading 'from the centre' allows the text to disclose its theological depth in ways that can shape the understanding and practice of all readers.

5. Reading from the centre: a reflexive positional statement

While acknowledging the limitations of any such statement[39], I offer the following reflection on how my positionality shapes my approach to the biblical text, and to John 4:1–42 in particular.

- I am a British citizen. I trace my origins to a nation historically characterized by its expansive imperial reach—an empire once thought of as so vast that the sun never set upon it.
- I serve as an officer in The Salvation Army, an organisation founded in 1865 that expanded globally during the ascendancy of the nineteenth-century missionary movement. My denominational affiliation is thus entangled with some of the structures of colonial expansion that postcolonial criticism seeks to interrogate.
- I am married to a woman whose people, the Bakongo, were divided by colonial borders, partitioned between Belgian and Portuguese imperial claims on land, resources and

[36] Ricœur, 'The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought', p. 351.
[37] Ricœur, 'The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought', p. 351.
[38] Ricœur, 'The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought', p. 351.
[39] Rogers, 'Looking into the Mirror', p. 465.

people. My sympathy with postcolonial critique is not simply theoretical; it is shaped by family ties (and a self-understanding split between Angolan and Congolese), and by the daily realities of raising children whose lives straddle both centre and margin.

- I have benefited from a peaceful, privileged lower middle-class upbringing and a stable, rigorous Western education. I am a graduate of institutions that were founded on claims to objectivity, even though I (and they) have come to question the epistemological assumptions that underwrite such claims.
- I am a committed Christian and hold to the life-giving potential of Scripture—not only as a neutral, historical document, but as a theological witness that continues to speak, confront, and transform.

In terms of reflexivity, and as one who hails from a former colonial power, I consider my own position not primarily in terms of consequences, but, rather, of advantages gained.[40] I also recognise that I cannot escape the formative power of my background. My reading, therefore, is necessarily shaped by this position. However, it is offered in a spirit of attentiveness and accountability: an attempt to read not from above, but alongside, without seeking to speak *for* the margins, but to endeavouring to listen with them, and to be challenged in the process. At the same time, I do not want to allow any ideology framework to suffocate the theological message of John 4:1-42.

6. Towards a postcolonial reading 'from the centre'

To bring this chapter to a conclusion, the interpretive positions that will drive this dissertation's approach to the text will be summarised:

[40] The parallel with John 4:38: 'I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour' resonates here.

6.1. Postcolonial sensitivity and openness to transformation

John 4:1-42 will be read with an awareness of this writer's inherited interpretive privilege while seeking to stand alongside the margins, attentive to histories of harm and open to being changed by the text and by the interpretations of others.

6.2. Reflexivity grounded in positionality

This writer acknowledges his own racial, theological, institutional and geopolitical location, and intends for that awareness to shape his interpretive approach with humility, accountability, and a willingness to be challenged by the readings of others.

6.3. Faithfulness to Scripture as theological witness

The biblical text will be engaged not as a static, historical authority, but as a living voice that confronts, reorients, and invites a response—especially, perhaps, in contexts of unresolved trauma and marginalization.

6.4. Historical-critical rigour held reflexively

Historical-critical tools will be valued to place the text in its historical context, but they will not be employed as the gatekeepers of normativity. Furthermore, these tools will be used to serve theological engagement with the text's message.

Conclusion

These methodological positions will shape the rest of this dissertation and will provide the building blocks of postcolonial readings of John 4:1-42 'from the centre'. In the next chapter they will be applied to a critical engagement with Dube's 'decolonising' reading of John 4:1-

42.[41] While Dube offers a provocative ideological lens, her reading risks flattening the theological contours of the Fourth Evangelist's (FE) narrative. The aim of the next chapter is *not* to dismiss her reading, rather to listen attentively, to wrestle with the discomfort it generates, and to argue that a faithful postcolonial reading 'from the centre' must hold lived experience of those oppressed, ideological critique and the text's theological claims in careful balance.

[41] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 52.

Chapter 2: Engaging Dube's 'Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42)'

Introduction

This chapter will evaluate Dube's exegesis of John 4:1-42 in *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power*.[42] Dube's stated intention is to 'decolonize' the text, which she understands as not only identifying the vestiges of imperialism and colonialism within, behind and before the text, but also seeking to remove these vestiges.[43]

Building on the methodological foundations of Chapter 1 for a reading 'from the centre', this chapter will first explore the ideological framework that underpins Dube's exegesis, then will evaluate her seven conclusions. The aim here is not to dismiss Dube's interpretation but to carefully engage the disorientation is generates and to consider if her decolonizing approach is applied too firmly, potentially overshadowing theological themes that might offer a more positive and liberative reading within the broader Johannine context. The chapter will argue that through a selective reading of the text, Dube allows her interpretative bias to, perhaps ironically, suppress the whole-gospel theological framework within which the narrative of John 4:1-42 is situated.

1. 'Decolonising' Jesus' journey to Samaria

Dube's interpretation of John 4:1-42 is firmly shaped by the consequences of colonialism and imperialism. For Dube, imperialism is an 'ideology of expansion' where one society imposes its culture on another.[44] The result of this is a 'relationship of subordination and domination'[45], which aligns with the definition of colonialism and imperialism that was sketched in the

[42] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 63.
[43] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 52.
[44] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 51.
[45] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 51.

previous chapter on this dissertation's methodology. Her interpretation of John 4:1-42 demonstrates the potential for Jesus to be read, understood and perceived as the head of an imperialistic movement which seeks to impress its norms and beliefs on the members of another people group. In the context of the text, these are the Samaritans, but Dube also reads this text as 'authorising' subsequent generations of Christians to enter and dominate other foreign lands.[46]

The ideology that underpins Dube's reading is built on two pillars. The first is that the world in front of, of, and behind the text of John 4:1-42 is profoundly affected by colonialism and imperialism. The text portrays a world shaped by Roman rule, with imperial presence woven into its narrative fabric.[47] Composed under ongoing Roman rule, it bears the imprint of empire.[48] Its transmission has been entangled with colonial and imperial histories—most notably the 19th-century expansion into Africa.[49] And today, it continues to be read in a world still marked by those legacies.[50] Dube makes an important point: the role of colonialism and imperialism cannot be denied in approaching John 4:1-42.[51] Dube, then, is right to ask whether this text reinforces the ideology of imperialism, even though this chapter will reach a different conclusion when the passage is read within the context of the FG's broader theological themes.

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[46] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 61.
[47] Lance Byron Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John* (Pickwick Publications, 2023), p. 67 <https://www.perlego.com/book/4510525/roman-imperial-ideology-and-the-gospel-of-john-pdf?queryID=ed4fb5315bc9c2b9ed4ff252fdd0d07c&index=prod_BOOKS&gridPosition=1&searchType=title> [accessed 3 December 2024].
[48] Beth M. Sheppard, 'The Gospel of John: A Roman Legal and Rhetorical Perspective' (University of Sheffield, 1999), p. 1 <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/10234/1/322931.pdf>.
[49] Addressing the Bible generally, see: T. Shingange, 'Biblical Discourses and the Subjugation of Africa: A Decolonial-Foucauldian Perspective', *Acta Theologica*, 43 (2023), pp. 108–26, doi:10.38140/at.vi.7015.
[50] Praisemon Thevan Vijayaprakash, 'Hear the Voice of Silenced: A Postcolonial Reading of John 4:1-42', *Biblical Studies Journal*, 6.2 (2024), pp. 1–13 (pp. 11–12), doi:https://doi.org/10.54513/BSJ.2024.6201/; Steve Gerardo Christoffel Gasperz and Nancy Novitra Souisa, 'Living Dialogical Conversation: Reading John 4:1–42 through the Lens of Post-Colonial Indonesian Christianity', *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 38.2 (2022), pp. 178–89, doi:10.3138/tjt-2022-0002.
[51] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 61.

The second pillar of Dube's argument is precisely the role played by literature in the promulgation and persistence of colonial and imperial ideologies.[52] For example, she cites the example of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* failing to note the critique of colonialism that this work represents.[53] Nevertheless, this work falls under the category of 'imperializing texts.'[54] Whether by design or default, the texts Dube considers as imperialising can be used to 'legitimate and authorize' imperialistic endeavours.[55] It follows then that the Bible also falls into this rubric. In the case of the Bible's legitimising and authorising role in imperialism and colonialism, Dube—who originates from the former British colony of Botswana[56]—focusses on the 19th century colonial movement, particularly in Africa. Dube claims that 'for many African nations the success of colonization is inseparably linked with the use of the Bible'.[57] In summary, Dube is unwavering in her conviction that imperialism and colonialism shape the subject, composition and reception of biblical texts.

John 4:1-42 is therefore no exception for Dube. She justifies her choice to analyse John 4:1–42 on the grounds that, in her view, it depicts a movement of expansion from one land to another, and that it serves to legitimise and authorise subsequent expansionist, so therefore colonialist and imperialist, movements.[58] This may well be the case, but Dube fails to provide any evidence of John 4:1-42 being used as an imperialising text.

[52] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 56.
[53] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 56.
[54] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 56.
[55] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 57.
[56] Musa W. Dube, 'Savior of the World but Not of This World: A Post-Colonial Reading of Spatial Construction in John', in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. by Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, The Bible and Postcolonialism, 1 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 118–33.
[57] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', pp. 58–59.
[58] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 61.

2. Evaluating Dube's exegesis

The next section will critically evaluate Dube's seven textual foci that she identifies as requiring decolonising.

2.1. Imperialism saturates the text of John 4:1-42 and conditions the behaviours of the colonised (Dube's focus text: 4:1)[59]

Placing the composition of FG following the sack of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, Dube identifies in 4:1 a three-way power struggle between the disciples of Jesus, the disciples of John the Baptist, and the Pharisees for religious authority over the Jewish population.[60] Dube concludes that Jesus' followers are losing this struggle, which leads to their expansion into Samaria.[61] According to Dube, this power struggle finds its roots in the religious power vacuum left by the sack of Jerusalem, and is, thus, a consequence of imperialism that shapes the behaviours of the nascent Christian movement, of the disciples of John, as well the Pharisees.[62]

John 3 does seem to hint at a sense of rivalry between John the Baptist's disciples and Jesus'. In 3:26 some of John's disciples remark: 'Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.' It seems that Jesus was attracting more candidates for baptism than John, and his disciples seem to be left feeling 'confuse[d], or perhaps, threaten[ed]' by the success of Jesus' ministry.[63] John is quick to put them right in 3:30: 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' Any sense of competition can only be read into the text if John's role is misunderstood. John is not a rival to Jesus, rather he is a

[59] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', pp. 61–63.
[60] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 61.
[61] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 62.
[62] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 63.
[63] Alicia D. Myers, *Reading John and 1, 2, 3 John: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Kindle Edition (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2019), p. 64.

witness (1:29-34). Furthermore, 3:27 seems to emphasise that each protagonist has his own role to play.[64] Dube, argues that Jesus (and his disciples) subordinate John to Jesus in an attempt at imperialism fuelled domination.[65] However, the text of FG does not allow such a reading. Rather, John's role was one of preparation; and his role being fulfilled he exits the action.[66] A competitive relationship between the disciples of John and Jesus seems difficult to conceive, unless one is applying an ideological lens more forcefully than the text allows.

Struggles with the religious authorities is a hallmark of the FG (cf. 7:14-24; 8:12-20; the motif reaching its climax with the arrest of Jesus in chapter 18).[67] For instance, John 9 may point to the 'excommunication' of the Johannine community from synagogue worship.[68] The FG does not seem to imply, however, that this expulsion leads to a plan to subjugate neighbouring people.

