

Ringgren (1966/1976: 66–94); van der Toorn (1999: 361–3).  
 Gen. 1:26–7.  
 Exod. 34:10; Pss. 10:4; 33:16; 110:1; 144:7; Isa. 66:1; 40:11–12, 66:1–2. Cherbonnier (1962: 187–206).  
 E.g. Neh. 1:4; Ps. 115:3.  
 Isa. 66:1.  
 Deut. 6; Ezek. 1:1. On the history of YHWH and his astral associations, see Niehr (1999: 370–72).  
 Pss. 18:10–11; 68:33; Deut. 33:26; Isa. 19:1; Judg. 5:4–5; Deut. 33:2; Pss. 18:7–9; 68:7–8.  
 Isa. 6:1.  
 1 Kgs 8:27.  
 E.g. Pss. 11:4; 48:9–14; 68:28–9, 35; 84:1–4; 99:1–2; 132:13–14. See Burnett (2010: 115–50).  
 Oppenheim (1977: 171–227).  
 Cf. Exod. 29:41; Lev. 21:21; Ps. 141:2.  
 Gen. 3:8.  
 Gen. 11:5–8.  
 Gen. 7:16.  
 Gen. 32:22–30.  
 Deut. 4:12, 5.  
 Ps. 88:14.  
 Exod. 33:17–23.  
 DeConick (2006: 11–14).  
 DeConick (2010: 310–11).  
 Carabine (1995: 13–187); van der Horst (1999: 367).  
 van der Horst (1999: 367).  
 Dreyer (1970: 68–145).  
 Isa. 45:15. Howard-Snyder and Moser (2002: 2–3).  
 Deut. 31:17, 18; 32:20.  
 Balentine (1983: 157–63); Friedman (1995); Burnett (2010).  
 Friedman (1995: 7).  
 Howard-Snyder and Moser (2002: 1–23).  
 Tertullian, *Apologeticus* §17.  
 Isa. 63:11–12.

## CHAPTER 1

### WHO IS HIDING IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN?

#### RECONCEPTUALIZING JOHANNINE THEOLOGY AND THE ROOTS OF GNOSTICISM

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I became intrigued with Johannine theology when I noticed that the standard English translations of John 8:44 obscure the Greek, which reads: *ὁμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ*. With the article preceding *πατὸς*, the phrase *τοῦ διαβόλου* is a genitive phrase modifying the nominal phrase *ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς*. Thus: “You are from the father of the Devil.” If the statement were to mean, as the standard English translation renders it, “You are of the father, the Devil,” then the article preceding *πατὸς* would not be present. In this case the phrase, “father” would be in the predicate position and could be expanded with an appositional phrase *τοῦ διαβόλου*, a grammatical choice that the author of John makes a few verses later in 8:56 when referencing Abraham: Ἀβραὰμ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν, “Abraham, your father.”<sup>1</sup>

This literal reading is confirmed by the last segment of the verse (8:44f) which straightforwardly acknowledges the present of two beings, the liar and his father: *ὅταν λαλήῃ τὸ ψεῦδος, ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων λαλεῖ, ὅτι ψεύστης ἐστὶν καὶ ὁ πατήρ αὐτοῦ*. The full verse reasons that the Devil lies since his nature is that of a liar. Why? Because not only is the Devil a liar himself but his father is also a liar. But this is not the sense of the standard English translation which is peculiar and strained. It reads *αὐτοῦ* as a genitive “it” referring to an unnamed singular antecedent such as “lying” or “falsehood.” Thus: *ὁ πατήρ αὐτοῦ* is rendered in the standard English translation idiosyncratically, “the father of lies.”

In order to sort out what was going on with this verse, I went back through the literature and discovered that this verse has a controversial history. In another publication, I have drawn out the parameters of the controversy.<sup>2</sup> I found that this verse functioned as a calling card for Gnostics who used it as plain evidence that Jesus taught that the Jewish God was the father of the Devil. A number of Gnostics employed this verse to prove that Jesus himself instructed them that there existed a god in addition to Jesus’ true Father. This other god is the God of the Jews and is responsible for the generation of the

Devil and evil. They insisted that this verse demonstrates that determinism plays a role in human nature, especially in terms of the most wicked people, the apostates. According to these Gnostics, it is a wicked deity – the Jewish god – who fathered both the apostates and the Devil.

