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Authority Curved Inward: A Psycho-Hermeneutical Reading of Narcissistic Leadership in Biblical Texts and Implications for Indonesian Ecclesial Discourse

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Description
This article examines narcissistic religious leadership through a psycho-hermeneutical reading of biblical texts, arguing that authority becomes distorted when it turns from service toward self-exaltation, control, and relational exploitation within Indonesian Christian discourse.

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Abstract

This article argues that narcissistic distortion in Christian religious leadership constitutes a theological deformation of authority, which this study designates as the inward curvature of authority, rather than a merely psychological or moral failure. Through a psycho-hermeneutical analysis of five biblical passages, namely Ezekiel 34:1-10, Matthew 23:1-12, 3 John 9-10, Mark 10:42-45, and John 13:1-17, the study attends to specific lexical and grammatical features: the reflexive use of ra'ah in Ezekiel, habitual present disjunctions in Matthew, the dispositional philoproteuon in 3 John, domination verbs in Mark, and the eidos-grounded service syntax in John 13. The analysis demonstrates that these texts together disclose a coherent scriptural grammar distinguishing distorted from restored authority. Three recurring features of distorted authority emerge across the corpus: self-referentiality, instrumentalization of others, and systematic resistance to reciprocity and correction. These textual findings are brought into critical dialogue with Indonesian ecclesial discourse, where leadership idioms such as gembala, hamba Tuhan, and bapa rohani have functioned to legitimate asymmetrical power structures. The study contributes a biblically grounded theological framework for pastoral discernment, leader formation, and ecclesial accountability in the Indonesian Christian context.

Keywords: *narcissism; religious leadership; psycho-hermeneutics; authority; Indonesian Christian discourse; spiritual abuse*

INTRODUCTION

The question of how religious authority becomes distorted stands at the center of several converging scholarly conversations. Pastoral psychology and trauma research have documented with increasing precision how narcissistic and abusive leadership patterns produce lasting harm within religious communities (Ellis et al., 2022; Perry, 2024; Durkin et al., 2025). Leadership studies have generated refined analyses of narcissistic rivalry, coercive control, and congregational conflict (Rosenthal and Pittinsky, 2006; Gauglitz et al., 2023). Yet these conversations remain only intermittently brought into sustained

engagement with the biblical texts that continue to authorize, shape, and contest religious leadership in Christian communities worldwide.

This disjunction is not incidental. Biblical scholarship has long attended to failed shepherds, hypocritical teachers, and domineering rulers, but its analyses have typically stopped at moral description, historical reconstruction, or generalized servant-leadership models. What remains undertheorized is the larger scriptural logic that binds together texts such as Ezekiel 34, Matthew 23, 3 John 9-10, Mark 10:42-45, and John 13:1-17 into a coherent grammar of distorted and restored authority. The issue is not the absence of exegetical attention to these passages individually. It is the absence of a sharper conceptual account of how they expose authority as a convergence site of desire, status, vulnerability, and power, and what that account means for concrete ecclesial communities.

The corpus was selected purposively to capture both negative and positive construals of leadership within a coherent scriptural arc spanning the Old and New Testaments. The five passages were chosen on three criteria: (a) each presents a formally distinct portrait of either distorted or reordered authority; (b) together they traverse the major genres and literary contexts in which leadership is theologically construed in Scripture (prophetic oracle, Synoptic discourse, epistolary, narrative); and (c) each has generated significant secondary scholarship that can be engaged critically. The selection is not exhaustive; passages such as Jeremiah 23:1-4, 1 Peter 5:1-4, and 1 Timothy 3:1-7 address related concerns and are proposed as directions for future intertextual mapping. The present study concentrates on five texts in order to maintain the depth of lexical and grammatical analysis that a rigorous psycho-hermeneutical reading requires.

Yet the field remains conceptually divided. Leadership studies, pastoral psychology, and trauma research have generated increasingly precise analyses of narcissistic rivalry, abusive supervision, spiritual abuse, and congregational conflict (Ellis et al., 2022; Gauglitz et al., 2023; Lee, 2022; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). However, these discussions are only intermittently brought into sustained conversation with biblical texts. Conversely, biblical scholarship has long attended to failed shepherds, hypocritical teachers, and domineering rulers, but often stops at moral description, historical reconstruction, or generalized servant-leadership models. The larger scriptural logic that binds Ezekiel 34, Matthew 23, 3 John 9–10, Mark 10:42–45, and John 13:1–17 into a coherent *grammar* of distorted and restored authority remains under-theorized. The issue is not the absence of exegetical attention. It is the absence of a sharper conceptual account of how these texts expose authority as a convergence site of desire, status, vulnerability, and power, and what this means for concrete ecclesial communities.

This lacuna is particularly consequential in the Indonesian Christian context. Indonesia hosts one of the largest and most rapidly growing Christian populations in Southeast Asia, with significant concentrations in provinces such as North Sulawesi, North Sumatra, Papua, and East Nusa Tenggara, as well as a growing urban Pentecostal-charismatic movement across Java (Haire, 2013; Steenbrink & S. Aritonang, 2008). The Indonesian Christian community, estimated at approximately 10% of a population exceeding 270 million, is served by thousands of congregations spanning mainline Protestant denominations, Catholic parishes, and a rapidly

expanding constellation of Pentecostal and charismatic churches, the latter having experienced the most dramatic numerical growth since the 1980s (Steenbrink & S. Aritonang, 2008, pp. 847–881).

