HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

A Johannine spatial theology of life, light and love as counter-space: Calling Christian scholarship to counter violence against older persons in hostile African environments

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Author:
Fednand M. M'bwangi[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Pwani University, Pwani, Kenya

[2]Department of New Testament and Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Fednand M'bwangi,
manjewarev@gmail.com

Dates:
Received: 11 Apr. 2026
Accepted: 16 July 2026
Published: 02 Oct. 2026

How to cite this article:
M'bwangi, F.M., 2026, 'A Johannine spatial theology of life, light and love as counter-space: Calling Christian scholarship to counter violence against older persons in hostile African environments', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82(1), a11434. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i1.11434

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In many African contexts, violence against older persons arises within hostile socio-spatial environments shaped by economic vulnerability, weakened kinship and fragile institutions. Yet Christian scholarship often responds pastorally without attention to the structural and epistemic conditions producing such violence. Within the theme of Christian scholarship in a hostile environment, this article advances a Johannine spatial theology of life, light and love as counter-space through which Christian scholarship can resist and transform hostility. Using qualitative interdisciplinary methods, the study interprets Johannine Kingdom through the Prologue (Jn 1:1-18), Soja's Thirdspace theory and Robbins' socio-rhetorical intertextual analysis. Building on Gharbin and Van Eck's view of the Prologue as the key to Johannine communal identity, the article argues that the Johannine Kingdom is a relational counter-space shaped by divine indwelling, mutual belonging and life-giving presence rather than territorial sovereignty or social productivity. Reading Johannine concepts of life [ζωή], light [φῶς] and love [ἀγάπη] against first-century Jewish and Roman spatial imaginaries of hierarchy, exclusion and violence, the study develops a framework for reorienting Christian scholarship in Africa. The study concludes that Johannine spatial theology offers a hermeneutical lens and a calling fostering indigenous knowledge and praxis to counter violence, protect older persons and cultivate justice, care and dignity in hostile African contexts.

Contribution: Integrating Soja's Thirdspace theory, Robbins' socio-rhetorical criticism and John's Gospel, this study offers a theological-spatial-social analysis advancing *HTS Theological Studies*' commitment to biblical interpretation, public theology and African socio-cultural realities.

Keywords: Gospel of John; spatial theology; counter-space; Christian scholarship; hostile environments; ageing; older persons; African indigenous knowledge.

Introduction

Across many African societies, older persons increasingly inhabit hostile environments – social, economic and symbolic spaces marked by dispossession, exclusion and violence (Hungwe 2022:154, 2024a:42; Moyo & Hungwe 2026:150–165). These vulnerabilities are intensified by economic instability, migration, urbanisation and weakening extended-family structures. In some contexts, accusations of witchcraft and property-grabbing practices further expose older women and men to structural harm (HelpAge International 2020; Hungwe, Mugari & Hungwe 2023).

Despite Christianity's demographic strength and institutional reach (Ndlovu 2025:3; Vengesai & Naicker 2023:8), African Christian scholarship has not consistently developed theological frameworks that explain how spatial and structural conditions produce and perpetuate such violence. Responses have frequently remained pastoral, moralistic or charitable, rather than critically structural. Violence against older persons thus persists not merely as an ethical failure but as spatial injustice embedded in systems privileging youth, productivity and economic utility.

This raises two fundamental questions: (1) *What kind of transformative theology emerges when theological scholarship is intentionallygrounded in the lived spaces and experiences of suffering communities?*

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Africa Platform for NT Scholars,' under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Ernest van Eck.

(2) *How can biblical interpretation function as a counterspace in which marginalized communitiesrecover voice, dignity, agency, and hope?*

Masvotore (2024) critiques the continued dominance of Eurocentric theological curricula that inadequately prepare students to engage Africa's socio-spatial realities. Shirley, Nel and Meyer (2024) propose hospitality as an ecclesial paradigm but do not sufficiently embed it within epistemological transformation. Landman (2024) similarly exposes the limits of reactive pastoral care.

This article argues that Johannine spatial theology offers a constructive alternative. Interpreted through Soja's (1996) Thirdspace and Robbins' (1996) socio-rhetorical framework, the Johannine Kingdom emerges as a lived relational counter-space that reconstitutes belonging through divine indwelling rather than territorial or productive hierarchies.

By situating Johannine theology within both its 1st-century CE hostile environment and contemporary African contexts marked by violence against older persons, this article seeks to contribute to the renewal of Christian scholarship as a transformative, justice-oriented practice. In doing so, it calls African educational institutions to become an active site of counter-space production – where scholarship, pedagogy and praxis converge to protect vulnerable bodies and cultivate spaces of dignity, care and life. The aim of this study is to construct a Johannine spatial–theological framework, grounded in the Prologue (Jn 1:1–18) and informed by Thirdspace theory, that addresses violence against older persons in Africa through transformative Christian scholarship and praxis.

