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Eternal Life and Eschatology in John's Theology

Is the Gospel of John History or Theology?

The differences between John's Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels have provoked many to question whether the former is genuine history.¹ Questions about the historical rootage of this Gospel have a long-standing history in Gospel criticism. Many elements found in the Synoptics are missing in John. There are no lepers, no demon exorcisms, no tax collectors, no Sadducees, and no Sermon on the Mount. The infancy narratives, the garden of Gethsemane, and the Lord's Supper are absent. John has little in the way of parables, and virtually all the Synoptic parables are lacking. The temple cleansing is not at the end of the Gospel story but at the beginning.

John also contains much material that is not in the Synoptics. We find stories about a wedding at Cana, Nicodemus, a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, the healing of a man at the pool of Bethzatha, and the resurrection of Lazarus. Jesus appears before Annas only in John, and

1. For a concise discussion of some of the differences and commonalities between John and the Synoptics, see L. Johnson 2006: 97–102. Johnson's sketch is particularly useful in reminding readers that the Synoptics and John share the same perspective on a profound level.

John seems to have a distinctive date for the Passover and to extend Jesus' ministry to three or four years, whereas the Synoptics suggest only one or two years. The discourses in John are also long and leisurely and seem different in character from the sayings of Jesus in the Synoptics. The Christology is bolder and more explicit. A dualism exists between truth and error, light and darkness, above and below, Spirit and flesh that has suggested Hellenistic influence to some. The eschatology is almost completely realized instead of future.² Hence, many scholars who think that the Synoptics are at least basically historical doubt the historical accuracy of John, concluding that theology trumps history in the Fourth Gospel.

It is not my intention here to discuss the matter of historicity in detail. Such a venture would require a book-length treatment. Nevertheless, we can sketch in reasons why John should be taken seriously as a historian.³ Perhaps we should note first that John's relationship to the Synoptics is controverted. Unanimous agreement does not exist as to whether John used the Synoptic Gospels as a literary source.⁴ Even in texts where the same incident is recounted in the Synoptics and in John, the linguistic variation is significant enough to call into question literary dependence. And yet it also seems that John is aware of Synoptic traditions, even if he does not show an awareness of these Gospels as literary sources. Nevertheless, he intentionally chose to write his own distinctive account of the life of Jesus. It follows, then, that the failure to include events and sayings found in the Synoptics does not necessarily call into question John's historicity.

The historical quality of the Fourth Gospel, in other words, must be assessed on its own terms and cannot be dismissed merely by observing the variations from the Synoptic accounts. Direct contradictions of the Synoptics, naturally, would raise serious questions about the historicity of John or the Synoptics. One of the striking features in John's Gospel is that the writer claimed to be an eyewitness (John 1:14; 19:35; 20:8; 21:24) and insisted that his testimony is true.⁵ Indeed, a very good case can still be made that the Beloved Disciple was the apostle John

2. See Dodd 1953: 7, 148.

3. For support of this view, see Carson 1991b: 29–94; Köstenberger 2002: 2–216; and especially the detailed defense in Blomberg 2001. See also Smalley 1978: 162–90; and the convincing article by Bauckham (2007).

4. Gardner-Smith (1938) initiated the modern discussion with his study arguing for the literary independence of John from the Synoptics. For a brief and clear survey, see Beasley-Murray 1987: xxxv–xxxvii.

5. For the fundamental role of eyewitnesses in preserving Gospel traditions, see the groundbreaking work by Bauckham (2006), and note his claim that eyewitness testimony is central in the Gospel of John (2006: 358–83), though in contrast to my view, he thinks that the author was John the elder.

himself.⁶ The author was familiar with Judaism. He knew about messianic expectations, Jewish purification rites (John 2:6), Jewish views of Samaritans (John 4:9, 27), the importance of the Sabbath (John 5:10; 7:21–23; 9:14), the libation at the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:37; 8:12), and the danger of defilement at Passover (John 18:28; 19:31–42). He also knew about Jewish history, such as the building of the temple (John 2:20), the mutual hostility between Samaritans and Jews (John 4:4–42), the contempt for the Diaspora (John 7:35), and the role of Annas and Caiaphas (John 11:49; 18:13–14, 19–24). This Gospel has been verified in terms of some concrete details—the kind of details that suggest an eyewitness and one who is concerned about history.⁷ The pool in John 5:1–9 is not a figment of John's imagination. It fits with what is found in the *Copper Scroll* from Qumran and archaeological work near St. Anne's church in Jerusalem.⁸ So too, the pool of Siloam (John 9:6–7) is noted by Josephus (*J.W.* 6.363) and mentioned in the *Copper Scroll* (3Q15 X, 15–16).⁹ The stoa of the temple in John 10:23 accords with what we know of the temple and with Josephus (*Ant.* 15.396–402; 20.221; *J.W.* 5.184–185; cf. Acts 3:11; 5:12). The brook of Kidron that John mentions is indeed a wadi (John 18:1).¹⁰

