

The World: Promise and Unfulfilled Hope

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Introduction

Within the story of the incarnate *Logos*, the Fourth Gospel introduces its readers to the multi-layered and theologically significant term, ὁ κόσμος (“the world”).¹ In Hellenistic Greek, κόσμος carries a range of meanings, several of which are employed by the Fourth Evangelist.² The term is used to refer to the material reality of the created world,³ the physical realm into which Jesus has entered,⁴ and the object of God’s affection and salvific intentions.⁵ However, of greater importance for the present study is the term’s metonymical function as a symbol for humanity. In at least eight instances in John, κόσμος emerges as a technical term for the human race and in those contexts is presented with a “distinctly pejorative meaning.”⁶ This nuance is especially important for the unfolding story of the Johannine Jesus.

While many commentators have analyzed the significance of the term κόσμος in John, few have written examining the world as a character or character group. Both Lars Kierspel⁷ and Cornelis Bennema⁸ have treated the world as a

¹ The term is used 78 times in the Fourth Gospel and appears in all but four chapters (chs. 2, 5, 19, and 20).

² See H. Sasse, “κόσμος,” *TDNT* 3:868–98; *BDAG*, s. v. κόσμος, 561–63.

³ Most notably 1:10b: ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο.

⁴ The Fourth Gospel presents Jesus as the one who has come “from above.” Thus, his departure from the Father represents his entrance into “the world,” the realm of “below.” On this, see 1:9, 10a, 3:17ab, 19; 6:14.

⁵ See, among others, 1:29; 3:16, 17c; 4:42; 6:51.

⁶ “‘Obscure’ though its etymology remains to this day, κόσμος is still beyond doubt one of the principal concepts of Greek thought. It was, to be sure, the richness of its various meanings that fitted it for the role it played in Greco-Hellenistic philosophy ... For in this variety of meanings lay its potential to become ‘one of the most important terms in Greek philosophy’ and ‘one of the great original creations of the Greek spirit.’ It is, therefore, doubly puzzling that κόσμος comes to have a *distinctly pejorative meaning* in the NT, and particularly in the Gospel of John” (Stanley B. Marrow, “Κόσμος in John,” *CBQ* 64 [2002]: 90) (emphasis added).

⁷ Lars Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel: Parallelism, Function, and Context* (WUNT II/220; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), especially chs. 3 and 4.

⁸ Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 31–37.

character in John, though both focus too narrowly on the connection between “the Jews” (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) and “the world” (ὁ κόσμος) that emerges in the latter stages of the Gospel story. In my opinion this identification is too restrictive and more discussion should be devoted to understanding parallel characteristics exhibited by both the world and other characters in the Fourth Gospel. Such an examination has the potential to yield fresh insights about the world as a character, but also runs the risk of flattening out a robust and complex Johannine concept. We must be careful to emphasize at the outset of our study that a character study of the world is not the same as a comprehensive analysis of the κόσμος concept in John. Such a study would take us far afield from the focus of the present volume. To be sure, for John the world is a beautiful place created by God, as well as a place capable of great evils. These complementary ideas stand side-by-side in the Fourth Gospel and should be kept in mind in the face of the exclusively negative presentation that follows.

Despite the previous criticism of their work, both Kierspel and Bennema provide, at the very least, a satisfactory foundation for treating κόσμος as a character. They note that in the Gospel, the world is described as having human emotions and responses to Jesus; even though the reader is never formally introduced to the world as a character, the narrator’s depiction of the world establishes its impact upon events and other characters in the story.⁹

This essay will plow a narrow swath through the text of the Fourth Gospel, focusing specifically on those places where the world, as a character, represents a human race that is at odds with the plan of God as inaugurated by Jesus. In what follows, I will argue that κόσμος, when used of humanity, is macrocosmic, referring to all humanity within John’s story world, and to individual Johannine characters in particular. After a discussion of κόσμος in the Johannine Prologue, the remainder of this essay will use narrative exegesis to focus on five examples in John that illustrate the relationship between Jesus and ὁ κόσμος: (1) the world hates Jesus and his followers (7:1–7; 15:18–21; 17:14–15), (2) the world follows Jesus in ignorance (12:19), (3) the world rejects the Spirit of truth (14:15–17), (4) the world rejoices at Jesus’ departure (16:20), and (5) the world does not know the Father (17:25). These categories will be used to illustrate the promise and unfulfilled hope displayed by the world in the Fourth Gospel.