Research methods and design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design and is situated within the broader challenge of Christian scholarship operating in hostile environments. Accordingly, it pursues the following objectives.

General objective

To construct a Johannine spatial–theological framework, grounded in the Prologue (Jn 1:1–18) and informed by Thirdspace theory, that addresses violence against older persons in Africa through transformative Christian scholarship and praxis.

Specific objectives

The study pursues this general objective through the following three specific objectives, namely, to:

- Analyse Johannine concepts of life [ζωή], light [φῶς] and love [ἀγάπη] as spatial constructs that form a counter-community within the late 1st-century context.
- Employ Vernon K. Robbins' socio-rhetorical intertextual analysis to situate the Johannine narrative in dialogue with 1st-century Jewish and Roman spatial ideologies.
- Propose a heuristic model for African theological education that brings biblical scholarship into dialogue with indigenous knowledge, challenges age-related injustice and equips communities to protect and care for older persons.

Conceptual framework

Edward Soja's theory of Thirdspace

Soja's (1996) theory of Thirdspace provides the conceptual backbone for this study. Conceptualising the Johannine Kingdom as Thirdspace also reframes Christian scholarship itself as a counter-spatial practice – one that interrogates dominant epistemologies and generates alternative forms of knowledge in hostile socio-political contexts.

Soja (1996:10) defines Thirdspace as 'an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life'. Unlike Firstspace (physical) and Secondspace (conceived or ideological space), Thirdspace is lived, contested and transformative, where marginalised voices generate alternative spatial meanings.

Soja (1996:68) further insists that the Thirdspace is 'a space of radical openness, a space of critical exchange'. This insight aligns profoundly with Johannine theology, where divine presence destabilises dominant spatial orders and produces new forms of belonging through relational indwelling.

This article, therefore, conceptualises the Johannine Kingdom of God as a Thirdspace in Soja's sense – that is, neither a Roman imperial territory structured by domination nor a synagogue-regulated religious domain governed by boundary-maintaining practices, but a lived, relational and transformative theological space produced through Christ's embodied presence among vulnerable and marginalised bodies. In this regard, the – Johannine narrative functions as what Soja (1996:68) describes as a 'space of radical openness' in which alternative forms of belonging and social relations are imagined and enacted.

Robbins' socio-rhetorical analysis

To elucidate this spatial significance, the study employs Robbins' (1996) socio-rhetorical and cultural intertextual analysis, attending to the 1st-century Jewish and Roman socio-political texts, practices and spatial ideologies that form the backdrop against which the Gospel of John emerged. Reading the Johannine narrative within this intertextual matrix enables a clearer understanding of how the Gospel constructs a counter-space that resists imperial and religious exclusion while reconfiguring communal identity around life-giving presence and mutual indwelling.

Analysis

Inner texture: Opening-middle-closing texture

Before engaging the inter-textual analysis, it is essential to undertake a concise examination of the opening–middle–closing inner texture in order to establish the Johannine argument as grounded in the Prologue (Jn 1:1–18).

While the repetitive-progressive pattern emerges from word analysis, the opening-middle-closing texture is a product of exploring this pattern. Understanding the opening, middle and closing of a text aids the task of analysing inner-texture by revealing how the parts relate to the whole and how rhetorical effects are produced. According to Robbins (1996:72–75), to achieve the goals of opening-middle-closing analysis, interpreters should: (1) correlate sub-units with the overall unit to explain their rhetorical function in relation to each other; and (2) bear in mind that the purpose of such analysis is to discern the persuasive effects of the various parts and how they operate together within the text.

Some critical questions guide this process: (1) What is the nature of the opening of a unit or passage in relation to its closure? How do topics at the beginning relate to those at the end? (2) What is the nature of the topics that replace the initial topics? (3) Is there repetition connecting the beginning, middle, and end? Or (4) is repetition limited to a particular section? and (5) What is the function of each part in relation to the whole passage? The value of opening-middle-closing analysis in socio-rhetorical interpretation lies in preparing the interpreter for a detailed examination of narrational and argumentative texture (Robbins 1996, 19–20; M'bwangi 2019, 33–34). Robbins' (1996) opening–middle–closing inner-texture analysis clarifies how John 1:1–18 rhetorically constructs communal identity, supporting Gharbin and Van Eck's (2022:1–9) claim that the Prologue functions as a hermeneutical key to Johannine community formation.

