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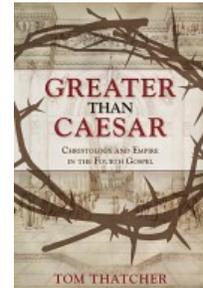
Book Review

Greater than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel

Tom Thatcher

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009

The Johannine scholar Tom Thatcher's recent work on the fourth gospel, *Greater than Caesar*, stands out as one of the most captivating studies on this unique Gospel. I suspect, no one would challenge the contention that scholars have been intrigued by this New Testament book since the advent of historical critical studies of the Bible. In my academic lifetime Johannine studies have oscillated from notion to notion, often in radically opposite directions.



In my own adult faith, John has moved from most to least favoured Gospel. Adele Reinhartz' seminal *Befriending the Beloved Disciple* strengthened immensely my negative reaction to John's overarching anti-Judaism. Even Raymond Brown's earlier nuancing and brilliant scholarship could not erase this blight from my mind and heart. Then along comes Thatcher's recent work to grip me by its intriguing and convincing notion that this sectarian Gospel was fundamentally an act of subversion against the imperial might of Rome. Of course, the interface of Roman imperial power and the early Jesus Movement is the rage these days, a development which I welcome with all my scholarly and pastoral heart. So I confess that I suffered some doubts. And then I read the book.

Thatcher's take on John's Gospel is creative and convincing. Building on the work of James C. Scott and others, he sees this Gospel as a clear example of how a tiny oppressed group (the Johannine community) used "the little tradition" of the oppressed to "profane" (by use of imperial language and notions) and to challenge "the great tradition" of empire and domination. Although Thatcher's use of the Cerberus image (the three-headed dog guarding the gates of Hades) may be an authorial conceit well beyond the purpose of the Gospel writer, it stands out as an apt image nonetheless. In short, Thatcher makes an excellent case that the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel trumps empire in a battle for dominance and control over a triad of imperial powers: (1) the client Jewish high priestly aristocracy, embodied by Caiaphas; (2) the Roman governor Pontius Pilate; and (3) the horrendous and terrifying Roman killing machine, crucifixion. In the face of all three of these powers the Johannine Jesus remains sublimely and supremely in control of the entire drama, orchestrating it according to the will of God over against the multi-form and seemingly irresistible power of Caesar and his minions.

Although Thatcher has not succeeded in removing my unease with the harsh sectarian anti-Judaism of the Fourth Gospel he has provided for me, for the New Testament field, and for all those interested in John's Gospel a welcome and brilliant study.

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