Dualisms in the Gospel of John

Christopher W. Skinner

The corpus of writings traditionally identified as the Johannine Literature consists of the Gospel of John, three epistles (1 John, 2 John, and 3 John), and the apocalyptic-prophetic book of Revelation. The Gospel of John is an enigmatic text with a presentation of Jesus and his ministry that stands out from other portraits in the New Testament. This article will consider some of the "dualisms" in the Gospel of John with a view to understanding both where they appear and what they mean within John's narrative world. Before approaching that discussion, however, we should reflect briefly on the question: "what is the Gospel of John?" In the context of an issue devoted to the larger question: "what is the Johannine Literature?" this seems like a logical place to begin.

What is the Gospel of John?

The "Fourfold Gospel" long accepted by the church consists, first, of three gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—all of which share a substantial amount of material with one another. These have been designated the "Synoptic Gospels" (from two Greek roots meaning "seeing together"). The final text is the Gospel of John, which provides a distinctive vision of Jesus: his message, mission, and identity. John is probably the last of the four canonical gospels to have been composed (ca. 95–100 CE) and reflects an outlook that is primarily Jewish but tinged throughout with Hellenistic influence.

The Prologue to John's gospel (1:1-18) provides a lens through which to approach the rest of the story. There we learn that Jesus has come from above and has eternal origins (1:1-2), that he is the agent of God's creation (1:3-4), and that he has taken on human flesh (1:14). As the story progresses

The Marriage at Cana, scene from a Mirror of Holiness (Mir'at at-quds) of Father Jerome Xavier, 1602–4. Photo courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art (open access).

we learn that Jesus has been given a specific mission: to complete the tasks assigned to him by the Father and return to the place from which he came (e.g., 14:1-6). Throughout this gospel, when he speaks, Jesus introduces difficult concepts and utters enigmatic truths that are commonly misunderstood by his audiences, who mistakenly believe that he is merely from Galilee rather than "from above" (e.g., 7:52), and find his words difficult to accept (e.g., 6:60-66; 10:31-33). This Jesus differs significantly from the earthy Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels, who is a preacher and exorcist from rural Galilee. John's Jesus, in the words of Marinus de Jonge, is more like a "stranger from heaven" who speaks of the things above while sometimes baffling his hearers (*Jesus, Stranger from Heaven and Son of God* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977]). The Gospel of John also differs from the Synoptic Gospels in other important ways.

First, John presents Jesus as the divine Word-made-Flesh (1:14-18). Though the concept (commonly known as "the Incarnation") has become a key element in our understanding of Jesus within the broader context of Christian theology, this picture of Jesus is, in fact, unique to the Gospel of John. Second, unlike the Synoptic Gospels' depiction of Jesus traveling to Jerusalem just once, immediately before his passion, John pictures Jesus making frequent visits to the city (see 2:13-25; 5:1-15; 10:22-42; 12:12-19). Three of these trips are during Passover and this, in part, establishes a chronology that accounts for the popular conception of Jesus' three-year public ministry (though even in this scenario it is actually closer to two years). Third, the Jesus of John's gospel neither utters parables nor performs exorcisms, though both of these activities are foundational to the portrayals of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Instead, John's Jesus speaks in lengthy, revelatory discourses (e.g., the "bread of life" discourse in 6:25-59; the "good shepherd" discourse in 10:1-18; the "farewell discourse" in 14:1–17:26) and performs deeds of power known as "signs" (e.g., turning water to wine in 2:1-12; walking on water in 6:16-21; raising Lazarus from the dead in 11:38-44, among others). Fourth, Jesus often performs his signs on the sacred days of the Jewish calendar. John's Jesus engages in important activities not only on the Sabbath (e.g., 5:16; 7:22-23; 9:14) but especially during the important Jewish feasts (e.g., Passover in chs. 2, 6, and 12; Tabernacles in ch. 7; Dedication in ch. 10). Indeed, Jesus often reinterprets the feasts in light of his appearance and activity.

Is Jesus really a "stranger from heaven," or is he "one of us"?

Another important feature in the Gospel of John that differs significantly from the Synoptics is the dualistic framework for thinking about the world and human behavior, including the relationship between good and evil.

We will refer to these as *cosmic dualism* and *ethical dualism* respectively. We turn now to a consideration of John's dualistic teachings and the importance they have for understanding this gospel's theological rhetoric.

What is Dualism?