Numerous minor details in the Gospel suggest eyewitness remembrance:¹¹ the six water pots in Cana (John 2:6), the naming of Philip and Andrew (John 6:7), the barley loaves at the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:9), the detail that the disciples rowed out twenty-five to thirty stadia (John 6:19), the odor that filled the house when Mary anointed Jesus' body for burial (John 12:3), Peter's beckoning of the Beloved Disciple (John 13:24), the reaction of soldiers at Jesus' arrest (John 18:6), the name of the high priest's servant (John 18:10), the weight of embalming spices (John 19:39), the knowledge of the disciples' reactions (John 2:11, 24; 6:15, 61; 13:1), and the catch of 153 fish (John 21:11).

6. Such a position is the minority view in NT scholarship today. For the standard critical view, see Lindars 1972: 28–34; Barrett 1978: 100–134. Hengel (1989a) argues intriguingly that the author was not John the apostle but John the elder. The evidence, however, for a second John, a John the elder who should be distinguished from the apostle John, is unconvincing. Indeed, the most likely reading of the evidence from Papias is that John the apostle and John the elder are one and the same person. Despite the critical consensus, it seems that the arguments supporting apostolic authorship are still the strongest. See especially Carson 1991b: 68–81.

7. The older study by Morris (1969a) is still invaluable. See especially his discussion of authorship (Morris 1969a: 218–92). For more recent studies that defend John's historical accuracy, see Carson 1981b; Blomberg 2001. See now the important article on historiography in John by Bauckham (2007).

8. So Meier 1994: 681, 729–30n11.

9. See Meier 1994: 696–97.

10. See Köstenberger 2004: 504.

11. See the compilation of evidence and discussion in Morris 1969a: 233–44.

These details do not prove that the author was an eyewitness, but they are consistent with such a view.

Virtually all agree that this Gospel is cast in John's own idiom. Hence, there are instances in which it is difficult to discern where John himself is speaking or Jesus (cf. John 3:16–21, 31–36). When John reports Jesus' words, he summarizes them and clothes them in his own style, but it does not follow from this that he invents or distorts the words of the historical Jesus. John writes in his own style and yet respects the historical particularity of the events that transpired. The Christology of this Gospel is more explicit, and this is evident in both the prologue (John 1:1–18) and Thomas's confession (John 20:28), leading some to think that John reflects the view of the later church. We could overemphasize, however, the high Christology of John. Nathaniel spoke better than he knew in identifying Jesus as the king of Israel and God's Son (John 1:46–51). In using the expression "Son of God," he likely did not mean that Jesus was divine but rather used the title to indicate that Jesus was the Messiah (John 1:49; cf. Matt. 16:16). Nathaniel's words, from a postresurrection perspective, have a deeper meaning than Nathaniel imagined, and hence his confession can be read at more than one level, but we know that messianic expectation was diverse and high in the day of Jesus, and so there is no reason to doubt that Nathaniel in a moment of enthusiasm could have uttered such words.

We should observe that in John's Gospel Jesus disclosed himself plainly as the Messiah only to the Samaritan woman (John 4:25–26) during his public ministry, and he does not overtly identify himself as the Messiah with regularity. Jesus often spoke cryptically so that his hearers were uncertain about what he was claiming about himself (e.g., John 10:24–25; 16:28–29). Such observations fit with the "misunderstanding" theme that is common in John. Jesus' disciples and those listening to him often fail to grasp what he says. John informs us that understanding was gained only after the resurrection (John 2:18–22; 7:37–39; 12:16; 16:12–13; 21:18–23).¹² Apparently, John does not impose postresurrection insight upon his narrative, for he specifically informs the readers on a number of occasions that the disciples could not and did not grasp Jesus' words or actions until the Spirit was given or Jesus was risen. Recording the misapprehensions of others suggests that John was interested in what actually occurred in the ministry of Jesus.