The early catholics faced a real dilemma when it came to explaining this verse. In order to neutralize it, they insisted that the Greek be read oppositionally, “you are from the father, the Devil” even though they confess that reading it this way would be clearer if the genitive article before *father* were erased.<sup>3</sup> Their ultimate concern is that the scripture cannot say “from the father of the Devil,” so they plead that another reading of the text is necessary, a reading that they regard as ‘better’ than the plain reading. They are so certain that that text means “from the father, the Devil” that they freely render it, “You are sons of the Devil,” and attribute these words to Jesus instead of the words found in the scripture. They are uneasy about quoting the Greek in the form it appears in the biblical passage itself. So they tend to substitute for it what they think the passage should say by paraphrasing the passage whenever they reference it.<sup>4</sup>

Early in the tradition, the catholics do claim the literal reading of John 8:44f, “because he is a liar and so is his father.” However, they come up with four interpretative strategies to deal with the problem that if the Devil is the liar, then he has a father who is also a liar. They argue that the passage is interpreted with reference to the Antichrist who is the *liar* and the Devil his father.<sup>5</sup> The *liar* can refer to any evil spirit whose father is the Devil.<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps *liar* is anyone who lies, and the liar’s father refers to the liar who fathered the lie.<sup>7</sup> Some choose to allegorize the reference so that Judas and Cain are liars whose father is the Devil.<sup>8</sup> Augustine is the first to have realized that the persuasiveness of the Gnostic argument for the existence of the Devil’s father was strongly tied to 8:44f – “because he is a liar and *his* father” – because the Manichaeans emphasized *αὐτοῦ* to make this point. So Augustine marks this as the ‘simpleton’ reading and then retranslates it idiosyncratically to mean the Devil is the father of “it” where “it” is falsehood.<sup>9</sup>

As I worked through this Catholic-Gnostic debate, it became clear to me that this debate was not a late development that we could sever from the production and first interpretations of the Gospel of John. Rather this debate was already raging in the Johannine epistles written in the first decade of the second century. Furthermore, the catholic interpretation did not appear to be primary, but secondary, put into place to domesticate an older Gnostic sentiment written into the very fiber of the Gospel of John itself.

#### A CATHOLIC-GNOSTIC DEBATE IN THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

Just how early can we trace the dispute over the ‘authentic’ reading and meaning of John 8:44? It has long been recognized that 1 John 3:11-12a – “For this

is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, and not be like Cain who was from the Evil One and murdered his brother” – references John 8:44, although most modern commentators understand this reference to be a casual allusion.<sup>10</sup> Given what I have learned about the history of interpretation of John 8:44, I have become convinced that the epistle was written as an exposition on John chapter 8, in order to dispute an interpretation of this passage that the Johannine secessionists espoused. I am of the opinion that the chapter represents an authentic historical dispute that took place at the beginning of the second century, written from the perspective of the presbyter whose opponents were the secessionists. The secessionists were members of a church congregation that was using the Gospel of John. They left the congregation due to a hermeneutical rift that involved as much the formulation of theology as it did christology.<sup>11</sup> The presbyter and the secessionists were arguing over the theological implications of John 8:44 and the impact of these implications on christology, anthropology, and soteriology as framed by the Gospel of John. The presbyter’s side of the debate is preserved in 1 John.

The presbyter is an advocate for an early version of the catholic hermeneutic that was developed to tame the plain or literal reading of John 8:44. He wants to set straight exactly who the “liar” is. He has issues with some teachings about determinism, and so wishes to establish whether or not believers are sinners. Finally he wants to resolve a thorny debate that was going on about Jesus’ nature and role.

