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Jesus’s Puzzling Retort to the Royal Official (John 4:48) in Isodiegetic Perspective

Abstract

When a “royal official” (βασιλικός) urges Jesus to help his dying son, Jesus surprisingly retorts (John 4:48): “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe!” Researchers find this outburst out of place in response to this desperate father, but this paper argues that it can be explained by use of an isodiegetic perspective, where the Johannine storyworld is informed by a larger narrative tradition in which the tetrarch Herod Antipas (ca. 4 BCE–39 CE) is a known adversary of Jesus, whose adherents strive to entrap him and get him killed. In view of the official’s expected patronal loyalty to “king” (βασιλεύς) Herod, his healing request can reasonably be presumed to be a trap until his appeal “Lord, come before my child dies!” (John 4:49) clarifies that the man is not acting as a client, but as a father.

Keywords

βασιλικός – Herod Antipas – Herodians – loyalty – shared storyworld – Gospel of John

1 A Surprising Outburst

At first glance, the healing of the son of a royal official (John 4:46–54) is a simple and straightforward healing narrative, where a father approaches Jesus to plead for his dying son (4:47), Jesus declares that the son is alive (4:50), and the man returns home to find him healed (4:51). But Jesus’s first reaction to the man’s request is a puzzling retort, that seems to have nothing to do with the narrated situation.¹

There was a royal official (βασιλικός) whose son lay ill in Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, who was close to death. Jesus said to him: “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe (ἐὰν μὴ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα ἴδητε, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε!)” The royal official said to him: “Sir, come down before my child dies!” Jesus said to him: “Go, your son lives.” The man believed what Jesus said to him, and went (John 4:46b–50).

As is clear from the renewed request in v. 49, the father character has no interest in miracles as proofs on which to base his faith. He already trusts Jesus to be both able and willing to heal, and is simply desperate to get him to his son before it is too late.² The outburst cannot make sense as addressed merely to the anxious father, and we need to seek the identity of the larger group – of which he is a member – that would motivate the use of the second-person plurals ἴδητε (“you see”) and πιστεύσητε (“you believe”) in the retort.

¹ W. Klaiber, *Das Johannesevangelium, Teilband 1: Joh 1,1–10,42* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017) 130: “Das klingt nicht nach einer verständnisvollen Antwort für einen Vater, der um das Leben seiner Kinder bangt.” Cf. M.M. Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015) 110–116.

² J.R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 257: “The father is so deeply anxious for the welfare of his son that no other consideration weighs with him.” Cf. D.M. Smith, *John* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) 126; C.G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 4; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2008) 145.

Scholars usually find the outburst directed either to the Galilean Jews that would have been Jesus's audience in Cana,³ or to first-century Jews in general.⁴ A connection between miracles and faith is suggested when many in Jerusalem come to trust Jesus's name when they see the signs (σημεῖα) he does (John 2:23), and a conflict may be at hand when the Jews (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) in Jerusalem ask him for a sign (σημεῖον) to prove his authority (2:18). Although Jesus has escaped his potential enemies in Jerusalem by travelling north through Samaria (4:1–4), in Cana he is met by a group of Galileans who have observed his deeds in Jerusalem, when they celebrated Passover there (5:45, cf. 2:13). But even though word has travelled, the Galileans receive Jesus well (4:45). There is therefore little to suggest that a conflict regarding signs and wonders is at hand, and nothing to connect such a conflict to the desperate father, who only wants his son alive. The outburst thus makes little narratological sense.

The conundrum is not made any simpler by the Johannine Jesus's habit of knowing what he has not been told. He has seen Nathanael under the fig tree (John 1:48), he is aware of the Samaritan woman's five men (4:16–19), he senses that Lazarus is dead (11:3–14), and he knows that Thomas has demanded to put his finger in his nail wounds (20:24–29). In this particular scene, he does not need to be told where to find this official's son, or be led to him – he already knows whom to heal, and can simply tell the father that he

³ R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968) 466; D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 238; Kruse, *John*, 145; U.C. von Wahlde, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Vol. 2 of *The Gospel and Letters of John* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 209.

⁴ R.V.G. Tasker, *John: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1960) 81–82; Smith, *John*, 126.

is well.⁵ As the Johannine narrator avers (2:24–25), Jesus knows the inner life of human beings.⁶ A mere mistake on the part of the Johannine Jesus would therefore not be consistent with his characterization.

Perhaps the best proposal in previous scholarship is Ernst Haenchen’s redaction-critical solution that most of the story is repeated verbatim in the form in which it reached the Johannine evangelist, who then inserted the retort (4:48) in order to express his own views on the concept of a miracle-supported faith, and the father’s renewed request (4:49) to get the story back on track.⁷ In this reading, the second-person plurals mainly address the Johannine readers, whose theology on trusting Jesus on the basis of his deeds (διὰ τὰ ἔργα; John 14:11b) might be in need of correction. But even if Haenchen’s proposal makes theological and redaction-critical sense, it is far from satisfying from a narratological perspective to have the protagonist break the fourth wall and speak directly to the Gospel readers, leaving his intradiegetic interlocutor absolutely perplexed.

Therefore, this paper proposes a narratological methodology where the Johannine narrative is assumed to take place in a storyworld constructed by a larger narrative tradition of Jesus stories, where the

⁵ On the issue of Jesus’s special knowledge, see W. Bauer, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr, 1925) 39, 65–66; R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i–xii)* (AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966) 83, 171; C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978) 184; E. Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 1–6* (trans. R.W. Funk; Hermeneia; Fortress Press, 1984) 166, 221; Carson, *John*, 161, 220–21, 657; A.T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (BNTC 4; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005) 120, 320; J. Tripp, “Jesus’s Special Knowledge in the Gospel of John,” *NovT* 61.3 (2019) 269–288, here 272–277, DOI: 10.1163/15685365-12341635.

⁶ Tripp, “Special Knowledge,” 280.