⁹ At first glance it might seem strange to treat the world as a character alongside other established Johannine figures such as Peter, Mary, Martha, and Nicodemus. In recent years a handful of studies have appeared that examine other entities in narrative literature and consider their role as characters. A very good example of this recent approach in Johannine studies is Stan Harstine, *Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel: A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques* (JSNTSup 229; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). Harstine treats Moses as an actual character, though he only appears in references to OT passages and in metonymical references to Torah.

The World in the Prologue

It is widely recognized that the Johannine Prologue (1:1–18) sets both the literary and theological agendas for the Gospel story. There, the reader learns that Jesus is the agent of all creation, including the totality of humanity (1:3, 10–11). Because of its unique relationship to God through Jesus, the world carries the promise of great things, most of which never materialize. Among the most important of these is the promise of knowing the God whom Jesus reveals.¹⁰ In this regard, Barrett has written, “The world made through the Word is a world capable of knowing, or of reprehensibly not knowing, its Maker.”¹¹ The failure of the world to know God is demonstrated explicitly in the passages considered below, and implicitly in numerous interactions between Jesus and other uncomprehending characters. There can be little doubt that misunderstanding is one of the key themes in John’s presentation of Jesus’ life and mission.¹² Throughout the Fourth Gospel Jesus is met with a steady stream of characters whose most consistent trait is an inability to know him in a way that would be deemed legitimate by Johannine standards. Many characters fail to comprehend even the most transparent elements of his message, mission, or identity. Though there is not space here to develop this argument in greater detail, it must be kept in mind nonetheless. Two proleptic statements from the Prologue describe this unfolding reality in the story:

1:10 – He was in the world (ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ), and though the world (ὁ κόσμος) was created through him, the world (ὁ κόσμος) did not know him.

Three different nuances seem to be present in this verse. The first use of κόσμος refers to the physical realm into which Jesus has entered. The second occurrence refers to the created order while the third refers to humanity. This statement prepares the reader for the world’s rejection of Jesus and builds upon 1:5, where the narrator comments that “the darkness has not comprehended the light” (ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν). Verse 11 reiterates what v. 10 communicated:

1:11 – He came to his own place (τὰ ἴδια) and his own people (οἱ ἴδιοι) did not receive him.

¹⁰ One important facet of Jesus’ mission in John is his role of “the revealer of God” (cf. 1:18).

¹¹ C. Kingsley Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2d ed.; London: SPCK, 1978), 161.

¹² With the exception of the Beloved Disciple, all other Johannine characters display some inability to understand Jesus’ identity, message, or mission. Misunderstood statements, ironic speech, and *double entendre* are the means by which the narrator brings about these instances of misunderstanding. When characters misunderstand Jesus it often leads to one of the Fourth Gospel’s theological discourses, and these are the means by which the evangelist clarifies the misunderstood elements of Jesus’ mission or identity.

The neuter plural use of ἴδιος in the first half of the verse is a reference to the world as the physical realm into which Jesus has entered. The masculine plural use of ἴδιος in the second half of the verse refers to humanity. Together, these two verses function in much the same manner as the synthetic parallelism in poetic passages of the Hebrew Bible. Specifically, the second verse reiterates and clarifies the meaning of the first.