Opening (1:1–5)

The Prologue begins: Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος [*En archē ēn ho logos*] and καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος [*kai theos ēn ho logos*]. The repetition of ἦν [imperfect indicative active third person singular, 'was'] stresses eternal being and establishes primordial divine space. In verse 4, ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν [*en autō zōē ēn*] and ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων [*hē zōē ēn to phōs tōn anthrōpōn*] locate life [ζωή] within the Logos and portray it as light [φῶς] for humanity (Barrett 1978:149–152; Brown 1966:4–5). The light shines ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ [*en tē skotia*], introducing spatial dualism (light or darkness). Robbins' (1996) method asks how opening topics relate to closure; here, divine life and light define the community's origin and symbolic universe.

Middle (1:6–13)

The shift to Ἐγένετο [*Egeneto*; second aorist middle or deponent indicative third person singular, `he was or it came to be'] ἄνθρωπος [*anthrōpos*], marks movement from eternal being to historical emergence. John testifies περὶ τοῦ φωτός [*peri tou phōtos*], mediating divine light into contested world-space. Although the Logos was ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ [*en tō kosmō*], the world did not know him. Yet those who receive him become τέκνα θεοῦ [*tekna theou*], born ἐκ θεοῦ [*ek theou*], whereby ἐκ signals a rebirth beyond ethnicity or human will that constitutes new communal identity (Brown 1966:9–13; Carson 1991:119–125). Consequently, the preposition ἐκ signals new origin and spatial relocation. The middle thus develops the opening themes into communal participation: identity is constituted by divine rebirth, not ethnicity or will.

Closing (1:14–18)

The climax – ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο [*ho logos sarx egeneto*] … ἐσκήνωσεν, [*eskēnōsen*; aorist active indicate third person singular, `he manifested his dwelling or he tabernacled'] ἐν ἡμῖν [*en hēmin*] – unites primordial and communal space (Brown 1966:13–18). The Logos 'manifested his dwelling or tabernacled among us', and ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν [*etheasametha tēn doxan*] marks eyewitness identity. From his fullness – ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος [*ek tou plērōmatos*] – the community receives grace (Barrett 1978:165–168). Finally, the Son [ἐξηγήσατο, *exēgēsato*] (aorist middle deponent indicative third person singular, he made him known) explained God, establishing the Prologue itself as an interpretive key.

Thus, ζωή grounds ontological participation (ζωή grounds how believers participate in God's being). The term φῶς [light] shapes how divine truth is revealed and understood and the seeds of ἀγάπη emerge in χάρις καὶ ἀλήθεια [*charis kai alētheia*], anticipating later Johannine love theology.

Johannine community's identity

Robbins' opening–middle–closing inner-texture analysis reveals the Prologue's persuasive design: it constructs a symbolic universe in which the Johannine community understands itself as:

Born ἐκ θεοῦ

In the Prologue, those who receive the Logos and believe in his name are granted the right to become children of God, 'born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God (ἐκ θεοῦ)' (Jn 1:12–13). This divine birth establishes a new origin and spatial relocation, reorienting identity away from ethnic, fleshly or worldly belonging towards participation in the divine family.

Dwelling in incarnational presence

The climax of the Prologue declares that 'the Word became flesh and tabernacled (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us' (Jn 1:14), evoking the Old Testament tabernacle where God's glory dwelt with Israel. This incarnational dwelling shifts divine presence from a localised Temple or hierarchical sacred space to embodied, relational communion 'among us', making God's glory visible and accessible in the flesh of the Logos.

Participating in divine ζωή

The Prologue announces that 'in him was life [ζωή], , and that life was the light of all mankind' (Jn 1:4). This ζωή is not mere biological existence but qualitative, eternal participation in the divine life inherent in the Logos. Those who receive him enter this life-giving reality, grounding the community's ontological identity in the primordial, inexhaustible life of God rather than in worldly productivity, utility or hierarchy.

Reflecting divine φῶς

The life that resides in the Logos is simultaneously 'the light (φῶς) of all mankind' (Jn 1:4), which shines in the darkness and is not overcome by it (Jn 1:5). The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world (Jn 1:9). Believers thus reflect this divine φῶς as they participate in the revelatory presence of the Logos, exposing darkness and orienting the community towards ethical clarity and inclusion within the contested spaces of the κόσμος.

Anticipating relational ἀγάπη

The Prologue culminates in the revelation of the Son who is 'full of grace and truth' (Jn 1:14, 17), from whose fullness the community receives 'grace upon grace' (Jn 1:16). While the explicit command to love appears later in the Gospel, these closing verses of the Prologue anticipate relational ἀγάπη through the reciprocal dynamics of grace, the intimate Father–Son relationship ('the only God, who is at the Father's side', Jn 1:18), and the incarnational indwelling that models self-giving presence, laying the foundation for the mutual, sacrificial love that defines Johannine communal identity.

'Thus, the Prologue spatially reorients believers from κόσμος, [*kosmos*; the world ordered apart from God] to divine communion. providing precisely the hermeneutical key proposed by Gharbin and Van Eck for Johannine community identity. This spatial identity – life-filled, light-bearing, love-shaped – grounds Johannine missional theology: as the Logos was sent into the world, so the community, constituted in divine space, becomes embodied witness within contested space.