Yet this growth has been accompanied by a disturbing pattern of leadership failure that has attracted both journalistic and scholarly attention. In 2020, a pastor in Surabaya was reported to the East Java Regional Police for allegedly abusing a congregation member who had been under his pastoral care since childhood, a case that investigators linked explicitly to the structural absence of oversight over *gembala sidang* (senior pastors) who operate with near-absolute authority within their congregations (Lumbanrau, 2020). Weismann and Tumbol, in the only Indonesian theological journal article specifically dedicated to narcissistic leaders in church organizations, document how leaders with narcissistic personality tendencies are particularly prevalent in charismatic and Pentecostal church structures, where the concentration of spiritual authority in a single figure, the absence of collegial accountability, and the conflation of personal charisma with divine anointing create conditions uniquely conducive to narcissistic distortion (Weismann, 2019).

In many Indonesian church settings, leadership is imagined and legitimized through dense scriptural idioms: *gembala* (shepherd), *hamba Tuhan* (servant of God), *bapa rohani* (spiritual father), *urapan* (anointing), and appeals to submission and *pertanggungjawaban rohani* (spiritual accountability). As Singgih notes, Indonesian theological discourse has frequently operated within cultural frameworks that elevate hierarchical deference, making the critical examination of authority particularly fraught (Gerrit Singgih, 2000). Siahaan documents the rapid growth and characteristic features of Indonesian Pentecostalism, including its strong emphasis on spiritual authority and dynamic leadership, which in certain expressions have been observed to reproduce patron-client dynamics under biblical sanction (Siahaan, 2017). Aritonang draws attention to the persistence of *gereja keluarga* (family church) structures in Indonesian Pentecostal and charismatic churches, structures that concentrate authority in founding figures and their biological descendants, often legitimized through the language of spiritual inheritance and apostolic succession (Steenbrink & S. Aritonang, 2008). These structural patterns do not merely reflect cultural preferences; they are actively authorized through scriptural language, making the development of biblically grounded criteria for discernment an urgent ecclesial priority. What remains insufficiently developed is a reading strategy capable of holding together the biblical archive's positive ideals of shepherding and service with its counter-texts against self-serving, honor-seeking, and exclusionary authority, and of doing so with sufficient exegetical precision to function as a genuine instrument of pastoral discernment in the Indonesian context.

At precisely this point, a psycho-hermeneutical approach proves valuable. Properly employed, it does not impose modern psychological diagnosis onto ancient texts. Rather, it names recurring patterns already rendered visible by the texts themselves (patterns of reflexive self-orientation, status investment, relational exploitation, and defensive control) and clarifies how those patterns continue to shape the reception of scriptural authority in contemporary communities (Forster & Gjesdal, 2019; Perdue, 2021). The approach builds on

the insight, developed in the tradition of theological hermeneutics, that the history of a text's interpretation is inseparable from the patterns of power in which it is received.

This article argues that narcissism in Christian religious leadership constitutes a theological, not merely psychological, distortion of authority: a deformation of authority's proper *telos* from communal care toward self-maintenance, symbolic inflation, and exclusionary control. Three questions structure the inquiry. First, what specific lexical and grammatical features in the five selected passages disclose a coherent biblical grammar of distorted and restored authority? Second, how do these features illuminate, with theological precision, what contemporary scholarship designates as narcissistic distortion of religious leadership? Third, what are the implications of this psycho-hermeneutical reading for pastoral discernment, leader formation, and ecclesial accountability in the Indonesian Christian context?

This article therefore argues that narcissism in Christian religious leadership should be understood not merely as personal pride or private pathology, but as a theological-psychological distortion of authority. Its novelty lies in bringing together three conversations that are too often kept apart: biblical hermeneutics, contemporary scholarship on narcissistic and abusive leadership, and Indonesian ecclesial discourse as a site of scriptural reception. The purpose is not to use biblical texts as illustrations for modern theory. It is to show that the texts themselves furnish a rigorous theological grammar for identifying how authority becomes distorted through self-exaltation, relational exploitation, and defensive control, and how that same authority is reconfigured toward service, protection, and communal care. In that sense, this study contributes to biblical studies not by moralizing the texts or psychologizing them, but by reading their semantic and grammatical force closely enough to show that the corruption of leadership is already inscribed within the scriptural language of authority.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary, text-based design situated primarily within biblical hermeneutics, while engaging selected insights from pastoral theology, leadership studies, and contemporary scholarship on narcissism. The governing approach is psycho-hermeneutical. Psycho-hermeneutics, as employed here, is distinguished from two related but methodologically distinct practices. It is not the retrospective clinical diagnosis of biblical figures, an approach rightly criticized for its anachronism and epistemological overreach. Nor is it the uncritical transfer of modern psychological categories into ancient textual worlds in ways that collapse historical distance. Rather, psycho-hermeneutics as a heuristic and interpretive method, following Perdue, the trajectory outlined in the Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics, attends to how texts represent recurring patterns of human interiority and social behavior: patterns of self-exaltation, status investment, relational exploitation, defensiveness, and control (Forster & Gjesdal, 2019; Perdue, 2021). These patterns are not imported into the texts; they are identified within the texts' own rhetorical and semantic logic, and then placed in critical dialogue with contemporary theoretical

frameworks. The method remains text-governed rather than theory-driven: exegesis establishes the pattern; theory helps name it with greater precision.

