

DUALISM OR PARADOX? A NEW 'LIGHT' ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Abstract

Modern scholarship maintains the Gospel of John is dualistic. This view is uneasily held as there is a growing move to distance the gospel from the original history-of-religions concept of dualism that reached its peak in the mid-twentieth century with expectations of incipient Gnosticism in John. Instead of further nuancing the dualistic-sounding ideas in John, this essay challenges directly the claim that John is dualistic—and it proposes that what is often understood to be a dualistic metaphysic is actually paradoxical language as part of the Gospel's oral and literary language games. Starting with a survey of how dualism entered into the scholarly purview of John, the essay then turns to the meaning and function of paradox in the ancient world. Since scholars point to John's 'light' and 'darkness' imagery as the most prominent example of dualism, this essay uses the paradox language of 'light' and 'darkness' as a test case to demonstrate how paradox, and not dualism, is a more accurate and historical descriptor for John's communicative strategy.

'If someone were to follow the Scripture [they] could show many such statements in the character of the paradoxes' – Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 114, Heine

THE metaphysical framework from which the Fourth Gospel tells its story of Jesus is often curious to the modern reader, as it contains strong contrasts between light and darkness, heaven and earth, the Father and the world, as well as bold propositions about insiders and outsiders, truth and falsehood, life and death. These contrasts, according to many scholars, suggest that John's Gospel is inherently *dualistic*. Thus, the Gospel has a world-view that is shaped by dualism and the Gospel employs a number of binary oppositions in a variety of ways to make its theological case.¹ Either way, there is a general consensus that the Gospel of

¹ In this perspective, dualism is an '*umfassende Rahmenbedingung*' for the whole Gospel; see Jörg Frey's summary of this view in 'Zu Hintergrund und Funktion des johanneischen Dualismus', in Dieter Sänger and Ulrich Mell (eds.), *Paulus und Johannes: Exegetische Studien zur paulinischen und*

John is, to some degree, shaped by *dualism*.² To what degree, and in what way, is a long-standing problem of Johannine studies.

The purpose of this essay is twofold: to challenge the consensus that the Gospel of John is dualistic and to propose a new paradigm of *paradox* for the metaphysical and rhetorical framework of the Gospel. Thus, I argue that both the stark contrasts and bold propositions of John are indicative of paradoxical, not dualistic, thought and communication. I use the term 'paradigm' because even though I cannot defend every instance of paradoxical language throughout the entire Gospel in this short essay, I nonetheless argue from my examples and test case that it can, and should, apply to the entire Gospel. To make my argument, I will briefly describe the origin of dualism as a descriptor of John, briefly explain the significance of paradox in the ancient world, and offer examples and a test case of paradoxical language in the text of the Fourth Gospel.

The importance of this challenge is not simply hermeneutical. How we read ancient Gospels is important. In our increasingly pluralistic world, these stark contrasts and bold propositions

johanneischen Theologie und Literatur (WUNT 198; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), p. 4.

² For example, C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 258; John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 387; D. Moody Smith, Jr., *John* (ANTC; Nashville, TN: Abingdon), pp. 34–5, 43; Siegfried Schulz, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (NTD 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), p. 10; Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, vol. 1: *Introduction, Analysis, and Reference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 167; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 259–60; Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), p. 23; Raimo Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness* (NovTSup 118; Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 201–4; Robert Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1976), pp. 48–9; Jürgen Becker, 'Beobachtungen zum Dualismus im Johannesevangelium', *ZNW* 65 (1974), p. 71; Paul N. Anderson, 'Gradations of Symbolization in the Johannine Passion Narrative: Control Measures for Theologizing Speculation Gone Awry', in Jörg Frey, Jan G. van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmermann (eds.), *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language* (WUNT 200; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), p. 182; Wayne A. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 (1972), p. 68; PHEME PERKINS, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. 39; John F. O'Grady, *According to John: The Witness of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1999), p. 141; Michael J. Taylor, *A Companion to John: Readings in Johannine Theology* (New York: Alba House, 1977), p. 72; and Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. Robert McLachlan Wilson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), p. 159.

cause John to be seen in a poor light, if not often misread. Notable scholars such as R. Alan Culpepper, Miroslav Volf, Stephen C. Barton, and C. K. Barrett have each wrestled with this problem, especially since it impacts not just biblical interpretation but also how Johannine theology—if not Christianity as a whole—is perceived by the world at large.³ If John is dualistic, and the world is pluralistic, there is a crisis of world-views.⁴ If modern interpreters have in fact misread the metaphysics of John by ascribing a dualistic world-view where there is none, this will have an impact not only on our interpretation of the Gospel (hermeneutics) but also the meaning of the Gospel as it intersects Christian theology and thought (ethics). Though it may seem like a small thing—in what way one Gospel is or is not dualistic—its impact on Christian theology as a whole becomes quite significant.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PERCEPTION OF DUALISM IN JOHN

The Fourth Gospel confronts its readers with stark contrasts and bold propositions from the outset, and this provocative style continues throughout the text. What is *not* in dispute in this essay is that John uses strong, polarizing language to make theological arguments. John's assertiveness is readily apparent to all readers. What *is* in dispute is how these propositions relate to the thought world of the Gospel. Are these contrasts part of a dualistic world-view, as many modern scholars suggest? Or is there something else at work here?

Dualism is 'any system of religious or philosophical thought which distinguishes sharply between two fundamental principles in terms of which the world is interpreted, typically spirit and matter, good and evil, light and darkness'.⁵ It is a philosophical

³ R. Alan Culpepper, 'The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith in a Pluralistic Culture', in Fernando F. Segovia (ed.), *What is John?*, vol. 1: *Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (SBLSymS 3; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), pp. 107–27; Miroslav Volf, 'Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism', in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (eds.), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 19–50; Stephen C. Barton, 'Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism', *ibid.*, pp. 3–18; and C. K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (London: SPCK, 1982), pp. 98–115.

⁴ For an example, see Amos Yong, "'The Light Shines in the Darkness": Johannine Dualism and the Challenge for Christian Theology of Religions Today', *JR* 89 (2009), pp. 31–56.

⁵ Michael Pye, *Macmillan Dictionary of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 73. I cite Pye's definition as representative rather than authoritative.

concept that existed to some degree in various pockets of the ancient world (not to mention our own world today).⁶ However, while New Testament writers were undoubtedly exposed to dualistic thought, there is little evidence that these writers would have embraced a dualistic ideology given that their tradition 'stand[s] within the fundamentally *monistic and monotheistic* framework of biblical faith and Early Judaism'.⁷ In fact, this tradition served as a 'defense against dualism'.⁸ Even among solid advocates of Johannine dualism, their arguments typically shift to the idea that the dualism in John is a later influence that has infiltrated the text.⁹ Yet, it is not evidence from the original milieu of the text that has largely shaped the idea that John is dualistic. Instead, it is the culmination of the reception and history of interpretation that has created the situation. There are three major turning points:

First, some of the earliest readers, adopters, advocates, and interpreters of the Gospel of John *were* heavily influenced by dualistic thought. These interpreters, today labelled as

Further, I recognize that advocates of and commentators on John's supposed dualism use qualifiers to describe dualism itself: 'absolute dualism', 'mitigated dualism', and similar, but to simplify my argument I will out of necessity treat dualism as one (large) concept. For one example of a list of various dualisms, see Hakola, *Identity Matters*, p. 200.