NT scholarship in previous days maintained a significant distinction between Hellenistic and Palestinian Judaism, identifying John with the former and concluding that John was not earthed in the Jewish

12. Carson (1982) rightly argues that this theme, so common in John, is an indication of the historical veracity of this Gospel.

milieu of Jesus' day. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and further study of Palestinian Judaism have overturned such conclusions. We now know that Palestinian Judaism was significantly influenced by Hellenism.¹³ Furthermore, alleged Hellenistic features in John appear also in the Dead Sea Scrolls, such as the opposition between light and darkness, truth and error, and Spirit and flesh.¹⁴ Scholars can no longer confidently place John in the Hellenistic category and dismiss its accuracy for that reason. Certainly, much more could and should be said about John's relationship to history, but space is lacking here to examine the issue in detail, and readers should consult other sources for a full discussion of the matter. In this study, however, I will work from the assumption that John's Gospel is both theological and historical, and that the theological depth of this Gospel does not mean that it is historically inaccurate.

Eternal Life

One of the primary themes in John's Gospel is life.¹⁵ Life in John is not an abstract entity but rather is rooted in John's Jewish worldview. Life belongs to the age to come, which is inaugurated by the resurrection. What is remarkable in reading John is his emphasis on the gift of life now. He does not focus on the future age when the resurrection will occur. He fixes his gaze on what believers in Christ possess even now through faith in Jesus as the Christ. The gift of life in the present age is available only because Jesus is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25).¹⁶ John anchors the believer's enjoyment of life to the resurrection of Jesus Christ in history. The life of the age to come has dawned because Jesus of Nazareth has risen from the dead (ch. 20). In the resurrection of Jesus the coming age has invaded the present age. Life has penetrated where only death reigned. Light has dawned where darkness shrouded all. Truth has arrived to conquer falsehood. John impresses upon the reader the presence of life now because the resurrection of Jesus in history shines in the darkness (John 1:5), demonstrating his victory over the ruler of the world (John 12:31) and over the power of death. Jesus, by virtue of his death, has cast out the world's ruler, Satan.

13. In this regard, see especially the decisive work of Hengel 1974.

14. See the sensible discussion in Carson 1991b: 33–34; Ladd 1993: 255. The commonalities between the Fourth Gospel and the Dead Sea Scrolls contributed to “the new look on the Fourth Gospel” (J. A. T. Robinson 1962: 94–106).

15. For this theme, see Dodd 1953: 144–50; Ladd 1993: 290–305.

16. See R. Brown 1966: 434; Barrett 1978: 396.

The triumph over death is achieved in Jesus' resurrection, and in John the resurrection of Jesus is rooted in history.¹⁷ John does not hang his teaching about life upon a gnostic hope of life in some ethereal sphere. He does not conceive of life as spiritual over against the material. Life is inaugurated in the space-time sphere by the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead. John leaves us in no doubt that Jesus' resurrection means the resurrection of the body. The account begins with Mary Magdalene fretting because Jesus' body is absent from the tomb (John 20:2). The folding up of the face cloth and the presence of the linen cloths testified to the absence of Jesus' body (John 20:6–7),¹⁸ for grave robbers would have stolen the linen and left the tomb in disarray.¹⁹ Subsequently, Mary Magdalene saw Jesus standing before her, and he is not merely a spirit but rather is someone who can be touched and handled (John 20:14–17). Moreover, Jesus demonstrated that he is risen by showing his hands and feet to his disciples (John 20:20), and he invited the skeptical Thomas to put his hands and fingers into his hands and side to remove any doubts that he is truly risen (John 20:25–27). The intrusion of life from the age to come cannot be relegated to a spiritual concept in John; the resurrection of Jesus testifies that the life of the coming age has invaded space-time history.

The emphasis on the present fulfillment of God's promises in John is rooted in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hence, those who enjoy eternal life now eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood (John 6:53–54). This language startles, and it would shock any Jew because the consumption of blood is most emphatically forbidden in the OT (Gen. 9:4). Clearly, the reference to Jesus' flesh and blood refers to his death, which is given for the life of the world (John 6:51). Life in the age to come is available only through Jesus, who possesses life in himself (John 5:26) and is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Participation in life does not stem from abstract faith in God or his goodness but rather comes by a faith that eats Jesus' flesh and drinks his blood. In other words, the life of the age to come becomes a reality as one trusts in the work of Jesus on the cross and in his resurrection. The age to come has entered history, then, through history—the gruesome death and physical resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

The crucified and risen Lord, then, has introduced life into the world, and that life shines in the darkness (John 1:4–5). He is the light of life (John 8:12) and came so that people could have life (John 10:10). The

17. In defense of the historical nature of the report on the resurrection in John's Gospel, see Wright 2003: 440–48, 662–79.