⁷ Haenchen, *John*, 234–238; cf. Brown, *John*, 196; Barrett, *John*, 247–248; Lincoln, *John*, 187. Haenchen, *John*, 234–236, finds the story based on the same historical event as the healing of the centurion’s servant (Matt 8:5–13, Luke 7:1–10), but attributes the significant differences to two different oral narrative traditions behind the Synoptics and John, respectively.

circle around Herod Antipas – who is likely to be the βασιλεύς (“king”) behind the βασιλικός (“royal official”) – is associated with both hostility toward Jesus and an interest in his miraculous abilities. Within this storyworld, the royal official can readily be presumed to represent the Herodian point of view until proven otherwise. Jesus’s puzzling retort thus becomes a reasonable way of responding to what can be presumed to be a Herodian scheme of attack – until the father’s renewed request clarifies that in this case, no evil intent is at hand, and the father serves no one except for his son.

2 An Isodiegetic Perspective on the Fourth Gospel

In the Gospel of John, a number of narrative clues suggest that the story is not intended to be the reader’s first encounter with the storyworld of John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth, and their disciples. First, the protagonist is introduced as ὁ λόγος (“the Word”; 1:1) and τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν (“the true light”; 1:9) before he is mentioned by name (1:17; cf. Mark 1:1).⁸ Secondly, John is questioned for baptizing people (1:25) before the narrator informs the reader that he does indeed baptize (1:28). Thirdly, John attests that he has seen the Spirit descend upon Jesus (1:32) in a scene that is narrated in Mark 1:10 and Matt 3:16, but never in John. And most importantly, many people in Jerusalem come to trust in Jesus’s name when they observe the signs (σημεῖα) he does (2:23, cf. 3:2), even though the only such sign that has been narrated has been performed as far away as in Cana in Galilee (2:1–11). Modern readers seldom find this jarring, since they already know that Christian Gospels are about Christ, that the Baptist baptized, and that Jesus is known for

⁸ Cf. K. Bro Larsen’s argument that John’s presentation of his protagonist is organized to overcome the rhetorical difficulty that Jesus is a *homo novus*, and therefore automatically inferior to traditional authorities. K. Bro Larsen, “Jesus, God of Old and Newcomer: Rhetorical Character Presentation in John 1–2,” in *Anatomies of the Gospels and Beyond: Essays in Honor of R. Alan Culpepper* (eds. M.C. Parsons, E.S. Malbon, and P.N. Anderson; BibInt 164; Leiden: Brill, 2019) 281–299.

his numerous miracles. The same would be true for ancient readers who had encountered the characters of Jesus and John the Baptist in other stories before hearing John's Gospel.⁹

In all probability, the Gospel of John was written in a context where a number of Jesus stories already circulated, some of which the Johannine authors chose to incorporate as part of their narrative, others of which they chose to leave out, but nevertheless presumed their readers to know.¹⁰ There is no way to discern exactly which these stories were, or what form they took in the minds of the Johannine authors. However, we have an approximation of them in the Synoptic Gospels, which may or may not have been available to the Johannine authors, but certainly reflect, to some extent, the same narrative tradition.¹¹ When Synoptic

⁹ M.J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012) 205: "Worlds are built up as more and more stories are set in them, and if a world's consistency is to be maintained, each additional story to be added to a world must take into account all of the narrative material already present in a world."

¹⁰ In the nomenclature proposed by Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 205–210, the Gospel of John would be a *transquel* to the individual stories of this narrative tradition, since it includes them within its larger narrative span, and a *paraquel* to the Synoptic Gospels, since it narrates events that putatively occurred in the same time-frame as the ones described in the Synoptics.

¹¹ Haenchen, *John*, 237–238, argues that the Johannine author had no knowledge of the Synoptic Gospels, but made frequent use of a narrative tradition that had certain points of contact with the Synoptics. Thompson, *John*, 2–8, argues that although John does not seem to depend on the Synoptics, he seems not to be writing in isolation from other early accounts of Jesus. J. Zumstein, "Intratextuality and Intertextuality in the Gospel of John," in *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel As Literature* (eds. T. Thatcher and S.D. Moore; trans. M. Gray; Resources for Biblical Study 55; Atlanta: SBL, 2008) 121–135, here 129–131, argues that John used the Synoptics, but rearranged their materials freely. Michaels, *John*, 29, describes the majority position as advocating John's independence from the Synoptics without ruling out his familiarity with unwritten traditions behind them. I. Dunderberg, "The Royal Man (Βασιλικός) in John 4:46–54," in *Christ and the Emperor: The Gospel Evidence* (eds. G. Van Belle and J. Verheyden; BTS 20; Leuven: Peeters, 2014) 279–300, here 285–289, argues that the story of

stories, events, or characters match the narrative gaps left by the Johannine authors, we can use this Synoptic material to estimate what would have been narrated in parallel stories known to the Johannine authors.

When a narrative character we recognize from one story reappears in another,¹² this transposition may have a smaller or larger impact on the storyworld of the other narrative.¹³ Any number of flat,

the royal official is formed by conflation of the Synoptic healing of the centurion's servant with an unattested alternative version of the story known to John.

¹² R. Saint-Gelais, "Transfictionality," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (eds. D. Herman, M. Jahn, and M.-L. Ryan; London: Routledge, 2007) 612–613, DOI: 10.4324/9780203932896, holds that two texts sharing elements such as characters, imaginary locations, or fictional worlds have a transfictional relation. M.-L. Ryan, "Transfictionality Across Media," in *Theorizing Narrativity* (eds. J. Pier and J.A. Garcia Landa; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008) 385–417, here 388–394, has a stricter definition of transfictionality where the worlds projected by the two texts must be related but distinct – a definition that is difficult to apply to the storyworld of Gospel stories.