Dualism as a philosophical category was ever-present in the ancient world. A generic description of dualism is the idea that all of reality consists of only two fundamental things or substances. Dualism was especially important in the writings of philosophers like Plato, who argued that the body and soul were two fundamentally different and separate realities. One of those realities (the body) would perish, while the other (the soul) would persist after death. Even an elementary familiarity with ancient religious and philosophical writings would demonstrate how ubiquitous various types of dualism were in antiquity. The Fourth Gospel is no different in this respect. We will see below that John's gospel has a dualistic framework that splits much of reality into only two substances or types of things.

Cosmic Dualism

John's story of Jesus begins with a *cosmic dualism* in which the universe is divided into two realms that represent the opposing forces of good and evil. As noted above, John's Prologue (1:1-18) is the source of crucial revelations about Jesus, the Word-made-flesh. In 1:10-11 we learn that he is "from the Father" (a phrase synonymous with "from above"). And though he is from the Father and oriented to the things above, he has descended to earth, been incarnated into the realm "down below."

Jesus' descent to earth, which is described as "his own" place and consists of "his own people" (1:11), is somewhat disorienting. While he is from above, the outward orientation of the realm below is one of hostility toward both Jesus and the things of God. On this subject Wayne Meeks has noted that "the story of Jesus in the gospel is all played out on earth, despite the frequent indicators that he really belongs elsewhere" ("The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 [1972]: 50.) The reader knows that Jesus has come from above to take on human flesh and accomplish the will of the Father. This *cosmic dualism* is further developed across the gospel in what is commonly known as John's "descent-ascent schema." The motif appears especially in Jesus' teachings about his coming to earth, his mission while here, and his imminent return to the Father (1:51; 3:13; 6:32-42; 13:1-2; 14:1-5).

The gospel's *cosmic dualism* is also reflected in the way Jesus teaches. He often uses a confusing sort of *double entendre* that leaves his audiences bewildered. As the stranger from heaven, Jesus speaks consistently in heavenly or "other-worldly" terms that are frequently misconstrued by his hearers because of their orientation strictly to the world below. The mind-

set of Jesus' conversation partners is often communicated through a type of misplaced literalism, which further reveals their (mis)understanding.

For example, when Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about being "born from above" (3:3), the only conception Nicodemus has of "rebirth" is physical, which leads to his question: "How can a person once grown old be born again?" (3:4). Recognizing his misunderstanding, Jesus uses different terminology to describe the same "from above" reality: "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being *born of water and Spirit*" (3:5, emphasis added). Still struggling, Nicodemus exclaims: "How can this happen?" (3:9). As Jesus speaks plainly of the things above, Nicodemus conceives of things only from the darkened perspective of the realm down below. (Fortunately, Nicodemus comes to a fuller understanding of Jesus as the story advances; see 7:50-52; 19:38-42.)

Similarly, Jesus encounters a woman at a well in the Samaritan town of Sychar in the heat of midday (4:4-7). She is there seeking actual, literal *water*. Jesus asks her for a drink and what ensues is a theologically circuitous conversation that is both playful and, at turns, awkward. Aware of her

Relief of Jesus and the woman at the well, Freising, Bavaria.
Photo by Didi43 via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

needs and the current circumstances of her life, Jesus says to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you *living water*" (4:10, emphasis added). When Jesus speaks of "living water" he is again referring to the "things above," intending to communicate something like "water that imparts life," which is itself metaphorical. In short: Jesus is offering the woman eternal life. However, in Jesus' use of "living water" the woman is only able to hear "running water," a *double entendre* for the Greek phrase in 4:10. She responds to him with sarcasm: "Sir, you do not even have a bucket, and the well is deep; where then can you get this living [read: *running*] water?" (4:11). Jesus knows that the woman needs nourishment extending beyond physical consumption of water, which only has the power to sustain her earthly life. The sort of water Jesus offers her, once consumed, will lead to everlasting life. The Samaritan woman does not grasp this at first, but after their increasingly profound theological dialogue she comes to understand Jesus better—ultimately evangelizing her entire village (4:28-42)!

Is Johannine dualism compatible with our present concepts of humanity and divinity?