Three methodological boundaries define the psycho-hermeneutical approach as employed in this study. First, the method is *text-governed* rather than theory-driven: the analysis does not begin with a clinical profile of narcissism and then search the texts for matching features. Instead, it begins with the texts' own rhetorical structure, verb sequences, and syntactic logic, and subsequently names what it finds with the aid of contemporary theoretical categories. Second, the method is *comparative* rather than diagnostic: it identifies recurring patterns across five passages drawn from different genres and canonical locations, treating convergence as evidence for a coherent biblical grammar rather than as coincidence. Third, the method is *historically situated*: the psychological categories employed, particularly narcissistic distortion, self-referentiality, and defensive control, are not retroactively imposed on ancient figures but are used to describe structural and behavioral patterns that the texts themselves already condemn or commend through their own rhetorical means. A psychological category, in this framework, functions as a more precise naming device for what the text already renders visible.

This approach has precedents in biblical scholarship. Rollins et al., Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology demonstrated that psychological categories could illuminate textual dynamics without reducing texts to psychological symptoms (Rollins et al., 1990). More recently, the field of trauma hermeneutics (O'Brien, 2008; Smith-Christopher, 2002), has shown how attending to psychosocial patterns within and behind texts can open new interpretive horizons while maintaining exegetical rigor. The present study works within this trajectory but focuses specifically on the psychosocial dynamics of authority and leadership as construed within the biblical text itself.

The analysis proceeds in three stages: First, Exegetical stage: Each passage is read with attention to its literary shape, rhetorical texture, and immediate theological context. Particular attention is given to semantically weight-bearing lexemes and syntactic features (verb tenses, participial constructions, and grammatical voice) that intensify the text's construal of authority. Second, Pattern identification stage: Recurring motifs related to leadership are identified across the corpus, including self-reference, treatment of the vulnerable, orientation toward honor or status, patterns of exclusion, and responses to correction or opposition. Third, Synthetic and dialogical stage: Identified patterns are brought into dialogue with contemporary scholarship on narcissistic leadership, abusive supervision, congregational conflict, and spiritual abuse, in order to clarify how the texts render visible patterns that may be described, in modern theoretical language, as narcissistic distortion (Ellis et al., 2022; Fernández, 2022; Gauglitz et al., 2023). This dialogical step engages Indonesian theological scholarship not as a regional appendix to the biblical analysis but as a site of *scriptural reception*: a context in which the texts studied here are actively read, preached, and applied, and in which the patterns of distortion they describe have been observed and documented by indigenous scholars. The movement from exegesis to context is therefore hermeneutical throughout, not merely illustrative. This synthetic step is then applied to the Indonesian Christian context through

dialogue with Indonesian theological scholarship. The study does not claim empirical generalization about all Christian leaders or Indonesian churches. Its contribution is interpretive and constructive: to show that a psycho-hermeneutical reading of these five biblical texts can illuminate narcissistic distortions of religious leadership and provide a theological framework for discernment, leader formation, and ecclesial accountability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ezekiel 34:1–10: The Reflexive Collapse of Shepherding

Ezekiel 34:1–10 frames the crisis of leadership through the shepherd metaphor, but the force of the passage lies in how the metaphor is grammatically and rhetorically reversed. The oracle accuses "the shepherds of Israel" by inverting the fundamental logic of the pastoral office. The key verb, רָאָה (rāʿāh), belongs to the semantic field of shepherding, feeding, tending, and pasturing ("to tend and care for as a shepherd,") (Koehler & Baumgartner, 1995, p. 1158). Its expected object is the flock. Yet in the indictment the syntactic relation is reversed: the shepherds are said to רָאָה themselves (אוֹתָם). This reflexive turn is not incidental; it identifies the essence of the prophetic charge.