Given that the interpretation and implications of John 8:44 were at the center of the schism, throughout the epistle the presbyter is anxious to clarify the identity of the “true” God and that god’s relationship to evil and the Devil. With allusion to John 8:19 – “You neither know me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” – he claims that he and his supporters “know” the Son and the “true” God, his Father.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the epistle, the presbyter argues that the “true” God is free from evil, he is light in whom there is no darkness. But God is also “righteous.” This assures kinship between himself and those who act piously.<sup>13</sup> It also means that although he is a loving Father, he is a just god whose laws need to be obeyed.<sup>14</sup> These laws are not “miserable.”<sup>15</sup> Although there will be a judgment, the believer who is obedient to God’s laws has nothing to fear.<sup>16</sup> God’s love is apparent through his action, when he sent his Son into the world “to be the expiation for our sins.”<sup>17</sup> As for Jesus’ commandment to love one another, this is not really a “new” commandment, but is already part of the old law of God.<sup>18</sup>

Given that these were the presbyter’s emphases, what were the secessionists claiming that they knew about the “true” God? Their position appears to represent an early version of the Gnostic hermeneutic that read John 8:44 as a literal reference to the Jewish God and lawgiver as the Devil’s father, while Jesus’ Father was another God. They were claiming that they knew the “true” Father, and he is not the traditional god who gave the laws to the Jews. Rather

the Jewish God gave “miserable” laws to be obeyed because he himself was wicked, associated with the “darkness” and “the world.” They emphasized that the God Jesus preached was to be contrasted with the Jewish God of the Law. Jesus’ Father was a God of love who gave a “new” commandment, to love one another, while the God of the Jews was a malicious god who gave the old Mosaic laws to burden people. The secessionists appear to have been claiming that they knew the “true” Father preached by Jesus, and that the members of the church were part of a sinless generation connected to the Father by nature.<sup>19</sup>

The presbyter wants it to be clear that this position is nonsense. A person’s affiliation with God or the Devil has nothing to do with a fixed nature. With reference to John 8:44 and in line with later catholic interpretation of this passage, the presbyter states that physical parentage does not determine whether a person is born from God or is “from the Devil” and considered a child of the Devil. Rather this is determined by deeds.<sup>20</sup> Here the presbyter is relying on the appositional reading of John 8:44a – “you are from the father, the devil” – to prove his point. The person who does right is righteous, the presbyter says, and the person who sins is “from the devil.” The presbyter then associates the “murderer from the beginning” in John 8:44c with the Devil. He explains that sinners are the Devil’s children “because the Devil sinned from the beginning” and sinners have imitated him. He uses Cain as an example. We should “not be like Cain who was from the Evil One and murdered his brother.” Why did he murder Abel? Because Cain’s deeds were evil.<sup>21</sup> The scope of “murder” is widened to include any hatred that one person has for another.<sup>22</sup>

This reading of John 8:44 is an early version of the catholic hermeneutic that read the text appositionally – “from the father, the Devil” – and identified the Devil as the murderer from the beginning whom Cain copied. The Devil’s children are identified as those who like Cain copy the Devil and commit sin.<sup>23</sup> They do not have the “spirit of truth” but the “spirit of error.”<sup>24</sup> They can be identified because they are liars (like the Devil and Cain), people who say they love God, but then hate their brothers.<sup>25</sup>

Why this emphasis on the will to sin? Because the secessionists appear to have held a different position – that believers were not sinners because they had a fixed nature that made them children of God. Thus the presbyter criticizes, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”<sup>26</sup> The presbyter thinks that the statement – “we have no sin” – makes the Son a liar, and his word not part of their community.<sup>27</sup> This is a reference to a clash over how John 8:24 – “I have told you that you would die in your sins unless you believe I am he” – should be interpreted. The secessionists seem to have read the passage to indicate that believers are part of a sinless generation. The presbyter and his followers think different. To them the text means that even believers are sinners. It is their relationship with Jesus that absolves them of their sin.

How is this sin absolved? According to the presbyter, a doctrine of expiation is the ticket.<sup>28</sup> The presbyter is of the opinion that the believer gains God’s spirit and is born into God’s family through an anointing ritual.<sup>29</sup> This birth means that God’s nature now lives within the believer and absolves him or her from sin. The presbyter talks about his followers being “perfected” and “purified,” assuring his followers that the believer “cannot commit sin because he is born of God.”<sup>30</sup>

If this is the presbyter’s position, what kind of position did his opponents hold? How were they reading John 8:44? The secessionists appear to have been claiming that they knew the “true” Father preached by Jesus, and were part of a sinless generation connected to him by nature. They appear to have identified this “pure” and “perfected” generation with the church. Opposing this generation was another generation that consisted of the children of the Devil, a sinful generation associated with the Devil through a fixed nature. They appear to be assuming that the Devil and his wicked generation were created by a father god that was not Jesus’ Father. Rather he was the “miserable” god who was the Lawgiver and God of the Jews.