Similar examples of confusing speech leading to misunderstanding are found throughout the gospel. However, confounding teaching also has the potential to engender further conversation between Jesus and his interlocuters in a way that produces genuine understanding. Jesus speaks on a heavenly level because he is from above, while many of his hearers understand on an earthly level because they are from below. This use of potentially confusing language is both rooted in and draws out John's *cosmic dualism*. In John's view one can only truly be oriented to the things above *or* the things below, realms that are representative of good and evil, respectively. One's ability to understand Jesus' teachings, turn to God, and live ethically is intimately connected to one's orientation to the things above (or, as it happens, the things below). In this way our consideration of John's *cosmic dualism* has immediate implications for our discussion of the gospel's *ethical dualism*.

Ethical Dualism

At the outset we must be careful to distinguish John's *ethical dualism* from the question of whether this gospel contains *any* ethical teaching (a question on which there has been much debate; see Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner, eds., *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017]). Like the *cosmic dualism* discussed above,

Interview between Jesus and Nicodemus, painting by James Tissot.
Photo courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum (public domain).

ethical dualism also deals with the contrast between good and evil, but more concretely in the realm of human behavior. In John's dualistic economy there is no middle ground; there are those who understand and those who do not, and by extension those who do good and those who do evil. We are able to see this idea in action across various passages that contrast freedom with slavery to sin (8:33-36), blindness with sight (9:26-41), "walking during the day" with "walking at night" (11:9-10), lies and truth (8:42-47; 16:12-13), and one's relationship to God or the devil (7:28-29; 8:44-47).

Perhaps the most significant contrast in the gospel relating to ethical dualism is John's use of imagery associated with light and darkness (1:4-9; 3:19-21; 5:35; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9-10; 12:35-36, 46). Jesus is the purveyor of light that shines forth into the darkness (1:4-5). He is also described as the "light of the world" (8:12), a metaphorical depiction that carries with it many of the resonances of "light" from the Hebrew Bible, where the term is commonly related to both goodness and spiritual insight. Against that backdrop many of John's characters fail to understand what Jesus reveals about the Father and are, therefore, "walking in darkness." Those who "walk in the light" are those who do the works of God. They who "walk in darkness" reject the Word and works of God. In this gospel the choice is stark and clear. In reality, however, we face many ethical decisions that are shrouded in shades of grey and require nuanced thinking to navigate. Still, the theological rhetoric of John's gospel forces Christian believers to reckon with the seriousness of ethical missteps that would be tantamount to rejecting the Word and works of God.

In this essay we have examined characters like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, both of whom initially fail to understand Jesus' teaching and remain in the dark for a time, only to emerge later to a more fully developed understanding of Jesus' message, mission, and identity. The flipside of this dualism is exemplified by figures like the mother of Jesus (2:1-11) and the Beloved Disciple (13:21-30; 19:25-27; 20:2-9; 21:7), both of whom comprehend Jesus' identity, approach him from the outset in faith, and show by their behavior that they have "come into the light."

Conclusion

The Gospel of John does not tell us everything about the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, but it tells us a great deal, including much that is not found in the other canonical gospels. John's distinctive vision of Jesus, his ministry, and the world he has entered has been placed alongside other New Testament texts in a way that provides us with a tensive counterpart to visions of Jesus that emphasize his humanity. For John, Jesus is the divine Word-made-Flesh who stepped out of heaven and came to earth to accomplish the Father's will. The gospel's dualisms enable readers to appreciate the "otherness" of Jesus, which emphasizes his worthiness to be worshiped. But we can also gain an appreciation for the humanity of Jesus, which should foster both awe and gratitude for his divine condescension in "becoming like us."

It is not enough, however, to recognize the Fourth Gospel's theological rhetoric and its distinctiveness from other gospel portraits. Its cosmic and ethical dualisms call for a human response from those who endeavor to follow Jesus. Awareness of John's cosmic dualism demands that we account for the realities of the Incarnation, while its ethical dualisms beckon us to live in light of the fundamental choice between the things of God and the things of the world. While we are aware that reality is often more complicated than these dualisms suggest, the gospel's dualistic framework provokes us to see the world and ourselves in stark terms that further prompt us to "walk in the light as he is in the light" (1 John 1:7).

Christopher W. Skinner (PhD, Catholic University of America) is professor of New Testament and Early Christianity and graduate program director in the theology department at Loyola University, Chicago. He has written extensively on the Gospels of Mark and John as well as the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas and New Testament ethics. He is the author or editor of eleven books, including *John and Thomas: Gospels in Conflict? Johannine Characterization and the Thomas Question* (Wipf and Stock, 2009), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (T&T Clark, 2012), and *Reading John* (Cascade, 2015).