With regards to 4:1, Dube's assertion that Jesus is losing the struggle with the Pharisees seems eccentric in the context of most scholarship. Beasley-Murray writes of the 'extraordinary success' of Jesus' ministry.'[69] Bultmann frames the Pharisees' attitude to Jesus' 'success' in terms of 'jealousy'.[70] It seems that it is Jesus' 'increasing popularity' and the 'opposition' of the Pharisees that lead him to leave Judea for Galilee.[71] In addition, Thompson helpfully notes that Jesus may be seeking to avoid conflict with the Pharisees until his 'hour' has come.[72] This

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[64] Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, 1st edn. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), p. 93 <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2100818/4> [accessed 20 May 2025].
[65] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', pp. 61–62.
[66] Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (Continuum, 2005), p. 161.
[67] J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd edn. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3239377/0> [accessed 31 December 2022].
[68] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Anchor, 1966), I, p. 380.
[69] George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Zondervan, 2018), p. 59.
[70] Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. by George R. Beasley-Murray, W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (The Westminster Press, 1971), p. 176.
[71] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 171; Thompson, *John*, p. 97.
[72] Thompson, *John*, p. 97.

situates 4:1 within a broader FG motif and highlights Jesus' reluctance to enter into a confrontation that seems at odds with an imperialist or colonialist project.

If the reason for the journey is to escape Judea and head for Galilee, why does Jesus and his disciples' route take them to Samaria? Practically, it was the quickest route, taking about three days.[73] Theologically, it was God's will that they should travel that way.[74] Missiologically, Thompson argues that 'his route will provide the occasion to demonstrate that his mission will not be limited to the Jews but is intended for all the world.'[75] Dube might read this as the oppressive vision of the nascent Christian mission, however, the themes that it broaches, namely the 'world', will be explored in more detail later in this dissertation and will seek to provide a more optimistic, hopeful, and theological, vision.[76]

2.2. The text conceals Jesus' true intention to dominate and subjugate foreign lands and peoples and to subsequently authorise his followers to do the same (Dube's focus text: 4:35)[77]

For Dube, John 4 is suffused with a 'rhetoric of concealment' that seeks to disguise Jesus' true intention in entering Samaria.[78] The following will seek to demonstrate that the claim Jesus harboured hidden motives lacks scholarly support and remains textually tenuous, except when filtered through an ideologically conditioned reading. Dube contends that Jesus' tiredness in 4:6 serves merely as a pretext for pausing in Samaria; his true intention being to initiate a strategy of domination and subjugation.[79] Leaning heavily on the postcolonial thinking of Said,

[73] Thompson, *John*, p. 97.
[74] Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, I, p. 169; Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 59; Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, p. 176.
[75] Thompson, *John*, p. 98.
[76] See p. 40.
[77] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', pp. 63–66.
[78] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 65.
[79] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 63.

Dube suggests that the Fourth Evangelist is putting words into the Samaritans' mouths when they state that they need Jesus' salvation (4:22); when they follow him of their own accord (4:30) and when they ask to hear Jesus' message for themselves (4:40). Dube further highlights that the 'distancing' of the disciples in the initial stages of the narrative serve to place the 'evangelization' of the Samaritans 'squarely on the shoulders of the Samaritans themselves.'[80] All of this, for Dube, is evidence of this 'rhetoric of concealment'.[81]

For Dube, the principal instance of this 'rhetoric of concealment' is found in the harvest imagery found in v. 35-38.[82] While on the surface at least, harvesting foreign fields and reaping what one has not sown may seem exploitative, Dube seems to ignore that a larger theologically scheme is at play here. Myers proposes that John 4:35-38 constitutes the Johannine parable of the Sower (cf. Mk 4:1-20; Matt. 13:1-23; Luke 8:4-15).[83] In this parable, God is the Sower, and 'the Word is accepted by an unlikely person'.[84] Far from being 'distanced' to affirm a rhetoric of concealment, the disciples silence is contrasted with the witness of an unlikely woman.[85] For Myers, the disciples' failure to speak up and evangelize leads to them harvesting what they did not sow.[86] Harvest imagery is deeply rooted in the Bible as an eschatological motif; harvest representing a gathering in of people into God's Kingdom.[87] While this definition might unsettle a postcolonial reader, such unease may only arise when the Kingdom of God is perceived as exploitative and coercive. On the matter of reaping what one has not sown, a consensus seems to emerge about different protagonists (God included) each having their own

[80] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 64.
[81] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 65.
[82] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 65.
[83] Myers, *Reading John and 1, 2, 3 John*, pp. 69–70.
[84] Myers, *Reading John and 1, 2, 3 John*, p. 70.
[85] The lens of witness will be applied to the woman in Chapter 4.
[86] Myers, *Reading John and 1, 2, 3 John*, p. 70.
[87] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 180; Thompson, *John*, p. 108; David Ford, *The Gospel of John* (Baker Academic, 2021), p. 119 <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3039251> [accessed 20 May 2025]; Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 63.

part to play in this ingathering.[88] Here we observe the limitations of a reader-response shaped by ideological commitments, which can neglect the theological integrity of the passage.

The apex, for Dube, of the 'rhetoric of concealment' is found in the Samaritans' declaration of Jesus as 'the Saviour of the world' (4:42).[89] Not only are the imperial overtones problematic in Dube's view but so is the fact that this title of acclaim is put in the Samaritans' mouth by the text's malevolent author. The title 'Saviour of the world' will be analysed fully in the next chapter.

2.3. The text constructs a hierarchical binary that elevates Jesus and his followers and that degrades the Samaritan people (Dube's focus text: 4:34, 38)[90]

Dube argues that the text casts Jesus' followers, whether at the time of the narrated events or the time of subsequent generations of Christians, as 'global travellers' who are authorised to carry out the worldwide expansion of their movement at the expense of the identity, culture and geographical spaces of the people whose land they expand into.[91]

Dube addresses Jesus' authority from above, particularly as it is seen through the gradual unfolding of Christological titles contained within the text.[92] At first the Samaritan woman refers to Jesus as a 'Jew' (4:9); later in 4:12 she compares him to Jacob; the woman refers to Jesus as a prophet in 4:19; she wonders if he could be the Messiah in 4:25 (to which Jesus responds in the affirmative (4:26)). The pinnacle of this list of titles is 'Saviour of the world' (4:42). While Cassidy interprets this gradual unveiling as the ongoing development of the

[88] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Baker Academic, 2010), p. 623; Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 64.
[89] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 65.
[90] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', pp. 66–67.
[91] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 66.
[92] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 66.

woman's understanding[93], Dube argues that a chasm is being formed between the woman (as a representative of the Samaritans, and, by extension, of all foreign people) and Jesus, due to his superiority.

It could be argued that the superior/inferior dichotomy is a significant feature of the theological architecture of FG, most clearly expressed in the opposition between 'above'—the divine sphere—and 'below'—the worldly sphere hostile to God.[94] From a postcolonial vantage point, this binary resonates with the ideological dualisms that it seeks to expose.[95] John 8:23 offers a striking example: Jesus is from 'above' and 'not of this world'; his disciples are from 'below' and 'of this world'. Jesus' origin 'from above' affirms several aspects of his identity. First, it confirms his status as the Son of God.[96] Second, it establishes his intimate relationship with the Father, which in turn confers upon him the role of witness to heavenly realities (3:12).[97] His superiority, then, is not arbitrary; it is rooted in his divine identity. This portrayal is precisely what Dube contests.[98] Critically, Lincoln argues that these spheres are not impermeable.[99] FG does not merely describe a static dualism but invites movement—from the world to the divine—through faith in Jesus. Indeed, faith in Jesus is the stated purpose of FG (20:31). If any notion of Christian domination remains in view, it must be tempered by the FG's climax: the crucifixion. This is not a triumphal assertion of power, but an act of self-sacrifice and humiliation. Again, Dube appears to miss the text's theological dimension, advancing instead a relentless ideological reading that risks flattening the FG's broader theological framework.

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[93] Richard J. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective* (Wipf and Stock, 2015), p. 34 <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1721002/14> [accessed 20 May 2025].
[94] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 268.
[95] Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, p. 126.
[96] Ford, *The Gospel of John*, p. 182.
[97] Thompson, *John*, p. 92.
[98] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 67.
[99] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 279.

2.4. The superior/inferior dichotomy is applied to the knowledge, intellect and religion of the colonised (Dube's focus text: 4:10, 22)[100]

According to Dube, another way imperialism surfaces in John 4:1-42 is through the portrayal of the Samaritan woman and particularly of how her intelligence and religious tradition are framed. She draws attention to the repetition of the verb 'to know' in 4:10 and 4:22, interpreting it as a literary device that elevates Jesus' knowledge and religious identity above hers.[101]

One outcome of this, for Dube, is that the woman is cast as ignorant. Yet, as noted earlier in this chapter, the gradual unveiling of Jesus' Christological titles may suggest something else: a narrative of recognition, in which the woman's understanding deepens over time.[102] While Dube might read this as a widening chasm between the two protagonists, it could equally be seen as the woman's deepening understanding of who Jesus is. The woman asks questions (4:9, 4:11) and engages Jesus without apparent. Her final role, as a witness to her community, suggests agency rather than passivity. Overall, her portrayal resists the notion of a downtrodden, unintelligent figure.

On the question of religious superiority, Dube argues that Jesus constructs a framework in which his tradition is presented as dominant. Kim's reading offers a helpful counterpoint.[103] She suggests that Samaria should not be treated as wholly foreign, nor the Samaritan religion as fundamentally distinct from Judean practice.[104] If expansion is the lens, then Jesus' movement toward Samaria may be better understood as a step towards the restoration of Israel.

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[100] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', pp. 67–68.
[101] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 67.
[102] R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Fortress Press, 1996), p. 137.
[103] Jean K. Kim, 'The Samaritan Woman (John 4:1–42)', in *Woman and Nation* (Brill, 2004), pp. 90–115, doi:10.1163/9789004494565_007.
[104] Kim, 'The Samaritan Woman', pp. 93–94.

In this light, the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman reads more like revival than conquest.

Once again, Dube presses forward with her ideological critique, but with limited engagement with alternative readings. Her postcolonial lens is provocative, but it risks narrowing the interpretive field, especially where the text invites a more dialogical, relational and egalitarian reading.

2.5. Dube applies the superior/inferior dichotomy to geographical spaces, thus authorising Christian missionaries to enter and dominate foreign (inferior) lands (Dube's focus text: 4:12)[105]

A key element of Dube's decolonising approach is the claim that colonial movements construct themselves as inherently superior to the lands and people they seek to dominate.[106] While this seems convincing in the context of colonialism, particularly from Europe in the 19th century, it is less persuasive when applied to John 4:1-42. As noted in section 3.4., Jesus is presented as superior, mainly to assert his identity and mission. Crucially, his aim is to invite a change of sphere from earthly to divine. Dube may be imposing a later model of colonialism onto the text, risking an anachronistic reading that overlooks the theological intent and historical setting of the FG.

[105] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 68.
[106] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 68.

2.6. The inferior/superior dichotomy is applied to the culture of the colonised to suppress diversity (Dube's focus text: 4:2)[107]

At the heart of Dube's argument lies the claim that worship at Jerusalem and Gerizim is being replaced by worship in Spirit and truth (4:24). Yet, if we set aside the postcolonial lens, what emerges is not an ideology of domination or hegemony, but rather the possibility of religious renewal, as outlined in section 3.4. and affirmed by Kim. Rather than displacing sacred sites, Jesus inaugurates a new age of worship, one that transcends the established modes described in the text and points towards Spirit-led transformation.[108] Dube risks allowing the postcolonial framework to overshadow the theological heart of the FG, namely in this instance, its invitation to transformative worship and divine encounter beyond geographical, cultural and, indeed, ideological bounds.

