

NUANCING THE NOTION OF CONFLICT IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

JOHN 3:16-21 AS A TEST CASE

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Amid being considered “the Gospel of Love”, John has also been called a “Gospel of Violence” because of what scholars perceive to be narratives of conflict in this Gospel. For some social-science critics, John’s binary language (e.g., above-below, light-darkness, etc.) reflects a conflict which was experienced by a putative Johannine community. This paper will conduct a synchronic analysis of Jn 3:16-21 using insights from the sociology of conflict to investigate the so-called presence of conflict in John. It is proposed that John’s complex binary language is inseparable from the Gospel’s Christological and soteriological proclamation.

Introduction

The binary or oppositional language in the Gospel of John¹ like light and darkness, truth and falsehood, (of) this world and not (of) this world, has been explained by some scholars to be an expression of the Johannine community’s experience of conflict. These scholars build their interpretations upon the two-level drama theory as popularized by J. L. Martyn²

¹ From this point forward, we shall use John to refer to the Gospel of John and to the presumed author of the Gospel.

² J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 32. reckons that a comparison between the Synoptic miracle stories with that of John will reveal how John built a series of scenes from these stories so that it can be said that John wrote a two-level drama, and if one studies carefully the style and accents of its discourses, this drama will reveal traditional materials as well as materials which reflect the evangelist’s own interests and experiences. His analysis of the history of the Johannine community is based on the occurrence of ἀποσπράγγος in 9:22, 12:42, and 16:2 (a word which occurs only in John), a word whose use can be traced back to a decision that was reached in Jamnia to expel those who profess faith in Jesus sometime after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. (ibid., 47–66).

and R. Brown³ which is hinged upon a theory of expulsion from the synagogue. Upon this theory of a Johannine community history of conflict, social-science critics like W. Meeks⁴, J. Neyrey⁵, and N. Petersen⁶ use the insights of sociology and anthropology

³ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, vol. 1, AB 29 (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1966), xxxvi, posits that 9:22–23 “seems to represent an adaptation of the story of the blind man to the new situation in the late 80s or early 90s which involved the excommunication from the Synagogue of Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah.” See also his reconstruction of the history of the Johannine community in Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times*. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979).

⁴ Wayne A. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *JBL* 91, no. 1 (March 1972): 44–45, argues that the system of metaphors in John which are “irrational, disorganized, and incomplete” can be better understood if one analyses it in relation to the function that it serves for the particular group that developed it. He postulates that the distinctive language of John reflects not just the story of Jesus, but also the story of the Johannine community and their attempt to understand their negative experiences through the creation of a “symbolic universe” (ibid., 49–50). Just like Jesus, the stranger from heaven who comes to his people and was rejected by them because he does not belong to “this world”, Meeks argues that the followers also see themselves as “being detached from the world” to become “not of this world” (ibid., 69).

⁵ According to Jerome H. Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt: John’s Christology in Social-Science Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988), 109, the statement “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world” in 8:23 is a high christological confession which was made within a context of excommunication and persecution – a period which reflects “fierce conflict” (cf. 5:18; 6:62–63; 8:23–24; 10:33).

⁶ Norman R. Petersen, *The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light: Language and Characterization in the Fourth Gospel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 1, contends that in John everyday language is used in two ways. The narrator and the characters (except Jesus) use everyday language on the one hand, while on the other hand, the grammar and vocabulary of this everyday language is used in a specialized way by Jesus and also by the narrator. Thus, while the hearers and readers understand what is being said, they do not understand what is being meant by the words because they do not know what is being referred to by them, thereby giving rise to misunderstandings and confusions (ibid., 10). For Petersen, John’s specialized use of everyday language can be seen in his creation of synonyms out of non-synonymous words and his “use of semantic opposites and grammatical negations” to express contrasts (ibid., 3); He explains this specialized use of language to be the community’s response to experiences of marginalization – an experience which resulted in the loss of their identity so that as a defensive reaction and at the same time to create a new identity, the group developed a special language (ibid., 81).

to explicate the development and use of a unique Johannine language, particularly John's binary cosmological language. In their eyes, the context of a community that was entrenched in intense conflict from within and from without gave rise to a specialized form of language that not only defined the Johannine group (the insiders) in relation to another group (the outsiders), but also defined their christological understanding and their participation in Christ's own story. However, even if their analyses are rooted in the presumed presence of conflict and even if they made use of concepts in the sociology of conflict, it is unfortunate that they provided no in-depth explanation regarding the sociological theory of conflict.⁷

In this paper, we shall explore the notion of conflict and the nature of the presumed conflict in John using Jn 3:16-21 as a test case. Our analysis will use cross-cultural insights from the sociology of conflict in conjunction with narrative critical and lexical semantic analyses of Jn 3:16-21 and its co-texts. The exploration will pay particular attention to lexemes that reflect the interests, thoughts, emotions, and actions of the subjects toward their objects and the response of the latter to the action of the former.⁸ Because most of the scholars claim the presence of a conflict in John without first articulating what is entailed by this concept, we shall begin with an investigation of the notion of conflict from the discipline of sociology.

⁷ For a similar criticism on the use of sociological insights in NT studies, see Philip Richter, "Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament: An Appraisal and Extended Example," in *Approaches to New Testament Study*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and David Tombs, JSNTSup 120 (Sheffield: Sheffield academic press, 1995), 268–269. For a discussion on the major types of sociological theorizing, see Jonathan H. Turner, *Theoretical Sociology: 1830 to the Present* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012). For his discussion on *Conflict Theorizing*, see pp. 470–519 of the same.

⁸ We are cognizant of the fact that we are using a modern model of analysing conflict in society and in organizations for our analysis. However, the elements of conflict that have been identified by the sociologists whom we are citing in this work are based on cross-cultural empirical researches. Hence, we believe that they are generally applicable to any analysis of social conflict. In this paper, we shall take the Gospel as the evangelist's narration of the story of Jesus as he perceives it, and not as a two-level narration of the story of both Jesus and the Johannine community.

A Working Definition of Conflict

Many definitions have been offered for the notion of conflict. Generally, conflict is defined as “*an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organizations, etc.)*.”⁹ This definition involves the following two elements: (1) the interaction between two opposing parties (an individual or a group) and (2) the existence of a disagreement between these parties. From this definition, it would seem that any form of disagreement might be considered a conflict. However, this is not always the case. Sociologists who are engaged in the analysis of conflict like R. Mack, R. Snyder, M. Wiewiorka, and J. Bernard admit to the complexity of this notion and the need for limitation and differentiation through a framework against which it can be analysed.¹⁰ Thus, Mack and Snyder identified five properties that may be considered as “analytic preconditions” for a conflict to exist, namely: (1) involvement of at least two parties, individual or group; (2) the presence of “position scarcity” (i.e., the inability of a person or object to occupy two places at the same time, to serve two different functions or perform two roles at the same time, or

⁹ M. Afzalur Rahim, *Managing Conflict in Organizations*, 3rd ed. (Westport, CT and London: Quorum Books, 2001), 18, italics original. Rahim notes the absence of a single clear meaning of conflict due to the profusion of definitions that have been offered by scholars from various disciplines, thereby resulting to some confusion (ibid., 16). For other definitions of conflict, see Robert A. Baron, “Conflict in Organizations,” in *Psychology in Organizations: Integrating Science and Practice*, ed. Kevin R. Murphy and Frank E. Saal (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1990), 198.