¹³ D. Herman, "Storyworld," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (eds. D. Herman, M. Jahn, and M.-L. Ryan; London: Routledge, 2007) 569–570, DOI: 10.4324/9780203932896, defines a storyworld as a discourse model used for understanding narratively organized discourse. He notes that any given storyworld is subject to being updated and revised as the readers encounter additional textual cues and attempt to reconstruct not only what happens, but also the surrounding context of what matters, drives action, and incites emotions for narrative characters and readers alike. L. Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 12–24, uses possible-worlds semantics to construct fictional worlds as "ensembles of nonactualized possible states of affairs," and argues that they are by nature constructed by authors, reconstructed and experienced by readers, and necessarily incomplete, because the reader can always conceive an undecidable question about the fictional world. This incompleteness also implies the always-present possibility of expanding and filling out the storyworld with new stories. M.-L. Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Indiana University Press, 1991) 19, prefers to speak of fictional worlds as "constructs of the mind," temporarily replacing the actual world in the mind of the reader. Cf. J.-N. Thon, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016) 35–43, who concludes that even though theorists disagree on the ontological status of storyworlds, they

indistinctive characters whose type, role, or personality we recognize from many other stories may be transposed without raising expectations that their actions or experiences in other storyworlds should be remembered or have consequences in the next. Such characters may be called *transdiegetic characters*, as they move freely across storyworlds. For instance, a flat ruler figure called “the king” appears in many fairy tales, without readers worrying about the consistency of their royal actions. The ultimately transdiegetic character is God, for whom any inconsistencies raise questions of the author’s theological outlook rather than in which storyworld the story takes place.

Contrastingly, if an identifiable round character with a significant backstory appears in another story than the one in which he was originally encountered, readers will infer that both stories take place in the same storyworld, that the events narrated in both stories can be placed within the same timeline, and that the character will act in accordance with characterization they remember from the previous story.¹⁴ A story featuring a spectacled young wizard with unruly hair named “Harry Potter” would be expected to occur in a world where Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry exists, where Quidditch is played, and where

tend to agree that readers use their imagination to fill in the gaps of narrative representation to arrive at a more complete fictional world.

¹⁴ This is a standard procedure in modern fan fiction, whose readers already know the main characters’ base characterizations, backstories, physical appearances, and reactions to certain life events from the canon literature, before encountering them in a fanfic. See D. Kaplan, “Construction of Fan Fiction Character Through Narrative,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (eds. K. Hellekson and K. Busse; McFarland, 2006) 134–152, here 136. Kaplan distinguishes between “canon characters” taken from the canonical works, and “original characters” invented for the fanfic, and K.B. Larsen, “Fan Fiction and Early Christian Apocrypha: Comparing Hypertextual Practices,” *ST* 73.1 (2019) 43–59, here 52, DOI: 10.1080/0039338X.2018.1552894, briefly reflects on how John’s original character “the beloved disciple” interacts with the canon character of Peter.

people travel by floo powder, even if these phenomena have no part in the plot at hand.¹⁵ Similarly, Lucasfilm's *The Mandalorian* undoubtedly takes place in the same universe as the 1977 *Star Wars* movie, even though the helmeted title character neither uses the force nor hunts womp rats. Such stories may be called *homodiegetic narratives*, as they take place in the very same storyworld, and reuse the same narrative characters.¹⁶

In the intermediate case, characters who are brought in from another story bring with them enough of their original characterization and background to be able to function in their new context, without necessarily importing their whole storyworld wholesale. Such characters may be called *isodiegetic characters*, since their storyworlds are equivalent, if not identical.¹⁷ A good example is Sherlock Holmes, whose various adaptations in books, theater, movies, radio, television, comics, and video games tend to

¹⁵ G. Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Stages 8; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 297, regards the preservation of a character's name as an almost infallible sign of diegetic faithfulness, where characters keep their nationality, gender, family background, and other parameters, which the reader can expect to reencounter. Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 18, retorts that the proper name as a rigid designator holding together all the embodiments of an individual in all possible worlds is theoretically thin and controversial.

¹⁶ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 294–303, 309–10, distinguishes between two kinds of diegetic transpositions of stories: heterodiegetic transformations, where the characters switch gender or are moved to another historical era, and homodiegetic transformations, where the story is retold from another perspective within the same storyworld, and perhaps given a whole other meaning. He also distinguishes between heterodiegetic, homodiegetic, and autodiegetic narrators in G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Cornell University Press, 1983) 244–252. Lastly, in Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 50–51, he also uses the same terms to refer to different levels of intradiegetic narratives – what Thon, *Transmedial Narratology*, 38, 50, prefers to speak of as a diegetic hierarchy of subworlds within a more encompassing storyworld.

¹⁷ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 231, n. 45, cf. 240–41, introduces the concept of isodiegetic analepses in the context of different levels of intradiegetic narratives, but the term easily lends itself to equivalent storyworlds organized laterally rather than hierarchically.

vary significantly in details from Arthur Conan Doyle's original 1887 *A Study in Scarlet*, but retain his overall characterization as an eccentric but perceptive private detective.¹⁸ BBC's 2010–2017 *Sherlock* successfully transposed Sherlock Holmes, John Watson, and Mycroft Holmes into modern-day London – a significantly larger transposition than the movement of characters between the similar storyworlds of the Markan and Johannine Gospels.¹⁹

In the Fourth Gospel, the character introduced as ὁ θεός (“God”) in 1:1 is a transdiegetic character, whose presence in the story does not inform us of any additional features of the storyworld. In contrast, the introduction of John (1:6) and the naming of Jesus Christ (1:17) imply that the story takes place in a storyworld already known to the reader from other stories about these characters.²⁰ At start, there is nothing to preclude the story from being homodiegetic with, say, the Gospel of Mark, but when Andrew and Simon

¹⁸ Saint-Gelais, “Transfictionality”, remarks that many readers would refuse to construe a strict identity between Conan Doyle's and Michael Dibdin's versions of Sherlock Holmes, since this would entail making the latter's adventure parts of the former's “authentic” biography. He suggests considering them transfictional counterparts to one another. Cf. L.E. Stein and K. Busse, “Introduction: The Literary, Televisual and Digital Adventures of the Beloved Detective,” in *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series* (eds. L.E. Stein and K. Busse; Jefferson: McFarland, 2012) 9–24, here 10–12. Ryan, “Transfictionality Across Media,” 390, similarly describes the French women who recur in various novels by Andreï Makine as counterparts of the same individual in different fictional worlds.

