

"NOW SHALL THE RULER
OF THIS WORLD BE DRIVEN OUT":
JESUS' DEATH AS COSMIC BATTLE
IN JOHN 12:20-36

JUDITH L. KOVACS
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903

How does the Fourth Evangelist interpret the death of Christ? This important question has not found a clear and satisfying answer. Some scholars, noting the paucity of references to sacrifice, have concluded that the cross has little importance in the theology of this Gospel, which puts so much emphasis on Jesus' exaltation and glorification. R. Bultmann asserts: "While for Paul the incarnation is secondary to [Jesus'] death in importance, one might say that the reverse is true in John. . . . In John, Jesus' death has no preeminent importance for salvation. . . ." ¹ Similarly, E. Käsemann, in his influential monograph *The Testament of Jesus*, says:

Apart from a few remarks that point ahead to it, the passion comes into view in John only at the very end. One is tempted to regard it as being a mere postscript which had to be included because John could not ignore this tradition nor yet could he fit it organically into his work. His solution was to press the features of Christ's victory upon the passion story. ²

Others have argued that, despite the scarcity of sacrificial terminology, the image of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb (1:29) is of primary importance for the Fourth Evangelist. ³ Still others hold that the Fourth Evangelist understands the death of Christ as revelation or as departure. ⁴

¹ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Scribner, 1955) 2. 52-53.

² E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 7. See also M. Appold, *The Oneness Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1976) 119.

³ B. Grigsby, "The Cross as an Expiatory Sacrifice in the Fourth Gospel," *JNT* 13 (1982) 51-80; G. Carey, "The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories," *TynBul* 32 (1981) 97-122.

⁴ As revelation: T. Forestell, *The Word of the Cross: Salvation as Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1974) esp. 191-93. See also Bultmann's remark (*Theology*, 2. 53): "John has subsumed the death of Jesus under his idea of the Revelation." As departure: G. Nicholson, *Death as Departure: The Johannine Descent-Ascent Schema* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983).

The present study aims to contribute to this debate by calling attention to an understanding of the death of Christ that has been little noticed, the idea that it brings about the judgment of and victory over Satan, the "ruler of this world." My point of departure is 12:31–32:

Now is the judgment of this world;
Now the ruler of this world will be driven out.
And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,
will draw all people to myself.⁵

I shall attempt to show two things: (1) that this passage and many others in the Gospel presuppose the ancient myth of cosmic combat, transmitted, in the author's own time, especially in apocalyptic texts; (2) that such apocalyptic traditions have influenced the Gospel's interpretation of the death of Christ, as well as its dualism.

Section I of this study will first explore the immediate context of these verses in John 12:20–36, then examine the two other passages in the Gospel that refer to the ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου (τούτου), and lastly will trace the theme of cosmic conflict through the whole Gospel. In section II, I shall then attempt to illuminate four specific motifs of John 12:20–36—victory over the power of evil, judgment, the Son of Man, and glorification—by comparing Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts.

I

John 12:20–36: A Preliminary Assessment

Coming at the end of the first half of the Gospel, John 12:20–36 is a key transitional text.⁶ Scholars are agreed that these verses are an introduction to the passion story—that the "hour" of vv. 23 and 27 and the "now" of v. 31 refer to the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus.⁷ But several other points are less clear: What is the relationship between the glorification of the Son of Man (v. 23) and judgment (v. 31)? Who is the "ruler of this world" (v. 31), and why is he introduced here? Finally, "Who is this Son of Man?" (v. 34)—why and how does the evangelist use this title?

In *Death as Departure*, G. Nicholson gives an interpretation of John 12:20–36 that focuses on the "lifting up" of v. 32. Understanding this verse to refer primarily to Jesus' ascent, that is, his return to the Father, Nicholson

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation.

⁶ R. Schnackenburg says that this whole passage is "the work of the evangelist" (*The Gospel According to St. John* [3 vols.; New York: Crossroad, 1987] 2. 380).