In this debate, the presbyter intends to make clear the identity of the “liar” in John 8:44d and f. He reads it along the lines of other early catholic exegetes. The liar is anyone who disobeys God’s commandments, including the worst offender, the Antichrist who denies the Father and the Son.<sup>31</sup> The liar is the person who says that he loves God while hating his brother.<sup>32</sup> He is the person who claims to “know” God, but disobeys God’s commandments: “the truth is not in him.”<sup>33</sup> All of these people have the Devil as their father and walk in darkness, lying and not living according to the truth.<sup>34</sup> They do not know the true Father or Jesus as they claim they do. They have not overcome the Devil but are his children.<sup>35</sup>

The presbyter plays with John 8:23, where Jesus contrasts his detractors with himself. It reads: “You are from below, I am from above. You are of this world, I am not of this world.” The presbyter uses this reference to posit that the secessionists are “of this world” and are not “of the Father.”<sup>36</sup> He associates “this world” with lust and pride and ignorance of the Father.<sup>37</sup> The presbyter also uses John 14:30 against the secessionists. He understands Jesus’ allusion to Judas’ imminent betrayal – “the ruler of this world is coming” – to be a reference to the coming of the Antichrist.<sup>38</sup> The presbyter says that his opponents, as antichrists, have come into the world. Given the presbyter’s exegetical tendencies to identify the Liar with a figure other than the Devil, it is very likely that the secessionists were like the later Gnostic exegetes. They were saying that John 8:44f identifies the Liar with the Devil and his father with the malicious Lawgiver. This would be consistent with what we already recovered of their arguments about the nature of the true Father. They were saying that the father of the Devil cannot be the God of truth, but must be the malicious Lawgiver, the god of the Jews.

With these parameters, it is not surprising that the presbyter was concerned about the nature of Jesus and his role. The presbyter wants to tie him tightly to the righteous God, the Lawgiver, who will enact judgment. Jesus Christ is an advocate with his Father on behalf of the righteous, a faithful and just god who hears confessions, forgives sins and purifies.<sup>39</sup> He can do this because he functions as an expiation for sin.<sup>40</sup> He came to teach people God's laws, laws by which they will be judged. The greatest of these laws is love toward one's brother.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Jesus' "new" commandment is tied tightly to the Torah.

The presbyter emphasizes that only those who confess that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα)" is to be counted among the children of God.<sup>42</sup> Never have there been more misunderstood words than these. They have been (mis)understood again and again as solid evidence that the secessionists were docetists.<sup>43</sup> But this is only because our 'academic' histories of early Christology have been so controlled by the needs, perceptions and polemics of conventional Christianity, even today, that the traditional Christological categories have not allowed us to see clearly what was going on.<sup>44</sup>

The cry "in the flesh" was not the presbyter's cry against the docetism of the secessionists, since he is merely referring to the prologue of the Gospel of John which I assume the secessionists knew too. As far as I have been able to determine, there is no literary-critical evidence that "the Word became flesh" is a post-secessionist addition to the opening hymn. The secessionists must have been familiar with it. This means that the problem was over the *interpretation* of the passage. What did it *mean* that the Logos became flesh? It appears to me that the presbyter took the meaning of this passage to be ensoulment, that the Logos descended into flesh at Jesus' birth and functioned as Jesus' soul. Or to put it another way, the Logos was born as Jesus' *psyche* in flesh – in bones and blood.<sup>45</sup> Thus I take 1 John 5:6 to be the presbyter's testimony about Jesus' advent, that the Logos did not just come down and possess Jesus at his baptism, "by the water only (ἐν τῷ ὕδατι μόνον)."<sup>46</sup> Rather Jesus came into being through both water *and* blood (δι' ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος), through baptism *and* birth. The presbyter argues that Jesus' advent through water and blood is proven by the presence of the Spirit, which is one with the water and the blood.<sup>47</sup> The claim the presbyter is making is that somehow the Spirit became unified with Jesus' flesh at birth, as well as at baptism.