¹⁰ See Raymond Mack and Richard Snyder, “The Analysis of Social Conflict-Toward an Overview and Synthesis,” *JCR* 1, no. 2 (1957): 212–48. For Jessie Bernard, “Parties and Issues in Conflict,” *JCR* 1, no. 2 (Jun 1957): 111, the concept of conflict has “has no clear-cut referent, being emotion-fraught, value-laden, fuzzy, and equivocal. It confuses analysis.” In this paper, we are using these two authors as our main dialogue partners since their works are often cited by contemporary sociologists in the analysis of social conflict. In the words of Susan Stewart, *Explaining the Low Intensity of Ethnopolitical Conflict in Ukraine*, Studien Zu Konflikt Und Kooperation Im Osten 12 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005), 38, “[I]t appears that in the last 40 to 50 years only meager progress has been made on the path toward a useful understanding of those factors which condition and cause conflict.”

to carry out different prescribed behaviours at the same time) and “resource scarcity”; (3) behaviours which are intended to destroy or control the other, with one party winning at the expense of the other; (4) mutually opposing actions and counteractions between the two parties; and (5) attempts to gain control or to influence behaviour.¹¹ It would be noted that these analytic preconditions have refined and delimited the general definition of conflict.

Nonetheless, even with the above delimitation, Mack and Snyder lament the fuzziness of the notion of conflict and the difficulty to make clear-cut distinctions as to what may or may not be considered as conflict and the many unanswered questions pertaining to this notion.¹² For instance, they maintain that competition is not a form of conflict although it can lead to it.¹³ They also suggest that some terms which may be related to conflict (e.g., antagonistic interests, aggressiveness, hostility or hostile sentiments, desire or intention to oppose, social cleavages, logical irreconcilability of goals or interests, tensions, and rivalry), are not synonyms to conflict, but may accompany or intensify it.¹⁴ These ideas are also espoused by M. Wieviorka who claims that social conflict cannot be simplistically equated with war, competition, simple opposi-

¹¹ Mack and Snyder, “Analysis of Social Conflict,” 218–219. Meanwhile, after gleaning the important components from the many proposed definitions of conflict, Baron, “Conflict in Organizations,” 199, suggests to define conflict as “a process in which various antecedent conditions, possibly but not necessarily including (1) opposed interests, (2) negative affect (e.g., anger, dislike), (3) negative cognitions (e.g., stereotypes, real or imagined past wrongs), and (4) actual or anticipated thwarting, result in an individual or group taking actions that are incompatible with the interests of other individuals or groups”. According to Baron, conflict begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively or is about to negatively affect what the former cares about (*ibid.*, 199). Based on Baron’s definition, we see that many factors involving the human aspects of cognition, emotion, volition, and action are involved in the development of conflict.

¹² Mack and Snyder, “Analysis of Social Conflict,” 212. Some of the questions they raised are: “Is desire to convert others to a set of beliefs more conducive to intense conflict than desire for scarce resources? [...] Why do some forms of group identification accompany intergroup conflict while others do not?” (*ibid.*, 213).

¹³ Mack and Snyder, “Analysis of Social Conflict,” 217.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

tion, and cleavage.¹⁵ Wieviorka argues that conflict “is not the implacable confrontation between enemies” but is rather “a relationship between opponents who share some cultural references”.¹⁶ According to Wieviorka, although there may be some instances when violence accompanies conflict, it does not necessarily mean that violence is inherent in a conflict.¹⁷

Meanwhile, J. Bernard has rightly pointed out the important role of incompatible interests for the genesis of conflict. According to Bernard, incompatible interests can result from two “mechanical phenomena of conflict”, namely, mutual exclusivity (i.e., two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time and neither can the same object be in two places at the same time) and mutual incompatibility (i.e., the same object cannot be made to perform opposing functions at the same time).¹⁸ By itself, neither mutual exclusivity nor mutual incompatibility can result in conflict. Both phenomena are inherent in nature and culture.¹⁹ However, Bernard rightly points out that the conflict among people results because of the value (importance) that an individual or a group attributes to a particular entity over another and when this value is incompatible with the interest of another individual or group.²⁰ Because no two entities can occupy the same space at the same time, to value something more than another will necessarily lead that person or group to make a potential or an actual choice or decision for one entity and a consequent rejection of the other.

According to Bernard, in an “archetypal conflict situation”, both parties to the conflict know that “what one wins the other loses” (zero-sum situation).²¹ When two parties vie for the same object, this entails that both have knowledge of the object or is-

¹⁵ Michel Wieviorka, “Social Conflict,” *Curr Sociol* 61, no. 5–6 (September 2013): 701.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 699.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Bernard, “Parties and Issues in Conflict,” 111–112. This is similar to what Mack and Snyder call the “position of scarcity”, one precondition to conflict.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 112–113.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 116. Wieviorka, “Social Conflict,” 699, opines that a conflict is not a zero-sum situation.

sue at hand. She observes that most discussions of conflict often assume that the parties to and the observers of the conflict have adequate information concerning the issue at hand, and that the latter have adequate information about the parties involved in the conflict.²² However, she argues that information of this kind is not easy to obtain even with straightforward research.²³ Moreover, information on the parties and issues of a conflict are often distorted because of the images that the interpreter creates based on her value systems.²⁴ Bernard considers it of paramount importance for the person analyzing conflict “not only to know what the objective situation is like but also to know what it looks like to those involved”.²⁵ She cautions that without adequate information, the parties to a conflict may perceive as opponent one who is not.²⁶ In the same manner, the interpreter is also cautioned since she may perceive the presence of a conflict when there is actually none. With these cautions on the difficulty of getting accurate information, the NT interpreter who analyses conflict from a written text that is far removed from her own time and culture, is thus faced with a dilemma as to the plausibility of her interpretation.

Bernard also cites the role of a third party in the development of conflict. She contends that sometimes, it could also happen that the conflicting values are presented to one or both parties by an “agitator”.²⁷ The agitator is not the cause of the conflict, but might be considered as a precipitant of the conflict.²⁸ By presenting two mutually exclusive values which call for a decision or choice, the agitator “may change people’s images so that they then recognize the existence of conflicting values or the possibility of fresh alter-

²² Ibid., 114.

²³ Ibid., 115.