⁶ I use the term 'pockets' because full-blown dualism is found more on the fringes of most ideologies rather than in the centre; cf. Roelof van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 150–1. Plato's dualism is an example of this; in Plato's work, dualism is central but soon moves to the fringes with many subsequent thinkers influenced by his philosophy (see, for example, Abraham P. Bos, "Aristotelian" and "Platonic" Dualism in Hellenistic and Early Christian Philosophy and in Gnosticism', *VC* 56 (2002), pp. 273–91). There are, of course, a few notable ancient ideologies where dualism was more centre stage: Mandaeism, Manichaeism, Gnosticism, and Zoroastrianism, for example.

⁷ Barton, 'Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism', p. 8; see also Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 331; cf. Schulz, *Evangelium nach Johannes*, p. 10; and von Wahlde, *Gospel and Letters of John*, vol. 1, p. 166. The thought of Qumran stands out as a possible exception, and this is part of what makes the Qumran literature so interesting.

⁸ Citing the Shema as an example, see Zlatko Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe: Narrative and Cosmology in the Apocryphon of John* (NHMS 52; Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 212.

⁹ For example, Becker, 'Beobachtungen zum Dualismus', 85; Schulz, *Evangelium nach Johannes*, p. 10; von Wahlde, *Gospel and Letters of John*, vol. 1, pp. 165–7; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist, 1979), p. 30.

'Gnostics', were known for their dualistic readings of biblical texts. While the type and degree and origin of Gnostic dualism is still debated,¹⁰ there is little question that dualism is a primary characteristic of Gnosticism.¹¹ Gnostic interpretation—especially of John—created quite a stir in the ancient world, which resulted in a great deal of attention being drawn to their theological arguments.¹² In fact, Irenaeus (c.125–202 CE), in his attack on Gnosticism, 'goes through all the forms of dualism, rejecting each one'.¹³ What is not important here is how Irenaeus felt about Gnostic theology; what is important is that one of the earliest 'alternative' interpretations of the Gospel of John was intentionally dualistic. In some senses, the Gospel has never recovered from this; there remains the temptation to debate the dualistic character of John since this was its first point of critical reception.

Second, Jörg Frey notes that early modern scholarship, fuelled by the popularity of the history-of-religions movement, may have tilted the modern interpretation of John: 'Only four years after the text of the Zend-Avesta had been translated into French in 1771, the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder suggested a Persian background of the notion of light and darkness, the dualistic worldview and other elements of the language of the Johannine writings (including Revelation), which now appeared to be more 'oriental' (*morgenländisch*) than classical Greek.'¹⁴

¹⁰ Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 98.

¹¹ Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 57–8; David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 19; Gedaliahu A. G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (NHS 24; Leiden: Brill, 1984), p. 1; Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden (London: T&T Clark, 2003), p. 17. That dualism is a Gnostic characteristic is opposed by a few, notably Nicola Denzey Lewis (*Introduction to 'Gnosticism': Ancient Voices, Christian Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 282).

¹² John Wright Buckham, 'Dualism or Duality?', *HTR* 6 (1913), p. 161; Gerard S. Sloyan, 'The Gnostic Adoption of John's Gospel and Its Canonization by the Church Catholic', *BTB* 26 (1996), pp. 125–32; and Maurice F. Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel: The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 98.

¹³ Gérard Vallée, *A Study in Anti-Gnostic Polemics: Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius* (SCJ 1; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981), p. 20; and see similarly, Wiles, *Spiritual Gospel*, p. 105.

¹⁴ Jörg Frey, 'The Diaspora-Jewish Background of the Fourth Gospel', *SEÅ* 77 (2012), pp. 170–1; and see also Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Erläuterungen zum neuen Testament aus einer neueröffneten morgenländischen Quelle*, in *Sämmtliche Werke: Zur Religion und Theologie*, vol. 11 (Stuttgart:

While Herder's (1744–1803) main argument was not persuasive, his work opened the door to further searches for comparative dualisms in John. In 1847 Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), and in 1849 Adolf Hilgenfeld (1823–1907) both published works arguing that John's dualistic thought originated from a Gnostic background.¹⁵ By 1886, Frédéric Louis Godet (1812–1900) could bemoan the notion 'that a dualism can be discerned even in the teaching of our Gospel ... [is] at present somewhat widespread'.¹⁶ Against Godet's (and others') objections, the supposed dualistic character of the Fourth Gospel continued to pick up steam, eventually finding its most ardent advocates in C. H. Dodd and Rudolf Bultmann.¹⁷

Third, there is the normal tendency of readers to search for comparisons, even when the comparisons are not necessarily the most productive. For example, the discovery of the Zend-Avesta prompted parallels between dualistic Zoroastrian thought and the bold categories of the Gospel of John. Next, the (re)discovery of Gnostic thought resulted in dualistic-looking parallels transferred from Gnosticism to John. Next, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and its possible dualistic world-view resulted in direct comparisons with the Fourth Gospel.¹⁸ Next, these discoveries triggered a re-evaluation of potential ties between John's metaphysics and the dualism of Greek philosophy. However,

Cotta, 1829). The first use of the concept dates to Thomas Hyde's *Historia religionis veterum Persarum*, published in 1700; see Piet F. M. Fontaine, 'What Is Dualism, and What is It Not?', in Armin Lange, Eric M. Meyers, Bennie H. Reynolds III, and Randall Styers (eds.), *Light Against Darkness: Dualism in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and the Contemporary World* (JAJSup 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), p. 267.

¹⁵ Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Kritische Untersuchungen über die kanonischen Evangelien, ihr Verhältniß zu einander, ihren Charakter und Ursprung* (Tübingen: L. F. Fues, 1847), p. 88; and cf. Christoph Ernst Luthardt, *St. John the Author of the Fourth Gospel*, trans. Caspar René Gregory (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1875), pp. 22.

¹⁶ Frédéric Louis Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John: With an Historical and Critical Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Timothy Dwight (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886), p. 123. Godet was strongly opposed to any dualistic interpretation of the Fourth Gospel.

¹⁷ Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 21–2, 103–8; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), pp. 7–9; cf. von Wahlde, *Gospel and Letters of John*, vol. 1, p. 218.

¹⁸ There is debate among Qumranic scholars to what degree dualism is present in Qumranic texts; see Géza G. Xeravits, introduction to *Dualism in Qumran*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits (LSTS 76; London: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 1–7.

Zoroastrian dualism and Gnostic dualism and possible Qumranic dualism and Platonic dualism are all relatively distinct. Even if the Gospel of John were dualistic, which dualism would apply? There is a danger that in the desire to understand the Fourth Gospel's curious thought-patterns, readers have engaged in a form of 'parallelomania' looking to find some system that can explain this.¹⁹ In fact, Wayne Meeks is most indicative (or most guilty) of this when he writes that John's dualistic-sounding language is an 'enigma [that] cries out for some master myth to explain it'.²⁰ While Meeks's belief that the Gospel's 'metaphors are irrational, disorganized, and incomplete' is not correct, he is right that there is 'some kind of language-game' with rules that are hard to discern. Thus, what the 'master myth' readers of John should look for is not parallels based on incompatible metaphysics but internal clues from the language games that the Gospel itself employs. To that end, we will consider the *paradoxical* language of the Fourth Gospel as a solution to this problem, one that explains the Gospel's language games of stark contrasts as an aspect of its communicative strategy.

Admittedly, the consensus that the Gospel of John is dualistic was stronger in the mid-twentieth century than it is today. The uncomfortableness with dualism as a descriptor of the framework of John is often very palpable in Johannine studies.²¹ Many scholars have tried to nuance or mitigate the use of the term. For example, C. K. Barrett tries to make the idea more palatable with the eloquent euphemism 'dualism in motion'.²² James Charlesworth elects to put 'scare quotes' around the term whenever referring to John's backdrop in his seminal essay.²³ Rudolf Schnackenburg hedges by saying John is 'dualistic-sounding'

¹⁹ Richard Bauckham, 'The Qumran Community and the Gospel of John', in Lawrence H. Schiffman, Emanuel Tov, and James C. VanderKam (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years after their Discovery, 1947-1997* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), p. 105; and for the original concept, see Samuel Sandmel, 'Parallelomania', *JBL* 81 (1962), pp. 1-13.