The exegetical force of Ezekiel 34:1-10 cannot be properly assessed apart from its historical and literary context. The oracle belongs to the exilic corpus of Ezekiel, delivered in the period following the Babylonian deportation of 597 BCE and anticipating the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. In this context, the failure of Israel's shepherds is not merely a pastoral metaphor for spiritual negligence; it is a covenantal indictment with direct political and theological stakes. The shepherds who have failed the flock are the rulers and leaders whose misgovernance is presented by the prophet as causally connected to the catastrophe of exile (Block, 1998, pp. 278–281; Zimmerli, 1983, pp. 210–214). Ezekiel 34 thus operates on two registers simultaneously: it addresses a concrete historical situation of leadership failure and, through the shepherd metaphor, articulates a theological grammar by which any exercise of entrusted authority may be judged. The singular contribution of the passage for the present study lies in this grammatical function: it does not merely describe what these particular shepherds did wrong, but discloses what the *structure* of distorted authority looks like when authority has been converted from a fiduciary trust into a mechanism of self-extraction

The following clauses intensify the inversion through a sequence of verbs describing what the shepherds do and what they fail to do. They eat the fat (אֶת־הַחֵלֶב), clothe themselves with the wool (אֶת־הַצֶּמֶר), and slaughter the fatlings (הַבְּרִיאָה). Against this sequence of self-benefiting actions, the oracle sets a counter-sequence of structural failures: the shepherds do not strengthen (חִזַּקְתֶּם) the weak, do not heal (רְפָאתֶם) the sick, do not bind up (חֲבַשְׁתֶּם) the injured, do not return (הֲשֵׁבֹתֶם) the strayed, and do not seek (בִּקַּשְׁתֶּם) the lost (Allen, 1990, p. 163; Block, 1998, p. 283). The rhetoric is cumulative and forensic: each failed verb represents an abrogated covenantal duty.

The theology of the passage is precise. The text does not depict leadership failure as the disappearance of authority; the shepherds remain institutionally operative as

officeholders. Rather, it depicts authority as still structurally present yet fundamentally disordered in telos. As Joyce observes, Ezekiel's indictment targets not incompetence but the conversion of fiduciary responsibility into self-enrichment (Joyce, 2007, p. 196). The shepherds shepherd themselves: the office has been made reflexive, curved inward upon the leaders rather than directed toward the sheep. A brief intertextual comparison sharpens this observation. In Jeremiah 23:1-4, a closely parallel oracle, the indictment of the shepherds uses the verb *abad* (to scatter, to destroy) and focuses on the dispersal of the flock as the primary charge. In Zechariah 11:4-17, the figure of the worthless shepherd is characterized above all by his abandonment of the flock. Ezekiel 34 is distinctive in its emphasis on the *reflexive use of office*: the shepherds are not primarily charged with negligence or abandonment in the abstract, but with systematically redirecting toward themselves the very resources that belonged to the care of the flock. This reflexive inversion, encoded in the grammatical structure of the passage, is the Old Testament formulation that most directly anticipates what the present study identifies as the *inward curvature of authority*. In psycho-hermeneutical terms, this is the clearest Old Testament instance in the corpus of authority reoriented toward self-maintenance rather than communal protection, legible not as a purely interior state but as the systematic behavioral abandonment of the weak, the injured, and the scattered (C. Carvalho, 2020, p. 340).

Matthew 23:1–12: Honor, Visibility, and the Semiotics of Religious Authority

Matthew 23:1–12 presents a different but structurally related distortion. The opening concession is exegetically crucial: the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat (ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας ἐκάθισαν). The text does not begin by denying office or the existence of teaching authority. Its critique begins instead with a syntactic fracture in verse 3: λέγουσιν γὰρ καὶ οὐ ποιοῦσιν (for they say and do not do). The present indicatives here are grammatically significant. As Wallace identifies, these are habitual or customary presents; they describe not an isolated lapse but a settled, repetitive pattern in which speech and action are structurally split (Daniel B. Wallace, 2009, p. 521).

The passage then unfolds this split through a sequence of visible signs. Burdens are tied and laid on others (v. 4). Phylacteries are enlarged (πλατύνουσιν) and fringes lengthened (μεγαλύνουσιν), both present verbs marking ongoing, habitual practice. First places at banquets and synagogues are loved (φιλοῦσιν). Greetings and honorific titles are desired (vv. 6–7). What binds these images together is not merely generic pride but a social and symbolic economy of visibility: authority is displayed through markers that can be seen, recognized, and publicly ratified. As Graulich rightly notes, Matthew 23 confronts a rupture between public religious performance and moral wholeness (Holmgaard, 2023, p. 8).

Before pressing the exegetical argument further, a redaction-critical observation is necessary. Matthew 23 is among the most debated chapters in the Gospel with respect to its social function: whether it constitutes an *intra-communal* critique directed at leadership patterns within the Matthean community, or an *extra-communal* polemical address directed at Pharisaic Judaism in the aftermath of 70 CE (Overman, 1990, pp. 12–15; Saldarini, 1994, p.

44). The present reading does not require a definitive resolution of this debate, but the argument is strengthened by recognizing that the polemic in Matthew 23 functions in both directions. If the chapter is read intra-communally, as a number of scholars have argued persuasively, then the scribes and Pharisees function as a negative exemplar whose patterns of distorted authority are precisely those against which the Matthean community must define itself. On either reading, the rhetorical force of the passage is to render visible a *structure* of leadership distortion, not merely to condemn a particular group. It is this structural visibility that the present study employs. This study presses that insight further: what Matthew 23 exposes is the semiotic inflation of leadership. The term *semiotic inflation* designates the process by which devotional markers and religious symbols, which ought to function as signs of accountability before God and commitment to the community, are redirected to serve as extensions of the leader's own status and self-presentation. This concept is consistent with the social-scientific framework of honor and shame operative in first-century Mediterranean communities, within which the public display of phylacteries, fringes, and preferred seating constituted claims to honor that operated in a zero-sum field: the more honor accrued to the leader, the less remained for those in the leader's care (Malina & Neyrey, 1991, pp. 25–65). Matthew 23 thus exposes a specific mechanism by which religious authority is corrupted: not through the outright abandonment of office, but through the subordination of its symbols to self-aggrandizement, in which devotional markers and teaching authority become extensions of a divided self rather than signs of responsibility before God.