²⁴ Ibid., 115. She proposes a conflict analysis paradigm which takes into consideration the amount of information on mutually exclusive values that is known by both conflicting parties and is available to the observer (ibid., 116).

²⁵ Ibid. The presumption of the presence of conflict in John falls short when gauged along these lines precisely because the Gospel was written from one perspective only and we have no evidence that the main purpose for its production is to give a historical account of a community’s conflict experience.

²⁶ Ibid., 115.

²⁷ Ibid., 118.

²⁸ Ibid.

natives”.²⁹ While conflict may occur because of mutually exclusive values or mutually incompatible interests from either nature or culture, Bernard cites another origin of conflict, i.e., conflict can also originate from one of the two conflicting parties themselves, if one party makes values mutually exclusive.³⁰ Thus, the factors that lead to conflict can either be outside of the conflicting parties or one of the parties.

Bernard has shown the complexity of grasping the notion of conflict, thereby reflecting the difficulty in defining this concept.³¹ Along with Mack and Snyder, the descriptions of zero-sum conflict that are offered by R. Baron³², and V. Jabri³³, argue that a conflict can only be called such if both parties know the issue at hand (cognition) and if it leads one party to carry out a thwarting action that opposes the interest of the other party (action). This presupposes that the purposeful action is being carried out to advance the interest of one of the parties. According to Jabri, crucial in the identification of conflict is the intent which results to a purposeful action that is aimed to achieve the desired outcome.³⁴ This action could be either violent or non-violent depending on several factors that are related to the resources of the conflicting parties, their relationship, ideologies, etc.³⁵ Meanwhile, Bernard maintains that good will plays a role in the resolution of a conflict. She reasons that if there is good will between the two parties, the conflict may be resolved through non-violent means, like one party giving in to the other.³⁶ If there is no good will, one party may get rid of the other (such as through exile or murder) or the latter may simply withdraw and isolate itself.³⁷ However, Mack and Snyder are correct to observe that in a conflict relationship

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 113.

³¹ Cf. Rahim, *Managing Conflict*, 15.

³² Baron, “Conflict in Organizations,” 199.

³³ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 14.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 13–14.

³⁶ Bernard, “Parties and Issues in Conflict,” 117.

³⁷ Ibid.

where the interests are mutually exclusive, “the parties can gain (relatively) only at each other’s expense”.³⁸

Meanwhile, M. A. Rahim clarifies that incompatibilities and disagreements *per se* do not lead to conflict.³⁹ Conflict occurs because the incompatibilities and disagreements have become so serious so as to exceed the individual’s or the group’s “threshold of conflict”.⁴⁰ But how serious should the disagreement be for the threshold to be crossed? Is there a way of determining a person’s or a group’s threshold of conflict? Do not different individuals have different thresholds? The difficulty in answering these questions could perhaps explain the absence of further elaboration from Rahim on this important concept.⁴¹

Based on the various explications of conflict from different sociologists that we have outlined above, we have seen the difficulties in trying to grapple with the notion of conflict. From our exploration, we have identified the following three common main elements in a zero-sum conflict situation without which a conflict situation does not occur: (1) the involvement of at least two entities⁴²; (2) mutually exclusive interests and incompatible values; and (3) a purposeful action that is undertaken to advance a party’s interest, at the expense of the other. It is mainly against these three variables that we shall analyze the notion and the nature of conflict situation in John. Even if the main focus of our analysis is 3:16–21, we will be including other parallel and related texts within the macro-context of the Gospel. Since conflict involves at

³⁸ Mack and Snyder, “Analysis of Social Conflict,” 218.

³⁹ Rahim, *Managing Conflict*, 19. This is perhaps the reason why conflict develops among some people and not in others even if all of them have experienced the same antagonistic circumstances.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² It is important to point out that the phrase “two entities” is not limited to mean two separate individuals or to two separate groups. Mack and Snyder, “Analysis of Social Conflict,” 218, also acknowledge the existence of a “one-party conflict” which they call as intrapersonal conflict. In this type of conflict, the individual faces a conflict within himself that may be caused by having to make a choice between two or more needs and values. In this sense, the conflict that is faced by the individual still involves at least two entities, i.e., two incompatible and mutually exclusive needs or values.

least two entities, we will focus our analysis on the relationship between God and ὁ κόσμος and between Jesus (the light) and ὁ κόσμος.⁴³ We begin our analysis below.

Analyzing Conflict in John: Jn 3:16–21 as a Test Case

John has been called the Gospel of love.⁴⁴ However, for J. van der Watt and J. Kok, John is also a “Gospel of violence”.⁴⁵ Premised upon their two-level reading of the Gospel narratives, van der Watt and Kok argue that John relates the conflict between “the disciples of Moses” (9:28) and the Johannine group (the “disciples of Jesus”).⁴⁶ For them, the conflict revolves around the two issues that are present in 20:30–31, namely, (1) belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God that (2) will lead to the attainment of eternal life.⁴⁷ These two issues are also introduced in 3:16–21 where both πιστεύειν (to believe) and ζωὴ αἰώνιος (eternal life) occur. On the one hand, the text presents the invitation to believe in the Son in order to have eternal life (3:16) while, on the other hand, it also informs the reader of what will happen to the one who does not believe (3:18).

⁴³ This exercise is aimed only at verifying and clarifying what scholars contend to be the conflict relationship between Jesus and the κόσμος. Due to limitation of space, exegetical analyses of all the texts in the Gospel which may depict a conflict scenario are not done in this paper.

⁴⁴ Cf. Adele Reinhartz, “Love, Hate, and Violence in the Gospel of John,” in *Violence in the New Testament*, ed. Shelly Matthews and E. Leigh Gibson (New York and London: T & T Clark, 2005), 109. In the opening lines to his Prologue, Allen Dwight Callahan, *A Love Supreme: A History of Johannine Tradition* (Fortress, 2005), 1, writes “The New Testament Epistles 1, 2, and 3 John and the Gospel of John are the literary footprints that mark the path of an ancient community. Across time and space, the writers of that community share [...] the preoccupation with an idiosyncratic notion of love that they called *agapē* - the greatest of all loves.”

⁴⁵ Jan van der Watt and Jacobus Kok, “Violence in a Gospel of Love,” in *Coping with Violence in the New Testament*, ed. Pieter G. R. de Villiers and Jan Willem van Henten, vol. 16, STAR (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 152.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

For A. Reinhartz, “the contradiction between the commandment to love and the incitement to hate [...] is inherent in the [Gospel] text itself”.⁴⁸ Reinhartz reads John in three levels which she calls “tales”.⁴⁹ She posits that while in the historical tale, “the Jews [hate and] kill Jesus”, in the cosmological tale, “Jesus/God condemn the Jews to death precisely because [in their hatred] they strive to kill Jesus”.⁵⁰ According to Reinhartz, the themes of love, hate and violence are present in the Gospel’s cosmological tale but in complex and less direct ways.⁵¹ She frames the cosmological tale as follows:

[It] has the cosmos—or the entire universe—as its setting, and eternity as its time frame. Its hero is the preexistent Word who becomes flesh and is sent into the world to bring salvation (1:1-18; 3:16). Its villain is the “ruler of this world” (14:30) [...].⁵²

Through the categories of hero and villain, Reinhartz hints at the conflict between Jesus and the “ruler of the world”. She also cites how 3:18 has the potential of violence (cf. condemnation) for

⁴⁸ Reinhartz, “Love, Hate, and Violence,” 110.