18. So Beasley-Murray 1987: 372.

19. R. Brown 1970: 1007; cf. Barrett 1978: 563.

life of the age to come is, therefore, radically Christ-centered. Eternal life comes by knowing Jesus Christ and by knowing the one true God (John 17:3). Jesus is the food, the bread, that must be consumed for one to enjoy eternal life (John 6:35, 48). We saw above that Jesus becomes food for people by virtue of his death on their behalf. Human beings must come to Jesus in order to enjoy life (John 5:40). Indeed, the purpose of this Gospel is enunciated in the claim that one must believe in Jesus in order to obtain eternal life (John 20:30–31).²⁰ We are not surprised to learn that John frequently emphasizes that those who believe enjoy life eternal (John 3:15–16, 36; 5:24; 6:47). The teaching of 1 John is similar.²¹ Jesus is the life, and the life was manifested in history through the incarnation (1 John 1:1–2). The promise of eternal life is realized in him (1 John 2:25), and such life is secured by his death (1 John 3:16), in which he yielded up his life for others. Hence, all those who believe in the Son enjoy eternal life now because such life is bound up with Jesus and his self-revelation (1 John 5:11–13). As the epistle says in closing, Jesus himself “is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20).

Since Jesus Christ has died and been raised as the Son of God, it follows that the age to come has penetrated the evil era. Meier rightly claims that John’s eschatology is inseparable from his Christology. “Because the Word has become flesh, the last day has become the present moment.”²² First John 2:8 demonstrates that the new age has arrived, for “the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.” The overlap between the present and future ages is evident in this verse, for the darkness and light exist concurrently. The age to come has arrived by virtue of the death and resurrection of Christ, but its arrival does not spell the immediate removal of evil and darkness. The Jews expected that when the coming age dawned, the evil age would be set aside immediately. The fulfillment of the OT promises is realized, however, in a surprising way. The light shines without instantaneously quenching the darkness. We would be mistaken, though, to conclude that light and darkness are now equivalent, as if the two balance each other with equal force. John emphasizes the defeat and doom of evil (it is passing away) and the triumph of the light (it is shining). Ultimately the light that has

20. Scholars dispute the purpose of John’s Gospel. For a handy survey of work up until 1978, see Smalley 1978: 122–49. Some maintain that it was written for believers (e.g., R. Brown 1970: 1060; Barrett 1978: 575; Ridderbos 1997: 652). Others argue that it was written particularly for evangelistic purposes (Dodd 1953: 9; Carson 1987a; 2005). Beasley-Murray (1987: 387–88) seems to opt for both views.

21. With most scholars, I maintain that the author of the Gospel of John and 1–3 John is the same person.

22. Meier 1994: 811.

dawned in Christ will shine triumphantly over all; even now the defeat of darkness is sure.

Jesus, as the Son, has inaugurated the new age by virtue of his death and resurrection, for John accentuates the truth that believers possess the life of the coming age even now. Belief does not merely secure life in the coming age; those who believe enjoy life even now (John 3:15). As John 3:36 declares, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life." The text does not relegate such life to the future but rather sees it as the present possession of believers. The same theme is communicated powerfully in John 5:24–25: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." The final judgment is reserved for the future, and yet those who believe in the Son will never face such a judgment, for they have already entered into life.²³ They face the day of reckoning with confidence because of their trust in the Son. The same theme sounds in John 5:25, where the "dead" refers to the spiritually dead who hear the voice of God's Son in the present era ("is now here"). Since they hear God's voice even now in history, John cannot have in mind future physical resurrection.²⁴ Those who hear the Son's voice will live in the present age; they are transferred even now from death to life.

Interestingly, 1 John 3:14 communicates the same reality in declaring, "We know that we have passed [*metabainō*] out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death."²⁵ The same verb, *metabainō*, is used in John 5:24, again conveying the truth that believers currently possess life.²⁶ The great transaction has occurred so that the reign of death has ended, even though believers still await physical death. Nevertheless, they have now passed into life and abide in life, and hence the age to come is now a reality. As Jesus declares in John 10:28, "I give them eternal life." Such life is not reserved for a future time but is the present gift of the Son of God to his sheep.

Clearly, then, John emphasizes the "already" when he speaks of life. Because of this emphasis, some scholars deny that there is any "not yet" in his teaching. They claim that future eschatology is entirely collapsed into present eschatology in John's theology. Such a perspective can be maintained, however, only by denying or omitting some of the

23. So Lindars 1972: 224; Barrett 1978: 261.

24. So Barrett 1978: 262; cf. Ridderbos 1997: 198.

25. See R. Brown 1982: 445; Smalley 1984: 188.

26. The perfect tense of the verb in both John 5:24 and 1 John 3:14 signifies the completion of the action in the past, emphasizing that life has already commenced.