⁷ Many commentators have pointed out how the Fourth Evangelist tends to collapse these three events into one; see, e.g., R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB 12, 12A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 1. 146.

implies that the cross is more an embarrassing fact to be explained away than an essential part of the evangelist's theology: "For the Fourth Evangelist, the death of Jesus is only a means to an end, a stage on the way that takes him back to the Father."⁸

In order to see the heavenly ascent of Christ, and not his death, as the central and unifying point of this text, Nicholson must gloss over parts of the passage. This is clearest when he tries to demonstrate that the saying about the grain of wheat in v. 24 is not "a direct reference to Jesus' death."⁹ He also deemphasizes v. 31, with its reference to the "ruler of this world," in comparison with v. 32.

Schnackenburg also understands the "lifting up" in v. 32 primarily as Jesus' ascent to the Father, and he seems keen to demythologize the imagery of v. 31: "The 'judgment' on 'this' world . . . is described in the language of mythological imagery as a judgment on 'the ruler of this world.' Stripped of the imagery, the subject is the human world in its obstinate unbelief and hatred . . ." ¹⁰ Commenting on the image of "casting out," Schnackenburg says:

The metaphorical conception should not be pressed. . . . [A]ll that needs to be said here is that the ruler of the world encounters the final rejection, loses his sphere of influence, becomes powerless. . . . This is not to exclude the possibility that faded mythological conceptions underly [*sic*] the language. . . . However, the picture is already faint and the language has lost its mythical force. . . . [T]he superficially mythological or cosmic language refers in fact to the fate of man.¹¹

One may still wonder whether this verse should be so easily demythologized and whether the mythological language would have seemed as "faded" and "faint" to John's original readers as it does to twentieth-century interpreters. Schnackenburg himself seems to vacillate, as his concluding remark on the verse indicates: "Nevertheless, within the context of the Johannine *krisis*, which is regarded as a cosmic lawsuit between God and the world, John is interested in the universal and fundamental change which takes place in the 'lifting up of the Son of man.'"¹² Might the theme of cosmic conflict and the view that Jesus' death is the decisive victory of God over the forces of evil be more important in John's theology than is usually recognized?

The "Ruler of this World" in John 14:30–31 and 16:8–11

One reason to think so is that the Fourth Evangelist speaks of the ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου (τούτου) in two other texts, the only other passages in the NT to

⁸ Nicholson, *Death as Departure*, 128; cf. 163.

⁹ Ibid., 152; see also J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 494, who sees 12:24–26 as a "late insertion."

¹⁰ Schnackenburg, *Gospel*, 2, 391.

¹¹ Ibid., 2, 392.

¹² Ibid.

use this phrase.¹³ The first comes at the end of the discourse in which Jesus first mentions the Paraclete (14:16ff.):

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of the¹⁴ world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way. (14:30–31)

Here, as in 12:31, the context suggests a connection between the ἄρχων and the death of Jesus (cf. 14:2–3). Chapter 12 tells how the cross affects the ἄρχων: Jesus' decision to take up the cross in the reworked Gethsemane story (12:27–28) leads to the casting out of the ἄρχων and the judgment of his (this) world. Then in 14:30f. the world-ruler is presented as an active party in the conflict. He "is coming," which apparently means that he confronts Jesus by bringing about his crucifixion (cf. 13:2, 27). Verse 31, however, makes clear that Satan is not the most important actor in the drama. In the end, Jesus' death comes about only because it is the will of the Father (cf. 19:11; see also 3:14, 16; 8:28), which is willingly accepted by the Son (cf. 12:27–28; 10:18). The ἄρχων is allowed to "come" so that Jesus' love and obedience to the Father may be known.