⁴⁹ In *The Word in the World: The Cosmological Tale in the Fourth Gospel*, SBLMS 45 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), Adele Reinhartz proposed the presence of three tales in the Gospel. The first is the historical tale which refers to the Gospel’s narrative content on the life of the historical Jesus, set in early 1st century C.E. Palestine, and which is intended to be read as “a ‘true’ account of events which really happened” (ibid., 2). The second is the ecclesiological tale refers to the Gospel narratives which allude to the conflict between the community and the synagogue (cf. 9:22; 16:2) and though they are part of the historical tale and are told from the perspective of the Johannine Jesus, they are anachronistic to the life of the historical Jesus and hence could only refer to the post-resurrection experience of the community (ibid., 3). Finally, the third is the cosmological tale which Reinhartz perceives to be the meta-tale “which provides the overarching temporal, geographical, theological, and narrative framework” for all the other narratives in the Gospel (ibid., 29-30). However, in “John and Judaism: A Response to Burton Visotzky,” in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John’s Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*, ed. John Donahue (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 111, Reinhartz changes her position and contends that since the ecclesiological tale is but a scholarly construct, the Gospel only contains the historical and the cosmological tales.

⁵⁰ Reinhartz, “Love, Hate, and Violence,” 115.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 114.

those who do not believe.⁵³ For Reinhartz, the “grammar of violence” that is easily discernible in the historical and ecclesiological tales (i.e., Jews – hate/kill – Jesus/followers) is reversed in the cosmological tale – this time with God/Jesus killing the Jews.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, from a literary perspective, it is undeniable that of all the Gospels, John starkly presents contrasting images. For some scholars, these images present a conflict scenario. For instance, L. Morris cites 1:5 as already alluding to the “bitter conflict” between light and darkness.⁵⁵ He suggests that whenever Christ is linked with light in the Gospel narratives (such as in 3:19), the interpretation ought to refer back to the conflict in 1:5 since Christ is the light whose mission is to combat darkness.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, S. Voorwinde maintains that “‘the hour’ [of Jesus] is the great showdown in a cosmic war, the decisive battle in the conflict between light and darkness”.⁵⁷

Does the Gospel indeed present a conflict between Jesus and God, on the one hand, and the unbelievers, on the other hand? Is John’s use of binary language, like light and darkness, indicative of conflict? We shall attempt to answer these questions using Jn 3:16–21 as a test case.

Jn 3:16–21 opens with the announcement of God’s love and the sending of the Son to the κόσμος (world, humankind). It proceeds with the responses of those in the κόσμος and the consequences of such responses. Below is a hypotactic sense line presentation of the text.

⁵³ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 119. Reinhartz explains this reversal of violence where the Jews are condemned to eternal destruction as a “cosmological vengeance” on the part of the minority Christian group who were “powerless to act against the Jews on the historical plane” (ibid., 121).

⁵⁵ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 168.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Stephen Voorwinde, *Jesus’ Emotions in the Fourth Gospel: Human or Divine* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 190.

John 3:16-21⁵⁸ reads:

- ¹⁶ οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον,
ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν,
ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται
ἀλλ' ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον.
- ¹⁷ οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον
ἵνα κρίνῃ τὸν κόσμον, ἀλλ' ἵνα σωθῇ ὁ
κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ.
- ¹⁸ ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν οὐ κρίνεται·
ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἤδη κέκριται,
ὅτι μὴ πεπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ
μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ.
- ¹⁹ αὕτη δέ ἐστιν ἡ κρίσις
ὅτι τὸ φῶς ἐλήλυθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον
καὶ ἠγάπησαν οἱ ἄνθρωποι μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος
ἢ τὸ φῶς·
ἦν γὰρ αὐτῶν πονηρὰ τὰ ἔργα.
- ²⁰ πᾶς γὰρ ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων μισεῖ τὸ φῶς
καὶ οὐκ ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς,
ἵνα μὴ ἐλεγχθῇ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ·
- ²¹ ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς,
ἵνα φανερωθῇ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔργα
ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἐστιν εἰργασμένα. (Jn 3:16-21)

Amid its brevity, Jn 3:16–21⁵⁹ presents a picture with complex sets of contrast and separateness of actors, actions, and objects. The following pairs reflect this contrast:

⁵⁸ We are using Nestle-Aland 28th rev. ed. for the Greek text. For the English text, we are using the NRSV.

⁵⁹ There is a question of whether 3:16–21 is still part of Jesus' discourse or already the evangelist's reflections on Jesus' words in the previous verses. In this exposition, we take the first position following J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 200. Michaels' decision is based on the majority of English bible translations (i.e., NASB, NIV, NRSV, NEB, REB, JB, NLT, and CEB) which consider 3:16-21 to be part of Jesus' previous discourse.

3:16	ἀπόληται (he/she may perish) - ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον (he/she may have eternal life)
3:17	κρίνειν (to judge/ to condemn) - σῶζειν (to save)
3:16, 18	ὁ πιστεύων (the one who believes) - ὁ μὴ πιστεύων (the one who does not believe)
3:19	τὸ φῶς (the light) - τὸ σκότος (the darkness)
3:20-21	ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων (the one who does evil) - ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν (the one who does the truth)
3:16, 19, 20	μισεῖν (to hate) - ἀγαπᾶν (to love)

Having identified the binary lexical units in the text, we shall now proceed with a close reading of the text to ascertain if these contrasting images indicate the presence of conflict. We shall begin our analysis by looking at the relationship between God and ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind).

God and ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind)

John 3:16 opens with a declaration of God's love for ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind). C. Spicq describes God's love for humankind as "the most generous, constant and universal love there is".⁶⁰ For Spicq, the prepositioning of ἀγαπᾶν⁶¹ (to love) in 3:16 emphasizes God's love (charity) – a love that is not limited to a particular group of people.⁶² This love is not just an affection which is an end in itself but is rather expressed in action – the

⁶⁰ Ceslas Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament: Agape in the Gospel, Epistles and Apocalypse of St. John*, vol. 3 (Saint Louis and London: Herder, 1966), 15.

