

Sung Uk Lim, *Otherness and Identity in the Gospel of John*.

Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021.

Caryn Reeder, Westmont College

Studies of the Gospel of John often emphasize the creation of the identity of the Johannine Community through separation from the “other.” Light vs. darkness, Spirit vs. flesh, Jesus vs. the Jews: The book’s dualism lends itself to the process of “othering,” marginalizing, and victimizing particular characters in contrast with the power of Jesus and his followers. In *Otherness and Identity in the Gospel of John*, Sung Uk Lim challenges the scholarly consensus with a “hermeneutics of otherness and recovery” (6). Drawing together deconstructionism, postcolonialism, and narrative criticism, he questions the existence of any clear, consistent identity for self or other. Lim represents John’s (so-called) marginalized characters as ambiguous and changeable. Their agency in the narrative, in particular their destabilizing effect on the identity of Jesus, “interrupts the process of othering deeply ingrained in the traditional biblical scholarship” (164).

The first two chapters of the book develop the hermeneutical approach. Lim introduces theorists such as Cristina Grenholm, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Homi Bhabha. In his analysis of John’s characters throughout the book, Lim consistently and patiently repeats key concerns of postcolonialism, deconstructionism, and narrative analysis to help readers track the specifics of his interpretation. While Lim writes for the academy, his pedagogical approach makes the book accessible to a wide audience. I could imagine using the book (or at least select chapters) in an undergraduate New Testament survey course, as well as topical undergraduate and graduate courses on John’s Gospel or hermeneutics.

Chapters three through six address the characterization of specific minor figures in the Gospel in relationship with Jesus. Each chapter follows a similar format. Lim begins by introducing important hermeneutical concerns and specific constructions of otherness. These concerns guide his subsequent analysis of particular minor character(s) and their effect on the characterization of Jesus. By disrupting the stability of Jesus’s own identity, the “others” in John “subvert the imperial-colonial structures within the context of first-century Judaism and the Roman Empire” (6).

In chapter three, Lim defines Nicodemus as “an *unambiguously* ambiguous character” whose allegiance shifts between the Jewish community and the Johannine community—an otherness which is “in-between” (44). Because of his ambiguity, interpreters have made Nicodemus “one of the most marginalized and victimized characters” in John (44). Lim instead presents Nicodemus’s changeability as a constructive (or, rather, deconstructive) contribution to the narrative. Through his interactions with Jesus, his character creates fluidity in Jesus’s identity. Rather than being the victim of Johannine irony, then, Nicodemus challenges the apparent dualism of the Gospel, Lim argues.

In chapter four, Lim presents the Samaritan woman as “otherness within.” He argues that this woman, marginalized in the narrative in multiple ways (nameless, female, Samaritan, colonized), resists Jesus’s exercise of colonial power through her subversive mimicry. In the process, she complicates Jesus’s own identity. Jesus’s failure to refute the accusation that he is a Samaritan in John 8:48-49 marks the

woman's destabilization of his own "racial-ethnic and political identity" (87). Lim uses the ambiguity of identities to argue that the Samaritan woman, and, as a consequence, Jesus himself, is a challenge to imperial power.

In chapter five, Lim explores "otherness without": the characterization of the Jews and Pilate in opposition to Jesus. Lim's careful analysis of the shifting power dynamics in John's crucifixion narrative make this discussion particularly insightful. As he shows, the obvious power relationships—Pilate as colonizer and the Jewish rulers as the colonized holders of power, Jesus as object of their differing authorities—are inverted through the series of interactions in John 18:38-19:16. So, for instance, Pilate enacts his power as colonizer to mock Jesus and humiliate the Jews. Jesus, however, challenges Pilate's power through his imperialistic claim to be Son of God, bearing the authority of heaven. The Jewish rulers are dependent on Pilate's colonial power to accomplish their goal, but they reclaim power by accusing Pilate of disloyalty to the emperor. In turn, their proclamation of allegiance to Caesar problematizes their Jewish allegiance to the sovereignty of God. Lim concludes that these shifting dynamics disempower Pilate and the Jews through the subversive threat of Jesus's liminal identities.

Chapter six turns to the representation of the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, neither of whom is named in the Gospel. Lim argues that these two anonymous characters represent two different racial-ethnic communities: the Galileans and Judeans. Lim reviews the different potential meanings of *Ioudaios* (following Cohen 1999), noting in particular the geographic and political distinctions between Galilee and Judea. However, it is not clear from this discussion how a Galilean *Ioudaios* and a Judean *Ioudaios* represent different racial or ethnic populations in the first century context. A more thorough explanation in this section would make Lim's use of the familial unification of the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple to signify the unity of Galileans and Judeans in the Johannine community more significant.

Instead of addressing how the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple shape Jesus's own identity, in the second part of chapter six Lim explores the gendering of Jesus in John. He argues that the characterization of Jesus as (masculine) Logos and (feminine) Sophia, who mothers the children of God by birthing and feeding them, replaces a hierarchical gender binary of male and female with a fluid gender identity. This discussion would benefit from recognition of the single-sex construction of gender in the Greco-Roman world within which all (free) people, regardless of biological or anatomical sex, are defined as more or less masculine. Moreover, masculinity was performative and persistently malleable (and so always under threat). Recognition of the complexities of the constructions of gender in John's cultural contexts would add nuance to Lim's discussion of the gendering of Jesus, as well as depth to his comments on the Samaritan woman and the mother of Jesus.

In *Otherness and Identity in the Gospel of John*, Lim's careful, thorough analysis of the development of John's (not so) minor characters and their effects on Jesus's shifting identities brings a refreshing challenge to historic trends in Johannine studies. The significance of his thesis reaches beyond the Gospel of John. In introducing the book in chapter one, Lim connects his work with his own identity as a biblical scholar from South Korea, and a member of a church that began as an outworking of Western colonialism. He knows the experience of being marginalized and "othered" within White, Eurocentric hermeneutics. Lim's work, then, participates in the ongoing efforts to decenter White European and North American

perspectives within the guild. His development of “otherness” as a category with agency, with the ability to destabilize colonizing power and authority, advances the study of identities in the biblical texts and their communities.

Reference List

Cohen, Shaye J.D. 1999. *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*. Berkeley: University of California Press.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)