2.7. The imperialist ideology of the text seeks to demean women (Dube's focus text: 4:42)[109]

Dube's argument draws upon the scholarly consensus that John 4 portrays a betrothal type-scene, reconfiguring the HB pattern (Gen 24; 29:1–20; Ex. 2:15–21) identified by Alter within a NT narrative scaffold.[110] This type-scene can be summarised as having three stages: first, a man travels to a foreign land where he meets a girl at a well; second, either the man or the girl draws water from the well before the girl rushes home to share the news of the man's arrival with her relatives; third, the man is invited to the girl's home where he is fed and the marriage arranged. John 4:1-42 is widely read as being composed following this model, but with some modifications. Dube argues that this type-scene serves to launch the career of a young patriarch,

[107] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 69.
[108] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 177.
[109] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', pp. 69–71.
[110] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 2011), pp. 61–78.

while the status of the woman is gradually reduced.[111] It does seem true that while the woman seemed an equal discussion partner with Jesus and that she is portrayed as a spokesperson for Jesus to her people that she eventually disappears completely from the narrative at that point. Indeed, this leads Kim to view the woman merely as a foil for the revelation of Jesus' identity, which is an important function of the FG's fourth chapter.[112] While she does seem to engage Jesus as a curious, independent equal, her disappearance does raise interpretive concerns. John 4:1-42 does deviate from the HB betrothal type-scene in other ways. Dube particularly focuses on the fact that it does not end in marriage.[113] For Dube, this transforms the betrothal type-scene into a 'type-scene of land possession'.[114] Her reading culminates in the bleak assertion that the text promotes an ideology in which 'foreign lands are immoral women which await taming by foreign saviours.'[115] This conclusion is both reductive and exegetically unsubstantiated as it depends completely on the ideological lens at the expense of broad, critical engagement with the text itself.

Bejon's analysis of John 4 identifies three key departures from the traditional betrothal type-scene, each of which reframes the narrative toward theological rather than romantic resolution.[116] First, no water is drawn from the well. Bejon argues that this intentional omission shifts the focus from physical thirst to the 'living water' Jesus offers (4:14). Second, while Jesus assumes the role of bridegroom in John 2, here he is not seeking a bride but preparing a collective one, comprising Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles, in an echo of the spiritual renewal suggested by Kim.[117] Third, the obstacle in this scene is neither external nor circumstantial as

[111] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 70.
[112] Kim, 'The Samaritan Woman', p. 101.
[113] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 71.
[114] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 71.
[115] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 71.
[116] James Bejon, *An Altered Perspective on the Woman at the Well*, n.d. <https://www.academia.edu/40181445/An_Altered_Perspective_on_the_Woman_at_the_Well> [accessed 22 September 2025].
[117] Kim, 'The Samaritan Woman', pp. 90–115.

in OT betrothal type-scenes but internal and moral: the woman's past and present marital situation. Jesus names these directly (4:16–18), not to shame her but to point towards the possibility of purification eschatological hope.

Stepping away from Dube's postcolonial reading allows the theological shape of John 4:1-42 to come into focus. Her abrupt disappearance notwithstanding, the woman is not portrayed as a passive symbol of land to be entered and possessed but an active participant in Jesus' revelation. Viewed through this lens, Jesus does not seek to dominate and demean; rather he seeks spiritual renewal, both for the woman and their peoples.

3. An example of a decolonized reading

Unfortunately, Dube cannot offer a fully realised decolonised of John 4:1-42. Instead, she presents Mositi Torontle's short story as an example of a decolonised retelling of John 4:1-42 as an illustration of what such a reading might look like. Torontle's narrative is set in an idealised and, potentially problematically, unspecified African context. Both Torontle's reimagining of the text and Dube's appropriation of it, risk romanticising culture by ignoring the effects (and, indeed, ravages) of history rather than critically engaging the biblical text and, indeed, present lived realities. The absence of her own decolonised reading highlights the limitations of the approach.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that while Dube's postcolonial reading raises important questions about power and space, her interpretation ultimately relies on an ideological framework that obscures the theological shape of the John 4:1-42. Her seven textual foci highlight genuine concerns, but her approach often suppresses the FG's motifs of revelation, witness, and life. By

overemphasising the imperial contexts at the expense of Johannine theology, her reading remains partial. The next chapter will therefore examine 'Saviour of the world' (4:42) to explore how John's narrative can be read in ways that resist and subvert imperial overtones and offer a more liberative vision.

Chapter 3: The Saviour of the world

Introduction

The narrative climax of John 4:1-42 may be found in the Samaritan townspeople's proclamation of Jesus as σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου, the 'Saviour of the world'.[118] This narrative moment has led to divergent readings. For Dube, the use of the title suggests that 'John 4 models its vision along imperial goals, strategies and values'.[119] Others argue that the Johannine use of imperial language is theologically reoriented and ultimately subversive.

This chapter will demonstrate that although John 4:1-42 uses language that would have resonated in an imperial context, the title σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου is reoriented within Johannine theology, especially through Jesus' self-giving on the cross, so that it functions as theological redefinition rather than an endorsement of imperial ideology or the appropriation of its methods. John 4:1-42 borrows imperial vocabulary but transforms its meaning by locating salvation in Jesus' sacrificial love rather than in political power or reciprocal patronage.

To make this case, this chapter will firstly trace σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου antecedents in the Hebrew Bible and Greco-Roman usage to show the semantic range attached to σωτὴρ (saviour) and σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου. Second, the title will be read in its whole Gospel context to show how Johannine motifs such as mission from the Father, sacrifice, and the Johannine conception of the 'world' shape the title's reorientation. Third, alternative readings will be engaged to build a framework for understanding how the title echoes, yet also subverts, its imperial resonance. Finally, these strands will be brought together to show that the title generates a 'symbolic

[118] It is interesting to note that NRSVUE capitalises 'Saviour', whereas Greek texts do not (see, for example, the SBL Greek New Testament).
[119] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 66.

surplus'[120] by evoking imperial associations while subverting their logic by ascribing universal salvific authority to the crucified Jesus.

1. Antecedents of the title 'Saviour of the world'

The title σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου in 4:42 draws on both Jewish and Greco-Roman uses of σωτὴρ. In its HB context, σωτὴρ evokes God's deliverance and, at times, human liberation; in the wider Gerco-Roman world, it signals benefaction, protection, and expanding universal claims. Mapping this background informs us on the conceptual world FE engages and reshapes to formulate the title.

1.1. Hebrew Bible and Jewish antecedents

The use of the word σωτὴρ to designate God is well attested in LXX (cf. 2 Sam. 22:3, Pss. 17:7; 106:21; Jer. 14:8; Hos. 13:4). Its use is particularly prominent in Deutero-Isaiah (43:3, 11; 45:15, 21-22; 49:26), as well as in 60:16; 63:8-9. The specific emphasis in the application of this title in these verses is God's deliverance of Israel in difficult times.[121] However, Is. 45:21-22 points to the universal purview of God's salvific plans.[122] This brief analysis is shared to highlight the association of the title σωτὴρ with the theme of universal deliverance and salvation, that ought to speak powerfully in the liberationist context of postcolonial biblical interpretation. The association with the theme of deliverance is also present in Judges where the title σωτὴρ is applied not to God but the human rulers Othniel and Ehud (see Judges 3:9, 15).

[120] Michael Labahn, '"Heiland Der Welt": Der Gesandte Gottesohn Und Des Römische Kaiser - Ein Thema Johanneischer Christologie?', in *Ausgewählte Studien Zum Johannesevangelium: Selected Studies in the Gospel of John, 1998-2013*, ed. by Antje Labahn (Peeters, 2017), pp. 261–87 (p. 262).
[121] Thompson, *John*, p. 110.
[122] Thompson, *John*, p. 110.

Outside of the Bible, the full title σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου is employed by Philo of Alexandria to refer to God.[123] While FE and Philo (20BCE-50CE) could be understood as broad contemporaries, this echo shows a common Hellenistic-Jewish background rather than a shared theological outlook, principally because Philo remained Jewish. While the title σωτὴρ has biblical antecedents, it is more commonly associated with Greco-Roman emperor worship, which we will now turn to.

1.2. Greco-Roman antecedents

In the Greco-Roman world, the title σωτὴρ was widely used in reference to gods such as Zeus, Asclepius, Isis, Serapis, Athena, Apollo, Dioscuri and Poseidon.[124] In addition to this, the title is also applied to heroic, philosophical and political figures.[125] The divine heroic figure Heracles is described by Dio Chrysostom as 'Saviour of the earth and mankind' for defeating tyrants and monsters (Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 1.84). This is noteworthy because of the universal scope of this application of the σωτὴρ title. Epicurus is called σωτὴρ by his followers for liberating them from fear and superstition (Polystratus, Herc. 346). Plato's ideal leader is referred to as σωτὴρ for preserving the state and ensuring justice (Republic 5.463b). Philip of Macedon (Demosthenes, *Orationes* 18.43) Titus Quinctius Flaminius (Isthmian Games, 196BCE). Importantly, Labahn notes that Dionysius (*Ant. Rom.* 4.32.1) lists σωτὴρ (as well as εὐεργέτης, benefactor) as the most honourable titles for humans.[126]

These Jewish and Greco-Roman antecedents show that the title σωτὴρ carried connotations of deliverance, benefaction, and an increasingly universal scope. These strands provide an insight

[123] Craig R. Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 109.4 (1990), pp. 665–80 (p. 666), doi:10.2307/3267369.
[124] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', p. 666; Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 264.
[125] 'Sōtēr', n.d. <https://www.wenstrom.org/downloads/written/word_studies/greek/soter.pdf> [accessed 11 November 2025].
[126] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 266.

into the conceptual world within which FE's designation of Jesus as σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου must be read, a conceptual world in which salvation can be simultaneously theological and political.

1.3. Imperial worship

The title σωτὴρ is particularly associated with Greco-Roman imperial worship as it was conferred upon emperors such as Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius Nero, Vespasian, Domitian, Trajan, and Hadrian.[127] Some inscriptions combine σωτὴρ with universal claims (σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου), though Labahn himself notes that this is not a common formulation.[128] Rare as the actual examples of the use the full title might be, they are nonetheless well attested.[129] Crucially, as Labahn will go on to demonstrate, whether or not it was used in this exact formulation, the title σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου holds significant cultural resonance.[130] It is critical to note, however, that the term σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου held no theological connotations.[131] Both Koester and Labahn agree that the *sōtēr*'s salvation was political or material in nature, amounting to protection from war, famine and illness.[132]

1.4. Narrative parallels: the welcome scene

From a narrative perspective, the manner in which Jesus is welcomed by the Samaritan townspeople in 4:40 echoes how imperial narratives recount how emperors, such a Vespasian and Titus were welcomed.[133] The narrative similarities are seen in how FE's welcome narrative unfolds in three stage: the townspeople go to Jesus (to meet him before he reaches the village); they ask him to stay; Jesus accepts and remains with them for two days (4:40). However,

[127] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 265.
[128] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 267.
[129] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 267.
[130] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 267.
[131] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 265.
[132] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 265; Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', p. 666.
[133] Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, p. 666.

Labahn injects a brief but important note of caution by stating that while Vespasian is called σωτὴρ the universal scope is not present.[134] Nonetheless, and in spite of this relatively minor nuance, FE seems to be drawing on an imperial narrative framework.

2. 'Saviour of the world': a formulaic encapsulation of Jesus' role in FG.