⁶¹ Louw and Nida, "ἀγαπάω", 1:288, classify ἀγαπάω under the semantic domain "attitudes and emotions". Three meanings have been given to ἀγαπάω, namely, (1) "to have love for someone or something, based on sincere appreciation and high regard"; (2) "to demonstrate or show one's love"; and (3) "to like or love something on the basis of a high regard for its value or importance" (ibid., 293–294, 301). These three meanings fall under the subdomains "love, affection, compassion" (meanings 1 and 2) and "enjoy, take pleasure in, be fond of doing" (meaning 3) (ibid.).

⁶² Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament*, 3:15–16.

sending of God's only Son εἰς τὸν κόσμον (to the world, to humankind). J. R. Michaels is correct to contend that God's love for the world "implies not so much a feeling as a conscious choice".⁶³ God's choice is expressed in action, i.e., in the giving of the Son.⁶⁴ The goal for God's action is lexically indexed by the conjunction ἵνα (in order that). The sending of the Son is aimed to evoke faith in the Son, a faith that has the ultimate end of enabling all who believe in him to have eternal life, and consequently save them from perishing (μὴ ἀπόληται). The interest of God, therefore, is eternal life for humankind. This interest is rooted in God's love for ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind). Because of God's interest, God made the decisive act of sending the Son. John 3:16 thus gives us a clear picture of how God felt (affectivity), what God wanted (God's choice and interest), and what God did for the world (activity).

The interest of God to save humankind is reiterated and clarified in 3:17 – God sent the Son not to judge ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) but to save it through the Son. The expected response to God's action is belief in God's only Son.⁶⁵ But how does humankind respond to God's action? The answer to this question lies in the lexical units that are used as nominals in 3:18, namely: ὁ πιστεύων (the believer) and ὁ μὴ πιστεύων (the non-believer). John 3:16 declares God's overarching love for ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind). However, the succeeding verses explain that God's interest of salvation and eternal life for ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) is not received by the whole κόσμος, but only by ὁ πιστεύων (the believer). Precisely, because ὁ πιστεύων (the believer) is cited as that entity which will benefit from the effect of the sending of the Son εἰς τὸν κόσμον (to the world, humankind), πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων (the believer) may be considered to be a subset

⁶³ Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 202.

⁶⁴ See Francis J. Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical, Theological, and Literary Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013). Moloney expounds on the action dimension of love in John, beginning with the Father's expression of love in the sending of the Son (cf. 3:16), to Jesus' expressions of love in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, until Jesus' commissioning of the disciples to make this love known (ibid., 208–209).

⁶⁵ This is hammered in by the use of πιστεύειν (to believe) three times and the repetition of μονογενὴς υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (only begotten Son of God) in 3:18.

of ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind). When 3:18 states that the one who believes (ὁ πιστεύων) is not judged while the one who does not believe (ὁ μὴ πιστεύων) is already judged, the reader is informed that the response of those in the world to God's gift is divided – there are those who believe and those who do not. These two kinds of people are further described in 3:19–21 according to their deeds as ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν (the one who does the truth) and ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων (the one who does evil), respectively. John 3:19–20 reveals that there is no reciprocal response to God's love on the part of οἱ ἄνθρωποι (human persons) which is a part of ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind).⁶⁶

The lexical units ὁ πιστεύων and ὁ μὴ πιστεύων (3:18), οἱ ἄνθρωποι (3:19), πᾶς ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων (3:20), and ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν (3:21) reflect entities that are part of ὁ κόσμος. The evangelist uses substantives that pertain to belief (ὁ πιστεύων and ὁ μὴ πιστεύων) and deeds (πᾶς ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων and ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν) to articulate the nature of the two opposite groups. While God's decision to send the Son to the world reflects God's universal salvific interest, God's action puts ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) in a tight situation where it has to decide whether to believe or not believe in God's only Son (3:18).⁶⁷ In this sense, God can be considered “an agitator” whose action challenges humankind to choose between two mutually exclusive actions.

Noteworthy is the fact that God's interest is not for God's self but for ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind). Although the sending of the Son entails the choice between the two mutually exclusive actions of believing and not believing, God's action was undertaken

⁶⁶ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1978), 215, argues that in John, love is a reciprocal relationship as exemplified by the love of the Father for the Son (3:35; 10:17; 15:9; etc.) and the love of the Son for the Father (14:31), the love of Jesus for his own (11:5; 13:1, 34; 14:21; 15:9; etc.) and the disciples' love for one another (13:34–35; 15:12, 17; 17:26), as well as their love for Jesus (14:15, 21, 23–24, 28; 21:15).

⁶⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Zweite, durchgesehene Auflage, NTG (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1954²; 1958³; 1961⁴; 1965⁵; 1968⁶; Otto Merk, ed. 1977⁷; Otto Merk, ed. 1980⁸), 367, calls this *Entscheidungs-Dualismus*. Due to limitation of space, a discussion on *dualismus* in John will not be done in this paper.

not at the expense of humankind, but for its sake. God's interest is for humankind to benefit from his gift of the Son (the light). However, the response of οἱ ἄνθρωποι (human persons, a subset of ὁ κόσμος) to remain in the darkness reflects its interest. If we consider what God wills for ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) which is eternal life and what the choice of darkness would mean for οἱ ἄνθρωποι (human persons), we see that the interest of οἱ ἄνθρωποι (human persons) for itself is irreconcilable with God's interest for ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind). However, God neither imposes nor forces his gift upon humankind. It is up to humankind to decide whether to accept the gift or not.

We have explored God's relationship with ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind). John 3:16–21 is explicit in its proclamation of God's active love for ὁ κόσμος and the non-reciprocation to this love by a part of ὁ κόσμος. How about ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind)? How does it relate with God? We note that nowhere in the Gospel do we find the construction ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind)–hate–God. However, Jesus claims that those who hate him also hate the Father (15:23–24). In 7:7 and 15:18, the Johannine Jesus declares that ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) hates him. Even if the unbelieving part of the world (cf. οἱ ἄνθρωποι) do no thwarting action against the Father, the Gospel claims that whatever is done to Jesus is also done to the Father (cf. 13:20). Hence, the hatred of ὁ κόσμος (cf. οἱ ἄνθρωποι) and its consequent thwarting action toward Jesus is also a hatred for and a thwarting action toward the Father. Crucial here is the question of availability of information to both parties. Amid Jesus' claim in 15:23–24, does ὁ κόσμος (cf. οἱ ἄνθρωποι) know that its rejection of Jesus is a rejection of the Father? It would seem not. However, the Gospel is explicit that the works and signs that Jesus performed attest to his identity as the One sent by the Father and who is one with the Father (5:36; 10:25, 37–38; 14:10–11). Nonetheless, ὁ κόσμος (cf. οἱ ἄνθρωποι) stubbornly refuses to believe Jesus' claim and its unbelief results to its judgment (cf. 9:41; 15:24). Confronted with God's gift of the Son, ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) is faced with the dilemma of

believing or not believing.⁶⁸ While the judgment may be considered as a thwarting action of God (and Jesus) toward ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind), the thwarting is a consequence of the latter's decision not to accept God's offer of salvation.⁶⁹ It is clear that it is not an intentional thwarting action of God to advance God's interest at the expense of the world.