Johannine material. Bultmann embraces such a conclusion and supports it by identifying as a later gloss any text that includes future eschatology (e.g., John 5:28–29).²⁷ We must be suspicious of any scholar who domesticates the text to fit a preconceived scheme, when the text itself points us to a more complex reality. Bultmann was partially right, for John certainly underscores present eschatology, but unfortunately Bultmann failed to see that the eschatological tension present in the rest of the NT is maintained in John also, even if John places his emphasis on fulfillment in the present age.²⁸

The tension between the future and the present is evident in John 10:28, a verse that we noted above. Eternal life is the present possession of the believer, and those who possess such life will never perish. The presence of life now secures the future so that believers will never die. The life that belongs to believers in this present evil age guarantees that death will never triumph, and so we can say that there is an indissoluble connection between the life that believers now possess and the future realization of life forever. Still, even though believers now enjoy eternal life and the future has been secured, the promises of the future have not yet been fully realized and obtained. Believers await the future with confidence because they have eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Several texts demonstrate that John did not surrender future eschatology and focus solely on realized eschatology. John, as we have seen, emphasizes that believers have already passed from death into life, and so they already possess the life of the new age (John 5:24–25). And yet a mere few verses later, the future physical resurrection of both believers and unbelievers is announced (John 5:28–29).²⁹ Those who have practiced evil will be raised for judgment, whereas those who have done what is good will experience the resurrection of life. Even though John highlights the theme that believers already possess eternal life, he does not become one-dimensional and deny a future fulfillment. The present experience of eternal life is not the consummation of God's purposes; instead, eternal life in the present age is, so to speak, the guarantee that believers will experience physical resurrection in the same way as Jesus the Christ. In the same way, John declares that unbelievers already stand under judgment in the present age (John 3:18) and God's wrath abides on them now (John 3:36), and yet there will also be final judgment on the day when unbelievers are resurrected.

27. See Bultmann 1971: 261. Bultmann (1971: 219) also argues that the references to being raised on the last day in John 6:39, 40, 44 are editorial additions.

28. Rightly Smalley 1978: 235–41.

29. Lindars 1972: 226–27; Carson 1991b: 258; Ridderbos 1997: 201. Barrett (1978: 263) wrongly restricts the resurrection and judgment to unbelievers.

The theme of final resurrection surfaces often in the “bread of life” discourse in John 6. Jesus offered life in the present to all who will trust in him, come to him, abide in him, or eat of him. Those who are believers can also be described as those given by the Father to the Son (John 6:37)—that is, those who are drawn by the Father (John 6:44). The account is punctuated with the refrain that those who are given to the Son by the Father (John 6:65) will be raised on the last day (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54). Those who come to Jesus and eat of him participate in life now, but the present experience of life does not exhaust God’s promises, for he will raise physically from the dead all those who trust in Christ. The already is a preview of the not yet, containing the promise of final victory over death.

The future dimension of Johannine thought is also reflected in the promise of Jesus’ return. The meaning of John 14:2–3 is disputed, but it likely refers to the future coming of Jesus, not to the promise of the Spirit after the resurrection.³⁰ Jesus pledged to his disciples not that he will visit them where they reside but that he will come and take them to be where he is, with the Father. Jesus will take them to be with himself in the rooms of the Father’s dwelling, so that believers will live with him forever. The prayer of Jesus in John 17 runs along somewhat similar lines. He prayed that believers will be preserved and unified in his absence and that they will not fall prey to the stratagems of the evil one. The language of preservation, however, suggests a day when the work of keeping is completed, when the task has been accomplished. This interpretation is confirmed by John 17:24: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” Presently, believers are not with Jesus, but he anticipated a day when the church has been united and the work of preservation has reached its goal, and then believers will reside with Jesus and see him in all his glory and beauty. Clearly, John does not teach a fully realized eschatology but rather anticipates a day when Christ’s dazzling glory will be seen.

The relation between present and future eschatology can also be discerned in 1 John. We have already looked at 1 John 2:8, where it is said that the darkness is passing away and the true light is even now shining. This text implies future eschatology inasmuch as the darkness has not yet been eclipsed in its entirety. Believers still anticipate the light streaming upon them with its full intensity and the quenching of

30. For a helpful survey and convincing explanation of these verses, see Beasley-Murray 1987: 250–51. Contra Gundry (1967a), who sees a reference to Jesus coming in the Spirit. Barrett (1978: 457) rather confusingly mixes the future and present together here. Lindars (1972: 471) wrongly sees a reference to Jesus coming in the resurrection.

darkness. First John 2:17 speaks in similar terms in declaring that the world and its desires “are passing away,” whereas the one who does God’s will remains forever. John recognizes that the world and its desires still entice believers and have not lost their allure, but a day is coming when God’s ways will embrace the whole of reality, so that the desires of the present world are no more.