2.1. Formulaic encapsulation

Having welcomed Jesus into their town, the Samaritans acclaim Jesus as the 'Saviour of the world' (4:42). While this acclamation serves as the narrative climax of John 4:1-42, it may also be read as encapsulating Jesus' mission as portrayed by FE. In FG, Jesus' mission is initiated by the Father (see 3:16-17; 5:36-38; 6:38-39; 7:16, 29; 8:42; 10:36; 12:44-45; 17:8; 20:21). It is not marked by coercion or conquest; rather, it is marked by humility, the desire to see the relationship between God and humanity (the hostile and alienated world referred to in the next subheading) restored. Jesus' mission is life giving (cf. 10:10; 20:31) and above all, characterised by self-giving love (cf. 3:16, 15:12-13, 15:9). This title, voiced by outsiders, summarizes the Gospel's theological framework, where salvation is not imposed but offered, and is not presented in triumphant terms (from a worldly perspective at least) but in terms of sacrifice.[135]

2.2. The world: hostile and alienated

In FG, 'the world' is described primarily along two lines: God as its Creator and the creation's hostility and alienation from him. The world, and all people, are God's creation (John 1:1-5).[136] The Johannine conception of the world, contra Dube, is not spatial. Lincoln states that the term 'the world' does not denote its vastness in terms of size but rather signifies the vastness of its

[134] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 267.
[135] Zorodzai Dube, 'The Divine Preservation of Salvation in John's Gospel: A Social Scientific Reading', *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 100 (2019), pp. 1–7 (p. 3).
[136] Thompson, *John*, p. 86.

alienation from God.[137] The world resists the λόγος (1:10) and refuses the light (3:19). Nevertheless, 'God so loves… this alienated and undeserving world'[138], that he gives the Son to die that it might live (cf. 3:16). Critically, God's love is expressed in giving life to the world through the Son (6:33).[139] FE's logic is not transactional, as perhaps emperor worship was through the paying of homage and cultural expectations of reciprocity.[140] Rather FG's logic is transformational: God's love initiates a process of renewal in his relationship with the world, even at the cost of the Son's life.

2.3. Jesus: a sacrificial gift

In 1:29, FE introduces Jesus as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'. Bultmann draws out Jesus' role as a 'sacrificial lamb' whose death 'expiate[s] sin'.[141] Ford helpfully notes that the 'basic sin' in FG is 'lack of faith/trust/belief,'[142] a consequence perhaps of the alienation described above. The overriding thrust of this title in 1:29 is that Jesus brings salvation from sin not through power, but through self-sacrifice. This should reverberate intensely in the context of a postcolonial reading. FG emphasises the theme of self-sacrifice through the imagery of bread in chapter 6, particularly 6:51 where Jesus says that the bread he speaks of is his σάρξ (flesh). Jesus' mission, as portrayed in FG, reaches its fulfilment in the cross—a sacrificial act through which life is offered to the world.[143] But the emphasis in 6:51 here seems to not be so much on Jesus dying to expiate sin but to offer life: Jesus is the incarnate Word of God (1:14) in which there is life (1:4).[144] This life does not form part of an abstract,

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[137] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 154.
[138] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 154.
[139] Catrin H. Williams, 'Faith, Eternal Life, and the Spirit in the Gospel of John', in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, ed. by Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 353, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198739982.013.20.
[140] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', pp. 666–67; Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', pp. 263–65.
[141] Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, p. 96.
[142] Ford, *The Gospel of John*, p. 49.
[143] Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 94.
[144] Thompson, *John*, p. 154; Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 94.

theological future. Williams emphasises that FE's eschatology refers not only to a future event but can be experienced in the present: Jesus offers life both now and in the age to come.[145] Salvation for the world, embodied and, ultimately, enacted by Christ, is not punishment but liberation towards abundant life (10:10).

2.4. 'Not to condemn, but to save'

John 3:17 and 12:47 emphasise the fact that Jesus does not come to condemn (3:17) or to judge (12:47) the world, but to save it. Lincoln calls this 'salvific judgement'[146] which seeks restoration rather than retribution. Thompson sharpens the understanding of restoration as 'deliverance from death and participation in the plenitude of God'.[147] Within this theological framework, the world is the object of God's love, the recipient of God given and enhanced life, and the arena in which God's mission takes place.

2.5. Jesus as God's representative

FE also presents Jesus not as a ruler demanding allegiance, but as the visible enactment of divine love for the world. In John 12:44-47, Jesus summarizes his identity as God's fully authorized representative, who speaks and acts on behalf of the Father. Thompson takes this further: Jesus is not only the representative, but the very representation of God and, therefore, of his purposes.[148] With this in mind, Jesus' mission is not to secure territory or enforce loyalty, but to give life, 'eternal life' (3:16; 5:24; 17:3), as God's 'commandment' for the world.[149]

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[145] Williams, 'Faith, Eternal Life, and the Spirit in the Gospel of John', p. 354.
[146] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 155.
[147] Thompson, *John*, p. 86.
[148] Thompson, *John*, pp. 276–77.
[149] Thompson, *John*, p. 277.

2.6. A mission defined by self-giving

Jesus' mission in FG is not marked by domination or imposition, but by voluntary, self-giving love. Jesus' words: 'I lay down my life… No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (10:17–18) affirm that his death is not only the result of an imperial judicial process but a deliberate act of obedience and love. In 6:38, Jesus declares that he has come 'not to do [his] own will but the will of him who sent [him]', a will that culminates in the giving of his flesh 'for the life of the world' (6:51). Ford describes this as 'God's self-giving in Jesus'[150]. Voorwinde emphasizes that salvation in FG is only secured through the loving self-offering of Jesus[151], which highlights of the uniqueness of Jesus' salvific claim, especially when contrasted to reciprocal and transactional imperial claims. In FG, self-giving is not incidental to salvation; it is its very logic, the means by which divine love becomes life for the world.

2.7. Spoken by outsiders

Perhaps the most startling aspect of the use of the title 'Saviour of the world' in 4:42 is that it is pronounced by the Samaritan townspeople. For Dube, the fact that these words are placed in the mouths of Samaritans served two purposes. First, it distances Jesus and his disciples from their imperialising intent.[152] Second, it highlights the Samaritans need for 'domination' and justifies the Christian imperialising project.[153] However, when read outside of a decolonial framework, the Samaritans declaration shows that Jesus' salvation, which comes from the Jews (4:22), is truly universal and intended for the whole (alienated) world.[154]

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[150] Ford, *The Gospel of John*, p. 96.
[151] Stephen Voorwinde, 'The Assurance of Salvation and the Love of Jesus in the Gospel of John', *Vox Reformata*, December 2006, pp. 28–44.
[152] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 65.
[153] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 65.
[154] Thompson, *John*, p. 110; Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective*, p. 35; Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, p. 90.

2.8. A Johannine innovation

The ascription of the title 'Saviour' to Jesus in the wider NT may point to the development of an early church tradition. Luke's infancy narratives introduce the title (Luke 1:47; 1;69; 2:11), while Acts continues this theme (Acts 5:31 & 13:23). The Pauline epistles frequently refer to Jesus by this title (Eph. 5:23; Phil. 3:20; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; 2 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:3-3:6). Petrine traditions also include it (2 Pet. 1:1-3:18; Jude 1:25). While Richey does not detect a 'pattern' in the use of σωτὴρ in relation to Jesus in the early Church[155], the fact that the specific title 'Saviour of the world' appears in 1 John 4:14 may point to an appellation particular to the Johannine community.

Furthermore, the exact formulation σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου or 'Saviour of the world' seems to be a Johannine innovation as it is only found only in John 4:42 and 1 John 4:14. For Labahn, this suggests a deliberate and unique theological emphasis.[156] Labahn highlights that the fact that the title is applied to Jesus and not God is particularly striking and, therefore, plays an important part in the revelation of Jesus' identity.[157] For Koester, the application of the title σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου to Jesus evokes imperial associations and positions Jesus as a figure of universal significance, transcending Jewish and Samaritan categories.[158]

Though the Samaritan confession in 4:42 occurs only once in FG in this exact formulation, the title 'Saviour of the world' encapsulates many facets of Jesus' identity as portrayed in FG. It anticipates and echoes FG's broader witness to Jesus as the one who rescues, restores, and gives life to the world. The title 'Saviour of the world', though never repeated in FG, resurfaces, as we have seen, throughout the Gospel through sacrificial imagery, mission statements, and

[155] Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, p. 84.
[156] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 268.
[157] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 268.
[158] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', pp. 667–68.

eschatological promises. The title summarises the Gospel's central Christological claims, that life for the world comes through Jesus' death, and that divine love is most fully revealed in the giving of the Son to an estranged world.

3. Polemical edge

Richey offers a sustained analysis of FE's designation σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου to demonstrate both its uniqueness and its deliberate polemical edge. He observes that, although the title occurs only twice in the Johannine corpus (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14), it articulates Johannine Christology with greater precision and brevity than the frequently cited John 3:16.[159] Crucially, Richey argues that the title lacks any clear Jewish precedent and advances that Hebrew Bible passages offer at best a scriptural framework for its conception.[160] Pauline and Lukan parallels are acknowledged, but Richey dismisses any intertextuality.[161] Furthermore, Richey sees no generalised use of the title in the Primitive Church, assessing its use as a Johannine innovation.[162] The critical context for the interpretation of σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου, Richey contends, is Augustan ideology in which emperors from Augustus to Hadrian where acclaimed as σωτὴρ.[163] Richey emphatically states that use of the title is polemical in nature, given the risks associated with appealing to the cultural resonance.[164] By presenting Jesus as the 'Saviour of the world', Richey contends that FE surpasses nationalistic messianic expectations and redefines universality in terms that resonate with, while challenging the claims of the imperial cult.[165] In this way, FE asserts Jesus' supremacy over the hopes of the established Jewish faith and the claims of the imperial cult.

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[159] Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, p. 82.
[160] Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, p. 83.
[161] Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, p. 83.
[162] Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, p. 84.
[163] Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, pp. 85–87.
[164] Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, p. 88.
[165] Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John*, p. 90.

4. Symbolic surplus

Labahn's analysis of John 4:42 situates the Samaritan acclamation of Jesus as 'Saviour of the world' within an 'encyclopaedia'[166] of imperial semantics, while reframing it through the hermeneutical lens of *symbolischer Überschuss* (symbolic surplus).[167] Rather than dismissing the Greco-Roman resonance of the title σωτὴρ, Labahn argues that the FE appropriates this culturally conditioned term as *kultureller Code* (cultural code), a culturally familiar expression carrying the potential for multiple layers of meaning.[168] For Labahn, the Gospel does not merely echo the imperial honorific title but actively reconfigures it, generating a surplus of symbolic significance that transcends its original meaning. The title then retains its rhetorical power but reorients its object firmly: from the emperor as saviour to Jesus as cruciform life-giver.[169]

Labahn is clear, this symbolic surplus is not a parody nor a rejection of imperial imagery, but a theological reorientation.[170] Labahn refuses to read John 4:1–42 as a polemic against the empire. Instead, he discerns a narrative strategy that combines shared cultural codes to articulate a Christological claim. The Samaritan declaration functions as a narrative climax within the Cana-to-Cana arc (John 2–4), where Jesus' life-giving authority is progressively revealed across ethnic and religious boundaries. The Samaritan response, shaped by Jesus' revelatory speech and not by signs, exemplifies a paradigmatic faith that culminates in the universal title σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου (4:42). Labahn notes that this phrase, while resonant with

[166] Laura J. Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar: A Roman Reading of John 18:28—19:22' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wales Trinity St David, 2017), p. 40 <https://repository.uwtsd.ac.uk/id/eprint/749/> [accessed 18 November 2025].
[167] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 262.
[168] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 265.
[169] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', pp. 263–68.
[170] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', p. 271.

imperial cult inscriptions, is uniquely Johannine in its NT usage, underscoring its theological intentionality.[171]

The symbolic surplus generated by the title 'Saviour of the world' allows the Gospel to evoke imperial associations while subverting their logic; not through overt critique, but through theological redefinition. Jesus is not the emperor's rival; he is the world's 'true' (4:42) redeemer, whose salvific agency is marked not by domination and transactionality, but by the selfless giving of himself.