Our analysis reveals the complexity of the relationship between the Father and ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) and the difficulty of easily concluding as A. Reinhartz does that a conflict exists between the Father and the unbelieving part of humankind. First and foremost, it cannot be shown that God and ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) are parties to the conflict. Our exploration has revealed that God may be considered "an agitator" of the conflict by sending the Son and confronting ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) with the choice to believe or not believe. While the interests of God and ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) may be mutually exclusive, it can be seen that God's interest is not for God's sake but for what God perceives to be the good ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind). Moreover, the unbelieving part of ὁ κόσμος (cf. οἱ ἄνθρωποι) does not explicitly hate nor thwart God. Neither does the Gospel contain explicit statements of God hating and thwarting the unbelieving part of ὁ κόσμος (cf. οἱ ἄνθρωποι).

Based on our analysis of the relationship between God and ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) vis-à-vis the three variables of conflict, we can say that no conflict exists between the two parties despite their irreconcilable interests. Clearly present though is what Mack and Snyder call intrapersonal conflict, i.e., the conflict within ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) itself who is faced with the choice on whether to believe or not believe in the One whom God sent.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Cf. Meeks, "Man from Heaven," 56. In his analysis of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, Meeks contends that 3:33-36 elaborates on 3:11-21 by making it clear that the issue is on whether one will accept the God's Son or not (ibid.).

⁶⁹ According to Brown, *John*, 1:345, Jesus is not like an apocalyptic figure who judges at the end of time. Rather, his presence provokes judgment and "cause[s] men [sic] to judge themselves."

⁷⁰ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983), 97, rightly identifies the conflict between belief and unbelief in the Gospel: "The plot of the gospel is propelled by conflict between belief and unbelief as responses to Jesus."

We shall continue our exploration of conflict in 3:16–21 by looking at the relationship between the Son and ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind).

The Son (the light) and ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind)

Central to the proclamation of God's active love for ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) in 3:16 is the sending of the Son – the light. The sending is reiterated in 3:19 with the announcement of the coming of the light εἰς τὸν κόσμον. Whereas in 3:16–17, God takes the active role with the Son as object (ὁ θεός – δίδωμι/ἀποστέλλω – ὁ υἱός [object₁] – ὁ κόσμος [object₂] = God - give/send – Son – world), in 3:19 the light takes the active role of coming εἰς τὸν κόσμον (to the world). The narrative structure along with the repetition of κόσμος as the recipient of the action of the subject signals the reader to correlate the giving and sending of the Son in 3:16–17 to the coming of the light in 3:19. The Son is the light of the world who gives the light of life to those who follow him (cf. 8:12; 9:5; 11:9). In other words, the Son shares the salvific interest of God (12:47). The story makes an ironic turn, however, when it declares in 3:19c that amid the coming of the light, οἱ ἄνθρωποι (human persons) love the darkness more than the light. As mentioned above, 3:20–21 further clarifies the nature and identity of οἱ ἄνθρωποι (human persons), and this time using the substantive ὁ φαῦλα πράσων (doer of evil) in 3:20 which is contrasted with ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν (the one who does the truth) in 3:21. Because of its evil deeds, οἱ ἄνθρωποι (human persons, cf. ὁ φαῦλα πράσων) not only love the darkness more than the light (3:19), but also hate the light and do not go toward it (3:20).

Meanwhile, by using ὁ φαῦλα πράσων as the subject in 3:20 instead of picking up οἱ ἄνθρωποι (human persons) in 3:19, the evangelist seems to highlight and hone in the negative character of those who refuse and hate the light by virtue of their evil deeds. The only other occurrence of ὁ φαῦλα πράσων in John is in 5:29 where it is also used to contrast with those who do that which is good (cf. Rom 9:11; 2Cor 5:10). John 3:20 informs us

that the one who does evil hates the light using the lexeme *μισεῖν* (to hate) that strongly suggests negative emotion. Louw and Nida renders *μισεῖν* (to hate) as “to dislike strongly, with the implication of aversion and hostility”.⁷¹ From Baron’s definition, this can be classified under negative affect - an antecedent condition that could lead to a thwarting action. The juxtaposition of *ἀγαπᾶν*⁷² (to love) and *μισεῖν* (to hate) in 3:19 and 20, respectively, exposes the antagonism of οἱ ἄνθρωποι (cf. ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων) toward the Son, the light.⁷³ The hatred of ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων toward the light in 3:20 is paralleled by the hatred of the κόσμος toward Jesus in 7:7 where *μισέω* is again used but this time with ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) as subject. John 7:7 has the only other occurrence of τὰ ἔργα πονηρά (evil deeds) in the Gospel which Jesus testifies against.⁷⁴ Thus, both 3:20 and 7:7 express the antagonistic affect toward Jesus by those in the world who do evil deeds.

Whereas the antagonism toward the light is said to have come specifically from ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων (the doer of evil) in 3:20 (and οἱ ἄνθρωποι in 3:19), the shift in the lexeme to ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) in 7:7 seems to indicate that the whole world is antagonistic toward Jesus. However, the context of 7:7 informs us that the reference for ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) is still that part of the world that does not believe in Jesus and to which his unbelieving brothers belong (7:5) – that part whose deeds are described as πονηρός (evil) in 7:7. We can thus say that the hatred toward Jesus is related to unbelief.⁷⁵ Those who hate Jesus are those who do not believe.

⁷¹ Louw and Nida, “μισέω”, 1:763–764. They classify *μισέω* under the semantic domain “moral and ethical qualities and related behavior” and the subdomain “hate, hateful” (ibid., 742, 763).

⁷² The use of *ἀγαπάω* (to love) in 3:19c recalls the *ἀγαπάω* (to love) in 3:16a, thereby providing a stark contrast between the object of the love of οἱ ἄνθρωποι (human persons) with the object of God’s love.

⁷³ On the other hand, 3:21 describes a part of ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) who shares the interest of God – the one who does the truth and comes to the light (3:21). The contrast between 3:20 and 3:21 is clear in the two subjects’ respective responses to the coming of the light and their respective reasons for such a response.

⁷⁴ The texts do not make explicit what τὰ ἔργα πονηρά (evil deeds) in 3:20 and 7:7 refer to.