¹⁹ Stein and Busse, “Introduction,” 11; E.J. Evans, “Shaping Sherlocks: Institutional Practice and the Adaptation of Character,” in *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series* (eds. L.E. Stein and K. Busse; Jefferson: McFarland, 2012) 102–117.

²⁰ K. Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* (Routledge Advances in Comic Studies 3; New York: Routledge, 2017) 90–108, describes the importance of recognizable characters to provide narrative continuity in comics and graphic novels, create a visual bridge between otherwise disparate panels, and give the reader a sense of what is important in the story. The beginning of the Fourth Gospel similarly constructs a narrative bridge to the larger narrative tradition about Jesus.

Peter seek out Jesus on John's recommendation (1:35–42) rather than being called by Jesus while pursuing their business, as in Mark 1:16–18, minor contradictions start to appear between the two storyworlds.²¹ As the narrative proceeds, the reader may observe that despite many differences in details, features of the Johannine storyworld maintain a functional equivalence with their counterparts in other Gospel stories, and conclude that the Johannine and Synoptic traditions are largely isodiegetic.

From the introduction of the royal official (βασιλικός), there is nothing in particular to suggest that the king (βασιλεύς) behind this designation is anything else than a flat, transdiegetic character. If we only need a general understanding of the royal official's status in the storyworld, a comparison with any first-century royal figure with power over Capernaum would do.²² But faced with Jesus's puzzling retort, we may consider whether the ideal reader is expected to bring in the characterization of an isodiegetic counterpart of the βασιλικός from some other first-century story about Jesus in order to make sense of his position within the Johannine storyworld.

²¹ For instance, the Markan Jesus begins his public ministry after John has been jailed (Mark 1:14), and cleanses the temple shortly before his arrest (Mark 11:15–18), while the Johannine Jesus works alongside the Baptist (John 3:22–24) and cleanses the temple at the outset of his ministry (John 2:13–22).

²² Had the king been identified as "Herod," the situation had not been particularly different, since the multiplicity of royal figures with this name – Herod the Great, his sons Herod II, Herod Antipas, and Herod Archelaus, his grandsons Herod Agrippa I and Herod of Chalcis, and his great-grandson Herod Agrippa II – would facilitate a rapid transition from historical accuracy to a stock character. Cf. the argument that Mark is characterizing Herod typologically as a tyrant in A. Smith, "Tyranny Exposed: Mark's Typological Characterization of Herod Antipas (Mark 6:14–29)," *BibInt* 14.3 (2006) 259–293., the argument that the various Herods in Luke form one composite character in F. Dicken, *Herod as a Composite Character in Luke-Acts* (WUNT II/375; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014) 62–70, 166–7, Cf. also the Herodian family tree in H.W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas: A Contemporary of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 349; or J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 394.

If we consider that Herod, Jesus, and their respective adherents are not merely fictional characters, but also historical figures, their isodiegetic statuses become one step more complex, since their narrative characterizations also have some relationships to their historical counterparts.²³ However, since readers fill in the gaps of storyworlds not from the actual world itself, but from their limited knowledge of the world,²⁴ which is in turn formed by stories featuring fictional counterparts of historical figures, it is unlikely that historical reconstructions would have anything more to bring to this study than the ancient stories from which such reconstructions are made.

Therefore, the following analysis will presume that the story of the royal official takes place in a storyworld constructed not only by the Johannine narrative, but also by a number of unknown other ancient stories that give additional information about the royal official and which stance toward Jesus he may be construed to have. To approximate the impact on the Johannine storyworld from these unknown stories, we will consider the pericope from an isodiegetic perspective, where the characterizations of the official's putative master, Herod Antipas, and of his adherents – the Ἡροδιανοί (“Herodians”) – are given by the Synoptic Gospels.

3 The King Behind the Royal Official

To decipher the designation βασιλικός (“royal official”) using only information available within the Gospel of John would be far from straightforward.²⁵ The only βασιλεύς (“king”) that has been mentioned in the

²³ Doležal, *Heterocosmica*, 16–17, remarks that the distinctions between actual and fictional entities is easily blurred, especially if they share a proper name, and argues that “fictional persons and their actual prototypes are linked by transworld identity.”

²⁴ A point made by Thon, *Transmedial Narratology*, 41.

²⁵ The term is a rare one, but appears in Egyptian papyri as shorthand for the βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς (“royal scribe”) charged with duties of administration and taxation, and in Josephus (in plural) to denote the soldiers of Herod

narrative up to this point is Jesus himself, who is designated βασιλεὺς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ (“king of Israel”) by Nathanael in John 1:49,²⁶ and it would be unreasonable to take βασιλικός as denoting someone in Jesus’s service. The Roman emperor is declared a βασιλεὺς in 19:15, but only to make it clear that hailing Jesus as king would be an act of insurrection against Caesar. Although it would be within the realm of possibility to take the βασιλικός to be a member of the imperial household,²⁷ a solid majority of scholars take the title to associate him with Herod Antipas,²⁸ even though no such character is ever mentioned in the Fourth Gospel.

the Great, and in Philo as an adjective denoting royal qualities. See Bauer, *Johannesevangelium*, 73–74; A. Verhoogt, *Regaling Officials in Ptolemaic Egypt: A Dramatic Reading of Official Accounts from the Menches Papers* (Leiden: Brill, 2020) 28–30; Dunderberg, “The Royal Man,” 289–292, 297–298. Dunderberg (298) suggests that John deliberately chooses a vague term to neither confirm nor contradict that the official is identical to the centurion of Matt 8:5–13, Luke 7:1–10.

²⁶ Jesus’s royal title reappears in the triumphal entry into Jerusalem in John 12:12–15, and in the trial before Pilate in 18:33–19:22, where it is altered to ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων (“the king of the Jews”).

