

Unit 3

Contrasts and Conflict: Johannine Dualism

One of the most striking features of John's Gospel is its distinctive symbolism and frequent use of opposites, otherwise known as its dualistic language. Dualism is most commonly defined as the notion that the universe is under the dominion of two opposing principles. Although the usage of opposites is not uncommon in the Hebrew Scriptures or even in the New Testament, what is striking about John's Gospel is the frequency of such dualistic or opposite pairs. Indeed, the author seems to have anchored the major components of his theology with reference to such contrasts. The following are some of the most obvious dualistic pairs: light/darkness (Jn 1:5); from above/from below (3:3); spirit/flesh (3:6); life/death (5:24); truth/falsehood (8:44-45); heaven/earth (3:31); God/Satan (13:27); Israel/'the Jews' (1:19; 1:47); Israel/world (17:14).

Belief in Two Worlds: The World Above and the World Below

The Fourth Evangelist clearly assumes belief in two worlds. Jesus says in 8:23: 'You are of this world; I am not of this world'. But how, precisely, is the term 'world' (*kosmos*) used in the Gospel of John? It undoubtedly plays an important role in the narrative, since it occurs 78 times in comparison with 14 times in all the Synoptic Gospels put together. However, the complex and varied range of its meaning in John's Gospel, must be taken into account.

a) Neutral/Positive Usage In numerous Johannine passages the term 'world' is used in a neutral sense and, to some extent, even positively. In parallel with its usage in the Synoptic Gospels, 'world' describes both the created order (1:10; 17:5) and the earth (11:9), and is often referred to as the dwelling-place of humans (6:14; 9:5; 16:28). The evangelist does not possess a negative attitude towards the created world itself, for it is none other than the object of God's love (3:16).

b) Negative Usage There is a distinctive use of *kosmos* in John's Gospel to describe human alienation from God. It symbolizes unbelief and rejection of the divine truth as revealed in Jesus. 'This world' is often viewed in the Fourth Gospel as evil, ruled by the devil (16:11). However, what makes the world evil is not intrinsic to it, for the world remains within God's realm. It is rather the fact that it has turned away from its creator and is enslaved to evil power (Bultmann: 'the distortion of creation').

c) 'The World Above' Over and against the earthly world stands the realm described by John as 'the world above'. Jesus regularly claims that his true home is another place, not this world: 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world' (8:23). Jesus, the messenger from above, has indeed come into this world through the incarnation (1:9-10; 3:16-17), albeit temporarily from his divine dwelling-place. The authority of his mission does not stem from 'this world' but from above (18:36). His mission from God is to come into this world, dominated by darkness and the prince of this world (that is, Satan), in order to save the world; this is interpreted as an expression of God's love for the world (3:16). Hence Jesus is to bring life to the world (6:33) by giving his life for the world (1:29; 6:51). When Jesus' mission is completed, he departs from 'this world' (13:1; 14:19), having commissioned his disciples to continue his mission both in and to the world (17:21). Those who are called out from the world no longer belong to it (15:19; 17:6, 11), because they have undergone a new birth from above and are consequently hated by the world, as Jesus himself was hated (15:18-19).

Cosmic Dualism

What, therefore, does John's terminology concerning 'the world' tell us about the form of dualism which he has embraced? The numerous references to the earthly world as a dwelling-place different from the heavenly world suggest that the evangelist is using a form of cosmic dualism (spatial imagery). The most primitive form of eschatological expectation among the early Christians was that they lived in an interim period between the

coming of the historical Jesus and his final reappearance (*parousia*). This kind of dualism, which is particularly characteristic of the Synoptics and of Jewish eschatology, believes that history can be divided into two main periods, namely the present age still under the authority of Satan and the age to come when he will be destroyed; it possesses a horizontal, historical dimension, formed within a temporal framework. Nevertheless, this kind of dualism is not particularly prominent in the Gospel of John and has largely been replaced by a cosmic, vertical dualism. John does not contrast ‘this world’ with a future world, but juxtaposes the world above and the world below.