The third reference to the ἄρχων comes in a description of the future activity of the Paraclete:

And when he [the Paraclete] comes, he will prove the world wrong (ἐλέγξει) about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. (16:8–11)¹⁵

This text, like 12:31–32, closely associates the ἄρχων and the κόσμος ("world"). Both texts seem to refer to the same event when they speak, respectively, of the judgment of "this world" (12:31) and the judgment of the "ruler of this world" (16:11).¹⁶

¹³ But compare the similar expression οἱ ἄρχοντες τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου in 1 Cor 2:6–8, discussed in J. Kovacs, "The Archons, the Spirit, and the Death of Christ: Do we Need the Hypothesis of Gnostic Opponents to Explain 1 Corinthians 2:6–16?" in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn* (ed. J. Marcus and M. Soards; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989) 217–36.

¹⁴ NRSV reads "this."

¹⁵ NRSV renders παράκλητος as "advocate" and κέκριται as "condemned."

¹⁶ While 12:31 uses κρίνειν in the present tense, 16:11 uses the perfect tense. In general, the retrospective point of view (looking back after the events of the crucifixion and resurrection) is especially prominent in chaps. 15–17 (cf. perfect verbs in 15:3, 10, 11, 15, 18, 24; 16:1, 4, 6, 25, 27, 28, 32, 33 and throughout chap. 17). Brown takes 14:31 as the original conclusion of the Farewell Discourse, to which chaps. 15–17 were added by a redactor (*Gospel*, 1. xxvi). In this essay I am concerned with the Gospel as it has been handed down to us, that is, with the end product of what was undoubtedly a complex process of composition. Although I do not adopt any single theory of composition, I would agree with Ashton (*Fourth Gospel*, 165–66), against Brown, that chaps.

Situated in a discourse whose purpose is to prepare the disciples for Jesus' death and the persecution they themselves will experience, this text promises that Jesus will send the Paraclete to continue his conflict with the forces of evil. In a reversal of the Jews' attempt to "convict" Jesus of sin (8:46, where the same verb ἐλέγχειν is used), the Paraclete will "prove the world wrong" and show how sin, righteousness, and judgment are brought to light in Jesus' death and exaltation. Here the struggle between Jesus and the world-ruler is described in forensic imagery.¹⁷

Cosmic Conflict and Dualism in the Fourth Gospel

Taken together, the sayings in 12:31–32, 14:30–31, and 16:8–11 suggest that the Fourth Evangelist sees the death, resurrection, and ascent of Jesus as the turning point in the conflict between God and the forces of evil. It remains to be shown that these texts are not isolated sayings but signal a theme that has importance for the Gospel as a whole. This section discusses, in the order of their appearance, several texts that refer to the evil ἄρχων under other names, as well as passages that depict the conflict with evil through either battle imagery or forensic imagery.

Already in the prologue we read, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:5). With the verb καταλαμβάνειν, which can mean both "understand" and "overcome," the evangelist introduces the conflict between the forces of light and darkness, between God and Satan. The powers of darkness, failing to understand the light (the Logos), have contended against it but have not succeeded in overcoming it. This verse may also contain the first allusion to the cross: the aorist κατέλαβεν suggests a specific event in which the forces of darkness unsuccessfully tried to extinguish the light.¹⁸

The image of conflict continues in 1:10–12:

He [the true light] was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

The division of human beings into two camps, according to their different reactions to the incarnate Word—a prominent theme in the Fourth Gospel¹⁹—is presented from the outset as part of a larger cosmic struggle (1:5) between the forces of darkness, who reject the Word, and the forces of light, who accept him and become "children of God" (cf. "children of light" in 12:36).

15–17 were added by the evangelist himself, in a second edition of the Gospel. For other theories of composition, see R. Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975) 9–81; B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Oliphants, 1972) 46–54; Ashton, *Fourth Gospel*, 76–90.

¹⁷ Schnackenburg, *Gospel*, 3. 128; cf. Brown, *Gospel*, 2. 705.

¹⁸ See Lindars, *Gospel*, 87.