²⁰ Meeks, 'Man from Heaven', p. 71.

²¹ Cf. Fred L. Horton, 'Dualism in the New Testament: A Surprising Rhetoric and a Rhetoric of Surprise', in Lange, Meyers, Reynolds, and Styers (eds.), *Light Against Darkness*, pp. 187-8.

²² C. K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (London: SPCK, 1982), p. 106.

²³ James H. Charlesworth, 'A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in 1QS III,13-IV,26 and the "Dualism" Contained in the Fourth Gospel', *NTS* 15 (1968-9), pp. 389-418.

instead of dualistic.²⁴ Jörg Frey explains in his lengthy study that John is ‘far removed’ from any dualistic ideology.²⁵ Paul Rainbow registers his objection to the ‘so-called dualism’ and suggests scholars stop using the term.²⁶ Rainbow is correct.²⁷ Unfortunately, in the face of uncertainty, many scholars follow the well-worn path. *This is because it is hard to tear down a category without replacing it with a better alternative.* John is not dualistic—John is paradoxical.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PARADOX

Paradox in the Ancient World

The culture of the ancient world was an *oral* culture, and the importance of this cannot be overstated as we read texts that originate from this world. The people that inhabited these oral cultures enjoyed oral presentations that stimulated the senses. Socrates’ warning against the weaknesses of written texts is apt for us today—there is an art of orality that the written text does not fully convey, and we would not be of sound mind to assume it does.²⁸ In the ancient world, language games that included proverbs, riddles, parables and *παροιμία*, rhetoric, dialectic, questions, and disputations were an important and acknowledged part of these cultures’ communication strategies.²⁹ There was an ‘art of speaking’ that prevailed.³⁰ As oral cultures began to give way to literary cultures, these language games became fossilized in written texts. One other language game like those above that has largely been overlooked—yet is crucial to John’s Gospel—is the *paradox*.

Like dualism, paradox is not an easy idea to pin down, and modern philosophers have offered a variety of slightly different

²⁴ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, trans. Kevin Smyth (HTCNT; New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 21.

²⁵ Frey, ‘Zu Hintergrund und Funktion des johanneischen Dualismus’, p. 68.

²⁶ Paul A. Rainbow, *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, the Epistles, and the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), pp. 128–9.

²⁷ Cf. Volf, ‘Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism’, 22.

²⁸ Plato, *Phaedr.* 275c.

²⁹ On parables in the Gospel of John, see Ruben Zimmermann, ‘Are there Parables in John? It is Time to Revisit the Question’, *JSHJ* 9 (2011), pp. 243–76.

³⁰ Plato’s descriptor for the paradoxical communication of Zeno of Elea (‘Τὸν οὖν Ἐλεατικὸν Παλαμήδην λέγοντα οὐκ ἴσμεν τέχνην’, *Phaedr.* 261d).

definitions in an attempt to understand the phenomenon.³¹ In its simplest sense, a paradox is any remarkable claim that seems contradictory or illogical.³² Paradoxes are a form of logic and argumentation that is related to riddles.³³ Especially in the ancient world, paradoxes often use and exploit ambiguity and vagueness. They also often use stark contrasts.³⁴ As a working definition based on my study of ancient and modern paradox, a *paradox* is a *group of related propositions* that, considered alone, are valid, but when considered together *contains one proposition that is at odds with the others*, and as a result creates a *seemingly true but uncomfortable solution* for the group. Sophisticated paradoxes, such as the examples I give below, *did* exist in the ancient world, but they do not appear to have the exact terminology or definitions that befits modern expectations. This is why in some places it is not always easy to tell whether an argument was truly paradoxical or just unbelievable.³⁵

Turning to the Greek-language tradition for the sake of brevity, paradox as a logical and rhetorical device first shows up at the start of recorded history in the arguments of the pre-Socratic philosophers. A few examples are illustrative.³⁶ Heraclitus of Ephesus (c.535–475 BCE), in his effort to show that wisdom was of greater value than common knowledge, is remembered as

³¹ Margaret Cuonzo, *Paradox* (MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), p. 2. Also, much like dualism, scholars qualify paradoxes via a number of descriptors, such as logical paradoxes, rhetorical paradoxes, veridical paradoxes, and falsidical paradoxes, to name but a few.

³² Paradoxes are ‘*quae quia sunt admirabilia contraque opinionem omnium*’; see Cicero, *Parad.* 4.

³³ Roy Sorenson, *A Brief History of the Paradox: Philosophy and the Labyrinths of the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 3; and Harold W. Attridge, ‘Genre’, in Douglas Estes and Ruth Sheridan (eds.), *How John Works: Storytelling in the Fourth Gospel* (RBS 86; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016), pp. 18–19. Perhaps even more so in the ancient world, e.g., Uvo Hölscher, ‘Paradox, Simile, and Gnostic Utterance in Heraclitus’, in Alexander P. D. Mourelatos (ed.), *The Pre-Socratics: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 230.

³⁴ Cf. David Mehl, ‘The Stoic Paradoxes according to Cicero’, in John F. Miller, Cynthia Damon, and K. Sara Myers (eds.), *Vertis in Usum: Studies in Honor of Edvard Courtney* (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, 161; Munich: K. G. Saur, 2002), 40.

³⁵ Cf. Cicero, *Parad.* 4.

³⁶ For a more exhaustive history of the influence of paradox in the ancient world through present day, see Sorenson, *Brief History*.

speaking in aphorisms and riddles that utilized paradoxical language.³⁷ This was the case of his most famous aphorism, often summarized as: 'It is impossible to step into the same river twice.'³⁸ While Heraclitus' riddle-paradox has a complex transmission history,³⁹ we can illustrate the paradoxical element contained within:

Proposition	Counter-Proposition
Person 1 steps River A = River A	Person 1 steps River A = River B Is River B $\equiv$ River A?

In this example, Heraclitus joins a proposition (that a person can step into a river) with a contradictory proposition (that said river is no longer the same river, since the current is moving), which leads to the seemingly true but uncomfortable solution that the second step *is* into a different river, at least in theory, because it is not the same exact quantity of water. Heraclitus exploits the ambiguity in the concept of 'river' to create a paradox that speaks to the issue of permanence in existence. Evidence suggests that Parmenides (c.515–450 BCE) used paradoxical language in a similar manner as Heraclitus.⁴⁰

³⁷ Kurt Pritzl, 'On the Way to Wisdom in Heraclitus', *Phoenix* 39 (1985), p. 304; Ava Chitwood, *Death by Philosophy: The Biographical Tradition in the Life and Death of the Archaic Philosophers Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 78; Carl Huffman, 'Philolaus' Critique of Heraclitus', in David Sider and Dirk Obbink (eds.), *Doctrine and Doxography: Studies on Heraclitus and Pythagoras* (Sozomena, 14; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), p. 135; and Raymond Adolph Prier, *Archaic Logic: Symbol and Structure in Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles* (De Proprietatibus Litterarum, 11; The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p. 87.

³⁸ Plato, *Crat.* 402A; Aristotle, *Metaph.* 1010a12.

³⁹ Mary Margaret Mackenzie, 'Heraclitus and the Art of Paradox', in Julia Annas (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 6 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 1–37.