Human Dualism

In addition to adopting a cosmic dualism, John combines it with a kind of ‘human dualism’, that is, there is also opposition *within* the world below between believers and unbelievers. This is a human dualism that centres on two kinds of self-understanding, and focuses upon the importance of human decision; in John’s Gospel the individual faces only two options, accepting or rejecting Jesus. This is reflected above all in the Johannine usage of the term ‘judgement’ (*krisis*). Although the word *krisis* can occasionally possess the negative connotation of condemnation (cf. 3:16, 18; 12:31; 16:11), particularly to denote the consequences of rejecting Jesus, the word ‘judgement’ for John primarily denotes the process of separation, the actual sorting out of believers and unbelievers to opposite sides of the divide (the word *krisis* can denote ‘a crossroads’: by coming to a ‘crossroads’ one must make a decision). The same applies to Jesus; he acts as judge or separator in John’s Gospel, because all who encounter him must come to a decision: to accept and believe in him or to reject him (cf. 1:11-12; 3:16-21; 5:24; 8:12-19; 9:39). And this focus on judgement or separation is a process already at work in Jesus’ ministry (realized eschatology). The difference between those who believe and those who do not believe is that those who opt for the positive form of existence brought by God through Jesus are assured a heavenly dwelling place (= eternal life) to which Jesus draws them; this is the result of making a positive decision (3:16; 5:24; 12:50). But those who reject Jesus’

message are condemned and remain enslaved to the world below, a world characterized by darkness, sin, unbelief and death (cf. 12:46; 5:24).

Other Examples of John's Dualistic Terminology

a) Darkness and Light Particularly prominent in John's Gospel are the dualistic terms of light and darkness (*phôs* and *skotia*), a language that occurs predominantly in John 1-12. It has recently been noted that this imagery (light/darkness) never overlaps with John's spatial imagery (above/below). When 'world' is used in connection with the image of light ('I am the light of the world'), it has the neutral sense of the created order rather than the negative sense of the world alienated from God. This is already stated in the Prologue: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' (1:5). Indeed, this focus on Jesus as the light who shines in the darkness provides the springboard for the symbolic system which dominates the narrative of John 1-12: Jesus as the logos incarnate is 'the life which is the light of men' (1:4), and where there is light (Jesus) there is life (salvation). It is for this reason that Jesus describes himself as 'the light of the world' (8:12; 9:5) so that humans may not remain in darkness but may have the light of life. And those who receive the light become 'sons [or children] of light' (12:36). In this respect, the narrative in John 9 about Jesus healing a man born blind provides a graphic illustration of his ability to offer light (a text that will be considered in some detail later in this module).

Being in darkness is equivalent to ignorance: 'he who walks in darkness does not know where he goes' (12:35). The challenge, therefore, is for people to leave the darkness for the light (e.g., Jn 9:5, 25, 39, 41). Indeed, John portrays the light as invading the darkness (1:5; 3:19; 12:35, 46). Note the words of John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 210 [second edition, 390]: 'The picture offered by the Gospel is one of a light shining in the darkness and attracting men by its radiance. Drawn to the source of light they come to attach themselves to it, extending and magnifying it and thereby limiting still further the domain of darkness'. Thus those who reside in darkness are given the choice to leave the

darkness and follow the light (Jesus), but those who refuse the light continue to live in darkness (cf. 3:19-20). For this reason, John places a great deal of emphasis on the ability of light to offer exposure; the light exposes those who reject or accept its illumination, which is an expression of the Johannine understanding of judgement.

b) Flesh and Spirit Flesh, for John, represents the weakness of the world below. Humans are born of ‘the will of the flesh’ (1:13), although it must be remembered that the Fourth Evangelist also states that the ‘Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (1:14). Flesh therefore is synonymous with humanity. To reach for the life above, one must be born from above or from the Spirit (3:12) for flesh cannot help a human to attain eternal life (6:63). It is the Spirit that raises humans from the earthly level, and enables them to worship God properly (4:24).

c) Satan The world below is said to be in the grips of an evil power called the devil (8:44; 13:2) or Satan (cf. 13:27: ‘Satan entered into Judas’); he is also called ‘the ruler of this world’ (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). In 8:44 the devil is said to control his children, to be a murderer from the beginning, to contain no truth, and to be the father of lies. This of course stands in stark contrast to Jesus, who is depicted as the truth and offers the true way to life (14:6). As the ruler of this world, Satan tries to overcome Jesus (14:30) but cannot do so, for he is cast out (12:31); at the hour of Jesus (his death and resurrection), the devil is judged and brought down (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). However, the devil remains sufficiently powerful for Jesus to pray that his followers will be kept from ‘evil’ or ‘the evil one’ (17:15) until the final judgement (12:48).