²⁷ Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.58/395 (GCS 10: 288.14–20), briefly remarks that the simple-minded (ἀκεραϊότερος) reader would take the royal official to be either one of king Herod’s men or a member of Caesar’s household, before focusing on possible symbolic interpretation of him as either representing Abraham, whose Jewish descendants are in mortal danger from rejecting Jesus, or the immaterial rulers of the present age, under whom humanity suffers. Cf. C.J. Berglund, “How ‘Valentinian’ Was Heracleon’s Reading of the Healing of the Son of a Royal Official?,” in *Healing and Exorcism in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity* (eds. M. Tellbe and T. Wasserman; WUNT II/511; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019) 219–239, here 224.

²⁸ Tasker, *John*, 81; Brown, *John*, 190; Schnackenburg, *John*, 465; Barrett, *John*, 247; Carson, *John*, 238; Smith, *John*, 125; Kruse, *John*, 145; Michaels, *John*, 256; J.J. Kanagaraj, *John* (New Covenant Commentary; Eugene: Cascade, 2013) 50; Thompson, *John*, 110–116; Klaiber, *Johannesevangelium*, 130; J.G. van der Watt, “Stereotypes, In-Groups, and Out-Groups in the Gospel of John,” in *Anatomies of the Gospels and Beyond: Essays in Honor of R. Alan Culpepper* (eds. M.C. Parsons, E.S. Malbon, and P.N. Anderson; BibInt 164; Leiden: Brill, 2019) 300–318, here 307. Cf. Haenchen, *John*, 234; von Wahlde, *John*, 205, who both prefer to state that we do not know how to read the

Historically, Herod Antipas was appointed tetrarch (τετράρχης) of Galilee and Perea after the death of his father, Herod the Great.²⁹ His authentic title is used by Strabo,³⁰ Josephus,³¹ Matthew,³² Luke,³³ and Ignatius of Antioch,³⁴ and confirmed by inscriptions, coins, and lead weights from his reign.³⁵ Contrastingly, Antipas's ahistorical royal title is only established in Mark 6:14–27,³⁶ where it serves to

title, A.H. Mead, “The βασιλικός in John 4:46–53,” *JSNT* 7.23 (1985) 69–72., who argues that he is a Gentile Roman officer, and G. Schwarz, “‘Καὶ ἦν τις βασιλικός...’ (Joh 4:46),” *ZNW* 75.1–2 (1984) 138–138, who argues that the term must reflect an original Aramaic כְּזָמ or כְּזָלְמָ (“royal advisor”).

²⁹ On the contested will of Herod the Great, see Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 18–39, 269–276.

³⁰ Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.2.46 (LCL 241: 298).

³¹ Josephus, *Ant.* 17.8.1/188, 18.2.1/27, 18.2.3/36, 18.4.5/102, 18.5.1/109, 18.5.3/122, 18.5.4/136, 18.6.2/148, 18.7.1/240, 18.7.2/252 (LCL 410: 252; LCL 433: 22, 30, 72, 76, 84, 92, 98, 144, 150); *J.W.* 1.33.7/664, 1.33.8/668, 2.9.1/167, 2.9.5/178–183 (LCL 203: 316, 318, 386, 392–94); *Life* 9/37, 12/65 (LCL 186: 16, 26). Dicken, *Herod*, 48, describes Josephus's characterization of the Herods as loyal to Rome and effective in quelling insurrections, but flawed by personal failings and domestic conflicts.

³² Matt 14:1.

³³ Luke 3:1, 19; 9:7, and Acts 13:1.

³⁴ Ign. *Snym.* 1.2 (LCL 24: 296).

³⁵ Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 103–109; M.H. Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee: The Literary and Archaeological Sources on the Reign of Herod Antipas and Its Socio-Economic Impact on Galilee* (2nd ed.; WUNT II/215; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 145–146, 204–210; G. Gelardini, “The Contest for a Royal Title: Herod versus Jesus in the Gospel According to Mark (6,14–29; 15,6–15),” *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi* 28.2 (2011) 93–106, here 95, 97.

³⁶ Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 149–150; C.S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 1986) 295; and Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 398–399, suggest that the ahistorical title may reflect popular custom. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 118–20, also argues that the title suggests a Palestinian origin of the story, since a story of Roman or Hellenistic audience would probably be more acquainted with the historically correct title. C. Karakolis, “Narrative Funktion und christologische Bedeutung der markinischen Erzählung vom Tod Johannes

activate parallels with Hebrew Bible stories of conflicts between just prophets and unjust kings, and to construct a narrative syncretism between the competing kingdoms of Herod and God.³⁷ Matt 14:9 repeats the title,³⁸ but Luke reserves βασιλεύς for Antipas's father, Herod the Great, for whom the title is historical.

Mark's characterization of Herod Antipas is uncomplicated, and the character's stance toward Jesus has three significant elements: curiosity, danger, and trickery. The first time we recognize his name is in Mark 3:6, where the Pharisees conspire with οἱ Ἡρῳδῖται (‘‘the Herodians’’) on how to assassinate Jesus. This term is an unusual one, unique to Mark 3:6; 12:13; Matt 22:16, that is coined in analogy with the Latin–Greek pair *Caesariani*–καίσαρῖται, used to denote the soldiers or slaves of Caesar.³⁹ The scarce

des Täufers (Mk 6:14–29),” *NovT* 52.2 (2010) 134–155, here 144, DOI: 10.1163/004810010X12495270769383, finds the ahistorical royal title ironically linked to Herod's incompetence as a ruler.

³⁷ Smith, ‘‘Tyranny Exposed,’’ 268; Gelardini, ‘‘Contest,’’ 95; R.A. Culpepper, ‘‘Mark 6:17–29 in Its Narrative Context: Kingdoms in Conflict,’’ in *Mark As Story: Retrospect and Prospect* (eds. K.R. Iverson and C.W. Skinner; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011) 145–163, here 154; G.D. Miller, ‘‘An Intercalation Revisited: Christology, Discipleship, and Dramatic Irony in Mark 6.6b-30,’’ *JSNT* 35.2 (2012) 176–195, here 181–184, DOI: 10.1177/0142064X12462659; N.L. Shedd, *A Dangerous Parting: The Beheading of John the Baptist in Early Christian Memory* (Baylor University Press, 2021) 96–97. Pace R.H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 311, who contends that Jesus's kingship is not a factor until Mark 15:2.