First-century intertextual context

In Exploring the Texture of Texts (1996), defining 'cultural intertexture', Robbins (1996) contends that:

> [C]ultural intertexture appears in a text either through reference or allusion and echo. … cultural intertexture appears in word and concept-patterns and configurations; values, scripts, codes, or systems (e.g., purity, law, covenant, and myths) … A reference is a word or phrase that points to a personage or tradition known to people on the basis of tradition. An allusion is a statement that presupposes a tradition that exists in textual form, but the text being interpreted is not attempting to 'recite' the text. (pp. 58–59)

This definition situates cultural intertexture as the mode by which texts interact with cultural norms, scripts, values and shared systems of meaning beyond the text. Such cultural intertexture functions as a way of hearing how texts implicitly reference cultural-ideological understandings of power, space and identity.

In the 1st-century Jewish and Roman world, cultural intertexture allows interpreters to track how texts such as the Gospel of John engage and reconfigure prevailing cultural patterns of hierarchy (Roman or Pharisaic), territoriality (imperial and Temple spaces) and communal identity (Jewish or Greco-Roman notions of belonging). Scholars have shown that communal self-understanding in dialogue with broader societal structures shapes narrative constructions of communal and individual identity (Klaasen 2020:3). Consequently, early Jewish and Christian writers negotiated imperial spatial and identity formations as they articulated community boundaries within Roman territorial orders (Van Groeningen 2025:1,6–7). Likewise, Carter (2011) argues through intertextual analysis that the Gospel of John reworks Jewish festivals to resist Roman imperial ideology, constructing communal identity and theological distance from dominant boundaries of power structures' with 'Likewise, Carter (2011:1,4–7) argues through cultural intertextual analysis that John's presentation of Jewish festivals contests Roman imperial and Ephesian civic-religious ideology, thereby shaping communal identity and encouraging distance from dominant structures of power.

Using cultural intertexture, Robbins examines how a text reuses, echoes, alludes to or imitates prior oral, scribal, cultural or social traditions, often through reconfiguration and reconceptualisation to serve new persuasive ends. This includes oral-scribal intertexture (echoes of sacred texts), cultural intertexture (reworking broader cultural scripts like social norms or spatial ideologies) and social intertexture (reordering roles or relations). Furthermore, Robbins observes that 'cultural intertexture is present when the text contains data that could be known only to people who are "insiders" in a particular culture. Robbins (1996) observes that:

> [C]ultural intertexture is present when the text contains data that could be known only to people who are 'insiders' in a particular culture. The data may be general cultural knowledge, such as the relation of a son to a father in Mediterranean culture during the first century C.E. (p. 58)

This tenet of Robbins' cultural intertexture elaborates the 1st-century Jewish and Roman contexts by highlighting how the Johannine text reconfigures insider cultural knowledge related to power (hierarchical authority), space (territorial and sacred domains) and identity (communal belonging and exclusion), thereby subverting dominant ideologies to promote a relational theology. The Johannine Gospel (especially the Prologue, Jn 1:1–18) and some segments of the narrative (5:24–29; 8:12; 10:10; 13:34–35; 15:9–17; 14:23) employ these modes to decontextualise (subvert and relocate) 1st-century spatial discourses reflected in Spec. Laws 2.44, Ant. 20.181–183, De Re Rustica 1.3.8, and Ann. 15.44.

Greco-Roman and Jewish sources characteristically construe space – whether land, Temple, city or even the human body – as hierarchically ordered and normatively structured. Such spaces are valued and accorded honour primarily based on productivity and purity, while those perceived to be unproductive and vulnerable are marginalised or excluded, all within frameworks legitimised by divine or imperial authority.

In Special Laws 2.44, Philo of Alexandria associates honour and social hierarchy with divinely ordained productivity, presenting virtue and contemplation as forms of fruitful

Labour (Philo of Alexandria 1993:2.44, Loeb Classical Library). Golden necklaces, rings and other ornaments are not merely decorative; such adornments symbolise rank, virtue and social standing. From the perspective of Robbins' (1996:59) cultural intertexture, such representations evoke embedded Jewish-Hellenistic conceptions of power and identity, in which space is imagined as a divinely structured hierarchy that marginalises those deemed unproductive. Within this cultural framework, the Johannine narrative can be read as reconfiguring these insider assumptions, transforming hierarchical spatial ideology into a counter-narrative that envisions divine dwelling as radically inclusive rather than exclusionary.