One aspect which will be discussed in more detail when analysing Jesus’ miracles (‘the signs’) is the fact that John’s Gospel never mentions Jesus carrying out exorcisms (casting out evil spirits). In the Synoptic Gospels the defeat of Satan is linked specifically with Jesus’ exorcisms, but John links the defeat of Satan directly to Jesus’ death (14:30; 16:11). This may have led John to omit other traditions about Jesus’ role as an exorcist.

Particularly interesting is the depiction of Judas and his motives in John's Gospel. The devil has many children who do not believe in Jesus (8:45) and do evil deeds (3:19; 8:40), and in their midst is Judas. He is portrayed as a 'devil' (6:70) into whom Satan enters on the occasion of the last supper and the washing of the disciples' feet (13:2). See especially 13:27: 'When he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas the son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him'. By making this decision to betray Jesus and follow the prince of this world, Judas has cut himself away from the light of the world. Hence John notes that when Judas left the room 'it was night' (13:30), to demonstrate symbolically that Judas had now surrendered to the powers of darkness.

The Background to Johannine Dualism

The distinctiveness of John's dualistic language leads us to enquire about its precise conceptual background. The most widely held theories can be presented in the following way: Is John's dualism Gnostic (which clearly embraces a cosmic or physical dualism) or Jewish (with its emphasis on ethical and eschatological dualism)? Or could it possibly be a modification of one or both?

a) Gnostic Background Since the time of Rudolf Bultmann, great emphasis has been placed on the 'History of Religions' method and, in particular, on the view that Gnosticism had deeply influenced John. This theory was developed in the light of the discoveries and publication of texts belonging to Coptic Gnosticism (from Nag Hammadi in Egypt) and Syrian Gnosticism (the Odes of Solomon). From the late second century CE onwards, the term 'gnosticism' came to be used to describe certain heretical groups who claimed divine knowledge. The Gnostic worldview consisted of an upper world of spirit contrasted with the lower world of evil matter. According to the Gnostic salvation myth, the Original Man was divided into small particles of light that descended as human souls into an evil world. Deliverance from material existence became possible because a heavenly redeemer

brought *gnosis* or knowledge; this knowledge could be acquired through revelation, which led to release from bondage and a lifting up to a heavenly sphere of light. The earliest source for Gnosticism, the Corpus Hermeticum, stresses that God is mind, light and life, and over against it stands a chaotic ocean of darkness. Salvation involves the separation of matter from spirit, of darkness from light. Some possible parallels can be noted:

‘The light shines in the darkness’ (Jn 1:5)

‘I [the Gnostic redeemer] shone down [upon the darkness]’ (Trimorphic Protennoia or ‘First Thought in Three Forms’ 36:5 from Nag Hammadi)

‘I will reveal myself to those who have heard my mysteries, that is, the sons of the light’ (Trimorphic Protennoia 42:16)

‘Let not light be conquered by darkness, nor let truth flee from falsehood’ (Odes of Solomon 18:6)

‘I am the light of the world’ (Jn 8:12; 9:5)

‘I am that light..... your God (Corpus Hermeticum 1:6)

Although Bultmann’s arguments in favour of Gnosticism continue to be accepted by some scholars (e.g., Kurt Rudolph and James M. Robinson), it is difficult to regard John as having been influenced by gnosticism for the following reasons:

i) No pre-Christian Gnostic sources have been found that reflect this particular kind of

cosmic dualism. Such texts as the Trimorphic Protennoia (from Nag Hammadi) stem from the second half of the second century CE. Indeed recent scholarship has demonstrated that many Gnostic texts contain allusions to Christianity, and their language may even partly be derived from such NT writings as the Gospel of John.