The prohibition of titles in verses 8–10 intensifies this critique by interrupting the hardening of authority into identity: titles are refused not because structure is illegible but because their function has become self-referential. Authority becomes distorted precisely when recognition ceases to be a byproduct of faithful service and becomes one of its operating aims (Luz, 2007, p. 146).

3 John 9–10: φιλοπρωτεύων and the Social Production of Exclusion

If Matthew 23 displays the symbolic inflation of authority, 3 John 9–10 presents its ecclesial consolidation in miniature. The passage introduces Diotrephes as ὁ φιλοπρωτεύων αὐτῶν (the one who loves to be first among them). The participle φιλοπρωτεύων is lexically rare; BDAG glosses it as "to love to be first, have a love of being foremost" (Bauer & Danker, 2013, p. 1058). It does not describe the holding of office; it marks an affective investment in primacy, a desire for precedence that is ongoing and dispositional rather than episodic.

The identity and ecclesial position of Diotrephes have been the subject of sustained scholarly debate that must be acknowledged before the psycho-hermeneutical reading can proceed. Harnack's influential proposal that Diotrephes represents an early form of monarchical episcopate, resisting the itinerant authority of the Johannine Elder, has been substantially revised by subsequent scholarship (Lieu, 2008, pp. 268–270). More recent interpreters, including Lieu and Smalley, read Diotrephes not as a bishop in any formal sense but as a local leader whose personal ambition for precedence has taken on organizational form within a house-church setting. The present study adopts this latter reading: the text is less

interested in the *office* Diotrephes holds than in the *disposition* he embodies and the behavioral pattern that disposition generates. What 3 John contributes to the biblical grammar of distorted authority is precisely the link between an affective investment in primacy (*philoproteuon*) and a predictable, institutionalized pattern of exclusion. The desire to be first is not merely an interior attitude; it produces a recognizable mode of community management.

This desire is not left abstract. The syntax of verses 9–10 unfolds it into a structured chain of concrete ecclesial acts: Diotrephes does not receive the author; he speaks wicked nonsense (φλυαρῶν ἡμᾶς λόγοις πονηροῖς); he refuses to welcome the brothers; he hinders those who wish to do so; and he casts them out of the church. The passage thus links inner disposition to an ordered pattern of governance: exclusion, malicious speech, control of access, and expulsion are all narrated as the institutional outworkings of φιλοπρωτεύων.

As Smalley observes, Diotrephes represents a type of early Christian leader whose self-aggrandizement generates a recognizable mode of community management, one in which belonging is curated, rivals are delegitimized, and correction is rendered intolerable (Smalley, 1984, p. 356). Lieu further notes that the text is less interested in the theological correctness of Diotrephes's position than in the behavioral and relational consequences of his desire for preeminence (Lieu, 2008, p. 278). In psycho-hermeneutical terms, this is the most explicit New Testament instance in the corpus of defensive control: the one who desires to be first cannot sustain that desire without transforming communal hospitality into a managed possession and communal plurality into a threat.

Mark 10:42–45: The Re-Specification of Greatness

Mark 10:42–45 marks a decisive transition in the textual corpus because it does not merely expose distortion; it explicitly redefines authority. The saying arises from the disciples' dispute over greatness (vv. 35–41), locating the problem within the community of Jesus rather than externalizing it onto worldly rulers alone. Jesus names the prevailing pattern with two compound verbs: κατακυριεύουσιν (lord it over) and κατεξουσιάζουσιν (exercise authority over). Both carry the prefix κατά in a directive sense: exercising lordship and power over others, in a downward, dominating direction ((Bauer & Danker, 2013, p. 519; Silva, 2018, p. 346; West, 2003, p. 416). The present tenses portray domination not as an aberration but as a recognizable social form, a durable pattern of relating.

The turning point in verse 43 is structurally emphatic: οὐχ οὕτως δέ ἐστιν ἐν ὑμῖν (but it is not so among you). What follows is not a rejection of authority per se but its radical re-specification: greatness is redefined as servanthood (διάκονος), firstness is redefined as slavery (δοῦλος πάντων). The climactic Christological statement in verse 45 grounds this re-specification in the vocation of the Son of Man: he came not to be served but to serve (διακονῆσαι) and to give his life as a ransom for many. As Marcus observes, the argument is not anti-authoritarian but anti-dominative: the problem is not the existence of asymmetry or responsibility but the organization of authority around superiority and visible preeminence (Marcus, 2009, p. 751).