³⁸ As does Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 103.3–4 (PTS 47: 247–48).

³⁹ Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 331–332; N.H. Taylor, ‘‘Herodians and Pharisees: The Historical and Political Context of Mark 3:6; 8:15; 12:13-17,’’ *Neot* 34.2 (2000) 299–310, here 302–303; J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* Vol. 4: *Companions and Competitors* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 561. A more naturally Greek Ἡρῳδῖται (‘‘Herodians’’) appears in Josephus, *War* 1.16.6/319 (LCL 203: 150), where it denotes associates of Herod the Great who are unjustly killed as presumed adherents of his enemy Antigonos II, the last Hasmonean king of Judea.

information available makes it difficult to determine precisely what the term denotes,⁴⁰ but most scholars suggest some kind of associates – servants, soldiers, clients, supporters, or political allies – of Herod Antipas.⁴¹ Since such figures were far from natural allies with the Pharisees, the scene depicts two adversary groups united against a common enemy.⁴²

In Mark 6:14–20, Herod hears about Jesus’s name and his miraculous power – and promptly draws the conclusion that Jesus is a resurrected John the Baptist,⁴³ whom he knew to be a righteous and holy man,

⁴⁰ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 4:560-5, enumerates no less than fourteen suggested possibilities before concluding that “the Herodians would be best understood as the servants, courtiers, or officials of Herod Antipas.”

⁴¹ B.W. Bacon, “Pharisees and Herodians in Mark,” *JBL* 39.3–4 (1920) 102–112, here 103; Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 331–342; R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium: Erster Teil: Kommentar zu Kap. 1,1–8,26* (3rd ed.; HThKNT 2/1; Freiburg: Herder, 1980) 195; Mann, *Mark*, 243; J. Gnllka, *Das Matthäusevangelium: Zweiter Teil: Kommentar zu Kap.14,1–28,20* (HThKNT 1/2; Freiburg: Herder, 1988) 247; R.A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (WBC 34A; Waco: Word, 1989) 138–139; R.H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 442; T. Fornberg, *Matteusevangeliet 13:53–28:20* (KNT 1b; Uppsala: EFS-förlaget, 1999) 383; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 249; G.A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC 34B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 244; Taylor, “Herodians and Pharisees,” 299, 302–303. Cf. W.J. Bennett, “Herodians of Mark’s Gospel,” *NovT* 17.1 (1975) 9–14, DOI: 10.1163/156853675X00095, who regards the group as a Markan literary invention.

⁴² Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 4:562, points out that the Pharisees would have needed Herod’s support to inflict a capital punishment within his realm. Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 250, suggests that the alliance may reflect the situation in Mark’s time rather than Jesus’s. Taylor, “Herodians and Pharisees,” 303–309, finds the brief reign of Agrippa I (41–44 CE) to be the most probable dating for such an alliance. P. Danove, “The Narrative Function of Mark’s Characterization of God,” *NovT* 43.1 (2001) 12–30, here 19–23, DOI: 10.1163/15685360151101737, includes Herod, the Herodians, and the Pharisees among characters portrayed in opposition to God and Jesus.

⁴³ Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 399, argues that Herod’s stubborn insistence that Jesus is John resurrected contributes to undermining his authority. Karakolis, “Narrative Funktion,” 138, remarks that Herod’s mistaken identification gets corrected in Mark 8:29, where Peter calls Jesus the Messiah.

whom he aimed to protect, and to whom he liked to listen.⁴⁴ Then, we hear in 6:21–29 how Herod has been coaxed into beheading John, proving himself to be susceptible to trickery and a dangerous threat to any righteous prophet.⁴⁵ The story stands out as Mark’s only retrospective account,⁴⁶ and is often thought to foreshadow the death of Jesus.⁴⁷ When Herod’s name reoccurs, in 8:15, it is to let Jesus enigmatically warn his disciples about the ζύμη (‘‘yeast’’) of Herod. The warning turns out to be valid in 12:12–13, when some of the Pharisees and Herodians (τινας τῶν Φαρισαίων καὶ τῶν Ἡρῳδιανῶν) are sent out to trap him with

⁴⁴ Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 168–169, argues that Antipas’s ambivalence toward John is consistent with his characterization in Josephus’s account, where he repeatedly demonstrates indecisiveness. J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Studying the Historical Jesus; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 245–250; and Karakolis, ‘‘Narrative Funktion,’’ 142. also point to Antipas’s combined enmity and respect for John.

⁴⁵ Smith, ‘‘Tyranny Exposed,’’ 281–287, argues that the story aims to connect John’s fate to those of Jesus and his disciples, expose Antipas as a tyrant, and establish a thematic critique against any kind of tyrannical posture. Shedd, *A Dangerous Parting*, 83–127, discusses how the beheading story serves to clarify not only that Jesus is not John, but also that Herod Antipas is a danger to righteous prophets, lacks the expected male authority (getting tricked by women), and completely disregards Jewish purity concerns (by placing part of a corpse on a serving utensil). J. Curran, ‘‘‘To Be or to Be Thought to Be’: The Testimonium Flavianum (Again),’’ *NovT* 59.1 (2017) 71–94, here 94, DOI: 10.1163/15685365-12341552, suggests that Josephus knew about the connection between Jesus and John, and the trouble it had caused for Antipas, but intentionally left it out when describing John’s fate in Josephus, *Ant.* 18.5.2/116–119 (LCL 433: 80–84).

⁴⁶ Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 125–131, cf. 169–170, corroborates John’s death to other events in Antipas’s life, and dates it to 30 or 31 CE. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 255–258, suggests 33 or early 34 CE. Shedd, *A Dangerous Parting*, 8–10, prefers no specific date between 27 and 37 CE.