This suggests that the secessionists were arguing that the reference to the Logos becoming flesh should be understood as the possession of the man Jesus by a great spirit from above at his baptism, "by the water only." This is an entirely different Christological model, and a very old one at that. This model had developed out of the prophetic tradition, which understood that God's Spirit could anoint righteous men, resting in them with every generation.<sup>48</sup> This model forms the basis for the Christology in the Gospel of Mark, which uses εἰς to describe Jesus' possession by the spirit.<sup>49</sup> But remnants of it

are also found in the other synoptics and the Gospel of John, which all record the descent of the spirit at Jesus' baptism and the release of his spirit at the crucifixion.<sup>50</sup> The Gospel of John preserves a saying that must have been of interest to the secessionists: "This is indeed the prophet-who-is-to-come into this world!"<sup>51</sup>

It is also the model used by the Gnostic Christian Cerinthus according to Irenaeus who says that Cerinthus taught that the primary supreme God, the unknown Father, was separate from the ruler of this world.<sup>52</sup> Tertullian tells us that Cerinthus taught that this lesser god was an angel who represented the god of the Jews and was associated with the Mosaic Law.<sup>53</sup> Irenaeus says that Cerinthus thought that Jesus was born a normal natural child, the son of Mary and Joseph. But he grew to be more righteous than most men. So at his baptism, "Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove." From then on Jesus proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. At the crucifixion, however, Christ departed from Jesus, so that Jesus the man suffered and rose again, while Christ the Spirit remained impassible.<sup>54</sup>

I bring up Cerinthus as a point of comparison, as the type of Christian theological system that would have been very close to the system of the secessionists. Taking into account the arguments and positions of the presbyter, it appears that the secessionists were arguing from the literal reading of John 8:44 that the god of the Jews, the Lawmaker, was wicked and the father of the Devil. Jesus' Father, however, was the God of love, the true God. Jesus, himself, was a normal man possessed by the Spirit of God, born of water only.

## JOHANNINE THEOLOGY IN THE GOSPEL

Recovering the Catholic-Gnostic debate over the interpretation of John 8:44 has revealed a well-kept family secret. The plain or literal reading of John 8:44 appears to be primary. The catholic reading appears to be apologetic, responsive and secondary, put into place to tame the beast. If this is the case, what might this suggest about the theology that plays out in the Gospel of John? What happens when we let the beast loose, when we grant the literal reading of 8:44?

To start, the narrative surrounding 8:44 becomes very clear. In this narrative, Jesus is presented as the light of the world and of life.<sup>55</sup> He has come from above, having descended into the world.<sup>56</sup> His detractors, a group of Jews (identified variably as "the Pharisees," "the Jews" and "the Jews who had believed in him"), ask him questions about his identity and his Father's identity.<sup>57</sup> Jesus says that they do not know either himself or his Father.<sup>58</sup> He contrasts his Father with the Father that the Jews heed and follow.<sup>59</sup> At first, the Jews think that Jesus is referring to Abraham. But Jesus says they are mistaken in this assumption. If they were truly Abraham's children, they would not be seeking to kill Jesus. Why? Because Abraham did not murder people. Jesus concludes that they must have another Father commiserate with their wicked

actions.<sup>60</sup> His detractors then respond to him by saying that they have only one Father, God.<sup>61</sup> But Jesus insists that they must be talking about different gods, because if they had known the Father God from whom Jesus came, they would love Jesus.<sup>62</sup> So their father must be another god, whom Jesus identifies as “the father of the Devil,” who was “a murderer” and “a liar” from the beginning.<sup>63</sup> Jesus claims to be glorified by his Father, whom the Jews say is their God. But they have not known Jesus’ Father, says Jesus.<sup>64</sup>

With this literal reading of 8:12-55, we can imagine a primary Johannine theology in which there are four key players: Jesus’ Father; Jesus; the Father of the Devil who is also the God of the Jews; and the Devil who is the son of the God of the Jews. Where are these players located in the universe and what are their characteristics according to the architect of the Fourth Gospel?