⁷⁵ Cf. Fernando F. Segovia, “The Love and Hatred of Jesus and Johannine

Important in this regard are the lexemes light and darkness which by themselves are mutually exclusive, i.e., both cannot exist together, so that it may be so easy to conclude that both entities are in conflict, as some scholars do. In order to understand if there is a conflict between the light and the darkness, we may need to look further at what these lexemes stand for in the Gospel. Jesus comes into the world as light (3:19; 12:46) and proclaims himself the light of the world (8:12; 9:5). On the other hand, the Gospel does not elaborate on what or who the darkness is. Although it is used twice as a subject with the active verb καταλαμβάνω (to overtake) in 1:5 and 12:35, the Gospel is not explicit on its referent. Meanwhile, darkness is used as a description in relation to other nouns.⁷⁶ Those whose deeds are evil prefer the darkness to the light (3:19). The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going (12:35).

While the evangelist personifies the light in the person of Jesus, darkness is not given a personified referent. It is used as a descriptive. By coming to the world as light, it would seem that Jesus, the light, is pitted against the darkness (cf. 1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46). However, the light does not take direct thwarting action against the darkness. As light, Jesus gives those in the world the choice of moving away from the darkness to come to the light (8:12; 12:46). In other words, while the interest of the light is to “enlighten” those who are in the darkness (cf. 1:5), the light does not impose this interest. By its nature, the light shines and could vanquish the darkness. However, in John the coming of the light does not necessarily entail an eradication of the darkness. Nowhere does the gospel mention that darkness ceases to exist.⁷⁷ Neither does the darkness vanquish the light.

In a situation where both darkness and light exist without overcoming each other, we cannot conclude that there is a conflict between light and darkness based on our working definition of

Sectarianism,” *CBQ* 43, no. 1 (Jan 1981): 267. Segovia equates the love in 3:19 with belief (*ibid.*).

⁷⁶ Barrett opines that “darkness” in John has an ethical dimension (*ibid.*, 158).

⁷⁷ The interpretation of οὐ κατέλαβεν in 1:5 has occupied many scholars for some time. While some see the presence of conflict between the light and the darkness in 1:5 (cf. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003, cf. 387), the meaning of κατέλαβεν in this verse poses a problem for it is not clear if the word means “to seize”, “to overcome”, “to understand or “to grasp with the mind (Barrett, *John*, 158).

conflict, even if both are mutually exclusive. However, from the perspective of those in the world who are invited to come to the light (i.e., to believe in Jesus) and not to remain in the darkness, the mutual exclusivity of the nature of darkness and light necessitates a decision. Those in the world have to choose between the two. The conflict then occurs, not between the light and the darkness, but within the one who has to make a choice on whether to come to the light who is Jesus (i.e., believe) or to remain in the darkness (i.e., not believe).

The choice depends on one's values. John 3:19–20 tells us that the preference of οἱ ἄνθρωποι (human persons) for the darkness rather than the light is because of their evil deeds, thus revealing what is more valuable for them. In other words, the kind of deeds they engage in is decisive for their choice. Even before the coming of the light, there is already an incompatibility between evil deeds and deeds that are done in truth. However, the light reveals the incompatibility and mutual exclusivity of these deeds. In his role as the light that enlightens, Jesus, may be considered “an agitator” who precipitates the intrapersonal conflict of choice. A distinction needs to be made between persons in conflict from values in conflict.⁷⁸ In the above, it would seem that what we have is a conflict in values, and not in persons.

Meanwhile, by presenting Jesus as the personified light vis-à-vis the darkness, Jesus becomes one of the two mutually exclusive choices that are involved in the conflict, without discounting his other role “as agitator” in the intrapersonal conflict. In this instance, the conflict may be called interpersonal, i.e., a conflict between Jesus, the light, and his interest to invite those in the world to come to (believe in) him, on the one hand, and those who embrace the darkness of not believing on the other hand. Jesus, the personified light, who presents the two choices, is at the same time one of the choices. In other words, the party to the conflict presents the two mutually exclusive choices. The presence of mutually exclusive interests is clear – belief and unbelief cannot go together. But is there a thwarting action that is done by Jesus,

⁷⁸ Cf. Jessie Bernard, “The Sociological Study of Conflict,” in *The Nature of Conflict: Studies on the Sociological Aspects of International Tensions* (Paris: UNESCO, 1957), 42–43.

the personified light, to the darkness and vice-versa? To help us answer this question, we need to look for referents in which the description “darkness” applies.

Earlier we mentioned the intrapersonal conflict that is faced by those who are in the world with the coming of the light, i.e., the decision on whether to come to the light or to remain in darkness. If darkness is the choice of those who do evil deeds, and if it is characteristic of that part of the world that remains in unbelief (cf. 3:19–20), we can thus conclude that Jesus, the light, is in conflict with those who do not believe and those whose deeds are evil. Who are these persons?

The following texts explicitly name the following as not believing the claim of Jesus as the One sent by the Father: οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι (the “Jews”) in 5:18; 8:41–46; 10:24–26); πολλοὶ ἐκ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ (many of his disciples) in 6:66; οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτοῦ (his brothers) in 7:5; ὁ ὄχλος (the crowd) in 12:34–37; and ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) in 16:8–9. These are the ones who are explicitly described as doing evil deeds: οἱ ἄνθρωποι (3:19) and ὁ κόσμος (7:7). Meanwhile, the invectives of Jesus against οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in chapter 8 shows the hostility that exists between him and οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι (the “Jews”). The phrase τὰ ἔργα πονηρά (evil deeds) does not occur in relation to Jesus’ interlocutors in chapter 8. However, because of their attempt to kill him (8:37, 40), Jesus calls the “Jews” the children of the devil who was a murderer from the beginning (8:44).⁷⁹ As children of the devil, they do what their father desires and does (8:41, 44). The language used to describe the “Jews” may reflect what Baron calls negative cognition, i.e., a negative perception or a stereotype of the other which is one of the antecedent conditions for a thwarting action.⁸⁰ In this brief survey,

⁷⁹ This is also called by some scholars as the ancient rhetorical style of “vilification” or “slander”. See, for instance, Luke Timothy Johnson, “The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic,” *JBL* 108, no. 3 (Sep 1989): 419–41; Adela Yarbro Collins, “Vilification and Self-Definition in the Book of Revelation,” *HTR* 79, no. 1/3 (Jan 1986): 308–20; and Sean Freyne, “Vilifying the Other and Defining the Self: Matthew’s and John’s Anti-Jewish Polemic in Focus,” in “*To See Ourselves as Others See Us*”: *Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 117–43.

⁸⁰ Cf. Jan van der Watt and Jacobus Kok, “Violence,” 166, who rightly

we see various names representing groups that do not believe in Jesus and who do evil deeds. While these groups have an interest that is opposite to that of Jesus', a planned or actual thwarting action (the most definitive of which is the killing of the other party⁸¹) will be the decisive criterion in order for us to clarify the presence of a conflict between these two parties.