⁴⁷ Bennett, ‘‘Herodians of Mark’s Gospel,’’ 12; Karakolis, ‘‘Narrative Funktion,’’ 135–137, 153–155. Cf. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, 423: ‘‘Without doubt the recounting of Herod’s execution of the Baptist whom he saw to be a ‘just and holy man’ (6:17–29) harbingers Jesus’ own rejection and death.’’

words (ἀγρεύσωσιν λόγῳ) in order to get him arrested.⁴⁸ Jesus sees through their pretense (ὀπόκρισις) and skillfully escapes the trap (12:15–17),⁴⁹ but the threat is real, as evidenced by the renewed, and more successful plot to have him handed over by one of his own (14:1–2, 10–11, 43–46).⁵⁰

The Matthean Herod repeats the deeds of his Markan counterpart. When he hears reports about Jesus, he focuses on the miraculous powers at work in him, which he explains by Jesus being a resurrected John the Baptist (Matt 14:1–2).⁵¹ This version of Herod wants to kill John, but does not dare to upset the

⁴⁸ R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium: Zweiter Teil: Kommentar zu Kap. 8,27–16,20* (HThKNT 2/2; Freiburg: Herder, 1977) 225–226; Taylor, “Herodians and Pharisees,” 300; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 510; Danove, “Narrative Function,” 19; J. Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 822. Gundry, *Mark*, 693, argues that the choice presented is a choice between angering the crowd by declaring Roman taxes legal, or angering the Romans by declaring them illegal, two alternatives that both would lead to Jesus getting arrested. L. Hartman, *Markusevangeliet 8:27–16:20* (KNT 2b; Stockholm: EFS-förlaget, 2005) 445, notes that the reader of Mark 12:13 already knows from 3:6 that the Herodians intend to kill Jesus, even different individuals are active in 3:6 and 12:13.

⁴⁹ Gundry, *Mark*, 692–693, finds that the Herodians’ and Pharisees’ great flattery in Mark 12:14 makes it easy for Jesus to see through their pretense.

⁵⁰ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 4:562–5, finds it entirely natural that the Herod who executed the Baptist on the mere suspicion of future revolt would strike pre-emptively against Jesus, his erstwhile disciple, who spoke regularly about a coming kingdom. Even though he does not trust Mark to describe any particular historical incident, he finds the situation historically plausible.

⁵¹ U. Luz, *Matthew 8–20* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001) 306–7, notes that Herod’s reaction clarifies that Jesus and John have the same enemies. Gundry, *Matthew*, 284, takes the whole point of Matt 14:1–12 to be Herod’s lack of understanding who Jesus is.

crowd until his stepdaughter forces his hand (14:3–12).⁵² The Herodians cooperate with the Pharisees in their attempt to entrap Jesus, but are unsuccessful (Matt 22:15–22).⁵³

Luke expands Herod's role in Jesus's story, and intensifies his characterization as crafty, curious, and hostile.⁵⁴ Herod is mentioned as a tetrarch (Luke 3:1), as the one who put John in jail (Luke 3:19–20),⁵⁵ and as an enemy of Jesus (Acts 4:27).⁵⁶ When he hears about Jesus and his miracles, he is thoroughly perplexed (διαπορέω), and seek to meet him (Luke 9:7–9). When some Pharisees come to Jesus to warn him that Herod wants to kill him, Jesus responds by calling him a fox (ἄλώπηξ), and by suggesting him to wait until they meet in Jerusalem, the proper place in which to kill a prophet (Luke 13:31–33).⁵⁷ When they

⁵² Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 158; Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 307.

⁵³ U. Luz, *Matthew 21–28* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005) 65, remarks that the interlocutors are dishonest, and that Matthew intensifies the Markan Jesus's rebuke.

⁵⁴ I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NICNT 3; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 750, 855; J. Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (WBC 35B; Waco: Word, 1993) 432–433, 740; D.L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* (BECNT 3a; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 824; D.L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (BECNT 3b; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 1819; Dicken, *Herod*, 124–125.

⁵⁵ J.A. Darr, *Herod the Fox: Audience Criticism and Lukan Characterization* (JSNTSup 163; A&C Black, 1998) 137–172, argues that Luke 3–9 builds up an anticipation of a coming clash between Jesus and Herod.

⁵⁶ Dicken, *Herod*, 72–73, regards Acts 4:25–27 as programmatic in establishing the Herods as one of the common antagonists of Acts' various protagonists. Darr, *Herod the Fox*, 205–208, finds Herod established as an archetypal enemy in Acts 4:23–31.

⁵⁷ Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 740, finds Jesus's message to be quite provocative, and suggests we take the fox as an image of craftiness or slyness. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 220–221, 343–347, cf. 224, also proposes an intended contrast between Herod as the weak fox of the Roman petty kingdom, and Jesus as the lion of Judah. Darr, *Herod the Fox*, 181–183, points to Luke 13:34b to argue that the contrast is rather between the predator and his intended prey.

actually meet in Jerusalem after Pilate sends him over to have him judged,⁵⁸ Herod is eager to see Jesus perform a miracle, and questions him extensively. When Jesus does not cooperate, he treats him with contempt, and sends him back to Pilate dressed up as a dignitary (Luke 23:7–12).⁵⁹ Frank Dicken summarizes the Lukan Herod as “a sinful, evil ruler who rejects the good news proclaimed by God’s prophet.”⁶⁰

The Synoptic tradition thus characterizes Herod Antipas as immensely interested in what he hears about Jesus and his abilities, eager to witness a miracle, but also a deadly threat to any radical prophet under his jurisdiction. After Herod himself is tricked by his stepdaughter into killing one of his favorite conversation partners, we hear from the Pharisees that Herod is intent on killing Jesus as well, and the Markan and Matthean narrators tell us that Pharisees and Herodians collaborate in getting Jesus rhetorically entrapped, arrested, and eventually killed. Given such a characterization, it is reasonable that the Johannine Jesus may treat a request by a Herodian adherent with some measure of suspicion.