Together, these two programmatic statements describe a future reality that will unfold throughout the narrative, especially in Jesus' interactions with human characters. As a character in the Fourth Gospel, the world represents the comprehension, internal orientation, and outward behavior of all who oppose the light (cf. 1:5). As a character that opposes and misunderstands Jesus' mission, the κόσμος has a number of representatives in John's Gospel – "the Jews," the crowds, individuals such as Nicodemus, and even the disciples. For the purposes of this essay, κόσμος is defined as the representative totality of humanity in John's story world, characterized by an internal disposition and outward response of misunderstanding and hostility toward Jesus. Though there are exceptions in the Fourth Gospel, this is the general rule for defining humanity's response to Jesus. We proceed now to an examination of passages where the world as a character is explicitly described or depicted.

Jesus and the World

The World Hates Jesus and His Followers (7:1–7; 15:18–21; 17:14–15)

The first of three references to the world's hatred for Jesus comes in the context of a conversation between Jesus and his brothers about the impending Feast of Tabernacles. In 7:1–4 Jesus is in Galilee when his brothers encourage him to travel to Judea to make his ministry public (φανέρωσον σεαυτὸν τῷ κόσμῳ, v. 4) at the upcoming feast. That this advice is driven by their derision is made clear in v. 5: "For his brothers did not believe in him." Jesus responds to their challenge by contrasting his divinely appointed time, which has yet to come, with their ability to come and go on the basis of any human whim (ὁ καιρὸς ὃ ἐμὸς οὐπὼ πάρεστιν ὃ δὲ καιρὸς ὃ ὑμέτερος πάντοτε ἐστὶν ἔτοιμος, v. 6). In v. 7 Jesus describes the world in two ways: (1) it is characterized by evil deeds, and (2) it hates Jesus because he bears witness to its evil deeds. This hatred will manifest itself in a number of ways, one of which is complicity in Jesus' condemnation and death.

The other two references to the world's hatred of Jesus occur in the Farewell Discourse (13:1–17:26). In that section of the Gospel, Jesus prepares the disciples for his departure by encouraging them to persevere, providing insights into forthcoming events, and praying for his disciples and all future believers.

In John 15 Jesus speaks to his disciples at length about the necessity of abiding in him as a means to both accomplishing God's will and remaining in his love (vss. 1–17). In this context Jesus again speaks of the world's hatred for him. Because the world hates Jesus, it will also hate those who follow him (εἰ ὁ κόσμος ὑμᾶς μισεῖ, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐμὲ πρῶτον ὑμῶν μεμίσηκεν, v. 18). This does not mean that the world is fully incapable of showing love. On the contrary, the world loves those whose perspectives and choices mirror its own (εἰ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ἦτέ ὁ κόσμος ἂν τὸ ἴδιον ἐφίλει, v. 19). Jesus cautions his disciples that the world will treat his followers in the same way they have treated him (vss. 20–21). This warning is not only a prediction of future persecution for the disciples but also an implicit exhortation to perseverance. Again it is clear that the world is characterized by hostility toward Jesus and those who are associated with him.

The third reference to the world's hatred comes during Jesus' prayer in John 17. In 15:18–21 Jesus warned that the world would persecute his followers simply because of their association with him. Picking up on this theme once again, Jesus acknowledges that the world hates his followers because he has given them the Father's message (ἐγὼ δέδωκα αὐτοῖς τὸν λόγον σου καὶ ὁ κόσμος ἐμίσησεν αὐτοὺς, v. 14a) and because they are not of the world (οὔτι οὐκ εἰσὶν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου, v. 14b). It is noteworthy that Jesus asks the Father not to remove them from the world, but rather to protect them from the evil one (ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ, v. 15). This protection will be necessary because "after Jesus' departure from the world, the story of *the disciples and the world* begins."¹³ In order for the Johannine disciples – as well as the future believers for which Jesus prays – to continue facing the hatred of the world, it will require a special protection from the wiles of the evil one.

One of the distinctive features of Johannine discourse is the use of dualistic contrasts (e. g., light vs. darkness, truth vs. lie) to make a theological point. In these three passages, another contrast emerges: one can be associated either with Jesus or the world, but not both.¹⁴ This contrast unveils the extreme opposition between the two, and further explains the reason for the world's hatred of Jesus and his followers. The world's unrighteousness and hostility toward Jesus are several stitches in a much larger tapestry of its rejection of God and the one whom he has sent.