⁴⁰ Martin J. Henn, *Parmenides of Elea: A Verse Translation with Interpretative Essays and Commentary to the Text* (Contributions in Philosophy, 88; Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), pp. 67–81; though there is an argument that Plato read paradox into Parmenides' thought; see Raymond Tallis, *The Enduring Significance of Parmenides: Unthinkable Thought* (Continuum Studies in Ancient Philosophy; London: Continuum, 2008), p. 22; though cf. Aristotle, *Soph. elench.* 182b27–8.

Most famous for paradoxes in the ancient world was Zeno of Elea (c.490–430 BCE). Because of Zeno's fame both in the ancient and modern world,⁴¹ it is often incorrectly assumed that he was the originator or primary proponent of paradoxical thought.⁴² Part of Zeno's popularity is due to Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who recorded some of Zeno's paradoxes—such as the *Achilles paradox* and the *grain of millet paradox*—and attempted to solve or refute them.⁴³ Zeno's paradoxes took on a more formal form of philosophical argument than those of Heraclitus or Parmenides, and as a result are still discussed today.⁴⁴

Prior to Aristotle's popularization of Zeno, both Socrates (c.470–399 BCE) and Plato (c.427–348 BCE) used and engaged paradoxical language in their philosophical work. For example, during a dialectical discussion in Plato's *Cratylus*, Cratylus succeeds in turning the tables on Socrates with a paradox on truth and falsehood.⁴⁵ Plato himself turned to paradoxical language when it came to teaching ethics,⁴⁶ not to mention his famous paradox on inquiry (aka 'Meno's Paradox'), which was widely discussed in the ancient world.⁴⁷

Another paradoxical philosopher who was a contemporary of Aristotle was Eubulides of Miletus (c. mid-4th century BCE). While little detail is known of the life and work of Eubulides, he is credited with devising several of the most important logical paradoxes in the history of philosophy—including the *liar* (*ψευδόμενος*) paradox and the *heap* (*σωρείτης*) paradox.⁴⁸ As he did with Zeno, Aristotle tried to refute all of Eubulides' famous paradoxes.⁴⁹ Because of Zeno and Eubulides, Aristotle did not seem

⁴¹ Gerhard Köhler, *Zenon von Elea: Studien zu den 'Argumenten gegen die Vielheit' und zum sogenannten 'Argument des Orts'*, (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, 330; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), p. 1.

⁴² Cuonzo, *Paradox*, pp. xi, 141, 143–4.

⁴³ See Aristotle, *Phys.* 239b14–18, and Aristotle, *Phys.* 250a19–22 respectively.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 182.

⁴⁵ Plato, *Crat.* 429D; see also Francesco Ademollo, *The Cratylus of Plato: A Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 58.

⁴⁶ Michael J. O'Brien, *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 4.

⁴⁷ Plato, *Meno* 80D–E; and see Gail Fine, *The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno's Paradox from Socrates to Sextus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 2.

⁴⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.108. The heap paradox is also known as the *sorites paradox*.

⁴⁹ Sorenson, *Brief History*, p. 84.

to appreciate paradoxes and considered them little more than sophistry.⁵⁰

Paradoxical thought and language were an essential element of the discourse and metaphysical backdrop of the ancient world into the first century.⁵¹ Cicero (106–43 BCE) wrote a book on Stoicism that defended the philosophy's use of paradoxical philosophy.⁵² Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–CE 40) later used one of these Stoic paradoxes to support his argument that goodness comes from God.⁵³ Likewise, the Gospel of Mark employs paradoxical language to bolster its theological arguments.⁵⁴ It is also likely that the book of James contains at least one reference to a Stoic paradox.⁵⁵ Finally, and most significantly, Paul used and engaged paradoxical language in his letters.⁵⁶ For example, in Titus 1:12, Paul cites the paradox about Cretans that is credited to Epimenides of Knossos, a seventh- or sixth-century Cretan philosopher.⁵⁷ Paul's use of paradox here is frequently misunderstood, as it has nothing to do with Cretans or lying *per se*; it is a logical paradox meant to exemplify Paul's argument against rebellious people.⁵⁸ However, Paul's use of this ancient paradox is striking in that it shows how enculturated paradoxes were in ancient thought. Given the prevalence of paradoxical thought in the cultural milieu of the ancient Mediterranean world, we should not be surprised to discover it in the thought and language of the Gospel of John. In fact, paradox was more prevalent in that milieu than dualism.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Soph. elench.*; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.109; and John Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 194.

⁵¹ Cf. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.25.31–3.

⁵² Mehl, 'Stoic Paradoxes', p. 39.

⁵³ Philo, *Sobr.* 56–7.

⁵⁴ Laura C. Sweat, *The Theological Role of Paradox in the Gospel of Mark* (LNTS 492; London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵⁵ Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, 'The Stoic Paradox of James 2.10', *NTS* 31 (1985), pp. 611–17.

⁵⁶ Larry J. Waters, 'Paradoxes in the Pauline Epistles', *BSac* 167 (2010), pp. 423–41.

⁵⁷ Titus 1:1 identifies Paul as the writer of Titus; for discussion of actual authorship, see George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 21–52.

⁵⁸ Anthony C. Thiselton, 'The Logical Role of the Liar Paradox in Titus 1:12,13: A Dissent from the Commentaries in the Light of Philosophical and Logical Analysis', *BibInt* 2 (1994), pp. 207–23, and W. V. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox: And Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 8.

Paradox in the Gospel of John

Proposing that John uses paradoxical language instead of dualistic language is not immediately convincing for two reasons. First, as noted above, readers tend to be more conditioned towards dualistic thought due to the influence of key dualistic texts (the writings of Plato, Nag Hammadi, and possibly Qumran literature), the history of interpretation, and unfamiliarity with the language games of ancient oral cultures. Second, modern students are not trained in paradox, nor riddles or dialectic. Even in our sophisticated modern world, paradoxes are not well understood and do not come with easy solutions. In fact, some of the paradoxes proposed in the ancient world have never been fully solved.⁵⁹ It is tempting to dismiss the idea of paradox because it is enigmatic and nebulous.⁶⁰

Proposing that John's Gospel uses paradoxical language—not just theologically, but logically and rhetorically—runs counter to our expectations about the Gospel. And yet, contending that John uses paradoxical language is not an argument that John knew Zeno or Eubulides, or that he was a master logician. Instead, just as John and other writers of the New Testament such as Paul and Mark picked up bits and pieces of rhetoric and style in the course of their communication, so too did they pick up the means to implement that rhetoric and style through basic skills such as *ἐκφρασις* ('description'), parable-writing, and delivery of riddles and paradoxes and similar oral-culture language games.⁶¹

While it is one thing to suggest that John's Gospel uses paradoxical language in areas such as Christology, it is a bit more to suggest that it is replete with paradoxical language from start to finish. This is especially the case when we consider the 'dualistic-sounding' examples that John uses throughout his Gospel: light and darkness, good and evil, truth and falsehood. Yet based on the prevalence of paradox and the problem of dualism, a consideration of these 'dualistic-sounding' examples on a case-by-case basis is needed. Prior to this, however, I wish to establish the general use of paradoxical language in John's Gospel with a look at the beginning and end of the Fourth Gospel before turning to a larger case study.

⁵⁹ Of course, this is a judgement call; some scholars of paradox would say that all have been solved as well as a paradox can be solved.

⁶⁰ Cf. Prier, *Archaic Logic*, p. 87.

⁶¹ E.g. Dan Nässelqvist, 'Stylistic Levels in Hebrews 1.1–4 and John 1.1–18', *JNTS* 35 (2012), pp. 31–53.