The verb ἀποκτείνειν⁸² (to kill) occurs twelve times in John. Of these, eight are direct references to attempts to kill Jesus by groups like the "Jews" (5:18; 7:1; 8:37, 40), the chief priests (11:47), and the Pharisees (11:47). Of the eight, three are explicit first-person discourses of Jesus accusing his interlocutors of wanting to kill him (7:19; 8:37, 40), while five are third-person narratives that point to attempts of some groups to kill Jesus (5:18; 7:1, 25; 11:53; 18:31). The attempts to kill Jesus clearly exhibit an intention to thwart. This intention was carried out and fulfilled in Jesus' crucifixion and death (19:18, 30). From a historical perspective, the antagonism between Jesus and those who do not believe in him culminated in the thwarting of Jesus. Based on our three variables of conflict, we can say that a conflict exists between Jesus, the personified light, and the unbelieving part of κόσμος (world, humankind).

Nonetheless, from the evangelist's christological perspective, Jesus' death (his lifting up) is also the hour of his exaltation or

observe how negative thoughts and attitudes toward the other led to violence in John: "vilification eventually leads to physical and institutional violence that culminates in murder."

⁸¹ A distinction needs to be made between conflict and violence. According to Bernard, "The Sociological Study of Conflict," 38, from a sociological model of conflict perspective, violence is not synonymous with conflict. There are conflicts without hatred and hostility in the same manner that hatred and hostility may exist even without conflict (*ibid.*, 39). Bernard further contends that "if we are interested primarily in the whole gamut of strategies for dealing with groups or systems in conflict, [...] violence and aggression constitute only one phase of a broader problem; they are viewed as often highly rational, purposive, deliberate, used coldly, even without hatred, a calculated choice based on policy or strategy" (*ibid.*, 40).

⁸² Another verb that expresses violent action that will lead to death is λιθάζω (to stone). John 10:31–33 and 11:8 reveal the attempts of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι to stone Jesus.

glorification (cf. 3:14; 8:28; 12:23).⁸³ In his eyes, despite the historical thwarting of Jesus, the interest of Jesus to invite faith in him continues even during (cf. 12:32) and after his death (cf. 20:31). Moreover, Jesus' resurrection shows his triumph over the thwarting action. Thus, from the perspective of the evangelist, what may be considered as the ultimate thwarting of Jesus by some groups in the κόσμος, is Jesus' triumph over ὁ κόσμος (16:33). In the final analysis, the Gospel proclaims that amid the thwarting action of that part of ὁ κόσμος which is characterized by the darkness of unbelief and evil deeds, it did not overcome Jesus, the light (cf. 1:5). The one who was thwarted was the one who was victorious. Because the invitation to faith continues after Jesus' death, persons continue to be confronted with the conflicting values of believing and not believing in Jesus.

Conclusion

Our foregoing analysis of conflict in John is based on a synchronic reading of the text. We purposely did not analyse John's language of conflict based on the history of the Johannine community in order to show that John's binary language can be explicated even without recourse to a two-level reading of the Gospel. Our exploration has revealed the complexity of delineating clearly the presence of conflict in John between (1) the Father and ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) and (2) Jesus, the light, and ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind). We have seen the need for nuancing in identifying conflict situations in this Gospel and the parties involved in this conflict. Based on our working definition, the Father and ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) do not exhibit a kind of conflict relationship amid their irreconcilable interests. Noteworthy in this relationship is the benevolent interest of the Father for ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) – an interest which was not reciprocated by

⁸³ Cf. Meeks, "Man from Heaven," 63, who argues that ὑψωθῆναι (to lift up) in 3:14 already hints at Jesus' death as his exaltation. He further contends that "the development of the 'elevation' and 'glorification' themes by the evangelist places the traditional passion narratives in quite a new interpretive context" (ibid., 66).

a subset of the world. By sending the Son, the Father becomes “the agitator” of the intrapersonal conflict within the κόσμος (the world, humankind).

Meanwhile, the Son comes to save ὁ κόσμος (the world, humankind) and not to judge it (3:17; 12:47) so that the Son can be seen as sharing the interest of the Father (3:16). The coming of the Son as light made visible the presence of both the evil deeds and the deeds of truth. As the light that illumines, Jesus becomes “the agitator” who puts before those in the world the choice whether to come to the light or to remain in the darkness. Thus, ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) faced an intrapersonal conflict. However, as the personified light, Jesus becomes one of the parties who is in conflict with a group of people in the world who refuse to believe in him and whose intent to thwart Jesus ended in the latter’s crucifixion and death. We thus have two kinds of conflict in the relationship between Jesus and ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind): intrapersonal conflict (where Jesus is “the agitator”) and interpersonal conflict (where Jesus is one of the conflicting parties who presents two mutually exclusive choices).

Meanwhile, the thwarting action of Jesus’ opponents became the means of Jesus’ glorification. In the eyes of the evangelist, the thwarting did not have the last say in the conflict. Just as in the pre-crucifixion narratives Jesus invited those in the world to believe in him as the One who was sent by God to give life to those who believe in him (3:16). In the post-crucifixion narratives, the evangelist presents Jesus as one who continues to invite all to believe in him and to have eternal life (20:31). The salvific interest of Jesus – the same interest as that of the Father – continues and is not thwarted by ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind). Still, this interest necessitates a response in order for one to benefit from it. It confronts the person to decide and choose to believe or not believe “that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing [she or he] may have life in his name” (20:31).

In this paper, we have shown that that the language of struggle in John which some scholars consider as a language of conflict and violence is a language that is inseparable from the Gos-

pel's christological and soteriological proclamation.⁸⁴ Jesus' call to faith in him as the One sent by God and the consequent response to either believe or not believe is the repeated refrain in these "conflict" narratives.⁸⁵ John presents the story of Jesus and his invitation to faith amid narratives of mutually exclusive and irreconcilable interests. Undeniably, the Gospel narratives show that there is conflict and that Jesus is involved in this conflict as evinced by his crucifixion and death. However, even with this seeming thwarting of Jesus, the Gospel proclaims him victorious. Our exploration has revealed the need for nuancing in the use of the word "conflict" in relation to the relationship between Jesus and God on the one hand and ὁ κόσμος (world, humankind) on the other. Moreover, our exploration has further demonstrated the need for caution in summarily describing John's binary language, e.g., light/darkness, as indicative of conflict.

Meanwhile, without denying the plausibility that experiences of conflict of the Johannine community may have been reflected in the Gospel's narratives and that this conflict may have involved the followers of Jesus, our exploration has shown that John's "vocabulary of hostility" can be explained within the Gospel's christological and soteriological proclamation and without recourse to the community conflict hypothesis. Since the Gospel is the proclamation of the story of Jesus, we propose that it is within this framework that the narratives be interpreted first and foremost of all.

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⁸⁴ Cf. van der Watt and Kok, "Violence," 176.

⁸⁵ According to van der Watt and Kok: "The main question in John (one might call it the essence of this conflict) thus revolves around the issue of its true centre: where, and with whom, is God to be found?" (ibid., 154–155).