¹³ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 31 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ This dualism seems to have been characteristic of the teaching in the Johannine community. See, for instance, 1 John 2:15–16, "Do not love the world (κόσμος) or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all the things in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – are not from the Father but the world."

*The World Follows Jesus in Ignorance (12:19)*¹⁵

Along with its hatred of Jesus, the world is also ignorant of his origins and mission. The Prologue unveils many facts about Jesus: he is from above and existed before time (1:1–2), he is the agent of creation (1:3), the light of humanity (1:4), the giver of authority (1:12), the incarnate λόγος (1:14), and the revealer of the Father to humanity (1:18). While the reader navigates the Fourth Gospel with an awareness of these themes, most characters within the story are unaware and therefore have difficulty coming to terms with Jesus' identity. Their moments of misunderstanding provide opportunities for the Johannine discourses, where Jesus often clarifies elements of his mission and identity. There are occasions, however, when the world, or one of its representatives, confesses something of significance about Jesus. While these insights often occur in the context of Jesus' sign-miracles,¹⁶ this is problematic because the Fourth Evangelist does not regard a signs-faith as a legitimate response to Jesus. Rather, belief in Jesus' word is legitimate while belief in his works falls short of the mark.¹⁷

The events of John 11:38–44 mark the turning point of the Fourth Gospel and usher in a series of responses to Jesus' last and greatest sign. In 11:41–43, Jesus performs his seventh and final σημεῖον in raising Lazarus from the dead – an act that not only foreshadows his own resurrection and power over death, but also serves as the impetus for his crucifixion at the hands of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι. The anger of the Jewish leaders and their plan to kill Jesus are recounted in 11:45–57. Then, in 12:1–19 the narrator describes a series of positive responses to Jesus: in vss. 3–8 Mary anoints Jesus and is praised for her actions; in v. 9 a large crowd of “Jews” (ὄχλος πολὺς ἐκ τῶν Ἰουδαίων) comes to see both Jesus and Lazarus; in vss. 12–19 that same crowd appears, waving palm branches and acclaiming Jesus as a messianic king. Each of these responses to Jesus is a source of dismay for the Jewish leaders, though the final response causes the Pharisees

¹⁵ I recognize that this instance, unlike the other occurrences of κόσμος discussed in this essay, arises from the estimation of Pharisees rather than the narrator. However, the characters in the Gospel story generally share the evaluative point of view of the narrator. Thus, it makes sense to consider this example of the κόσμος concept in the same context as the other occurrences in the Fourth Gospel.

¹⁶ The Johannine *semeia* have traditionally been identified as follows: 2:1–12 (changing of water to wine); 4:46–54 (healing of an official's son); 5:1–9 (healing at the pool of Bethesda); 6:1–15 (multiplication of loaves and fish); 6:16–21 (walking on the water); 9:1–12 (healing of the man born blind), and 11:38–44 (the raising of Lazarus). Though his position has garnered little support, Andreas Köstenberger (idem, “Seventh Johannine Sign: A Study in John's Christology,” *BRR* 5 [1995]: 87–103) departs from the traditional listing of *semeia* by replacing the walking on water (6:16–21) with the cleansing of the temple (2:13–22).

¹⁷ On the contrast between belief in Jesus' works vs. belief in Jesus' word, see this theme as it unfolds in three volumes by Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1–4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5–12* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); and *Glory Not Dishonor: Reading John 13–21* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

to remark, “Look, *the world* has run off after him” (ἴδε ὁ κόσμος ὀπίσω αὐτοῦ ἀπῆλθεν, v. 19). Though this statement is probably to be understood as hyperbole, it is significant that when the κόσμος is described as following Jesus, it does so on the basis of what it has seen (Jesus’ works) rather than what it has heard and internalized (Jesus’ word). For the purposes of the evangelist, this response amounts to following Jesus in ignorance.¹⁸ The world may be following after Jesus, but it eventually stops when the works it seeks cease to occur.