The means to understanding a text is often given in its opening and closing; this is a truism that defines texts both ancient and modern. John's Gospel is no exception in that regard—thinkers have spilt a tremendous amount of ink on both John 1:1 and 21:25.⁶² John 1:1 is an epic opening that establishes the Word in relation to God. John 21:25 uses hyperbole to introduce dramatic closure for the reader and to push the reader out of the text. In both cases, commentators rightly note the theological and literary significance of these statements. What is often missed is that *both* the opening and closing statements of John utilize paradoxical language to some degree to make their points and engage readers.

Let us consider the opening statement of John: Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος ('In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'). The purpose of this opening statement is to orient the reader with information needed to make sense of the text (in this case, who the Word is and why the Word is important).⁶³ Undeniably, its content is highly theological. The ἐν ἀρχῇ is a reference to Gen. 1:1 (same wording as in the LXX of Genesis). Yet one aspect that is not typically discussed about this statement is its use of paradoxical logic to explain the nature of the Word. For the sake of logical clarity, let us reword 1:1b and 1:1c to take it out of its biblical context: 'Smith was with Jones, and Jones(ian) was Smith.'⁶⁴ Stated as such, this rewording reveals it is a puzzle of some sort, designed to communicate something veiled about the relationship between Smith and Jones. In the same way, the opening statement of John's Gospel uses paradoxical language to

⁶² There are three notable points of closure in John's Gospel, 19:35, 20:30–1, and 21:24–5, all of which contribute to what the readers experience with the closing of the text. For further discussion on closure in John, see Douglas Estes, *The Temporal Mechanics of the Fourth Gospel: A Theory of Hermeneutical Relativity in the Gospel of John* (BIS 92; Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 116–29.

⁶³ E.g. Douglas Estes, 'Rhetorical Peristaseis (Circumstances) in the Prologue of John', in Kasper Bro Larsen (ed.), *The Gospel of John as Genre Mosaic* (SANT 3; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), pp. 191–207.

⁶⁴ Rendering θεός in 1:1c as 'God' is not uniformly accepted; see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII* (AB 29; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 5; and Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), p. 29. For a summary of the numerous approaches, see Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), pp. 67–70.

communicate something veiled about the Word. We can chart the paradox this way:

Proposition	Counter-Proposition
1: 1a Word at Creation (Word $\equiv$ God)	
1: 1b	Word with God (Word $\neq$ God)
1: 1c Word was God (Word $\equiv$ God)	Word is God (?)

As the chart shows, John 1:1a and 1:1c convey related propositions that suggest the divine nature of the Word. However, in 1:1b, the Fourth Evangelist introduces a contradictory claim, namely that the Word may not be divine after all (in the light of Jewish monotheistic expectations). The result is a seemingly true but contradictory solution—the Word is God but also is in some way distinct from God.

One reason the paradoxical language is so potent in the opening statement of the Fourth Gospel is because it is loosely built around the paradoxical logic of one of the most famous paradoxes in the ancient world—the *masked man* (ἐγκεκαλυμμένος) *paradox*. First proposed by Eubulides, the masked man paradox presents this problem: ‘You know who your father is. Your father is identical with the man in the mask. Therefore you know who the masked man is. Yet you do not.’⁶⁵ We can chart the paradox this way:

Proposition	Counter-Proposition
Know Father? (Yes)	
Know Father in Mask? (Yes)	Know Masked Man? (No)
	Masked Man is Father (?)

⁶⁵ Peter Cave, *This Sentence is False: An Introduction to Philosophical Paradoxes* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 87, and Nicholas Rescher, *Paradoxes: Their Roots, Range, and Resolution* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), p. 102.

This paradox creates a situation where the identity of the masked man is ambiguous. You know your father, and you know your father in a mask, but if one day you meet your father in a mask, you wouldn't know your father. The result is a seemingly true but contradictory solution—one's father is the masked man but in some ways we can never be sure if the masked man is one's father. Here the Fourth Gospel's use of paradoxical language echoes the paradoxical logic of Eubulides' ἐγκεκαλυμμένος paradox in order to exploit an ambiguity in the divine identity of the Word. Coming as it does in the opening statement of the Gospel, the paradoxical language alerts the reader that contradictions lie ahead—this is no straightforward text.⁶⁶

We find a more nuanced situation in the last statement of the Gospel of John: Ἔστιν δὲ καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ ἃ ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς, ἅτινα ἐὰν γράφηται καθ' ἓν, οὐδ' αὐτὸν οἶμαι τὸν κόσμον χωρῆσαι τὰ γραφόμενα βιβλία ('And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if it were possible for someone to write them down, I suppose the whole world would not have room for the books that could be written.'). The primary purpose of this statement is to bring closure to the text through a little bit of hyperbole: the acts of Jesus were more numerous than the reader can imagine. The hyperbole of 'more numerous than the reader can imagine' is akin to the way a writer today would create a really large number or use the concept of infinity. Though these kinds of endings seem heavy-handed by modern standards, they were not unusual in the ancient world.⁶⁷ Yet one aspect of this ending that is not typically discussed is the undergirding of paradoxical language.

Ancient writers struggled to understand the concept of infinity (plus very large numbers). For example, Zeno utilized paradoxes to depict infinity as it relates to the physical world for his audiences. Had the Gospel been written in a later era, there would be ways to express the concept of infinity that did not exist in the first century. From the perspective of logic, in order for John to engage in hyperbole, he would need to resort to one of several conventions—one of which being some type of paradoxical

⁶⁶ It also suggests that the implied reader either would be familiar with paradoxical language, or that the implied author believed paradoxical language was necessary to convey Johannine concepts (or both).

⁶⁷ The statement is an *explicit*, a type of paratext akin to those found at the end of 2 Maccabees, 2 Baruch, 1 Enoch, and other texts; for further discussion, see Estes, *Temporal Mechanics*, pp. 120–9.

language to express infinity. We can chart the logic of John’s paradox language within this hyperbole in this way:

	Proposition	Counter-Proposition
21: 25a	Other Things Written $\neq$ World Full Other Things Written +1 $\neq$ World Full	
21: 25b		x Other Things Written $\equiv$ World Full
21: 25b		How many is x ?

As the chart shows, the writer of the Gospel exploits the concept of a very large number to suggest that the number of deeds of Jesus are uncountable ($\sim$ infinite). If one or two other things were written about Jesus, it would not equal a world full of books; but Jesus has done so many things that if all were written down the number of books would surpass the size of the world. This raises the question (implicit in the logic of the paradox): how many books would fill the world? In the first century, a ‘world full of books’ would be a much smaller number than we can imagine today. In fact, the average person in the ancient world could not imagine counting a number much greater than the equivalent of five digits.⁶⁸ As a result, not only is this literary closing device employed by John not literal, it is also not envisaging an actual large number as a modern person’s imagination leads them to believe. The result is a seemingly true but contradictory solution—Jesus did so many miraculous things that the only thing to compare it to is the largest imaginable object (the size of the world itself). A paradox is set between the ability to count the number of Jesus’ acts and the size of the world, neither of which is fathomable in the mind of an ancient reader (at least, in the way we fathom these ideas today).

John may not have understood large numbers well, but he did understand paradoxical ideas. The Gospel’s closing statement borrows its underlying logic from the famous heap (*σωρίτης*)

⁶⁸ By way of example, I note the challenges of counting large populations; e.g. Dan. 7:10; Rev. 5:11.

paradox.⁶⁹ Created by Eubulides, this paradox also presents the problem of uncountable numbers. It does it this way: if you have one grain, you do not have a heap, and if you have two grains, you do not have a heap, so how many grains does it take to have a heap? We can chart the heap paradox in this way:

Proposition	Counter-Proposition
Grain of Sand $\neq$ Heap	
Grain of Sand + 1 $\neq$ Heap	
	x Grains of Sand $\equiv$ Heap
How many is x ?	