The climactic statement in verse 45 requires exegetical attention in its own right. The phrase *lytron anti pollon* (a ransom for many) has generated substantial debate: whether it reflects an Isaianic Servant soteriology (Isaiah 53:10-12), a covenantal-liberation framework, or a later Christological formulation added to an earlier dominion-saying (France, 2002, pp. 420–423; Marcus, 2009, pp. 752–755). For the purposes of this study, the soteriological debate does not need to be resolved. What is significant is the *structural logic* of verse 45 within the pericope: the Son of Man's act of giving his life is presented not as an isolated redemptive event disconnected from the leadership model of verses 43-44, but as the *ground* and *ultimate form* of that model. Greatness redefined as servanthood is not an ethical ideal abstracted from Christology; it is grounded in the specific movement of the Son of Man toward others, culminating in the giving of life itself. This means that the re-specification of authority in Mark 10:42-45 is not merely ethical but *ontological*: it is rooted in what Jesus *is and does*, not merely in what he *commands*.

John 13:1–17: The Syntax of Secure Authority

John 13:1–17 renders Mark's re-specification narratively and dramatically, but with sharper theological and syntactic density. The interpretive center of the scene lies in verses 3–5. The participial construction in verse 3 is exegetically decisive: Jesus acts εἰδώς (knowing) that the Father had given all things into his hands, that he had come from God, and that he was going to God. From this participial grounding of certain knowledge and secure identity, the main verbs of verses 4–5 unfold: he rises, lays aside his outer garment, takes a towel, girds himself, pours water into a basin, and begins to wash (ἤρξατο νίπτειν) the disciples' feet.

The syntactic logic is theologically precise. Jesus serves not despite authority but from within the certainty of it. This participial grounding of action in secure identity is not incidental to the narrative but belongs to a wider pattern in the Fourth Gospel. The *eido* root appears repeatedly in the Gospel of John at moments of decisive action: in 18:4, Jesus *knowing* all that would come upon him steps forward; in 19:28, he *knowing* that all was accomplished acts deliberately. This pattern of action grounded in knowledge, or more precisely in the certain self-knowledge of the Son's relation to the Father, is the Johannine way of expressing what might be described as *theological identity security*: an identity that does not need external validation through status or recognition because it is constituted by the Father's declaration and the Spirit's witness (cf. John 1:34; 5:37; 8:14). The footwashing in John 13 therefore models not merely a behavioral posture of humility but a *theological mode of existence*: authority that is free to descend because it does not depend on the maintenance of visible superiority for its own coherence. The narrative does not oppose power and humility; it grounds the latter in the former. Service is not the residue of authority voluntarily minimized; it is the enacted form of authority when authority is no longer organized around self-protection or status maintenance (Keener, 2003, p. 903; Lincoln, 2005, p. 368; Moloney, 1998, p. 375). As Barrett notes, the Johannine irony is deliberate: the one with the highest authority performs the lowest act, and it is the certainty of the former that makes the freedom of the latter possible (Barrett, 1978, p. 438).

This theological grammar is reinforced when Jesus in verse 15 identifies the act as an ὑπόδειγμα, a normative pattern to be embodied: "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." In contrast to Matthew 23 (where authority is sustained by visible signs of distinction) and 3 John (where authority is secured through the management of communal access), authority in John 13 moves toward the feet of others. The footwashing thus becomes not merely an ethical ideal but a theological criterion for reading religious leadership itself (Ijeudo & Unachukwu, 2022, p. 5). The term *hypodeigma* (v. 15) reinforces this criterial function. In classical usage *hypodeigma* denotes a normative pattern or model intended for replication, and it carries stronger force than the simple term *paradeigma* (example) in that it implies both an authoritative source and an obligatory correspondence (BDAG, p. 1037). Jesus does not say "you may find this inspiring" but "you also should do as I have done to you." The footwashing is thus installed as a *normative paradigm* against which all subsequent exercises of religious authority are to be measured: authority that cannot move toward the feet of others has not yet been formed in the image of the one who washed those feet from within the certainty of his own authority and identity.

Cross-Textual Synthesis and Discussion

A Scriptural Grammar of Distorted and Restored Authority

Across the three negative texts, three features recur with a consistency that is not merely thematic but structurally sequential. The primary feature is *self-referentiality*: authority is directed toward the maintenance and enhancement of the leader rather than the flourishing of the community. In Ezekiel 34, this takes the form of the reflexive *ra'ah* in which the shepherding office turns back upon the shepherd as its own beneficiary. In Matthew 23, it takes the form of the habitual disjunction between public speech and private action, in which religious observance becomes an instrument of self-presentation. In 3 John, it takes the form of the dispositional *philoproteuon*, the love of being first, which is not episodic but settled and ongoing. Self-referentiality, however, does not remain interior. Because the leader's self-directed authority requires resources, recognition, and space, it necessarily *instrumentalizes others*: the flock becomes a resource for self-extraction, the congregation becomes an audience for symbolic self-extension, and the community becomes a managed possession whose membership is curated around the leader's preeminence. This second feature follows causally from the first. And because instrumentalized relationships cannot tolerate genuine accountability, a third feature emerges as a structural necessity: *resistance to reciprocity and correction*. The distorted leader cannot receive dissent, hospitality to rivals, or truthful feedback without experiencing them as threats to be neutralized. The three features thus form not a list of parallel problems but a causal sequence, in which self-referentiality generates instrumentalization, and instrumentalization demands resistance to correction. Understanding this sequence is essential for the diagnostic and formative implications developed below.