The truth that believers are now forgiven of their sins and know God (1 John 2:12–14), and can be assured that they are his children (1 John 3:1–3), and even be sure of eternal life (1 John 5:11–13) does not cancel out the pressures from the world. The world still exists and continues to allure believers. And yet believers now enjoy victory over the world by faith (1 John 5:4–5). The charm of the world is temporary inasmuch as it is transient. Those doing God’s will can be assured that they will live forever. The joy of being God’s children in the present era certifies that believers will be perfected when they see Jesus (1 John 3:1–3). John recognizes that there is a hope that has not yet been attained, and he characterizes it as hope because believers can be assured that they will be perfected. We see, then, that John’s eschatology is quite similar to what we saw in the Synoptic Gospels. He accentuates the already more than the Synoptic Gospels do, yet without rejecting the future promise of the resurrection. The future resurrection, in fact, is secured by the gift of life now.

Johannine Dualism

Scholars have often discussed Johannine dualism, and some have even classified it as a species of Hellenistic thought.³¹ The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls showed that such a theory lacked substantive evidence, for similar dualism is found in the writings of the Qumran community.³² When we read the Dead Sea Scrolls, we see that the dualism there is not ontological but eschatological. In the same way, the dualism in John is not ontological but eschatological. Christ is the sovereign agent of creation (John 1:3, 10) in Johannine theology. Indeed, John particularly emphasizes the sovereignty and control of God over all things. Hence, there is no notion that the devil is equal in power or that he might triumph over God.

31. For the various backgrounds postulated for John’s thought, see Barrett 1978: 27–41; Beasley-Murray 1987: liii–lxvi. Both Barrett and Beasley-Murray propose a diverse background that includes both Judaism and Hellenism.

32. For the view that the background to John’s Gospel is fundamentally Jewish, see Carson 1991b: 58–63.

What we have in John, then, is an ethical and eschatological dualism between truth and error, light and darkness, what is above and what is below. Jesus declared to the Jewish leaders that they are from below and from this world, whereas he is from above and from heaven (John 8:23). In what sense were the Jewish leaders from below? Jesus explained that they are relegated to this world because of their sin, confirming that the dualism in view here is ethical. We understand, therefore, why Jesus demanded that Nicodemus be born from above (John 3:3, 7). As a sinner from below, he needed the work of the Spirit to enter God's kingdom.

Another way of designating those who are below is through the use of the term "world" (*kosmos*).³³ Those who are "below" are also described as those who "are of this world" (John 8:23). Sometimes John uses the term "world" to refer to that which was created—the realm in which human beings live. For instance, the world is said to be created by Jesus (John 1:10; cf. 9:32 [which speaks of the world beginning]; 13:1; 17:5). The world is also the place where human beings live, and Jesus participated in such life. We see this meaning in John 6:14: "When the people saw the sign that he [Jesus] had done, they said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!'" (see also John 1:10; 9:5; 10:36; 11:27; 12:46; 18:20). The term most often describes human beings, or at least what most human beings are doing: "Look, the world has gone after him" (John 12:19; cf. 7:4; 8:26). In most of these instances in John the term "world" is colored by its association with evil. Even in speaking of Jesus' coming into the world, intimations of his arrival into a sphere dominated by evil are present, since he came to be the world's Savior.

John predominantly uses "world" to designate the people of the world, but in doing so he highlights their subjection to evil, so that he announces that the entire world is under the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). The devil is characterized as "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), which signifies that human beings are in thrall to wickedness. The world failed to recognize Jesus as God's Word and the agent of salvation (John 1:10). Indeed, since the world is under Satan's rule, it hates Jesus (John 7:7) and his disciples, who have been called out of the world (John 15:18–19; 17:14–16; 1 John 3:13). Because the world does not know Jesus, it does not know his disciples either (1 John 3:1). The calling of the disciples out of the world indicates that they too were once part of the world, and hence those who are now believers were also once under the world's influence. Disciples formerly were part of the world, but now they have been rescued by Jesus from the world. Now the disciples are in the world but not "of the world" (John 17:13–16),

33. For a useful survey of *kosmos* in John, see Barrett 1978: 161–62. Compare the qualifications of Barrett's view in Carson 1991b: 123; Balz, *EDNT* 2:312.

since Jesus has freed disciples from the world's dominion by choosing them out of the world (John 15:19) and by overcoming the world (John 16:33). The disciples have been given by the Father to the Son (John 6:37; 13:1; 17:6, 9). Disciples overcome the world through their faith—that is, by believing that Jesus is God's Son (1 John 5:4–5)—and the subsequent verses indicate that they conquer on the basis of his death. Jesus, therefore, did not manifest himself to the world after his resurrection in the same way that he revealed himself to his disciples (John 14:22; 16:20). Nevertheless, the disciples were sent into the world to proclaim the message of salvation (John 17:18, 21), so that the world would come to believe that God sent Jesus.