ii) On the whole John seems to oppose the kind of dualism embraced by the Gnostics. When he stresses that ‘the Word became flesh’ (1:14), he appears to be opposing proto-Gnostic ideas, which differentiated between the spiritual and material worlds. Flesh and matter in Gnosticism are evil, but if John shared this view, he could never have written that ‘the Word became flesh’.

iii) The picture in Gnostic thought is of equally powerful forces of good and evil being locked in a struggle, the outcome of which is uncertain. But in John’s Gospel God’s sovereignty prevails. This is why Johannine dualism is often described as a ‘modified dualism’; both opposing principles are dependent on God the Creator. After all, God created darkness as well as light, evil as well as good (cf. Isa. 45:7).

iv) The emphasis upon realized eschatology in John’s Gospel means that the Gnostic image of the flight of the soul from the world is ‘replaced’ by the living fellowship with God in this world.

b) Jewish Background Some cases of John’s dualistic language find close parallels in the Hebrew Scriptures. Light, for example, is often used as a symbol of the divine presence and of divine salvation (e.g., Exod. 13:21; Ps. 27:1; Isa. 60:19). Note especially Isa. 42:16: ‘And I will lead the blind in a way that they know not, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground’.

There has been a movement away from the view that Hellenistic and Gnostic literature account for John’s dualism since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, whose dualistic language resembles that used by John in a striking manner. James H. Charlesworth, in an article reproduced in *John and Qumran*, offers a comparison between John and a

representative Qumran passage containing all the essential dualistic elements, namely the Manual of Discipline 3:13-4:26, a text discovered in Cave 1 and cited as 1QS (citation of text). In this text one encounters a number of contrasts between light and darkness, good deeds and evil deeds, truth and falsehood, two spirits at war with each other; it depicts two angelic beings, the Spirit of Light and the Angel of Darkness, known as the spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood or deceit (from a fountain of light and a fountain of darkness respectively), both created by God. Each of the two spirits rules over a part of humanity, which is divided into sons of light and truth and sons of darkness, and they are at war with each other in the human heart. This conflict will come to an end on the day of judgement when God will banish the spirit of falsehood, and the spirit of truth (light) will triumph. The dualism in this scroll is basically religious and ethical (i.e. the struggle is between good and evil) rather than physical dualism (i.e. between the material and spiritual); it does not view matter as evil as such. Among the most striking parallels are the following:

Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; cf. 1QS 3:18-19; 4:21)

Holy Spirit (John 14:26; cf. 1QS 4:21)

Sons of light (John 12:36; cf. 1QS 3:13, 24, 25)

Walk in darkness (John 8:12; cf. 1QS 3:21; 4:11)

Differences between the Johannine and Qumran dualism must however be noted:

- i) In Qumran, the conflict is between two spirits, both of whom were created by God, and said to be present in every person. In John the conflict is between the world and the incarnate Jesus; this represents a more external than internal dualism.
- ii) Whereas there are two spirits of light and darkness permanently in conflict with one another according to the Qumran text, in John's Gospel the Logos is light and all humans are in darkness until they are invited to enter into the light (what C.K. Barrett has called 'a dualism of motion').
- iii) Certain prominent Johannine phrases are absent: 'the true light', 'the light of the

world', 'to have the light', 'to come into the light', contrast of 'day' and night'.

iv) According to the Qumran texts the writers seem to be living through a present period of trial, expressed as the tension between the spirit of light and the spirit of darkness; in the Gospel of John, however, this struggle is passing through its climax, and victory is already decided (the emphasis is on realized rather than future eschatology). Although the Fourth Gospel does speak of the future, it does so primarily in terms of the completion or consummation of the salvation that is already, to a large degree, a present reality.

v) In Qumran, the sons of the light are those who dedicate themselves to the Torah of Moses and accept the community's interpretation of the Law, whereas in John's Gospel the sons of the light are those who believe in Jesus.