Josephus (Ant. 20.181–183) observation '… send their servants into the threshing-floors, to take away those tithes that were because of the priests' (Josephus 1987:Ant. 20.181–183, Loeb Classical Library) reflects crisis-era exclusion, describing how high priests appropriated tithes from threshing floors, resulting in the death of 'the poorest sort of the priests' from want – effectively marginalising vulnerable and elderly dependents from access to essential agricultural resources. In this context, Robbins' concept of cultural intertextuality (Robbins 1996:62) illuminates how the text reflects insider knowledge of Jewish social practices, particularly regarding power dynamics and spatial control, in which social identity was closely linked to access to both sacred and economic spaces. Johannine theology, by contrast, conceptualises identity, shifting the focus from hierarchical exclusion to relational life within the community.

Columella, in *De re rustica*, reflects a distinctly Roman spatial utilitarianism: land and farm space must maximise efficiency through diligent labour; unproductive bodies are an impediment to agricultural profit and should be avoided or reassigned (Columella 1941:1.3.8, Loeb Classical Library). As Columella puts it, '…we should not appoint … slaves who have pleased by their body; nor yet from … those accustomed to leisures, the Campus, the Circus, the theatres …' and '… that kind … never ceases to dream of idleness, which when transferred to agriculture brings loss not so much in the slave himself as in the whole enterprise', whereas '[*h*]e should be chosen who from infancy has been hardened by rustic works and tested by trials', underscoring the priority of utility in spatial and labour assignments. In Robbins' (1996:60) cultural intertexture framework, this emerges as specific cultural knowledge of Roman agrarian ideologies on space and power, where identity is defined by utility; the Johannine spatial theology counters this by redefining space as a domain of abundant life for all, including the marginalised.

Tacitus, in Annals 15.44, illustrates the exertion of imperial control under Nero, who, in the aftermath of the Great Fire of Rome, scapegoated those 'called Christians by the populace' in an effort to restore order within Roman urban space (Tacitus 2008:Ann. 15.44). According to Tacitus, Nero inflicted horrific punishments on them '… Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames …' and ultimately had some '… burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination', thereby turning their suffering into a public spectacle that reconfigured space as theatre of punishment and exclusion. This instance exemplifies Robbins' (1996:61) cultural intertexture through insider Roman cultural scripts of power and spatial violence, in which identity is enforced through public exclusion and corporeal punishment; Johannine light and love, by contrast, expose and seek to transform such dark spatial orders into communities of mutual belonging.

These 1st-century CE literary sources reflect 1st-century environments characterised by struggles to sustain livelihoods, imperial surveillance, religious exclusion and spatial violence – conditions that mirror, in structural terms, contemporary hostile environments faced by older persons in many African societies.

Results

Semantic significance of John's Gospel

Given these 1st-century social, economic, religious and political situations reflected in these 1st-century literary sources, John reconfigures these discourses via cultural and social intertexture, echoing spatial motifs (dwelling or tabernacling, light exposing, life as fruitful) by transforming them from productive or hierarchy or exclusion to relational, inclusive divine participation. Robbins' (1996:58–62) tenets of cultural intertexture further elaborate the Johannine spatial theology by showing how the Gospel uses insider cultural knowledge to reconfigure 1st-century concepts of power (from domination to shared authority), space (from exclusive territories to indwelling presence) and identity (from hierarchical exclusion to mutual belonging), thus creating a counter-space that resists Roman and Jewish ideologies.

Dwelling [ἐσκήνωσεν] (Jn 1:14); [μονὴν] (Jn 14:23)

Dwelling [ἐσκήνωσεν, *eskēnōsen*] (Jn 1:14); [μονὴν, *monēn*] (Jn 14:23): Echoes Jewish tabernacle or *shekinah* traditions (oral-scribal intertexture) and Philo's cosmic contemplation (souls 'dwelling' with stars). Yet John conceptualises: The Logos 'dwells or tabernacles' in flesh, not Temple hierarchies or productive spaces. God makes a 'dwelling' with believers via love, subverting exclusionary Temple courts (symbolised above) or Roman estates. This reconfiguration aligns with Robbins' (1996:60) cultural intertexture, where the text evokes and transforms specific cultural knowledge of sacred spaces and identity, shifting power from institutional control to relational communion.

Whitacre emphasises that John's choice of ἐσκήνωσεν functions syntactically as relational presence, not spatial localisation, indicating that divine dwelling is redefined as personal communion rather than cultic access (Whitacre 1999:55–57). Coloe (2001:78–85) similarly argues that the tabernacle verb signals a temple transference, where Jesus replaces the Temple as the locus of God's presence, dismantling sacred space boundaries that once structured Jewish social

exclusion. Brown situates this syntax within Johannine community conflict, noting that μονὴν [*monēn*; 'a dwelling place or abode'] and μονὴν παρ' αὐτῷ ποιήσομεν [*monēn par' autō poiēsomen*; 'we will make our dwelling with him'] in John 14:23 and extends the dwelling motif from Christ to believers (Brown 1966 vol. 1:503–505), creating a counter-space narrative of reciprocal indwelling that resists institutional mediation. Köstenberger adds that the verbal aspect of ἐσκήνωσεν implies continuity, reinforcing the idea that God's dwelling is enduring and communal rather than episodic or ritual (Köstenberger 2004:41–43).