### *Jesus’ Father*

Jesus’ Father is the supreme God. Jesus calls him “the only true God,” suggesting that the Johannine author is making some distinction between this God and some other god(s) who were falsely worshiped as God.<sup>65</sup> Jesus’ Father is the “righteous Father” whom the world has not known but whom Jesus knows.<sup>66</sup> He is a god of love, who wishes to save the world through the advent of his Son whom he sends into the world to bring judgment and salvation.<sup>67</sup>

### *Jesus*

The supreme God is described as spatially separated from “this world.” This spatial difference can be tracked in the person of Jesus who is the only entity who can move back and forth between the Father (who resides outside “the world”) and the world itself. This is a constant theme in the gospel, summarized in 16:28: “I came from the Father and have come into the world; also I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”<sup>68</sup> Jesus is not “of the world.”<sup>69</sup>

The gospel is very consistent that Jesus’ descent occurs into “the world” from the heavens where he has lived with his Father.<sup>70</sup> In terms of location, “heaven” is contrasted with the “earth (γῆ)” and the “world (κόσμος).”<sup>71</sup> Heaven is “above,” while earth and the world are “below.”<sup>72</sup> Jesus is the bread from heaven given by the Father to the world.<sup>73</sup> The Father glorifies Jesus (and his Name) “on earth” and in “the world.”<sup>74</sup> This “world” is identified with descriptors such as “darkness,” and it is described as something that Jesus overcomes as well as saves.<sup>75</sup> Jesus is the “light of the world” that comes into the darkness.<sup>76</sup>

Jesus is associated with creation. He is the one through whom all was made (including the world) and life given.<sup>77</sup> The world remains ignorant of him and his Father, although intimately connected to them.

The redemption Jesus brings about includes judgment, which involves the casting out of the ruler of this world, when Jesus is “lifted up from the earth” and believers are drawn up to him.<sup>78</sup> Jesus says that he must leave the world in order for the ruler of this world to be judged.<sup>79</sup> Immediately before the passion, Jesus exclaims that the ruler of this world is coming, but that he has no power to overcome Jesus.<sup>80</sup> Narratologically, this suggests that the crucifixion and death was understood to be the moment of Jesus’ triumph over the ruler of the world because Jesus does what the Father gave him to do.

### *The Father of the Devil*

Jesus’ claim to be able to reveal in the world his Father is predicated on Jesus’ exclusive residence with the Father in heaven prior to Jesus’ descent. It is predicated on Jesus’ direct knowledge of the Father whom only he has seen.<sup>81</sup> Repeatedly Jesus tells various Jewish constituencies that the Father who sent him is the true God whom they do not know while he himself does.<sup>82</sup> The text has the Jews themselves acknowledge the contrast between Jesus and the Father from whom Jesus comes, and Moses and God the Lawgiver. They rebuke the blind man whom Jesus had healed, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”<sup>83</sup>

This sets up a situation in which Jesus proclaims an unknown Father while arguing that the Jews think they worship this god, when in fact they do not. The god the Jews worship is another Father, the Father of the Devil. This is the god who gave Moses the Laws. Jesus predicts that his followers will be driven out of the synagogues and murdered by those in the synagogues who believe that they are serving God. But they are not serving the God Jesus knows because they have known neither Jesus nor the Father.<sup>84</sup>

There is tension in the text between the God Jesus preaches and the God the Samaritans and Jews are worshiping in ignorance in their temples.<sup>85</sup> The Father God whom Jesus preaches is characterized as “spirit” who must not be worshiped in the temples at Gerizim and Jerusalem. At the same time, Jesus understands the temple in Jerusalem to be “my Father’s house,” although a temple corrupted and made into “a house of trade.”<sup>86</sup> How can this tension be resolved? Could the Johannine author have understood the traditional story about the cleansing of the Temple to be an example of Jesus purging the Temple of impiety and the worship of the false god, so that he could set up the proper way to worship? Since the Johannine author a few verses later states that the Temple is Jesus’ body, I wonder if the author viewed the establishment of the church, the body of Jesus, to be the “temple” locus of the Father’s manifestation?<sup>87</sup>