The world's evil manifests itself in what it desires and its fierce pride (1 John 2:16). False prophets proclaim the world's message, and their content is celebrated by those in the world, but the message is that of the antichrist (1 John 4:1–6). The world does not have any capacity to receive the Spirit of truth (John 14:17) and does not know the Father (John 17:25), and hence people in the world are wakened out of their slumber only by the convicting work of the Spirit (John 16:8–11). The world cannot grant true peace, for peace in the midst of trouble comes only from Christ (John 14:31).

The only hope for the world, therefore, is Jesus Christ. John often emphasizes that the only deliverance for the world is Jesus Christ. The love of God for the world is not due to its attractiveness, as if God loved the world because of its loveliness; rather, God shows his love for the world by sending Christ for its salvation, even though it is remarkably evil (John 3:16; 10:36). The sin of the world can be atoned for only by Jesus Christ, who is God's lamb who removes the world's sin (John 1:29). In Samaria Jesus is acclaimed as "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42; cf. 1 John 4:14). Jesus came into the world to bear witness to the truth, even though his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36–37). He was sent into the world so that it might live (1 John 4:9). The five thousand fed by Jesus believed that he was the prophet sent into the world (John 6:15). Jesus is God's bread that grants life to the world (John 6:33; cf. 11:27), and the life bestowed on the world is available through his death (John 6:51), so that the world lives on the basis of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Propitiation—the satisfaction of God's wrath against the sins of the whole world—is accomplished by the death of Jesus (1 John 2:2). The only light for the world is Jesus (John 8:12; 9:5; 11:9; 12:46), for without him the world remains shrouded in darkness. These texts suggest that John often uses the term "world" to refer to the entire human race without distinction. John recognizes often that not everyone believes, and hence he is not teaching that the sins of every single person in the world are actually removed by Jesus' death. Nor when he says that

Jesus is the Savior of the world should we conclude that every single person in the world is saved by Jesus. What John emphasizes, rather, is that the whole world without distinction, both Jews and Gentiles, is the object of God's saving love in Christ.

Jesus also came to bring judgment onto the world, since those who refuse to believe him are condemned (John 9:39). What Jesus says in John 9:39 seems to contradict the claim that Jesus came not to judge the world but to save it (John 12:47), but the contradiction is superficial. Jesus' intention in coming into the world was to save it, but those who refused to believe in him were thereby judged, and so he came to judge in a secondary but not a primary sense.³⁴ His explicit intention in coming to the earth was to save the world, but those who refuse his salvation must come under judgment, even though salvation was Jesus' primary intention. Jesus' death spells salvation for the world, but it is also the case that Jesus by his death judges the world and evicts its ruler (John 12:31).

Therefore, John's theology of the world should also be understood eschatologically, for believers enjoy salvation in the midst of an evil world that is opposed to God and his Son. The devil rules the entire world, but Jesus has come to save his own in the world. His saving work has liberated believers from the evil of the world, and they are given strength to withstand the blandishments of the world, the false teaching of antichrists, and the work of the devil. The world and its influence are passing away (1 John 2:17), and the final victory is sure because Jesus has triumphed over the world via his cross.

The contrast between light and darkness should be understood in similar terms. Jesus himself is the light of the world (John 1:4; 8:12). The darkness hates the light and tries to conquer and understand it but is unable to do so (John 1:5).³⁵ Darkness represents evil that shrinks back from the penetrating and exposing gaze of the light (John 3:19–21). The corollary to hatred of the light is a love for darkness, and the light is detested because of the wickedness of human beings who flee from the uncovering of their evil. Those who do not follow Jesus live in the realm of evil (John 8:12; 11:9–10; 12:35). They continue in their blinding darkness because they insist upon their goodness and do not want to admit that they fail to live in the light (John 9:39–41). The first rays of light dawn when human beings confess their radical evil and blindness, but those in the darkness dogmatically insist on their own goodness, and

34. See Barrett 1978: 365, 430.

35. The verb *katalambanō* probably has a double meaning here, signifying both "overcome" and "comprehend" (so Barrett 1978: 158). Contra Lindars (1972: 87), who restricts the meaning to "overcome," and Ridderbos (1997: 39–40), who argues that only a misunderstanding is in view.

escape from darkness comes only for those who believe in Jesus (John 12:46). Once again, the eschatological character of light and darkness is present by implication, for the light is now dawning with the coming of Jesus, so that the realm of darkness is now illuminated by the radiance of his presence.