The chapters that follow contain numerous instances of human actors who take their stand on one side or the other of this conflict. A programmatic passage is Jesus' response to Nicodemus (3:1–21), where the evangelist brings together the themes we have been discussing: the death of Jesus, the conflict between light and darkness, and the division of human beings:

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. . . . 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. (3:14–16, 19–21)

These general statements about division and conflict are given concrete illustration in the encounters between Jesus and "the Jews" which follow. Chapters 5–8 contain a number of confrontations, in the form of legal debates,²⁰ which lead inexorably to the climax on Golgotha. At the end of the first of these, the author tells the readers: "For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him" (5:18). Thus, early in Jesus' career the lines of opposition are clearly drawn, and it is suggested that this conflict will climax in Jesus' death.

The great irony here—known to the reader but not to "the Jews"—is that both sides in the conflict are seeking the same end. For the reader has already been told: "So must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (3:14–15). In accordance with common NT usage,²¹ the impersonal verb *δεῖ* here indicates the divine will. The evangelist makes clear from the start that the crucifixion was not simply the result of human malice or error but a necessary part of God's plan for the salvation of the world (cf. 3:16).

In chaps. 7 and 8 the conflict intensifies. The debates are punctuated by repeated references to "the Jews'" desire to kill Jesus (7:1, 19, 20, 25; 8:37, 40, 59) and their attempts to arrest him (7:30, 32, 44, 45). Rejecting Jesus' claim to be from God, they insist that he is possessed by a superhuman evil power (*δαίμόνιον ἔχεις*, 7:20; cf. 8:48–49, 52).

For his part, Jesus provides a very different interpretation. Accepting his opponents' view that superhuman forces are at work, he turns it against them: the real issue is not that he, possessed by a demon, has broken the sabbath, but that they, in opposing him, have allied themselves with the wrong side in the great cosmic conflict:

²⁰ See A. E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976); J. Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) esp. 11–15; J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2d ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) esp. 64–89.

²¹ See, e.g., the passion prediction in Mark 8:31 par.

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. . . . You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. (8:12, 23)

The language of John 8 is strikingly dualistic. In addition to the contrast between light and darkness (cf. 1:4–10; 3:19–21; 12:35–36, 46) Jesus here uses several other pairs of opposites: above and below (v. 23), of this world and not of this world (v. 23), freedom and slavery (vv. 32–36), truth and falsehood (vv. 32, 40, 44–45). The story climaxes in Jesus' startling counteraccusation of his opponents:

You are from your father the devil (τοῦ διαβόλου), and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (8:44)

In these harsh words the veil is lifted, and the nature of the conflict, described generally and symbolically in chaps. 1 and 3, is concretely revealed. The story this Gospel has to tell concerns the battle between God and Satan—a battle acted out in the sphere of human history.

It should be evident from this brief survey that the announcement of the casting out of the world-ruler in John 12:31, far from being an unimportant, undigested remnant of mythological tradition, expresses a theme that has considerable importance in the first half of the Gospel. What is new in chap. 12 is the revelation that the turning point in the cosmic conflict has arrived: "The hour has come"; "Now is the judgment" (vv. 23, 31). The crucifixion of Jesus, that critical moment toward which the author has been pointing ever since 3:14 (or even since 1:5), is about to occur. On the cosmic level, this moment brings the decisive victory over the evil ruler of this world. On a human level, it involves the division of the "children of light" from those who follow darkness (12:35–36, 46).

While 12:20–36 provides the evangelist's own interpretation of the important events that are about to occur, chap. 13 presents the conflict in narrative form, allowing the other actors in the drama to step onto the stage:

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. (13:1–2)

So when he [Jesus] had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. (13:26–27)

Verse 2 is part of the evangelist's introduction to the passion narrative (vv. 1–3), which states the key themes of the story: the hour of Jesus' death has arrived, an event brought about both by the plots of Satan and by Jesus' love for