Though this is seemingly a more positive moment for the world than the three previous examples we have examined, the world’s pursuit of Jesus will not last. Ultimately, nearly everyone will abandon Jesus, providing further proof that the signs-faith the world has expressed is not genuine (Johannine) belief. The world runs after Jesus, but only because it hopes to gain that which the world values. Against the backdrop of Jesus’ death, the world’s abandonment of him reveals that it was following in ignorance all along.

The World Rejects the Spirit of Truth (14:15–17)

In 14:15 Jesus exhorts his disciples to demonstrate their love for him by keeping his commands. If they do, Jesus promises to petition the Father to send another advocate (ἄλλον παράκλητον) to remain with them during his absence. Throughout the history of Johannine research, much has been written about the παράκλητος, though the importance of ἄλλος is often overlooked. It is a given that παράκλητος is John’s unique term for the Holy Spirit. Numerous translations have been proposed – “helper,” “representative,” “advocate,” “comforter,” “intercessor” – though it is difficult to translate the term faithfully with an economy of words.¹⁹ While more is intended than any one of these definitions communicates on its own, the reader progressively understands that παράκλητος is John’s technical term for the coming Spirit that will assist his followers after his departure to the Father.

Of greater relevance to our argument here is the evangelist’s use of the term ἄλλος. Prior to the Hellenistic period ἄλλος was used to refer to “another of the same kind,” in contradistinction to ἕτερος, which denoted “another of a different kind.”²⁰ Though this distinction appears to have faded somewhat during the Hellenistic era – and particularly in the semitized Greek of the Gospels – there is evidence of its use in the NT.²¹ John employs ἄλλος 33 times

¹⁸ It should be noted that in 7:49 the Pharisees suggest something similar about the crowds that follow Jesus (ἀλλὰ ὁ ὄχλος οὗτος ὁ μὴ γινώσκων τὸν νόμον ἐπάρετοι εἰσιν).

¹⁹ For more detailed information, see BDAG, 766 and TDNT, 5:804.

²⁰ See LSJ, s. v. ἕτερος (especially section III, which provides several attested examples of the contrast between ἕτερος and ἄλλος).

²¹ An important example of this contrast is found in Galatians 1:6–7, where Paul refers to the gospel which the Judaizers preach as “another gospel (ἕτερον εὐαγγέλιον) which is really not another (ὁ οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλο).”

while the term ἕτερος appears once (19:37), but seemingly without the specific nuance stated above. However, given John's penchant for synonyms (e. g., φιλέω/ἀγαπάω, ἀποστέλλω/πέμπω, etc.), there is good reason to believe ἄλλος has been chosen and maintained almost exclusively throughout the Gospel for a specific reason. Thus, the use of ἄλλον παράκλητον communicates that the promised παράκλητος is of the same kind (or nature) as both the Father and Son.²² The advocate – to whom Jesus also refers as the Spirit of truth (τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας) – is intimately related to both the Father and Son, and will come to assist Jesus' followers in the same ways they have.

We have already seen that the world does not receive Jesus. In 14:17 the reader further learns that the world is not able to receive the παράκλητος. This realization adds a new dimension to the world's rejection of God and those he sends. It is not simply a case of the world choosing to oppose God. Rather, the world is unable to receive the things of God. The world neither sees nor knows God (14:17c) and therefore opposes God as a natural outworking of its internal orientation. By its very nature, the world rejects God, and by extension, both Jesus and the Paraclete.