Life [ζωή] (abundant in Jn 10:10; present in Jn 5:24–29)

Life [ζωή; *zōē*], abundant in Jn 10:10; present in Jn 5:24–29, reconfigures productivity-linked honour (Philo and Columella). Life is relational participation in divine zōē, not biological output or economic utility – revaluing the unproductive or marginalised (contra Josephus' starving priests or Columella's disposable labourers). Through Robbins' (1996:59) cultural intertexture, this elaborates Roman and Jewish contexts by echoing insider codes of power and identity tied to productivity, but in the Johannine narrative, *zōē*, reconceptualises space as life-giving for the vulnerable, opposing cultures of exclusion.

Brown highlights that John's syntactical use of ζωή – often anarthrous (ζωή – often used without the definite article) – marks it as qualitative rather than quantitative, signalling a mode of existence rooted in relationship with God rather than measurable vitality (Brown 1966 vol. 1:504–506). Whitacre develops this further by arguing that John 5:24's present-tense construction ('has life') collapses eschatological expectation into present experience, semantically redefining honour away from productivity and towards relational belonging (Whitacre 1999:188–191). Köstenberger notes that this grammar directly challenges Greco-Roman values where life was assessed by contribution or output, because Johannine ζωή [life] is received, not earned (Köstenberger 2004:141–144). Collectively, these three scholars show that John's syntax reorients social valuation, granting full dignity to those marginalised by economic or cultic standards.

Light [φῶς] (Jn 1:4–9; Jn 8:12)

Light [φῶς, *phōs*] (Jn 1:4–9; Jn 8:12); from a spatial perspective, *phōs* metaphorically exposes 'darkness' of exclusionary systems (Jn 3:19–21), echoing cultural scripts of order (Tacitus' imperial illumination, Philo's divine hierarchy) but Johannine narrative reconceptualises these cultural scripts by regarding Jesus as light who judges exclusion, rather than enforcing it. Robbins' (1996:61) framework reveals this as cultural intertexture, using specific cultural knowledge of light as a symbol of power and revelation in Jewish and Roman traditions, elaborating space as exposed and transformed, and identity as inclusive rather than hierarchical.

Brown observes that John's repetitive light or darkness antithesis operates as a symbolic syntax, in which moral and social realities are disclosed rather than imposed, exposing systems that prefer concealment (Brown 1966 vol. 1:130–134). Whitacre emphasises that φῶς [light] functions semantically as revelatory presence, where judgement occurs through exposure, not coercion – those who reject light self-exclude (Whitacre 1999:79–82). Köstenberger adds that the predicative use of light in John 8:12 ('I am the light') positions Jesus as the criterion by which all social structures are evaluated, including those legitimised by imperial or religious power (Köstenberger 2004:253–256). Consequently, Johannine syntax reframes light as an instrument of ethical unveiling rather than hierarchical control.

Love [ἀγάπη] (Jn 13:34–35; Jn 15:9–17)

Love [ἀγάπη, *agape*] (Jn 13:34–35; Jn 15:9–17) reorders social relations mutually or sacrificially, countering hierarchies (Philo's divine order, Josephus' elite seizure). Communal identity emerges through mutual indwelling, not exclusion. Robbins' cultural intertexture elaborates the contexts by reworking insider cultural codes of love as patronage or familial duty into sacrificial mutuality (Robbins 1996:62), redefining power as service, space as shared indwelling and identity as communal participation.

While Whitacre underscores that the command to love is syntactically embedded in reciprocal verbs and indwelling language, making love the defining marker of Johannine community identity rather than doctrinal boundary-keeping (Whitacre 1999:327–330), Brown interprets the repetition of ἀγάπη in the Farewell Discourse (Jn 13–17) as a literary strategy that forms a social ethic grounded in imitation of Jesus' self-giving, not status preservation (Brown 1970 vol. 2:609–612). Köstenberger (2004:458–461) notes that the comparative construction ('as I have loved you') grammatically centres sacrificial action as the norm, overturning patronage hierarchies common in the ancient world. Consequently, Johannine love functions semantically as communal reconstitution, where belonging is generated through shared self-giving rather than exclusionary privilege.