Here the logic of the heap paradox is predicated on the ambiguity surrounding large numbers. If we come across a grain of sand, we can count the grain; but at some point, the grains of sand no longer seem to be individual grains; they become a heap. There is a transformation (based on number) from the countable to the uncountable. Likewise, John has written of a few signs (countable), but he wants the reader to know that the actual deeds of Jesus are of a different magnitude (uncountable). Implicit in the heap paradox is the question ‘How many grains does a heap contain?’, akin to the implicit question in the last statement of John’s gospel: ‘How many books about Jesus does a whole world contain?’ The result is a seemingly true but contradictory solution—a number of grains is not a heap, but a heap can be made from a number of grains. Likewise, a similar seemingly true but contradictory solution undergirds John’s hyperbole—Jesus’ actions written about here is not a world full, but a world full can be construed by the reader by knowing of these actions.

Though the primary purpose of the final statement in John is rhetorical flourish based on hyperbole, the Gospel’s use of paradoxical language to explain an indefinite number to build the hyperbole echoes the paradoxical logic of Eubulides’ *σωρίτης* paradox. However, in this statement, the Gospel does *not* present a formal paradox (as in 1:1); instead, it adapts a common paradoxical idiom popular in the ancient world in order to make a rhetorical, concluding point. To summarize, John and Eubulides

⁶⁹ Even in the ancient world, there came to be many variations on this paradox; see, for example, Sorenson, *Brief History*, pp. 53–4, 96. Today philosophers consider it a class of paradox.

both use paradoxical language to try to explain the implications of a large number; Eubulides' use is in a formal paradox whereas John imbues his hyperbole with a paradoxical idea. Because John is a questioner, a riddler, and a paradoxical thinker, he uses these kinds of rhetorical flourishes when needed most.

Paradoxical language forms and undergirds the logical and rhetorical impetus of both the opening and closing statements in John's Gospel. In both cases, the paradoxical language is supportive—it is not meant to interfere with the theological or literary goals of these statements. This reflects the usage of paradox in the ancient world as both a formal problem of logic *and* as something that is so miraculous as to be mysterious. John is not a sophist, and did not compose these statements to be unsolvable. Rather, steeped as he is in the oral culture of the day, he uses paradoxical language and thought to make theological and literary points.⁷⁰ These statements also use paradoxical language rhetorically in order to catch and keep the reader's attention. In the light of the first-century cultural milieu, these types of oral language games were a necessary backdrop for the proclamation of the early Christian *kerygma*, and later committed to texts like John.⁷¹

A CASE STUDY: LIGHT AND DARKNESS IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

In the previous section, I have argued that John's Gospel makes use of paradoxical language and thought patterns to assist in both the theology as well as the rhetoric and argumentation of the Gospel. By identifying paradoxical language in the opening and closing statements of the Gospel, I hope to show that paradoxical thought—more so than dualism—is the cultural backdrop for John's preference for boldly contrastive statements. When scholars point to dualism in the Fourth Gospel, they often point less to Christology and rhetorical devices and more towards a number of symbolic and ethical statements throughout the Gospel. Within the scope of this essay, I wish to challenge the presumption of dualism through the most 'obvious' example of dualism in the Fourth Gospel—the 'light and darkness' motif. A review of modern commentators on the Gospel of John suggests that 'light and darkness' is the first and most commonly cited example of dualism

⁷⁰ Cf. Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 112–14, and Friederike Kunath, *Die Präexistenz Jesu im Johannesevangelium: Struktur und Theologie eines johanneischen Motivs* (BZNW 212; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), pp. 80–104.

⁷¹ Justin, *Dial.* 38, 48, 49.

in the Fourth Gospel.⁷² Thus, in order to overturn the dualistic understanding of John, we consider the stark contrasts and bold propositions about light and darkness in John as a case study.

Ancient peoples understood the concepts of light and darkness in a much different way than people today who have the benefit of modern science. The most basic and universal view of light and darkness was the twenty-four hour day–night cycle (cf. Gen. 1:3–5). The ability to see daylight was a sign of life (cf. 1 Enoch 41:8).⁷³ The only other primary source of light—and the only other significant source of artificial light—was fire (whether by log or torch or lamp). Whereas sunlight broke the darkness each morning, fire was a much more fickle source of light that had to be started, tended, and watched carefully.⁷⁴ The Hebraic view also held that light was an object, a thing, like darkness; metaphorically at least, one can wear light almost as a robe (Ps. 104:2) and God can speak from within it without being consumed (Exod. 3:2–3). In addition, the

⁷² For example, Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, p. 387; von Wahlde, *Gospel and Letters of John*, vol. 1, p. 232; Schulz, *Evangelium nach Johannes*, p. 10; Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 36; Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 260; Carter, *John and Empire*, p. 23; Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, p. 132; Ismo Dunderberg, *The Beloved Disciple in Conflict? Revisiting the Gospels of John and Thomas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 6; Taylor, *Companion to John*, pp. xi, 72; Yong, 'Light Shines in the Darkness', p. 38; James F. McGrath, *John's Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in Johannine Christology* (SNTSMS 111; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 50; Cornelis Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel* (WUNT 2.148; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), p. 121; Jutta Leonhardt-Balzer, 'The Ruler of the World, Antichrists and Pseudo-Prophets: Johannine Variations on an Apocalyptic Motif', in Catrin H. Williams and Christopher Rowland (eds.), *John's Gospel and Imitations of Apocalyptic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 182; Dorothy A. Lee, 'Imagery', in Estes and Sheridan (eds.), *How John Works*, p. 152; Anderson, 'Gradations of Symbolization', p. 182; and for similar recognition that 'light and darkness' is the most prominent Johannine motif that commentators use to argue for dualism in John, Bauckham, 'Qumran Community and the Gospel of John', p. 105.

⁷³ Michael Squire, 'Introductory Reflections: Making Sense of Ancient Sight', in Michael Squire (ed.), *Sight and the Ancient Senses* (The Senses in Antiquity; London: Routledge, 2016), p. 10.

⁷⁴ The exception, in a sense, was the Menorah, from which one lamp (*ner tamid*) burned during the day and the rest at night without being extinguished in the Temple in Jerusalem (e.g. Exod. 27:20–1, Lev. 24:2; but cf. Exod. 30:8, 1 Sam. 3:3, 2 Chron. 13:11; and contra three, not one, burning during the day, Josephus, *Ant.* 3.199); see Rachel Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form and Significance* (JSJSup 68; Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 177. Though the biblical-tradition data is not clear, it seems

popular Greek view by the first century was that ‘the eye emits a fire whose rays probe the surface of the observed object’.⁷⁵ The process of seeing was thought to be the same process as touching—just as a hand would reach out and feel an object, ‘fire’ from the eyes would ‘touch’ an object to see it.⁷⁶ At the same time, the popular Greek view held that light sources like the moon and the stars were objects that emitted their own fires. This is why people can see during the day but not as well at night—the fires of light sources are able to ‘shake hands’ with the fires emitted from the eyes. Aristotle and the Stoics modified this view somewhat, but all of these views were predicated on light existing as an object in a medium. This view is probably in mind to some degree in Matt. 6:22 // Luke 11:34, and it remained a popular view until at least the fourth century CE.⁷⁷ Thus, the average person in the Greek-speaking world in the first century understood light and darkness primarily in three ways: (a) literally, as daylight or sunrise, or artificially, as fire; (b) metaphorically, for example as a symbol of divine emanation; and (c) physically, in the sense that light was a fire that left both eyes and objects to ‘touch’ each other. In contrast, darkness was understood in the three contrastive ways: (a) literally, as night, or sunset; (b) metaphorically, as a blight or source of despair (e.g. Exod. 10:21–2; Ps. 88:6, 12; Joel 2:2; 1 Enoch 46:6; Eph. 5:8); and (c) physically, as the absence of emittable fire from eyes or objects.