5. Imperial subversion

5.1. Jesus as Caesar

Writing nearly three decades before Labahn, Koester notes the resistance of contemporary scholarship to read the title σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου as a polemic against the Roman empire's rule,[172] suggesting little shift in the intervening years. Nevertheless, Koester points out that the Samaritans declare that Jesus 'is truly the Savior of the world' (4:42) and suggests that the use of ἀληθῶς (truly) seems to exclude all other contenders to the title, including emperors.[173] This prompts Koester to examine additional evidence within 4:1-42 that may subtly contest imperial claims.[174]

The primary focus of Koester's analysis is the Samaritan woman's personal history, particularly her five former husbands and her current non-marital partner (cf. 4:18). Koester interprets her conjugal history as a symbolic representation of Samaria's colonial past, beginning with five foreign nations (cf. 2 Kgs 17:24; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 9.14.3 §288) and

[171] Labahn, 'Heiland Der Welt', pp. 276–77.
[172] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', p. 674.
[173] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', p. 674.
[174] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', p. 674.

culminating in the present Roman domination.[175] Koester suggests that 'the one you have now' (4:18) may allude to Rome, particularly Herod's transformation of the city of Samaria into Sebaste, a Greco-Roman city built to honour Augustus, including a temple to the emperor (*Jewish Wars* 1.21.1 §403; *Ant*. 15.8.5 §298).[176] The Samaritan woman's return to faith in God, demonstrated by her willingness to witness to the townspeople, may symbolise a national turn from imperial affiliation to divine allegiance: 'He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' (4:29).[177]

Koester insightfully points out that the Samaritan community's recognition of Jesus' kingship is sharply contrasted with the Jewish leaders' allegiance to Caesar in John 19:15 ('We have no king but Caesar.').[178] FG's trial narrative reinforces this contrast by calling attention to the divergence between Pilate's inscription (John 19:19-20) and Jesus' claim that his 'kingdom is not from here' (18:36). Labahn argues that this contrast creates a choice between divine and imperial sovereignty.[179]

Koester concludes that FG offers and alternative to both collaboration and violent resistance by portraying Jesus as a transcendent king whose truth liberates (8:32; 18:37).[180] The Samaritans' declaration of Jesus as σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου may then be read as a reorientation of allegiance that rejects Caesar's claims and embraces Jesus as the true 'Saviour of the word'.[181]

[175] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', p. 675.
[176] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', p. 676.
[177] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', pp. 676–77.
[178] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', p. 677.
[179] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', pp. 677–78.
[180] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', p. 680.
[181] Koester, 'The Savior of the World (John 4:42)', p. 680.

5.2. Imperial masculinity subverted

Jason Ripley's analysis of Johannine masculinity places Jesus within the Roman rhetorical framework of honour and *virtus* (virtue).[182] In this structure, masculinity is not merely a statement of fact but a public performance of imperial values such as domination, autonomy, and noble death.[183]

Ripley argues that Roman masculinity was defined by penetration, conquest, and the power to subjugate others.[184] By contrast, Jesus' manliness is reconfigured by FE around vulnerability, most fully displayed in his beaten, bound and crucified body.[185] This inversion of hegemonic masculinity may find a parallel in the Samaritan narrative of John 4. The woman's witness—from the margins, both geopolitically and socially, initiates her community's engagement with Jesus, reaching the narrative's climax in their declaration of Jesus as the 'Saviour of the world'. Critically, their recognition of Jesus' universal significance is not the product of conquest, born out of imperial ideology, but the result of transformation based on the woman's testimony.

The heart of Ripley's argument is the irony he notes in Pilate's proclamation: 'Behold the man!' (19:5), where, Ripley argues, mockery becomes of the revelation of true glory.[186] A similar irony could be at play in John 4, where a woman's marginalisation becomes the site of revelation and disclosure. This irony is further developed when the townspeople, as Samaritan outsiders to Israel, voice Jesus' universal significance. This dynamic may exemplify Ripley's

[182] Jason J. Ripley, '"Behold the Man"? Subverting Imperial Masculinity in the Gospel of John', *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception*, 2.2 (2015), pp. 219–39 (p. 220), doi:10.1515/jbr-2015-0009.
[183] Ripley, '"Behold the Man"?', pp. 220–23.
[184] Ripley, '"Behold the Man"?', p. 227.
[185] Ripley, '"Behold the Man"?', p. 225.
[186] Ripley, '"Behold the Man"?', p. 224.

claim that Johannine masculinity subverts imperial hegemony by ascribing honour to courageous vulnerability rather than in domination.[187]

Ripley's investigation into the rhetorical discourse of noble death, where courage and the benefit of others constitute true *virtus,* suggests that this vision finds its fulfilment in Jesus' crucifixion.[188] Nevertheless, its fulfilment is radically re-imagined: Jesus' death is not self-slaughter by the sword, the Roman model of manly autonomy, but acceptance of suffering for the sake of others.[189] While in anticipation of Jesus' act of self-sacrifice, the narrative of John 4 may contain indications that foreshadow this subversion of Roman masculinity. The woman communicated Jesus' message of salvation, not through conquest but through witness. The townspeople's confession also recognises Jesus' alternative masculinity.

In this light, the Samaritan episode anticipates the Gospel's broader irony where salvation is voiced by outsiders, and Jesus' glory is revealed not through (imperial) domination but through cruciform love.[190]

6. A hidden transcript that subverts ethnicity

Laura Hunt's unpublished PhD thesis presents John 18:28-19:22 as a 'hidden transcript' that reconfigures Roman and Jewish ethnic identities, constructing a 'superordinate' identity for Jesus-believers grounded in loyalty to Jesus' empire.[191] Drawing on social identity theory, Hunt explains that ethnicity in antiquity functioned through 'categorization, identification and comparison', with identity markers such as language, law, and election shaping group

[187] Ripley, '"Behold the Man"?', pp. 225–28.
[188] Ripley, '"Behold the Man"?', pp. 226–27.
[189] Ripley, '"Behold the Man"?', p. 225.
[190] Ripley, '"Behold the Man"?', pp. 225–27.
[191] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', p. 327.

boundaries.[192] Roman identity, for example, was reinforced through imperial discourse that portrayed Rome as 'a sort of common race (*genos*)' encompassing all others.[193] Jewish identity, by contrast, emphasized Torah observance and divine election.[194] However, Hunt argues that, in the Johannine trial narrative, these categories are destabilized.[195] Pilate's question 'Am I a Jew?' (John 18:35) is ironically answered 'Yes' by the Gospel's logic, since both Roman and Jewish authorities are implicated in Jesus' rejection.[196] The *titulus crucis*: 'Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews' (19:19-22), written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, becomes a symbol of universal witness, proclaiming Jesus' kingship in the languages of empire and diaspora.[197]

It could be that this concept of a hidden transcript is anticipated by the Samaritans townspeople declaring Jesus to 'Saviour of the world' in 4:42. These ethnically marginalised and religiously excluded people then could be seen as appropriating an imperial title and reassigning its use through the witness of the Samaritan woman rather than through political imposition or military domination. Hunt observes that Roman identity was not based on bloodline but on participation in imperial structures and cultural codes.[198] By contrast, the Samaritan villagers recognise Jesus' authority not through any performative action but through the personal testimony of the Samaritan woman that 'they have heard for [them]selves' (4:42). This response to the woman's testimony could be an example of what Hunt terms 'recategorization' in which 'membership of two different groups are included within a new higher-level identity'.[199] In this way, the Samaritans' identity (and indeed any other ethnic identity) is not eliminated, instead it is

[192] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', p. 328.
[193] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', p. 336.
[194] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', p. 341.
[195] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', pp. 351–52.
[196] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', p. 352.
[197] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', p. 353.
[198] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', p. 333.
[199] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', p. 331.

reclassified. As such their identity is redefined, not along ethnic or geographical lines, but according to their allegiance to Jesus.

Quite critically, Hunt emphasises that such recategorization 'does not limit or restrict identification with previous groups, but allows instead for a continued primary identification along with a recategorization of group identity under a shared ethnic umbrella.'[200] This is consistent with FG as a whole, where Jesus' followers are called to navigate Roman law and Jewish Torah while maintaining loyalty to Jesus as a priority, and regulated by the Spirit.[201] The Samaritan's declaration then reflects FG's hidden transcript: Jesus' kingship is not validated by imperial authorities but by the witness of people on the margins of society. Their confession perhaps anticipates the irony of FG's narrative climax, where, in the trial scene, imperial and religious authorities reject Jesus, but multilingual inscriptions placed on instruments of torture and marginalised people proclaim his kingship.

The Samaritans declaration in 4:42 then is not only a theological statement but it is politically charged too in its resistance and subversion. It enhances the Gospel's aim to reimagine salvation, anticipating the cross as the moment when Jesus' true kingship is paradoxically enthroned.

7. Reflexive excursus: How long do imperial echoes reverberate?

Reflexivity, as emphasised in Chapter 1, demands that this author critically acknowledge how his background has been conditioned by the structures and histories of former colonial powers. If he has benefitted from this colonial past, it has been to his advantage. Furthermore, he must

[200] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', p. 331.
[201] Hunt, 'Jesus Caesar', p. 327.

also recognise the risk of perceiving imperialism and colonialism through the lens of their ideological justification rather than through the experiences—both in terms of history and current consequences—of the people who originate from former colonies. It is precisely at the level of lived experience that this author diverges from Dube, whose decolonial methodology questions both the application of the title 'Saviour of the world' to Jesus and the portrayal of his movement as benevolent. Where Dube reads the title as complicit in imperial ideology, this author contends that its contemporary reception is more likely theological than imperial. Labahn's argument about the title's cultural resonance is persuasive when the text is read in its original context and perhaps across the following centuries to the fall of Rome, the critical question is whether that resonance persists in today's post-colonial world. When approached without knowledge of the Greco-Roman context, does 'Saviour of the world' speak of reciprocity and domination or is the reader drawn to the notion of salvation for all people? This writer contends that the reverberation of any imperial overtones most likely ended with the Roman Empire. It seems highly unlikely for a reader without any classical education to perceive such an allusion. By contrast, a more theological interpretation regarding God's purposes for the world may be the more immediate reading. While this writer must remain alert to the risk of reproducing imperial frameworks, he contends that the title's contemporary resonance is more theological than imperial.

Conclusion: towards a cruciform hermeneutic

The Samaritan proclamation of Jesus as σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου (4:42) re-imagines the salvific claims of Greco-Roam emperor worship and crystallises Johannine Christology into a universal claim. While the title resonates with Jewish traditions of divine deliverance and the Greco-Roman ascription of honour, FG reorients its meaning: salvation is not imperial protection or reciprocal patronage but the liberating, self-giving love of God embodied and enacted by Jesus

on the cross. Therefore, σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου in its Johannine context can only be read through the lens of the cross, the efficacy of which is available to all.

From a postcolonial perspective, the narrative shaping of the Samaritan's confession is critical. It is outsiders, ethnically and religiously, who proclaim Jesus' identity, challenging imperial hierarchies and showing that revelation can come from the margins, rather than the centres of power. Another instance of what Hunt may call a 'hidden transcript' is at play here: the Samaritans could be seen as engaging in an act of resistance that appropriates imperial language while ascribing honour to Jesus. The reoriented title may retain a political edge.

Σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου encapsulates Johannine Christology as a postcolonial claim: salvation is voiced by outsiders, it is enacted through a humiliating, self-giving death, and it liberates the once estranged world into abundant life (10:10). The next chapter will turn to one outsider's witness to Jesus' identity.

Chapter 4: The Samaritan woman as a witness

Introduction

Dube, in her decolonising reading of John 4:1–42, argues that the FE casts the Samaritan woman in a negative light, portraying her as marginalized, silenced, and ignorant. For example, this portrayal is key to Dube's analysis when she writes: 'The ideology of this story is that foreign lands are immoral women which await taming by foreign saviours'.[202] Within this conception, the woman, as a representative of Samaria, is viewed as a passive victim that invites further abuse. However, the sustainability of this reading, once disentangled from postcolonial assumptions of marginalisation, oppression and subjugation, calls for closer examination.

This chapter will initially interrogate the postcolonial doctrine that states that marginalised people are always silenced and demonstrate that the Samaritan woman challenges this view. Second, in discussion with Smith Carman and Mehring, we will outline readings of John 4:1-42 that portray the Samaritan woman as an independent actor and disciple of Christ in her own right.[203] Thirdly, we will explore the Samaritan woman's role as a witness in the cosmic trial that FE uses to frame his Gospel. Fourthly, we will investigate the woman's role as a witness in a more missional sense. Fifthly, the problem of the woman's abrupt dismissal in 4:42 will be addressed. This chapter argues that the lens of witness provides a more sustainable lens than Dube's postcolonial critique, allowing the Samaritan woman in John 4:1–42 to be read not as a passive victim but as an active interlocutor, missional agent, and nascent disciple. The Samaritan woman cannot be reduced to a symbol of marginalisation or a passive object of Jesus' mission. Rather, the narrative portrays her as having a voice, agency as well as the

[202] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 71.
[203] Amy Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria as Mistress, Slave, and Disciple: Reading for Race, Gender and Status in John 4:4-42', in Wm Curtis Holtzen and others, *Looking Both Ways: At the Intersection of the Academy and the Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph C. Grana II* (Claremont Press, 2021), pp. 57–70; Hanna-Maria Mehring, 'The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4', *Religions*, 15.8 (2024), p. 924, doi:10.3390/rel15080924.

capacity to interpret Jesus' discourse. The following chapter will examine how the Samaritan woman's role as a witness might challenge postcolonial assumptions of silencing and victimisation and make way for a more liberative reading of her role in John 4:1-42.

1. The Samaritan woman: a voice for the voiceless?

1.1. Can the subaltern speak?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay *Can the subaltern speak?* concludes: 'The subaltern cannot speak'.[204] For Spivak, who is analysing the role of women in the Hindu practice of *sati* (widow immolation), the voices of the marginalized are inevitably silenced or mediated within dominant discourses. This seems to stand at odds with the role played by the Samaritan woman in 4:1-42. Her testimony is not silenced but proclaimed in such a way that her community encounters Jesus.

Spivak insists that 'between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears'.[205] It is true that in the Johannine narrative the woman disappears abruptly (4:42) but not before she has engaged Jesus in dialogue and has shared the revelation she has received about him with her townspeople: 'Come and see a man who has told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' (4:29). Her voice is not lost in the 'violent shuttling' Spivak describes but emerges as a clear, and possibly disruptive, witness.[206]

[204] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson (Macmillan Education, 1988), p. 271.
[205] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', p. 306.
[206] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', p. 306.

Spivak also warns that 'representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish'.[207] Without being an intellectual, and without adopting a 20th century ideology, FG portrays the woman as such a figure. Her speech, though perhaps contained within some social limitations, nonetheless brings about revelation. Her testimony leads to the confession that Jesus is 'Saviour of the world' (4:42). Far from being absorbed into hegemonic discourse, her voice may also challenge gender and social boundaries but nevertheless makes way for divine revelation among her people.

Finally, Spivak claims: 'There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak'.[208] But John 4:1-42 seems to provide an example of the opposite. The Samaritan woman speaks boldly, clearly, and effectively and as such seeing the Samaritan woman as a witness challenges Spivak's conclusion by suggesting that marginalized voices can break through silencing structures and become the very vehicle through which revelation is received.

1.2. The call identified, the role model missed

Vijayaprakash provides a detailed analysis of John 4:1-42 from the postcolonial context of India, remaining clear-eyed about the enduring consequences of colonialism in formerly colonised lands.[209] His discussion focusses on the marginalisation of the Samaritans, particularly in relation to the Jews, tracing this back to the deportation of the Samaritans by Assyria in the 8th century BCE.[210] He also extensively highlights how Jesus' encounter with the woman challenges societal and religious norms. The essay is, as its title suggests, a call to

[207] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', p. 308.
[208] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', p. 310.
[209] Thevan Vijayaprakash, 'Hear the Voice of Silenced', p. 12.
[210] Thevan Vijayaprakash, 'Hear the Voice of Silenced', p. 8.

give due attention to marginalised voices.[211] While Vijayaprakash highlights an important issue, especially as one who emanates from a postcolonial context, by missing an opportunity to address the Samaritan woman's role as a witness, he risks reducing her to a symbol of marginalisation and exclusion (albeit not in her engagement with Jesus). By not engaging the liberative potential of her example, he overlooks the way her agency, theological insight, and witness bring transformation to her community and, potentially, to the Gospel's broader readership. The Samaritan woman's role as a witness makes way for a reading that not only highlights the persistence of marginalisation but also demonstrates that marginalisation can be overcome and transformation brought about by unlikely voices.

While Spivak and Vijayaprakash are right to highlight the potential for the Samaritan woman to be viewed as a figure of exclusion, they risk overlooking the narrative's insistence on her agency. The Samaritan woman not only receives revelation about Jesus' identity, but she wrestles with it, asks questions, interprets Jesus' words and ultimately proclaims what she has learned. This should prompt a shift from viewing her as a silenced subaltern to a nascent disciple and witness whose actions shape the narrative of 4:1-42.

2. The woman as a disciple in her own right

2.1. The woman as a 'theologically competent disciple'

Far from being silenced and unable to act, the Samaritan woman also emerges as a disciple of Jesus. Smith Carman sets out to correct the common assumptions in biblical scholarship that the Samaritan woman at the well is 'a morally corrupt character'.[212] Through a detailed analysis of three aspects of this woman's identity, Smith Carman shows that FE actually depicts the

[211] Thevan Vijayaprakash, 'Hear the Voice of Silenced', p. 11.
[212] Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria', p. 57.

woman as 'a theologically competent disciple' who takes on a pioneering role in revealing the identity of Jesus to non-Jews.[213]

First, from the standpoint of ethnicity, Smith Carman argues that most of the hostility between Samaritans and Jews is read into this passage rather than arising from it.[214] Smith Carman argues in detail that the narrative itself emphasises dialogue, mutual respect through dialogue and the breaking down of cultural divisions (the sharing of food and drinking vessels).[215] She concludes by observing that the Samaritan woman points out that she and Jesus share the same lineage as descendants of Jacob.[216] For Smith Carman, the woman's ethnicity does not invalidate her testimony.

Second, with regards to gender, Smith Carman, quite provocatively, states that: 'The woman's past sexual history is a single line in the story, but many have dismissed the woman as a possible disciple because they find her sexuality problematic and presume Jesus thinks likewise.'[217] The woman's negative reputation arises primarily from interpretive traditions shaped by readers' assumptions rather than from FE's characterisation itself. By reframing her situation in light of death, divorce and social vulnerability, Carman highlights how the woman can be seen as a victim of her circumstances rather an agent of immorality. Her theological acuity demonstrates that the text affirms her discipleship.[218] Smith Carman, like Dube[219], also suggests that her ability to take the missional initiative towards her people is in stark contrast with Jesus' (male) disciples.[220]

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[213] Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria', p. 58.
[214] Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria', pp. 57–58.
[215] Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria', pp. 57–59.
[216] Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria', p. 60.
[217] Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria', p. 63.
[218] Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria'.
[219] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 65.
[220] Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria', p. 64.

Third, Smith Carman raises the possibility of the woman's enslavement. In antiquity, slaves were commonly regarded as acceptable sexual outlets for their masters. This may explain why Jesus does not rebuke her or her behaviour; if she is enslaved, her body is not her own, and any moral culpability would rest with her owner rather than with her.[221]

Her testimony leads many Samaritans to believe, making her theologically a 'theologically competent disciple'.[222] For Smith Carman, far from being a fallen figure, the Samaritan woman emerges as a model disciple whose witness expands the scope of Jesus' mission. Smith Carman's framing of the Samaritan woman is persuasive but the brevity of the woman's appearance in FG must temper any assessment of her discipleship. This explains this writer's choice to describe the woman as a nascent disciple.

2.2. The woman as a 'quick-witted border crosser'

Another positive interpretation of the Samaritan woman comes from the pen of Hanna-Maria Mehring. In her article *The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4,* she traces the history of intersectionality from its Black feminist roots to its appropriation in European biblical studies, before applying it to John 4.[223] Intersectionality, she argues, describes how different forms of discrimination interact[224], and how in biblical exegesis it serves to expose power structures at three levels: the world of the text, the socio-cultural world of the New Testament, and the history of interpretation.[225] This approach aims to 'uncover complex, multidimensional liberation-theological potentials'.[226] This framework allows Mehring to present the Samaritan woman as a border-crossing figure whose encounter with

[221] Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria', p. 67.
[222] Smith Carman, 'The Woman of Samaria', p. 58.
[223] Mehring, 'The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4'.
[224] Mehring, 'The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4', p. 1.
[225] Mehring, 'The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4', p. 5.
[226] Mehring, 'The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4', p. 5.

Jesus challenges entrenched hierarchies and opens up fresh possibilities for reading agency and liberation into the narrative.

Mehring identifies three intersecting aspects of the Samaritan woman's identity that mark her for discrimination: her gender and sexuality, her role as a worshipper of Yahweh on Mount Gerizim, and her belonging to a 'non-people' often dismissed as foolish.[227] However, in John 4, she emerges not as a passive victim but as a quick-witted interlocutor who challenges boundaries.

In their first dialogue, Jesus asks for water and the woman responds with a pointed question: 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (4:9). Mehring sees the Samaritan woman as the 'secret heroine' of this dialogue, pointing out Jesus' breach of purity rules and taking responsibility for *his* ritual status.[228] Later, the reference to her five husbands evokes stereotypes of Samaritan foolishness, but her honest reply overturns this stigma and parallels Nathanael's role in 1:45–51: both figures become key witnesses to Jesus' identity.[229] Finally, in 4:25–26 she voices the first confession of faith in Christ by a woman, raising the possibility of his messiahship and receiving Jesus' affirmation, ἐγώ εἰμι ('I am') (4:26). She then becomes a missionary to her townspeople.[230]

Mehring concludes that the Samaritan woman is a border crosser—intelligent, independent, and theologically astute—who undoes categories of gender, ethnicity, and religion, and plays

[227] Mehring, 'The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4', p. 5.
[228] The emphasis is Mehring's. Mehring, 'The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4', p. 7.
[229] Mehring, 'The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4', p. 9.
[230] Mehring, 'The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4', p. 10.

a decisive role in revealing Jesus' identity.[231] This assessment moves decisively away from passivity and victimhood.

As the Samaritan woman emerges as a theologically perceptive conversation partner and boundary-crossing interlocutor, her involvement moves beyond an example of personal transformation towards a more public role that draws others into an encounter with Jesus. This leads to an evaluation of her place within FG's juridical framework, where witness is not personal but cosmic in scope.