How does one account for the similarities and differences between Johannine and Qumran dualism? Many draw the conclusion that the influence of Qumran on John's Gospel is more indirect than direct, and that the similarities between them can be defined more as a resemblance with regard to terminology than to its application. Some recent scholars have been less cautious, drawing attention to the fact that these symbols and dualistic language are virtually unique to the Qumran community and John's Gospel. For this reason, they have sought to offer a more decisive explanation than simply in terms of indirect influence. Until recently John Ashton, was convinced that the fourth evangelist once belonged to an Essene group. In the first edition of his *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* he claimed that 'the evangelist had dualism in his bones.... and he may well have started life as one of those Essenes who were to be found, according to Josephus, in large numbers in every town' (p. 237). Furthermore, James Charlesworth claims that, although the fate of the Qumran Essenes is unclear, it is likely that some Essenes - scattered throughout Palestine - became Christians (archaeological discoveries indicate that there was an Essene Quarter in Jerusalem).¹ This may be particularly relevant in view of the striking parallels between the

¹ One possible link may be through John the Baptist, whose disciples according to John 1:35-40 subsequently followed Jesus. However, John's links with the Essene community are strongly disputed.

Dead Sea Scrolls and compositions written by second generation Christians (after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE). One cannot rule out the possibility that former Essene Jews were among the members of the Johannine community for which the Gospel of John was composed.

Richard Bauckham in an influential article highlights the weaknesses of the arguments that John is directly dependent on Qumran texts for his dualism, and focuses in particular on his use of light and darkness imagery.

i) There are certainly Qumran parallels to the light/darkness imagery (cf. Jn 1:4-9; 3:19-21; 8:12), but not for the distinctively Johannine spatial imagery encapsulated in its use of the term 'the world' (8:23; 18:36). Even if John's Gospel were dependent on Qumran texts from some of its dualistic language, it cannot explain all aspects of Johannine dualism.

ii) Bauckham notes the importance of the contrast between light and darkness (interpreted metaphorically as knowledge and ignorance, truth and error, life and death) in a variety of cultural traditions, particularly in the Hebrew Bible and in late Second Temple Jewish literature available to both the Qumran community and to John. 'If the imagery was available in the Jewish tradition, it would not be especially surprising to find two authors independently developing it more extensively than most other Jewish texts do'.

iii) Bauckham demonstrates that the Johannine use of the light/darkness imagery, which has no Qumran parallels, can be understood as rooted in biblical texts (Gen. 1:4-5 in the Prologue; light shining in the darkness of the world - messianic exegesis of passages in Isaiah; e.g., Isa. 9:1: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light' and references to the Servant of the Lord in 42:6-7 as a light to the nations) different from those biblical texts which influenced the Qumran use of the light/darkness imagery.

One particularly interesting development in connection with discussions on Johannine dualism involves the nature of the so-called Johannine community. It has become increasingly clear that the Gospel reflects the concerns of those that had experienced rifts from other groups, particularly from the Jewish synagogue. Exclusion from such groups

and allegiance to one's own group could (and can) lead to a sectarian mentality in which exclusive claims predominate. Such claims to exclusiveness are numerous in the Dead Sea Scrolls; having cut themselves off from other Jews, the Qumran members regarded themselves alone as 'the sons of light' and as possessing secret knowledge. In other words, this is a group that set up barriers between itself and those on the outside. Sociological analyses of the kind of community reflected in John's Gospel have thus led some scholars to propose a wider similarity between the two groups than merely one of common terminology. Like the Qumran scrolls, the Fourth Gospel, it is claimed, is the product of a sect striving to assert its own distinctive identity.² Whether this points to a gospel directed at insiders rather than (or as well as) outsiders will need to be considered in a later part (Unit 10) of this module.

Conclusion

The Johannine application of dualistic terms displays certain affinities with both the Greek worldview (cosmic-vertical dualism) and the Jewish view (historical-ethical dualism), but neither offers a comprehensive explanation of John's distinctive application of this dualistic language. The salvation motif is particularly important for John, namely that Jesus descends to the world below and dwells in it in order to draw believers to the world above. John's unique contribution may be the welding of both the mythological and the historical aspects of such diverse dualistic thoughts. One point is certain: these ideas need not stem from a *late* Hellenistic environment; they can be easily derived from a Jewish background which was already heavily influenced by Hellenistic thought at the turn of the first century CE.

² See also Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1994), 70-91, who stresses that the Qumran and Johannine communities were of introvert nature, division between insiders and outsiders, separation between themselves and the outside world. Similar expressions of thought due to common religious and cultural traditions.

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