The World Rejoices at Jesus' Departure (16:20)

By now, the implied reader of the Gospel is aware that it is necessary for Jesus to return to the Father in order to complete the mission for which he was sent. Though the end result of his departure (resurrection) will ultimately be a cause of rejoicing for his followers, Jesus knows that in the interim they will weep and mourn (ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι κλαύσετε καὶ θρηνήσετε ὑμεῖς, 16:20a). However, the world, which has been continuously characterized by its opposition to Jesus, will rejoice at Jesus' departure. Since the world does not know Jesus, its rejoicing over his departure is rooted in its ignorance. Jesus' crucifixion, to which the Evangelist refers as his glorification, will initially appear to the world as the silencing of Jesus once and for all. But, this event will ultimately be a triumph over which the disciples will rejoice. In this regard, Moloney comments:

The reader knows that a death through being lifted up on a cross lies in the immediate future. This death will bear all the appearances of a victory for the forces which are lining up against Jesus. But their rejoicing will be short-lived as, for this author, the brute facts of history do not reflect the true significance of the death of Jesus. The departure of Jesus through the cross will create the *mikron* when Jesus will not be seen, but the sorrow of the disciples will be turned into joy.²³

²² There is no denying that this language, along with other imagery from the Fourth Gospel, served as a repository for later Trinitarian formulations in the first four centuries of the church.

²³ Moloney, *Glory Not Dishonor*, 91.

When the world rejoices over Jesus' departure it does so because it hates Jesus (7:1–7; 15:18–21; 17:14–15), fails to understand him (12:19), and rejects the God who sent him (14:15–17). Against the backdrop of this accumulated information, what else should the implied reader expect than the world's shallow satisfaction at their perceived victory over Jesus?

The World Does Not Know the Father (17:25)

At the very end of his farewell discourse, Jesus mentions the world once again, almost in passing. After a lengthy speech in which he has sought to prepare his followers for his departure, Jesus closes by offering a final supplication. John 17 consists of one long prayer in which Jesus prays for his own glorification (vss. 1–5), the perseverance and protection of his disciples (vss. 6–19), and the benefit of all future believers (vss. 20–26). In v. 24 Jesus prays that future disciples, those given to him by the Father, may be with him and behold his glory. His next statement pits the world against himself and the future believers for whom he has just prayed (καὶ ὁ κόσμος σε οὐκ ἔγνω, ἐγὼ δέ σε ἔγνω, καὶ οὗτοι ἔγνωσαν ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας, “Even though the world does not know you, I know you and these [the disciples] know that you sent me”).²⁴ This simple statement reiterates what the reader has already learned about the world – it has no transformative knowledge about the things of God. This ignorance keeps the world in the dark about the Father and his representatives – the Son and the Paraclete. In this context γινώσκω refers to more than simple knowledge.²⁵ The knowledge Jesus describes is one rooted in experience. The disciples have experienced God in the person of Jesus, the revealer of the Father (cf. 1:18). Because of its inward orientation, the world has never truly experienced God and therefore has no access to the same type of knowledge possessed by Jesus' followers.

Conclusion

The Jesus of John's Gospel has come down from above while the Johannine κόσμος consists of both the realm and the people in the sphere below. This simple positional contrast is symbolic of the greater divide that exists between

²⁴ Though this is not formally structured as a conditional sentence, some translations render it with a conditional force. In light of the cumulative argument of this essay, I translate the initial καὶ as “even though” rather than “even if.”

²⁵ “To know God is to have eternal life (17.3); to know the truth is to be set free (8.32). Knowledge, then, is a way of entrance into salvation and life. Jesus himself knows the Father, and his ministry may be summed up as the communication of this knowledge (1.18; 17.26). ... [K]nowledge itself implies relationship in addition to cognition; to know God is to be united with him” (Barrett, *John*, 81–82).

Jesus and the world (as character) in John's Gospel. The two are at odds, but only insofar as the world conspires to bring this existential situation about. As the one who comes from above, Jesus has set off on a mission to make God known to humanity. He is both the creator and savior of humanity though the world will ultimately reject and destroy him. The world's rejection of Jesus amounts to a rejection of the Father who sent him, and by extension, the coming Paraclete and Jesus' followers. Thus, as a character in the Fourth Gospel, the world represents the human forces that stand in opposition to Jesus, and in this way, functions even if surreptitiously, as the story's primary antagonist. As a character, the world carries the promise of great things but consistently betrays that promise for a darkened perspective that opposes rather than celebrates the plans and purposes of God.