The epistle of 1 John nuances matters a bit differently but appears to travel along the same arteries. God is light, and as such he is totally good and cannot be charged with evil (1 John 1:5). Those who walk in the darkness are secessionists from the church. They have left the Johannine community and claim to be without sin (1 John 1:8). Apparently, they maintained that they had not sinned since their conversion (1 John 1:10).³⁶ Conversely, those who walk in the light know that they are sinners and, by confessing their sins, acknowledge before God that they have fallen short of his will and ways (1 John 1:7, 9). They look to Jesus as the righteous one, the propitiation for their sins (1 John 2:2). The wicked, then, are those who insist on their goodness; they are blinded by the darkness and fail to see that hating their brothers and sisters is a parable of their death (1 John 2:9–10). The eschatological character of the light/darkness theme in John is clarified by 1 John 2:8, a verse that we noted above. The darkness is passing away, while the light is now shining. Those who live in the darkness of evil are dominated by the one who rules over the citizens of this world (1 John 5:19), but the light shines in the lives of believers, for they are born of God, and the evil one cannot harm them (1 John 5:18). Believers can be assured that they belong to God even in the midst of this evil world (1 John 5:19). In contrast to those who are under the dominion of the evil one, they have understanding of the one true God (1 John 5:20).

The contrast between truth and falsehood also constitutes a separation between good and evil. Jesus is the revelation of God and represents perfect goodness, and so he is the truth (John 14:6). He is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14; cf. 1:17), and the Spirit is also the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). The witnesses testifying about Jesus are true (John 5:31–33; 8:13–19). Since Jesus seeks God’s glory, his message is true and contains no falsehood (John 7:18, 28). The truth that people need cannot be confined to the intellect, for it frees people from the dominion of sin (John 8:32–34), and Jesus claimed that true freedom from bondage comes from him (John 8:36). So-called disciples are unwilling to hear the truth from Jesus (John 8:40, 45) because they belong to the father of lies, the devil (John 8:43–44). Hence, Jesus said that all those who belong to the truth will listen to his voice (John 18:37; cf. 8:47; 10:4). Pilate’s refusal to listen to Jesus demonstrated that he was dominated by

36. For this interpretation, see R. Brown 1982: 212, 234.

darkness (John 18:38), and his cynical question about truth (the pseudo-refuge of every person fleeing from goodness) testified to his spiritual state. Truth is found in the word of God (John 17:17), and believers will be preserved and sanctified by such truth. The truth is concretely present in Jesus himself (John 14:6). Once again, the contrast between truth and falsehood has an eschatological cast, for truth has entered history in the person of Jesus Christ. Truth for John is not an abstract entity but rather has entered history in the Word made flesh. Hence, those who live in the realm of falsehood can be freed only through the truth that is in Jesus.

Conclusion

The Synoptic Gospels emphasize the fulfillment of God's promises by speaking of the kingdom of God, but in John the focus is not on God's kingdom but on eternal life. Still, the two notions are remarkably similar. As Köstenberger says, "That the expressions 'kingdom of God' and 'eternal life' are essentially equivalent is suggested by their parallel use in Matthew 19:16, 24 pars."³⁷ John particularly emphasizes that this life is available now for those who believe in Jesus, while conversely those who do not put their trust in Jesus stand under God's judgment even now. Even though John focuses on present eschatology, it would be a mistake to conclude that he eliminates future eschatology. We noted a number of texts that indicate that the inauguration of eternal life in the ministry of Jesus does not rule out a future consummation. We have also observed that Johannine dualism should not be interpreted ontologically; rather, it is part and parcel of his eschatology. Those who belong to Jesus are freed from the world and its dominion. Those who are from below can belong to the realm above through faith and trust in Jesus. So too light and truth belong to those who trust in Jesus, since he is the light and the truth, whereas those who reject Jesus walk in darkness and are shrouded in error. When we perceive that John's dualism should be interpreted in light of his eschatology, it is clear that his dualism belongs on Jewish soil. It should be interpreted in light of the fulfillment of God's saving promises.

37. Köstenberger 2004: 123.