Overall, these texts articulate both the trauma and hope of the Johannine community, presenting divine life [ζωή, *zōē*], light [φῶς, *phōs*] and love [ἀγάπη, *agapē*] as incarnate realities among them. In doing so, the Gospel offers an alternative framework for identity and belonging amid the pressures of Roman imperial authority, synagogue exclusion and internal communal tensions. It functions not only to console but also to equip the community to enact this theology in their daily lives. Through this rich intertexture, John persuasively invites its late-1st-century audience – likely Jewish-Christians in Asia Minor who had been expelled from synagogues and were navigating imperial domination (Keener 2003:128; Martyn 2003:46–47) – to apprehend the spatial significance of God's presence, imagining a counter-space where relational belonging, divine indwelling and communal life reshape social and religious norms.

In this way, the Johannine Gospel functions as a theological counter-space, destabilising spatial regimes organised around productivity, honour and exclusion, and reconstituting community through relational participation in divine life.

Discussion

Implications for African theological education and African Union frameworks

This research carries significant implications for African theological education, particularly in aligning with the African Union's aspirations for innovative and transformative higher education, as articulated in Agenda 2063, which emphasises indigenous knowledge systems, social inclusion, human dignity and the cultivation of ethical leadership. Current scholarship highlights critical gaps in African theological institutions' capacity to respond to structural and relational vulnerabilities. Masvotore (2024) observes that many colleges continue to rely on Western curricula and pedagogical models that inadequately equip students to engage complex social realities, including ageing, marginalisation and social violence. This disconnect limits graduates' ability to translate theological insights into socially transformative praxis.

Shirley et al. (2024) further note that while there is growing attention to biblical hospitality and inclusive ecclesial practices, these insights are often insufficiently integrated into formal curricula. They emphasise that theological training must move beyond pastoral care models to cultivate missional praxis that enables congregations to become hospitably welcoming, inclusive and socially responsive. Landman (2024) adds that pastoral engagement alone is often reactive rather than structurally transformative, particularly for vulnerable populations, including older persons, who require theological frameworks that address systemic, relational and spatial dimensions of marginalisation.

Embedding a spatial–theological analysis of the Johannine narrative into African theological curricula offers a practical solution. By reading John through the lens of Soja's Thirdspace and Robbins' socio-rhetorical intertextual analysis, students are equipped to envision alternative spaces of communal belonging, where divine life [ζωή, *zōē*], light [φῶς, *phōs*] and love [ἀγάπη, *agapē*] function as relational principles guiding the care, protection and inclusion of vulnerable populations, including older persons. For example, the Johannine emphasis on abiding in Christ (Jn 15:4–7) and mutual indwelling (Jn 14:23) can inform pastoral and community interventions that reconfigure intergenerational care structures, challenge social exclusion and provide ethical models for relational justice.

As already noted earlier, African scholarship consistently demonstrates that many older persons experience significant vulnerability arising from intersecting social, economic, cultural and health-related challenges.

Traditional African societies have historically accorded older persons respect and social significance; however, rapid socio-economic transformations have weakened many of the familial and communal structures that once provided care and protection. Studies indicate that poverty, social exclusion, inadequate healthcare, loneliness, abandonment and age-related discrimination increasingly affect the wellbeing of older adults across the continent (Hungwe 2011:37–39). The erosion of traditional support networks, coupled with limited social protection systems, has further intensified the vulnerability of older persons, particularly in contexts of urbanisation, migration and economic hardship (Aboderin 2017:4–6). Similarly, Wolde et al. (2022) found that the prevalence of the abuse of older persons was significantly associated with multiple chronic diseases, physical disability, substance use disorders, advanced age, poor social support and other related risk factors. Despite international policy calls and formal expressions of commitment on the part of some African governments, comprehensive policy action has remained scant (Dhemba 2023, 8). Furthermore, according to Agunbiade, economic pressures and changing intergenerational relationships have contributed to various forms of abuse and mistreatment of older persons, including physical, emotional and material neglect (Agunbiade 2019:6–10). Negative societal perceptions of ageing and the decline of traditional values of reciprocity have likewise undermined the social status and security of many older adults (Okoye & Obikeze 2005:216–220).

Collectively, these studies reveal that the vulnerability of older persons in Africa is not merely a consequence of biological ageing but is deeply embedded within broader socio-economic, cultural and political realities that expose many older persons – particularly women, widows and those accused of witchcraft – to poverty, violence, social isolation and violations of their dignity and human rights. Consequently, Christian scholarship is called to construct a Johannine counter-space of life, light and love within hostile African environments – a transformative social and theological space that resists exclusion, challenges structures of violence and neglect, and fosters dignity, belonging, protection and holistic flourishing for vulnerable older persons.

To translate these insights into actionable education, African educational institutions, including theological colleges, can implement the following five practical curriculum strategies:

Christian scholarship as counter-space in hostile African environments

Within hostile African socio-economic and cultural contexts, Christian scholarship can function as a counter-space by intentionally resisting narratives that equate ageing with decline, dependency or social death. For older persons, such counter-spaces reconfigure value away from economic productivity and towards relational belonging, mutual care and inherent human dignity. Through curriculum design, research agendas and community engagement, theological education becomes a transformative site where alternative

imaginaries of ageing are cultivated, affirming older persons as integral participants in communal life rather than marginal or expendable bodies.