3. A witness in a cosmic trial

3.1. Μαρτυρεῖν

Where English translations speak of the woman's 'testimony' in 4:39, the Greek presents her as the subject of the verb μαρτυρεῖν (to witness). By translating a verb as a noun, English translations disguise the fact that she not only possesses a testimony but that she is active in sharing it. Furthermore, the Samaritan woman of 4:1-42 is unique in that she is the only one who is described as testifying (μαρτυρέω).[232] Lincoln identifies the Samaritan woman as one of seven witnesses in FE's cosmic lawsuit.[233] In this role, the Samaritan woman shares with John the Baptist (1:7, 19-34; 3:26-30), Jesus himself (8:14, 18), the Father (5:37-38; 8:18), Jesus' works/signs (5:36; 10:25), the Scriptures (5:39; 45-47) and the Spirit (15:26-27; 16:13-14). The Samaritan woman's role is distinctive as an outsider whose testimony is nonetheless

[231] Mehring, 'The Samaritan Woman as a Quick-Witted Border Crosser in John 4', p. 11.
[232] Tommy Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well as a Witness in John Revisited', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 73.2 (2022), pp. 535–88 (p. 577), doi:10.1093/jts/flac082.
[233] Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial* (Wipf and Stock, 2019), p. 23 <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1724962/> [accessed 7 December 2025].

worthy of inclusion in FG's lawsuit motif. Given its juridical associations, the verb μαρτυρεῖν has prompted many interpreters to read FG through the lens of a cosmic trial.[234]

3.2. The woman as a credible witness

Tommy Wasserman sets out to examine the Samaritan woman's role as a witness in 4:1-42 by focussing on her credibility. He begins by situating her testimony within the FG's broader trial motif, where protagonists testify to Jesus' identity before the world.[235] The Samaritan woman stands out, because, in the Greco-Roman as well as in the Jewish legal contexts, women were generally prevented from giving testimony in court, given the unreliability their words were considered to have.[236] The Samaritan woman's role in 4:1-42 seems antithetical to its cultural backdrop.

Wasserman draws out narrative clues that emphasise her marginalization. First, she herself expresses surprise at the fact that Jesus would even speak to her, a Samaritan (4:9).[237] Second, the disciples display a similar king of astonishment with Jesus speaking to a woman (4:27).[238] Third, her marital history of five husbands and a current non-marital partner would have also undermined her credibility as a witness (4:18).[239] These three narrative details combine to show that, by contemporary cultural standards, the woman would have been disqualified as a credible witness.[240]

[234] William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Zondervan Academic, 2009), p. 331.
[235] Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well', pp. 537–38.
[236] Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well', p. 586.
[237] Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well', p. 579.
[238] Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well', p. 581.
[239] Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well', p. 582.
[240] Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well', pp. 587–88.

Nevertheless, as portrayed by the text in 4:29-30, her testimony appears to be credible in the eyes of the townspeople since they follow her to meet Jesus for themselves. For Wasserman, this fact would have 'shocked' contemporary readers.[241] This suggests that FE is deliberately subverting their cultural expectations: while in human courts her testimony would have been dismissed, in the divine economy it is validated.[242] Furthermore, Wasserman suggests a 'two-level' reading of the text.[243] On the narrative level, the woman's testimony initiates belief. But, on the level of a possible Johannine community from which the text emanated, the woman's testimony shows a more egalitarian and inclusive attitude to women.[244]

Wasserman highlights a significant tension within the text. At the same time the Samaritan embodies the tension between cultural disqualification and divine validation, making her testimony both disputed (from the standpoint of the 'world') but also indispensable (in the context of FG's purposes summarised in 20:31).

3.3. The woman as a witness

Lincoln reads FG through the lens of a lawsuit motif, where truth itself is contested.[245] Drawing on Isaianic imagery, Lincoln argues that Jesus is portrayed as both witness and judge: he highlights how Isaianic courtroom imagery supports the Johannine lawsuit motif. In Isaiah 1:2 and 43:9–12, creation and the nations are summoned as witnesses, resonating with John 8:18 and 15:26–27 where Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit testify. Likewise, Isaiah 3:13 and 50:8–9 portray God as judge, echoed in John 5:22–30 and 8:16 where Jesus exercises judgment entrusted by the Father.[246] Furthermore, the Gospel dramatizes conflicting testimonies: the

[241] Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well', p. 588.
[242] Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well', p. 588.
[243] Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well', p. 585.
[244] Wasserman, 'The Woman at the Well', pp. 583–85.
[245] Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, pp. 12–33.
[246] Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, pp. 36–45.

Jewish authorities versus Jesus' disciples and the Spirit.[247] Finally, this trial motif frames truth as decisive for eternal destiny: life for believers and condemnation for those who reject Jesus.[248]

Lincoln notes that the 'forensic' language of μαρτυρέω only appears at the conclusion of the Samaritan woman's interaction with Jesus.[249] This leads him to reframe her role in terms of testimony rather than witness, in the strict legal sense. Her testimony unfolds in two ways. First, she expresses messianic expectations: 'I know that Messiah is coming' (4:25), which Jesus confirms with his declaration: 'I am he' (4:26).[250] In this way, the woman's testimony plays a critically part in the revelation of Jesus' identity. Second, she shares this revelation with her fellow villagers, giving her testimony a missional dimension.[251] Lincoln characterises her role as one of revealing Jesus' identity and then sharing that revelation with others. Furthermore, Lincoln highlights how the Jesus' mission extends beyond Isreal to all nations.[252] With this in mind, the Samaritan woman's testimony then anticipates the Spirit's mission in 15:26-27. In Lincoln's reading, the woman is affirmed as an important (if not technical) actor in the Gospel's cosmic lawsuit.

This section has outlined the Samaritan woman's place within FG's cosmic trial motif. The woman's testimony is not anecdotal: it is a deliberate contribution to FG's trial for truth. But the woman's witness extends beyond the legal motif as it is shared with her community. This transition highlights the dual aspect of Johannine witness, which leads to the examination of the Johannine conception of mission.

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[247] Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, pp. 57–73.
[248] Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, pp. 207–21.
[249] Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, p. 57.
[250] Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, p. 443.
[251] Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, p. 443.
[252] Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, p. 256.

4. Mission in FG

4.1. A Johannine understanding of mission

In Chapter 3, we explored the missional dynamic expressed through the Father's sending of the Son. This next section will investigate the role played by Jesus' followers in this mission. Gorman offers a significant insight by qualifying 4:31-38 as a 'mini-mission discourse'.[253] However, he also notes that this insertion is 'puzzling' since the disciples will not be sent until 20:21: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'[254] Gorman's conclusion is striking: 'The narrator's assumption, then, must *be* that simply to be Jesus' disciple is to be sent.'[255] Within this framework, the Samaritan woman is cast as a missional precursor. Her testimony in 4:29-30 exemplifies this dynamic: she shares her personal encounter with Jesus, and her words lead her townspeople to meet Jesus for themselves. In so doing, she anticipates the later sending of disciples and shows that mission begins not with formal commissioning but with witness that naturally follows her encounter with Jesus.

The emphasis on testimony is reinforced by Brown and Moloney, who explain that the Johannine community came to the early realisation that their belief that Jesus was the Christ who had been raised from the dead came with the mandate to share this good news.[256] Central to this sharing is the sharing of personal stories.[257] This is something that the Samaritan woman does. While she cannot yet witness to Jesus' death and resurrection (though this events looms over the whole Gospel, as seen in our analysis of the title Saviour of the world in chapter 3), she does testify to his omniscience (4:29) and to the possibility of him being the Messiah (4:25,

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[253] Michael J. Gorman, *Abide and Go* (Cascade Books, 2018), p. 66 <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/882592/10> [accessed 15 December 2025].
[254] Gorman, *Abide and Go*.
[255] Gorman, *Abide and Go*, p. 66.
[256] Sherri Brown and Francis J. Moloney, *Interpreting the Gospel and Letters of John* (Eerdmans, 2017), p. 102 <https://www.perlego.com/book/2015380/interpreting-the-gospel-and-letters-of-john-an-introduction> [accessed 15 December 2025].
[257] Sherri Brown and Moloney, *Interpreting the Gospel and Letters of John*, p. 101.

29). If mission is sharing one's experience of Jesus, then the Samaritan woman is an active participant in that mission.

Van der Watt takes this further and stresses that mission is not only verbal but lived, specifically by imitating Jesus by being one with the Father (17:11) This unity with God the Father 'regulate[s] their lives' in such a way that they represent 'the divine reality with all its qualities in this world'.[258] According to van der Watt, mission and living are closely intertwined. On the basis of 4:1-42 alone, however, it is difficult to comment on how this intersection works out in the life of the Samaritan woman. The text does not narrate her subsequent living, and her abrupt disappearance in 4:42 prevents us from knowing whether the testimony/living dichotomy existed in her life. What we can say is that her testimony initiates mission, even if the narrative does not support van der Watt's lived conception of mission.

The frameworks suggested by these scholars suggest that the Samaritan woman stands at the confluence of several strands of Johannine missiology: her testimony anticipates the later, formal sending of disciples, it models the sharing of a personal encounter with Jesus, and it raises the question of how witness becomes embodied by Godly living, though, in this instance, without resolving it.

4.2. The Johannine approach to mission

Teresa Okure argues that the Johannine approach to mission is rooted in the Evangelist's sustained emphasis on Jesus' unique and exclusive mission from the Father and that all further missionary endeavours derive—and are dependent on—on that God-given mission.[259] She

[258] Jan van der Watt, *An Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters*, 1st edn (T&T Clark, 2008), p. 68 <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/392965> [accessed 28 April 2025].
[259] Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (J.C.B. Mohr, 1988), pp. 286–88.

contends that in 4:1–42, Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman (conducted in the absence of the disciples) reveals him as the Messiah and the giver of life.[260] This shows that the Father and the Son are the true labourers in mission (cf. 4:38).[261] Nevertheless, the woman's role is crucial. Through her genuine interaction with Jesus, where she 'dictates the terms of the conversation' while he guides it toward revelation, she becomes the narrative and missiological bridge between Jesus and the Samaritans.[262] However, FE emphasises that, although she brings her townspeople to Jesus, the Samaritans ultimately confess that 'Jesus, not the woman, is their real evangelizer'.[263] Furthermore, her openness to Jesus' self-revelation exemplifies FE's audience's proper response of faith.[264]

Okure connects this missionary portrayal to the Johannine community's crisis, marked by defecting disciples and others acting with pride or self-sufficiency.[265] Hence the Gospel's forensic and didactic tone, urging believers to continue in faith.[266] Mission in John embraces both believers and non-believers, since Jesus' mission concerns 'the whole world' and addresses believers who must be sustained continually in their faith.[267] The Gospel is therefore a missionary document because it is a community document, centred on Jesus' ongoing and abiding mission.[268]

4.3. Jesus and the Samaritan woman (JN 4:1-42) in Africa (Okure)

Okure's later re-reading of John 4:1-42 focusses these missional insights on the African context. However, her reference to an African context risks implying a single, unified

[260] Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, p. 286.
[261] Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, p. 287.
[262] Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, p. 289.
[263] Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, p. 286.
[264] Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, p. 291.
[265] Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, pp. 288–89.
[266] Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, p. 289.
[267] Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, pp. 292–93.
[268] Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, pp. 292–94.

experience, despite the continent's vast cultural, linguistic, and socio-political diversity. Such a generalisation may obscure the distinct realities of different African communities. Okure brings forward the shared experiences of marginalisation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, making these interpretive keys for African socio-political realities.[269] She critiques historical-critical approaches for neglecting contextual and feminist dimensions, arguing instead for a narrative and intertextual approach that is attentive to contemporary African struggles.[270] Jesus' Galilean identity, marked by prejudice and rejection, runs in parallel with the Samaritan woman's stigmatization through ethnic hostility, gendered exclusion, and moral suspicion.[271] Their encounter then becomes a model of boundary-breaking dialogue that challenges racism, sexism, and religious exclusivism.[272]

The most provocative element of Okure's contextual reading is her imaginative 'relocation' of Jesus and the Samaritan woman to Africa, where both figures would recognise familiar patterns of prejudice, ethnic conflict, gender marginalisation, and global economic exploitation.[273] Okure argues that the Johannine narrative exposes how such structures inhibit Africans from receiving God's 'living water' of dignity and community.[274] Her critique extends to church structures that silence women despite the Gospel's portrayal of women as primary witnesses and theological interlocutors.[275] Ultimately, and pertinently for this dissertation, she contends that liberation emerges when all—poor and rich—embrace Jesus' self-emptying mission that restores human dignity and dismantles oppressive hierarchies.[276]

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[269] Teresa Okure, 'Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (Jn 4:1–42) in Africa', *Theological Studies*, 70.2 (2009), pp. 401–18 (pp. 401–03), doi:10.1177/004056390907000209.
[270] Okure, 'Jesus and the Samaritan Woman', pp. 402–04.
[271] Okure, 'Jesus and the Samaritan Woman', pp. 405–09.
[272] Okure, 'Jesus and the Samaritan Woman', pp. 409–10.
[273] Okure, 'Jesus and the Samaritan Woman', pp. 410–13.
[274] Okure, 'Jesus and the Samaritan Woman', pp. 413–15.
[275] Okure, 'Jesus and the Samaritan Woman', pp. 415–16.
[276] Okure, 'Jesus and the Samaritan Woman', pp. 416–18.