In fact, this appears to be the traditional way in which Heracleon read the passage, and it puts Origen out-of-sorts. According to Origen, Heracleon

understood Jesus' reference to the Temple as "my Father's house" to affirm the existence of Jesus' Father as a god other than the creator. Jesus came to cleanse the Temple of the worship of the impious who were offering sacrifices to the creator god. He was establishing the Temple as the "church" of his Father. Origen actually agrees that the text refers to the establishment of the Church by Jesus since the author of John equates the temple with Jesus' body, but he disagrees that Jesus' Father is a god separate from the creator.<sup>88</sup>

The Johannine author distinguishes the Law of Moses from the message of Jesus: "For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."<sup>89</sup> The commandments of Jesus are viewed in contrast. He gives laws he had been given directly from God his Father, and he declares the love commandment to be "new."<sup>90</sup> So it is not surprising to see in this gospel Jesus distancing himself from the Law of Moses. He refers to the Law as "your" Law when speaking to the Jews.<sup>91</sup> Jesus warns that those who are "of the world" hate him and also his Father. He explains that this fulfills what is written "in their law (ἐν τῷ νόμῳ αὐτῶν)": "They hated me without cause."<sup>92</sup> He says that the Jews have misinterpreted Moses' writings and they do not see in them the prophecies that refer to Jesus.<sup>93</sup> The gospel quotes several scriptural passages as prophecies fulfilled by Jesus, and depicts the Jews as unable to understand or observe correctly the Laws.<sup>94</sup> At the same time, the author of John presents Abraham and Isaiah as prophets who had been granted knowledge of Jesus or a vision of his Glory.<sup>95</sup>

This multivalent understanding of Jewish scriptures and the traditional Jewish heroes fits the type of Gnostic interpretation that both Irenaeus and Celsus disdained. Irenaeus tells us in his heresiological writings that some Gnostics believed Sophia occasionally in human history revealed or taught about the Christ-Anthropos, the luminous Man. Because of this, it was not uncommon to find Gnostics who thought that the prophets were inspired by both the true Father (unknowingly through Sophia's work) and the Creator, even though the prophets themselves were servants of the Creator and not the true Father.<sup>96</sup> Celsus criticizes the Christians (whom Origen identifies as Ophians) for their "blockheaded" ideas. He cannot understand why they would think that the Jewish god is accursed while also accepting his cosmogony and the inspiration of the prophets. This seems contradictory to Celsus who goes on to remark, "When your master Jesus, and Moses in whom the Jews believe, lay down contradictory laws, you try to find another god instead of this one who is the Father."<sup>97</sup>

### The Devil

The Devil is not developed substantially in the Gospel of John, although he is mentioned in 8:44 as having a father who is separate from the supreme Father Jesus preaches. Jesus prays that his Father will protect his followers

from the Evil One because they are not "of the world" just as he is not "of the world."<sup>98</sup> We are told that Judas "is a devil (εἷς διάβολός ἐστιν)" chosen among the twelve by Jesus.<sup>99</sup> Judas' selection appears to be part of some cosmic plan since Jesus insists that nothing can happen to Jesus himself unless his Father allows it to happen.<sup>100</sup> The Devil himself - called "Satan" - enters Judas when he is given the morsel by Jesus at the supper.<sup>101</sup> So whatever cosmic plan the Johannine author thought was enacted in Jesus' life and death, it involved the ruler of the world, the Devil, Judas' betrayal and Jesus' crucifixion, an event which brought about the 'casting out' of the ruler of this world.<sup>102</sup>

### A TRANSITIONAL THEOLOGICAL SYSTEM

The theological system assumed by the Johannine author is a *transitional* system, representing a previously unrecognized theological strain that forged some forms of Gnostic transcendent theism. This newly charted theological strain is marked by the bifurcation of the Jewish god into a good, just Father who lives in the high heaven and a malicious Lawgiver who fathered the Devil and is the ruler of the world - the earth and its atmosphere (see Fig. 1.1).