Across the two positive texts, authority is redirected toward service, communal responsibility, and the protection of the vulnerable. The critical distinction is not between power and humility in the abstract, but between authority secured through self-display and

authority secured through identity in God: The critical distinction is not between power and humility in the abstract, but between authority secured through self-display and authority secured through identity in God. For this distinction the present study employs the Augustinian concept of *incurvatus in se*, the self's curvature inward upon itself, as its master theological metaphor. Augustine developed this concept in the *Confessions* to describe the condition of the will that loves itself as its own end rather than God as its proper end (Augustine, *Conf.* 2.10, 3.8). Luther later applied the same concept to describe the condition of the human person under sin as one who is bent inward, unable to move outward toward God or neighbor, because all movement is intercepted by the claims of the self (*Commentary on Romans*, 1515-1516). What the five biblical texts analyzed in this study collectively disclose is that *incurvatus in se* is not only an anthropological description of sinful humanity in general; it is a specific structural possibility within the exercise of religious authority. Authority can be bent inward. It can be made to serve the leader's own self-maintenance, status investment, and defensive control. And when this happens, what remains is no longer a deficient form of the pastoral office; it is a false form, a representation of divine authority that enacts the opposite of what the God of Ezekiel 34:11-16 does when he himself shepherds the lost, heals the sick, and gathers the scattered. The outward movement of authority in Mark 10 and John 13 is therefore not a corrective supplement to an otherwise adequate model. It is the constitutive criterion by which the authenticity of all religious authority is to be judged (Augustine, 1991).

Narcissism as Theological Distortion of Authority

The argument of this study can now be stated with precision. The selected texts do not portray failed leadership as a secondary defect added to otherwise intact authority. They portray a distortion within the very structure of authority itself, a deformation of its *telos*. In psycho-hermeneutical terms, this distortion maps onto what contemporary leadership scholarship designates as narcissistic distortion. Rosenthal and Pittinsky define narcissistic leaders as those who are motivated primarily by an insatiable need for power, admiration, and status, and who use their leadership position to satisfy self-focused goals at the expense of followers (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Gauglitz et al. demonstrate that narcissistic rivalry, marked by antagonistic self-protection under perceived threat, is a significant predictor of abusive supervision (Gauglitz et al., 2023). Ellis et al. establish that religious/spiritual abuse, which includes manipulation, coercive control, and exploitation of spiritual authority, produces lasting psychological and theological harm in victims (Ellis et al., 2022).

The biblical texts add something that psychological and sociological theory alone cannot supply: they show that the issue is not merely that some leaders possess maladaptive traits. It is that authority can become theologically deformed, its very purpose corrupted. In Ezekiel 34, the shepherding office becomes a mechanism of self-extraction rather than communal care. In Matthew 23, titles and religious observance become extensions of a divided self. In 3 John, communal belonging is curated around one leader's preeminence. These are not merely dysfunctional behaviors. They are, in the language of the texts themselves, false forms of the representation of God's own care for the people, enacting a model of authority

fundamentally misaligned with what Ezekiel 34:11–16 reveals as the divine model of shepherding: God himself seeks the lost, heals the sick, and gathers the scattered.

Mark 10 and John 13 reorient the field. They do not abolish authority; they re-specify it by relocating its *telos* in self-giving service: first in the form of the Son of Man who gives his life as a ransom for many, and then in the form of the master who washes feet from within the certainty of his own identity and authority. The decisive criterion is not the presence or absence of power, but whether power is organized around self-protection or released for communal care.

Pastoral Implications in the Indonesian Context

Pastoral Discernment and Leader Formation: Implications from the Biblical Grammar

The cases of leadership failure documented in the Indonesian press and theological literature reveal a consistent pattern: harmful authority is not typically recognized as such until after significant damage has been done, precisely because it has successfully appropriated the markers of legitimate spiritual authority. Weismann (2019) documents how narcissistic leaders in Indonesian church organizations exploit the theological vocabulary of calling, anointing, and spiritual authority specifically to insulate themselves from accountability. The structural conditions that enable this appropriation, concentrated authority in a single figure, absence of collegial oversight, and the theological framing of submission as a spiritual obligation, are precisely the conditions that the three negative texts in this study describe and condemn.

The biblical texts analyzed above offer a different set of diagnostic criteria from those typically employed in Indonesian ecclesiastical evaluation. Where Indonesian churches frequently identify effective leaders by visible markers, namely rhetorical power, numerical church growth, charismatic presence, and organizational capacity, the prophetic oracle of Ezekiel 34 directs attention not to the leader's visibility but to the condition of the vulnerable: are the weak being strengthened, the sick healed, the scattered gathered? Matthew 23 unmasks religious visibility as a possible site of self-exaltation rather than genuine authority. Third John shows how control over communal belonging may present itself as strong leadership while serving the leader's own preeminence. The diagnostic criterion furnished by these texts is therefore not effectiveness but *directionality*: in which direction does this authority move, toward the self or toward the flourishing of others?