⁵⁸ Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 236, cf. 245, suggests that Pilate does this part to avoid the potential conflict of acquitting Jesus, part as diplomatic courtesy to improve his strained relations with Antipas.

⁵⁹ Luke also mentions two putative Herodians by name – Herod’s household manager (ἐπίτροπος) Chuza, whose wife Susanna is one of several women following and supporting Jesus (Luke 8:3), and Manaen, a childhood friend (σύντροφος) of the tetrarch, who later serves as one of several prophets and teachers in the Christian community in Antioch (Acts 13:1). Although these two individuals represent more positive attitudes to Jesus than most Herodians, their existence adds to the area of contact between Herodian and Christian adherents. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 303–306, even suggests that Chuza or Manaen might have provided Mark and Luke with eyewitness accounts of Salome’s dance and Herod’s trial of Jesus. See also Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 713.

⁶⁰ Dicken, *Herod*, 94.

4 A Herodian in John's Story

If we accept that the Fourth Gospel is written with a presumption that the readers have some prior knowledge of the storyworld in which the narrative takes place, that the royal official is associated with Herod Antipas, and that the presumed characterization of Herod and the Herodians can be approximated by the Synoptic Gospels, how can we then interpret the scene?

If we regard the official as a Herodian set on entrapping John's main character, there are multiple ways of interpreting his request as a trap. An outright rejection of the official's request could be considered an act of insurrection against Herod's power, and lead to Jesus's immediate arrest.⁶¹ If Jesus complies, and steps into the home of a prominent Herodian, it could be seen as fraternizing with the enemy,⁶² and thereby undermine Jesus's support among the Galilean people and his ability to hide from Herod's agents in the future.⁶³ Given the Synoptic Herod's stated interest in witnessing one of Jesus's miracles, the Herodian official can be suspected of attempting to coerce Jesus into performing a healing under the watchful eye of several trusted Herodians, who can help the tetrarch to assess the threat and take appropriate measure. Or more directly, the request to immediately accompany the official to Capernaum could be viewed as an

⁶¹ Cf. Mark 6:17–18, where John is jailed for criticizing Herod's marriage.

⁶² If the official is a Gentile, such behavior would also be seen as a transgression of the halakhic ban of visiting non-Jewish homes. See Jub. 22.16, Matt 8:8, Luke 7:6–7, Acts 10:28, 11:2–3, Gal 2:12–14; cf. J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (AB 28; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981) 652; F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 259; C. Wahlen, "Peter's Vision and Conflicting Definitions of Purity," *NTS* 51.4 (2005) 505–518, here 508, DOI: 10.1017/S0028688505000263; J.R.L. Moxon, *Peter's Halakhic Nightmare: The "Animal" Vision of Acts 10:9–16 in Jewish and Graeco-Roman Perspective* (WUNT II/432; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 65–68.

⁶³ John 4:1–3 indicates that Jesus leaves Judea for Galilee in order to avoid a confrontation with the Pharisees. Given the Synoptic alliance between Pharisees and Herodians, it would be reasonable for him to avoid the Herodians as well.

attempt to remove Jesus from most of his entourage and place him in a vulnerable position on the road, where Herodian soldiers can overpower and arrest or outright kill him.⁶⁴ A Johannine protagonist who knows the inner life of his interlocutors would have no difficulties in assessing which of such threats are real, if any, but his intradiegetic audience and the Johannine readers have all reason to suspect that evil intent is at hand, and would need reassurances before the story can proceed as a non-threatening healing narrative.

To that end, Jesus's harsh retort addresses the official with a second-person plural, thereby referencing his identity as a member of a political group known for its hostility toward prophets such as himself. His mention of signs and wonders hints at Herod's known curiosity toward miraculous phenomena, and points toward the potential evil intent behind the official's request. And the assertion οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε ("you will never believe") suggests the loyalty (πίστις) that is expected of any Herodian adherent toward the tetrarch, and the corresponding difficulty in also putting one's trust (πίστις) in Jesus. But most importantly, the retort prompts the official to clarify the situation for both intradiegetic and extradiegetic auditors, and assure them that his Herodian adherence does not, in this particular situation, carry with it a hidden agenda; he is acting on behalf of his son, not his patron.

When the narrative continues, and the official trusts Jesus (John 4:50b), investigates the healing (4:52), and shares his newly acquired faith with everyone in his household (4:53), he participates in Jesus's and his disciples' efforts to spread the gospel (cf. 3:22; 4:1), effectively serving a new master in Christ. In this, he parallels the Samaritan woman of John 4:4:4–42, who goes from her meeting with Jesus to tell everyone in her town about him (4:28–30, 39–42). In all, Jesus's three encounters with different minor characters in John 3–4 illustrate how his movement reaches out toward three groups that could be thought

⁶⁴ Cf. the plans to kill Jesus in John 11:53 and the troops sent out against him and his disciples in 18:3.

of as his natural adversaries:⁶⁵ the Pharisaic councilmen in Judea represented by Nicodemus, the religious dissidents of Samaria represented by the Samaritan woman, and the Herodian rulers in Galilee represented by the royal official.⁶⁶ Since the official is not only among the rich and privileged,⁶⁷ but directly in service of the oppressive tetrarch, the Johannine author demonstrates an inclusive attitude to people far outside of the Jesus movement's core demography.

Thus, an isodiegetic perspective, where we utilize Synoptic material to reconstruct the implied storyworld of the Fourth Gospel, has proven illuminating in interpreting the Johannine Jesus's interaction with one minor character. Further studies will show whether such a perspective might prove informative for other passages of the Gospel of John.

⁶⁵ Dunderberg, "The Royal Man," 282, notes that the conversations with both Nicodemus and the Samaritan occasionally slip into the second-person plural, suggesting that both characters represent larger collectives.

⁶⁶ If the royal official is seen as a Gentile, these three encounters could also symbolize ethnical inclusion, proclaiming that Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles are equally welcome into the Jesus movement. Cf. van der Watt, "Stereotypes," 307–308.

⁶⁷ van der Watt, "Stereotypes," 307.