Whether read through the lens of Johannine missiology or African contextual theology, Okure consistently presents the Samaritan woman as a transformative witness whose encounter with Jesus breaks down boundaries and empowers marginalised voices. Her testimony becomes both a model for mission and a means through which mission is carried out, strengthening the argument that she is not a passive victim but an active, boundary-crossing agent of revelation and renewal. Yet this positive portrayal sits uneasily alongside her abrupt dismissal in 4:42, a literary and theological tension that must be addressed to complete the picture.

5. The 'dismissal' of the woman in John 4:42

5.1. An abrupt dismissal

Having established the portrayal of the woman as a key witness in John 4:1-42, her abrupt dismissal by her townspeople in 4:42 constitutes a difficult theological and exegetical problem, which is compounded by her absence from the rest of FG. Having received her witness, they tell her: 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.' (4:42). The abruptness of this dismissal is compounded by the fact that the Samaritan woman does not feature again in the Johannine narrative. This is in direct contrast to Nicodemus in 3:1-21, who makes no immediate response to Jesus. Unlike the woman who shares her encounter, he returns in 7:50 and 19:39 where he generously contributes to the supplies required for Jesus' burial.

5.2. A gendered issue

Dube notes the Samaritan's sudden marginalisation in 4:42 and frames it in terms of discrimination against women.[277] She detects a literary pattern that initially recognizes the Samaritan woman's role, but once her role as a witness is complete, Jesus' mission is passed

[277] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 69.

on to men (Jesus himself, his disciples, and the male villagers).[278] Dube suggests that the woman then takes on a secondary role.[279] But this seems generous, given that the woman never reappears in the FE's account. This raises the question of whether her disappearance reflects a literary strategy, theological intent, or gendered marginalization.

5.3. A role completed

Several scholars interpret her dismissal as the natural completion of her role, as a witness or as a mediator. Lincoln reads the woman's dismissal as the encapsulation of 'the relationship of testimony and belief'.[280] The woman's role as witness is completed by the villagers coming to faith.[281] For Bultmann, FE 'has no special interest in the figure of the woman herself'.[282] The inclusion of the woman 'serve[s] only to bring the Samaritans to Jesus'.[283] Bourgel argues that FG originates from a context comprising both Jews and Samaritans.[284] The Samaritan women then is positioned at the intersection of both communities to show that both communities can live side by side. From this reading, the woman's dismissal can be explained by the completion of her role as a mediator. By these readings, the woman's role is seen as completed.

5.4. A narrative device

Day contends that the Samaritan woman's disappearance in 4:42 is not a dismissal but represents an instance of a narrative strategy, where FE depicts her testimony giving way to the townspeople's confession of faith.[285] By contrast, Kim views the woman's role as a 'foil' to

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[278] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 70.
[279] Dube, 'Reading for Decolonization', p. 70.
[280] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 179.
[281] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 179.
[282] Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, p. 193.
[283] Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, p. 193.
[284] Jonathan Bourgel, 'John 4:4-42: Defining a Modus Vivendi Between Jews and the Samaritans', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 69.1 (2018), pp. 39–65 (p. 41), ATLAi9KZ180630000592, doi:10.1093/jts/flx215.
[285] Janeth Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well: Interpretation of John 4:1-42 in Retrospect and Prospect* (Brill, 2021), p. 164 <https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Woman_at_the_Well/UMxKEAAAQBAJ?hl=en> [accessed 14 December 2025].

reveal Jesus' identity[286], her dismissal reflecting her limited narrative function.[287] Here, the woman's dismissal is the result of her inability to respond to Jesus in faith, though she is a witness.

5.5. A failure to respond

Toan Do rejects Bultmann's reading of the woman's role as a 'catalyst'[288], and argues that, whereas the townspeople respond in faith, the Samaritan woman's response is more ambiguous, if not 'disingenuous'.[289] Her personal inability to respond in faith could ultimately lead to her dismissal.[290] Here, the woman's dismissal is the result of her inability to respond to Jesus in faith, though she is a witness. Her dismissal is theological rather than merely narrative.

5.6. An unresolved problem

From a postcolonial perspective, the abrupt dismissal of the Samaritan woman in 4:42 perhaps betrays an uneasy balance between voice and power. She interacts confidently with Jesus, her testimony is received by her community and draws them to Jesus, but once that function is complete, her presence is erased, perhaps to the benefit of more powerful interests. The lack of a scholarly consensus to satisfactorily explain her disappearance underscores the unresolved tension between her pivotal role as a witness and that narrative's inability to sustain her agency within the Johannine narrative.

How ever one explains the Samaritan woman's disappearance in 4:42, it highlights a paradox within the theme of witness in FG. The Samaritan woman's voice is effective but temporary.

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[286] Kim, 'The Samaritan Woman', p. 101.
[287] Kim, 'The Samaritan Woman', p. 101.
[288] Toan Do, 'Revisiting the Woman of Samaria and the Ambiguity of Faith in John 4:4-42', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 81.2 (2019), pp. 252–76 (p. 252), doi:10.1353/cbq.2019.0106.
[289] Do, 'Revisiting the Woman of Samaria and the Ambiguity of Faith', pp. 254–55.
[290] Do, 'Revisiting the Woman of Samaria and the Ambiguity of Faith', p. 273.

This tension does not undermine the significance of her role but it does highlight a complexity within the Johannine conception of witness.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the Samaritan woman's role in John 4:1-42 through the lens of witness rather than marginalisation. First, this chapter has shown that postcolonial assumptions of silencing do not account for the Samaritan woman's role in John 4:1-42. Rather than being marginalised, she speaks, questions, interprets, and initiates dialogue. Second, combining insights by Smith Carman and Mehring, this chapter demonstrated that the Samaritan woman can be understood as an independent actor and nascent disciple whose agency disrupts ethnic, gendered, and religious boundaries. Third, her testimony participates in the FG's cosmic trial, where unlikely figures become bearers of truth and contribute to the FG's juridical context over Jesus' identity. Fourth, her proclamation to her townspeople marks her as a missional agent whose witness anticipates the later sending of the disciples. Fifth, her abrupt disappearance in 4:42 remains a tension that is difficult to reconcile. The Samaritan woman cannot be reduced to a symbol of marginalisation but must be read as an active interlocutor and witness.

Conclusion

This dissertation began by defining the methodological basis for a postcolonial reading of John 4:1-42 'from the centre'. Chapter 1 argued that postcolonial interpretation requires both attentiveness to the enduring legacies of imperialism and a reflexive awareness of the interpreter's own positionality. Drawing on Segovia and Sugirtharajah, the chapter highlighted the need to interrogate Western normativity and the ideological forces that shape biblical interpretation. Through Horrell and Rogers, a reflexive hermeneutical framework was sketched that acknowledges inherited privilege, resists claims to objectivity and impartiality, and welcomes plurality without collapsing into relativism. Alongside these voices, Ricœur's account of the hermeneutical circle and his notion of a 'second naïveté' provided a conceptual bridge between critique and trust, reminding interpreters that suspicion is necessary but not sufficient, and that the text must be allowed to disclose meanings that exceed any single ideological lens.[291] The chapter also affirmed the value of historical-critical rigour as well as theological interpretation, insisting that the Bible must remain a dialogical partner rather than the passive object of ideological framing. These positions form the basis of a reading 'from the centre' that is accountable, self-aware and theologically engaged.

Chapter 2 applied these methodological positions to a detailed engagement with Dube's 'Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42)'. Dube's work was recognised as an important contribution to postcolonial biblical studies because it exposes potential imperial entanglements in the worlds of the text and of its readers. The chapter also recognised that Dube's reading was provocative but the reading's starting point of suspicion risked preventing any other—potentially liberating—reading from emerging. By placing imperial oppression and subordination at the forefront of her reading, Dube risks flattening the text's theological

[291] Ricœur, 'The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought', p. 351.

significance as well as overshadowing Johannine themes of revelation and life. The critique of Dube was not intended to be dismissive but sought to hold postcolonial concerns in tension with the texts literary and theological integrity.

Chapters 3 and 4 suggested readings of John 4:1-42 'from the centre' to show that a reflexive, postcolonial and theologically aware approach can draw out liberative readings. Chapter 3 explored the title 'Saviour of the world' and showed how this title resonates with both imperial echoes and the Gospel's reappropriation of these echoes to form a unique theological vision of the person of Jesus. Far from reinforcing domination, the title functions within FG as a proclamation of life and divine initiatives that transcends ethnic and political boundaries. Chapter 4 examined the Samaritan woman's role as a witness by highlighting her agency and the centrality of her role in the unfolding of the narrative of 4:1-42. The woman's portrayal was read as transcending any characterisation as the passive object of Jesus' mission or the symbol of colonised vulnerability. These chapters sought to demonstrate that John 4:1-42 held a message of liberation and hope, even beyond any colonial context.

To conclude, it must be recognised that the text of John 4:1-42 itself provides the interpretive model this dissertation has sought to outline. The narrative holds together elements that might otherwise be forced apart: the reality of contested space, the presence of asymmetric power, the agency of a marginalised interlocutor, and the theological claim that life is received in and through encounter with Jesus. A postcolonial reading 'from the centre' must therefore proceed with the text as a model. Jesus' journey to Samaria cannot be abstracted from the imperial world that frames it; at the same time, the woman's acuity, her capacity to question, and her witness cannot reduce her to the symbol of imperial marginalisation and domination. The text itself

seems to resist being flattened in this way. Instead, the text presents a dialogical encounter in which meaning emerges through the unsettling of expectations.

The confession that Jesus is 'truly the Saviour of the world' (4:42) stands as a reminder that the theological claims of the FG are not detached from lived experience but arise from complex social, cultural, and political realities. A reflexive, theologically engaged postcolonial hermeneutic does not resolve these tensions; it seeks to accept them. In doing so, John 4:1-42 is not limited to the site of ideological confirmation but becomes a space where critique, confession and transformation remain possible. This position does not eliminate the interpreters' location 'at the centre', but it renders that location more accountable, more attentive, and more capable of being addressed by the text. The disorientation that prompted this dissertation becomes the first step for a hermeneutic marked by openness, responsibility, and a renewed attentiveness to the theological and narrative complexity of John 4:1-42.

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