Integrate spatial hermeneutics into biblical studies

Modules should explicitly teach students to read the Gospel of John using Thirdspace theory (Soja 1996) and Robbins' intertextual framework, with emphasis on life, light and love as practical theological concepts.

Exercises can map the Gospel's counter-space logic against 1st-century imperial, synagogue and intra-community pressures, drawing parallels to contemporary African social realities.

Embed transformative research projects

The promotion of interdisciplinary research linking biblical studies, public theology and social gerontology, is crucial. Students could design action-research projects on local elder-care practices, applying Johannine spatial principles to develop inclusive, justice-oriented interventions.

The transformative research project should encourage community-engaged scholarship, partnering with congregations, non-government organisations (NGOs) or community-based organisations (CBOs) to experiment with relational, space-informed models of care.

Develop experiential community praxis programmes

There is a need for practicums that involve students actively cultivating ThirdSpaces in congregations and neighbourhoods, embodying abiding love and mutual care for older persons.

Workshops can train church leaders and volunteers to implement spatially conscious pastoral care, transforming traditional caregiving approaches into inclusive, dignity-preserving practices.

Outcomes from these programmes can feed back into curriculum development, reinforcing the connection between theological reflection, social engagement and knowledge production.

Foster indigenous knowledge and critical public theology

A more effective curriculum encourages students to compare Johannine spatial theology with African communal worldviews, highlighting synergies between biblical principles and local care practices Akesseh (2023:1–2,6–7) and Baloyi (2024:1,8–9) meaningfully connect Christian teaching with African cosmologies and communal practices. Building on these insights, students can critically examine both the continuities and tensions between Johannine principles and African communal practices.

A curriculum that integrates discussions on African Union Agenda 2063 goals demonstrates how theological reflection can advance social justice, human dignity and inclusion.

Incentivise publications and conference participation where students present contextualised spatial–theological frameworks, positioning African theological institutions and Universities as leaders in transformative, socially engaged scholarship.

Through these five integrated strategies, African theological education can move beyond abstract moral exhortation, cultivating graduates who analyse, inhabit and create spaces of justice and care, effectively bridging theological insight and societal transformation. This approach positions institutions as critical sites of indigenous knowledge production and socially responsible scholarship, addressing violence against older persons as a theological, ethical and societal concern rather than merely a social or pastoral problem.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that a spatial reading of the Johannine Kingdom of God offers a robust theological framework for addressing structural vulnerability, particularly violence against older persons in African contexts. By conceptualising the Kingdom as a Thirdspace – a lived, relational and transformative domain of divine presence – Johannine theology presents a compelling model for alternative communal identity, belonging and ethical practice. Core Johannine motifs – life [ζωή], light [φῶς] and love [ἀγάπη] – operate not merely as theological abstractions but as practical principles that foster relational justice, inclusivity and resistance to exclusion and marginalisation.

Applied to African theological education, this framework calls for a reimagining of curricula, research and community engagement. Integrating spatial–theological analysis into biblical studies and pastoral formation enables institutions to generate indigenous knowledge, advance critical public theology and form graduates capable of cultivating inclusive, care-oriented communities. This transformation aligns with the African Union's Agenda 2063, particularly its emphasis on social inclusion, human dignity and transformative education, while also addressing challenges such as ageing, inequality and systemic violence.

Drawing on Masvotore (2024), Shirley et al. (2024), and Landman (2024), the study underscores that theological education must move beyond pastoral care and moral exhortation towards active engagement with the structural, relational and spatial dimensions of vulnerability. Johannine spatial theology thus functions as both a hermeneutical lens and a practical guide, enabling African institutions to bridge Scripture, context and societal transformation.

In hostile contexts, Johannine spatial theology calls Christian scholarship not only to interpret reality but also to create counter-spaces where life, light and love are tangibly embodied.

Acknowledgements

This article is partially based on Fednand M. M'bwangi's doctoral thesis entitled 'Ideology and Righteousness in Matt 5.20: A Study in Identity Politics from the Sermon on the Mount', towards a degree of PhD in Religious Studies in the Department of Religion, University of Cape Town, South Africa, in 2019. The thesis was supervised by Professor Charles A. Wanamaker and Dr. Louis Blond. The thesis supervisors were not included as authors because they did not contribute to this article, which draws on only a small section of the thesis and otherwise differs substantially from it. A section of the thesis, pages 33–34, was revised and adapted into this article for publication. This thesis can be found here: https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11427/30375/thesis_hum_2019_m_lsquo_bwangi_fednand_manjewa.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Fednand M. M'bwangi: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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