In the light of the ancient evidence about paradoxical language, let us briefly apply this to the light and darkness passages in John’s Gospel. There are six key passages:

that by the first century Josephus’ depiction of the Menorah as burning day and night was an accepted truth.

⁷⁵ Olivier Darrigol, *A History of Optics: From Greek Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2012), p. 2.

⁷⁶ Allan Chapman, ‘Divine Light’, in Snezana Lawrence and Mark McCartney (eds.), *Mathematicians and Their Gods: Interactions between Mathematics and Religious Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 51–4; Kelli Rudolph, ‘Sight and the Presocratics: Approaches to Visual Perception in Early Greek Philosophy’, in Squire (ed.), *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, pp. 44–6; and Andrea Nightingale, ‘Sight and the Philosophy of Vision in Classical Greece: Democritus, Plato and Aristotle’, *ibid.*, pp. 54–67.

⁷⁷ For example, Theon of Alexandria still held this view in the fourth century. Given that Plato promoted much of this popular view, unsurprisingly Aristotle disagreed, but Aristotle’s theories were more complex and not as accepted. For more details, see Darrigol, *History of Optics*, pp. 3–7.

John 1:4–9

The Gospel of John introduces light and darkness in the prologue, and it is here that these concepts are given their clearest definition.⁷⁸ Thus, if these two concepts are meant as paradoxical language, and not representative of a metaphysical dualism, it should be most evident in the prologue:

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. [John 1:4–9, NRSV]

At first glance, the contrast of light and darkness, coupled with the use of *καταλαμβάνω*, if taken out of Johannine context could seem as if light and darkness were two powers in heaven.⁷⁹ But in John's context, the meaning of light is defined, which gives the reader a clue that John intended something else. Beginning in 1:4, John defines light—metaphorically—as ‘the life’ for all people.⁸⁰ So the light of people was ‘the life’, and this life comes from the Word (and all that the Word created, *ὁ γέγονεν*). Next, 1:5 is a bold, and slightly aphoristic-sounding statement, that contrasts light (the life of the Word) with darkness ([undefined]). Though the Gospel does not identify what darkness represents metaphorically, it is reasonable to conclude that darkness is a metaphor for ‘death’ or ‘despair’ based on ancient ideas about the meaning of darkness and the contrastive meaning of the light metaphor.⁸¹ Therefore, the light/darkness contrast in verse 5 is essentially based on a contrast between

⁷⁸ Cf. Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), p. 30; Marianne Meye Thompson, “‘Light’ (*φῶς*): The Philosophical Content of the Term and the Gospel of John”, in Jan G. van der Watt, R. Alan Culpepper, and Udo Schnelle (eds.), *The Prologue of the Gospel of John: Its Literary, Theological, and Philosophical Contexts* (WUNT 359; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), p. 278; and Frey, ‘Zu Hintergrund und Funktion des johanneischen Dualismus’, p. 67.

⁷⁹ Especially if one reads the Greek verbs without nuance; see Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1–4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 33–4.

⁸⁰ On light as a metaphor, see, for example, Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, p. 17.

⁸¹ Or perhaps, more poetically, darkness as death and despair is a ‘loss of glory’; see Edward H. Gerber, *The Scriptural Tale in the Fourth Gospel: With Particular Reference to the Prologue and a Syncretic (Oral and Written) Poetics* (BIS 147; Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 178–81.

life in the Word/death with the added implication that this life is visible to all people (1:4, 9).⁸²

With these definitions of the metaphor in hand, the reader can become aware of the paradoxical language in the light/darkness contrast (the narrator already prepares the reader for this in John 1:1). In the ancient world, there were only two primary types of lights that shined: natural lights (notably the sun) and artificial lights (fire, oil lamps). Since the Gospel states that the light shines in the darkness, the simplest example of this is an *artificial light* source such as a fire, torch, or lamp.⁸³ Given ancients' understanding of the physical world, a torch or a lamp emitted 'fire' that made it visible to the human eye even in darkness. As the Gospel notes, this particular source of light was not overcome by darkness. However, *all* artificial sources of light *are* eventually overcome by darkness—the fires of torches and the oils of lamps sooner or later fail.⁸⁴ This is where the paradoxical language becomes evident: the Gospel creates a contradictory premiss that

Proposition

Counter-Proposition

All light overcome (Yes)

This light overcome (No)

A light eternal (?)

*there is a light that is not overcome—extinguished—by darkness.*⁸⁵
We can illustrate the paradoxical element contained within:

⁸² Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, p. 167.

⁸³ One could argue that the light represents a natural source such as stars, since stars do shine in the darkness. However, stars are never 'overcome' by darkness; hence this does not seem the most likely reference (cf. John 9:4–5, 11:9, where there are references to natural light that is contrastive with the type of light referred to in the prologue).

⁸⁴ Given that John's Gospel originates after the destruction of the Temple—and the removal of the Menorah—in 70 CE, this could also be a veiled reference to the fact that Jesus has replaced the light of the Temple with the light of his life.

⁸⁵ One may argue that we may be better served to consider an inextinguishable light as an example of the *miraculous* rather than the *paradoxical*. Certainly, it is miraculous, especially in an ancient world context. At the same time, much of what ancients thought of paradoxes bordered on the miraculous also. Thus, the miraculous and the paradoxical—when expressed in language—may often be compatible, or at least tangential categories.

In some ways, John's proposition is loosely akin to Heraclitus' river proposition or a Stoic type of paradox in the way they combine both metaphor and ambiguity in a short expression that has a deeper meaning.

The reader may then reapply the metaphorical intent to the paradoxical language. There is a light that shines in the darkness, but the darkness cannot extinguish this light. This light is the life of the Word for all people, but death and despair cannot extinguish this life. Just as it is seemingly contradictory to reason that there can be a light that is not eventually extinguished by darkness, so too is it contradictory to reason that there can be life that is not eventually extinguished by death. By imagining a light that cannot be overcome by darkness, the Fourth Gospel uses paradoxical language to demonstrate the power of the life found in the Word.

The remaining references to light in the prologue support this interpretation. In 1:7–8, John the Baptist is a witness to this light, but is himself not the light. In 1:9, the reader is told that this light can give light to everyone, and is now coming into the world. Thus, this light is both universal and something new, which an eternal light would be to people: an eternal light shines continually for anyone to be able to see, and it is something very different than people have seen before (cf. 1 Enoch 58:6). As God was in the burning bush, and the bush was not burned up and the fire extinguished, so too is Jesus the light (life) that darkness (death) cannot overcome. As the lamp of the Menorah burns in the Temple, and the light never goes out, so too is Jesus the light (life) that darkness (death) cannot overcome.

As the implied reader continues to read the Gospel, they are now in a position to solve the riddle that the paradox creates: The light is the life of the Word, which can never be extinguished; though the darkness tried to extinguish the light, by his resurrection the Word shows that even death cannot snuff out this light. The paradox not only teaches an unfathomable truth to the reader, it also compels the reader to keep reading in case the truth may soon be made more plain. We can trace this paradox as it runs through the remaining five passages.