For leader formation, the implication is equally specific. If narcissistic distortion is a corruption of authority's *orientation* rather than merely a defect of temperament, then ministerial formation in Indonesia cannot be limited to doctrinal orthodoxy, preaching skill, or organizational competence. It must also address selfhood, affective maturity, relational accountability, and the capacity to receive truthful feedback without retaliation (Lee, 2022). The grammar of John 13 is particularly instructive here: Jesus serves from within the certainty of his identity, not from insecurity, and not by evacuating his authority. The formative question that theological institutions are invited to ask of their students is therefore not only whether they demonstrate ministry aptitude, but whether they demonstrate the capacity to exercise

authority in ways that remain genuinely open to correction, genuinely directed toward others, and genuinely grounded in something other than the maintenance of their own position.

Ecclesial Accountability Structures and Critical Scriptural Literacy

Contemporary research on spiritual abuse consistently demonstrates that harmful religious leadership becomes most destructive when institutions lack mechanisms for naming, restraining, and redressing distorted authority (Durkin et al., 2025; Ellis et al., 2022; Fernandez, 2022). The biblical texts support and extend this finding. Ezekiel 34 is itself a public accusation of failed shepherds before God and the community. Matthew 23 is an act of rhetorical unmasking, publicly performed. Third John records and contests exclusionary domination within the community, naming Diotrephes and his behaviors explicitly. These textual acts carry a structural implication: protection from distorted authority cannot depend solely on the private virtue of leaders. Ecclesial communities require public, structural mechanisms by which authority is made accountable, and by which distortion can be named without this naming being construed as spiritual rebellion.

In the Indonesian context, this structural argument intersects with a hermeneutical one. Because biblical language continues to function normatively in Indonesian preaching, mentoring, discipleship, and church governance, the struggle against distorted authority is inseparable from the question of how Scripture is read and applied. Terms such as *gembala, hamba Tuhan, bapa rohani, urapan*, and appeals to *pertanggungjawaban rohani* can either nourish communal care or protect asymmetrical power from challenge, depending on the reading practices of the community that deploys them. Singgih (2000) has argued for the development of a hermeneutics of suspicion within Indonesian contextual theology, an approach that takes seriously the ideological dimensions of scriptural interpretation without abandoning Scripture's authority. The present study contributes to this project by demonstrating that the critical resources are already within the scriptural text itself. The counter-grammar of Mark 10 and John 13 is not an external corrective imported from Western critical theory; it is a retrieval of what the biblical texts fundamentally require of those who would lead in the name of the God who shepherds, washes feet, and gives his life as a ransom for many. Structural accountability and critical scriptural literacy are therefore not alternatives but complements: structures without a rereading of Scripture can be gamed, and a rereading without structural change can remain merely theoretical.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that narcissism in Christian religious leadership constitutes a theological deformation of authority, an *inward curvature* of authority's proper *telos* from communal care toward self-maintenance, symbolic inflation, and exclusionary control. Through a psycho-hermeneutical reading of five biblical passages, it has demonstrated that these texts together form a coherent scriptural grammar by which distorted and restored authority may be distinguished: a grammar that is not merely thematic but grammatical, lexical, and sequential. The reflexive collapse of the shepherding office in Ezekiel 34, the

habitual disjunction between speech and action in Matthew 23, the institutionalized desire for preeminence in 3 John, the radical re-specification of greatness in Mark 10, and the syntax of secure, identity-grounded service in John 13 together constitute a textually grounded framework for discerning when authority has ceased to serve and has begun to feed upon the community it was given to protect.

What this grammar adds to contemporary psychological and sociological analyses of narcissistic leadership is a claim of specifically *theological* gravity: distorted leadership is not merely a personality disorder or an organizational failure. It is a false representation of divine authority, one that enacts a model of care fundamentally misaligned with the God who, in Ezekiel 34, shepherds the lost himself, and who, in John 13, washes feet from within the certainty of secured identity. The criterion by which religious authority is ultimately to be judged is not its effectiveness, its visibility, or its capacity to generate institutional growth. The criterion is the direction in which authority moves: inward, toward self-maintenance, or outward, toward the flourishing and protection of those entrusted to its care.

Future research may extend this psycho-hermeneutical grammar to further canonical texts, including Jeremiah 23:1-4, 1 Peter 5:1-4, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, and Revelation 2-3, as well as to early Christian non-canonical literature such as the *Didache* and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, where questions of ecclesial authority and its legitimate forms are negotiated with particular intensity. Empirical research in the Indonesian context, including congregational studies, homiletical analysis, and interviews with those who have experienced distorted religious authority, would move the inquiry from the interpretive and constructive contribution offered here toward a grounded account of how this biblical grammar is received, resisted, and reproduced in the living reality of Indonesian Christian communities.

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