John 3:19–21

The next occurrence of the light/darkness contrast appears during the discourse with Nicodemus in John 3. According to John, these ideas do not seem well understood by Nicodemus (cf. John 3:10). When first confronted with paradoxical language, it is not

an easy language game to absorb. Unlike the Johannine characters who have not come to full understanding, John's readers are alert to paradox already; they are able to reflect on the seeming contradictions that John puts forward in order to digest uncomfortable truths:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God. [John 3:19–21, NRSV]

Here John's Gospel uses no new paradoxical language, but holds onto the contradictory premise in order to achieve ironic effect for his readers.⁸⁶ As Jesus states, this is the judgement: life in the Word, that is not extinguishable, has come into the world, but the same people it illuminates loved death more than life because their deeds were evil. Thus, those who do evil avoid the light (life), but those who do what is true come to the light (life). Irony occurs because the light that John refers to is an inextinguishable light, one that not even darkness (death) can overcome, and that there really is no escaping that light by those who do evil. Those who do evil will *not* be victorious, because the darkness *cannot* extinguish it.

John 8:12

A little later in the Gospel narrative, the Evangelist picks up and continues the paradoxical language from the prologue:

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' [John 8:12, NRSV]

Jesus identifies himself as a light to all people, just as the light of the Word is from the prologue—a clue that later readers get but the original audience does not. Jesus claims that he is a source of light that, if people follow, they will never be covered by darkness (death) but instead will have light (life). This echoes the paradoxical language from the prologue, because there is no light in the world that has a great enough strength or duration to prevent someone from eventually walking in darkness (dying). The

⁸⁶ Similarly noted, see Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1985), p. 108.

contradictory premiss—that there is a non-extinguishable light source—continues into this statement. Applying the metaphor, Jesus claims to be the life of the Word that never stops shining such that those in that light will never face death or despair.

John 9:4–5

In this discussion with his disciples, the Johannine Jesus makes reference back to the light/darkness contrast established by the Evangelist in the prologue:

‘We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ [John 9:4–5, NRSV]

In this discourse, day and night are *not* representations of the light/darkness contrasts. Instead, day is a time of natural light, and it is a time wherein the Evangelist indicates that Jesus’ disciples can do works that glorify God. But night is coming, when no one can work, and this will end the day. Yet, as long as Jesus is in the world, life will be in the world. The implication for the reader is that while Jesus is a light that darkness cannot overcome, there is still a natural time for work (day) and a natural time when that work will end (night).

John 11:9–10

In John 11, the discourse follows closely with the bold propositions in John 9:

Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.’ [John 11:9–10, NRSV]

Jesus’ question in 11:9 is probably not intended literally, but is a rhetorical push back against the disciples’ question.⁸⁷ After the sarcastic rejoinder to the disciples, Jesus reiterates a similar idea from John 9: a person who walks when there is plenty of natural light does not stumble, because they can see by this natural light; but a person who walks at night will fall, because there is no natural or artificial light to see by. Connecting this with the

⁸⁷ This question is a ‘retort question’, a special kind of rhetorical device that is highly sarcastic; see Douglas Estes, *The Questions of Jesus in John: Logic, Rhetoric, and Persuasive Discourse* (BIS 115; Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 140–4.

paradoxical language of the prologue, the Johannine Jesus states that when the time for natural light is over (the sun sets, night comes), there is no light (life) that is in people that can keep them safe once the sun has set. Of course, the implied reader can draw the connection that this is because there is only one inextinguishable light source in our world: the life of the Word. This is explained in 11:11, when Jesus states that Lazarus is one on whom the sun has set, who has passed into night because there is no eternal life in him at this point. Thus, the light of the World is not in people, it is in the Word that has come into the world (John 1:4).

John 12:35–6, 46

The final reference to the light/darkness contrast occurs in Jesus' final public teaching in the first half of the Fourth Gospel:

Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.' . . . 'I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.' [John 12:35–6, 46, NRSV]

Here John's Gospel summarizes the metaphors begun in the prologue and briefly developed in the text, with a reiteration of the original paradoxical language as a capstone. Starting in 12:35, Jesus clarifies that the life that comes through the Word will be with the disciples for only a little while longer. This spatial language is distinct from the contrastive language; the light is not going to be extinguished—just not be present with them. Next, Jesus encourages his disciples to do the work of God as long as there is natural light (John 9:4, 11:9), so that death and despair (darkness) will not overtake them. But if the disciples start to walk in death (darkness), they will not be able to see any longer (know where they are going), and the Gospel implies it is because there will be no light for them anymore. The Johannine Jesus warns the disciples that while the life of the Word is present with them, they should believe in the life, so that they may become children in this new life (John 3:3–4). Finally, Jesus makes the bold proposition that he is the life of the Word, such that anyone who believes in him can be free from death and despair. The paradoxical thought is restated, in a more evident way: the light is the life of the Word, which can never be extinguished; though

people may try to remain in the darkness, by his resurrection the Word shows that even death cannot keep people from this life.

CONCLUSION

As Michael Williams titled his book *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, so too has the purpose of this essay been to rethink 'dualism' in the Fourth Gospel, and to not only dismantle a dubious metaphysical category but to propose a new paradigm for understanding how John uses stark contrasts and bold language. The hope is to continue a corrective of a fundamental misunderstanding of the Gospel of John in modern scholarship. 'Dualism' is not the best descriptor for the metaphysical undergirding of the Fourth Gospel. As C. K. Barrett points out: 'The mere use of images in pairs, such as light and darkness, or even matter and spirit, is not in itself dualistic.'⁸⁸ In fact, using the term 'dualistic' to describe John is not merely inaccurate, it misleads the reader of the Gospel by imbuing the text with a different metaphysic than the Gospel actually has. The Fourth Gospel was not written to depict binary oppositions as much as it was written to take opposing ideas and put them in dialogue with each other. It was written this way in order that the dialogue would spill over into the lives of its readers.⁸⁹ The parables, the *παροιμία*, the riddles, the questions, the metaphors, and yes, the paradoxes of John are all a part of the Gospel's rhetorical strategy to show signs to convince the reader that Jesus is the Messiah (John 20:30–1).⁹⁰ Though there has been growing unease with the acceptance of dualism in John, a counter-proposal has not been forthcoming.

The error of ascribing dualism to John has ramifications that reach beyond hermeneutics, beyond even theology, and into Christian ethics and meaning for our world at large. As Culpepper, Volf, Barton, and Barrett have each noted in different ways, a dualistic Gospel is a Gospel that is out of phase with a modern, pluralistic world. As the Gospel of John is a commonly read book in the New Testament, if it is misread as dualistic—with oppositional categories of insider and outsider, truth and

⁸⁸ Barrett, *Essays on John*, p. 101; and cf. Thompson, "'Light" (*φῶς*)', p. 282.

⁸⁹ For the dialectical and rhetorical tendencies of the Gospel towards its readers, see Estes, *Questions of Jesus in John*, pp. 163–72.

⁹⁰ And they 'can play a significant educational role' for readers; see Attridge, 'Genre', p. 19.

falsehood, light and darkness—it creates a caricature of Christian theology that will be misunderstood (and misapplied) in our world at large. Yet the Fourth Gospel is not primarily dualistic; it is paradoxical, and the stark contrasts found within are designed to draw the reader in and create dialogue between two positions, not inseparable categories. Paradox is a way of thinking that allows for contradictory ideas to reach true—though uncomfortable—solutions. John's Gospel is actually a Gospel that can speak to our modern, pluralistic world, and the more so if we eliminate the out-of-date categories and allow the Gospel to speak clearly in its native language—riddle, metaphor, question, paradox. We live in a paradoxical age, and we can use a paradoxical gospel like John.