Conventional Christian interpretation of the Gospel of John has identified "the ruler of the world" with the Devil. Now that we have recovered the father of the Devil who has been hiding beneath the accumulated weight of centuries of catholic interpretation, the conventional identification appears

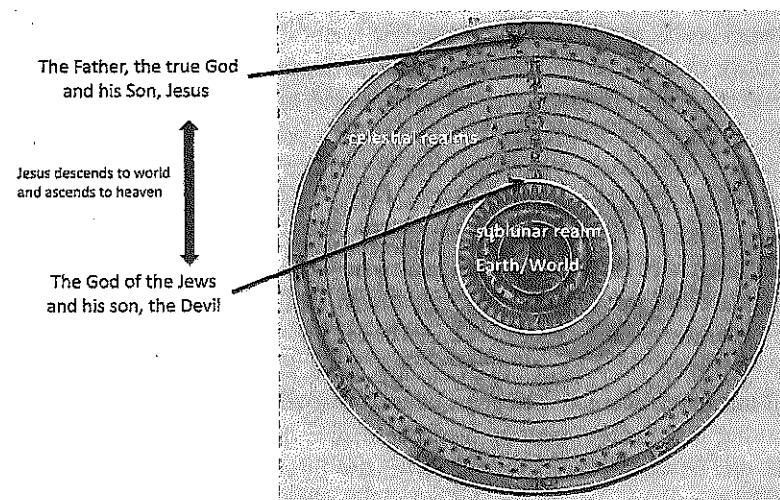


Diagram of Cosmology  
assumed by Gospel of John

Figure 1.1 Cosmology assumed by the Gospel of John. Illustration by April D. DeConick. Copyright: the author.



to be secondary, negotiating an orthodox interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. Critical investigation can be diverted no longer. The “ruler of the world” in the Gospel of John can no longer be understood as the Devil. We now know that the Devil has a father. This father is the Jewish God who is the creator and ruler of the world. What we have in the Gospel of John is a panastral *transitional* system where the cosmic Father rules the world with his son the Devil, just as the astral Father rules the heavens with his Son Jesus. The territory of the Lawgiver is “the world” – the earth and its atmosphere. He is not the astral Lord. The astral Lord is another god. The astral Lord, the God of the Heavens, is the supreme Father whom Jesus preached.

I want to stress this point because we are not seeing a simple addition of the Platonic transcendent Good as the supreme Father to a system in which the Jewish god has been demoted. The author of the Gospel of John is grappling with his community’s connection to Judaism and a Jewish scripture which the community still considers sacred, at least to the extent that it believes that prophecies of Jesus are hidden within the Jewish scripture. The author understands salvation to have come from Judaism, but not to have remained within traditional Judaism.<sup>103</sup> From the perspective of the Johannine author, Jesus came down out of the heavens to straighten out the religion, to teach that the just God is a god who resides in the heavens. He is a God of love and righteousness, grace and truth, whom no one knew about prior to Jesus’ advent when he revealed himself through his Son. The Jews think they worship this god, but in reality they are worshipping an inferior god, the Lawgiver, who rules the world and fathered the Devil.

Unlike later developed Gnostic systems, the supreme Father in the Johannine gospel is still part of this universe. He is not a transtheistic God. He is not living above or beyond the heavens in some distant pleromic world. He is far away, but he is still in the celestial sphere and immediately connected with creation through his Son Jesus. The system is a panastral one. In terms of the development of Gnostic traditions, this represents a crucial step. Although I am wary of creating an academic model that suggests a linear and straightforward evolution, I am certain from my study of the growth of traditions in general, that their growth usually occurs in very small increments or shifts. The shifts are not necessarily tidy, nor linear, nor the same across the board, but they are traceable.

In the case of the Gospel of John, we have evidence of a shift that has escaped our attention for centuries. It is a shift that split the Jewish God into two, leaving his “better” half *in the heavens*, and demoting his “uglier” half *to the earth and its atmosphere* to reside with the Devil who was already there in the conventional traditions. In the Johannine system at least, we do not yet have a Platonic graft, a Good transcendent god who is living outside the universe in competition with the Jewish God who is the ruler of this world, living in the highest of the heavens in the sphere above the Zodiac as he is, for instance, in the Sethian traditions.

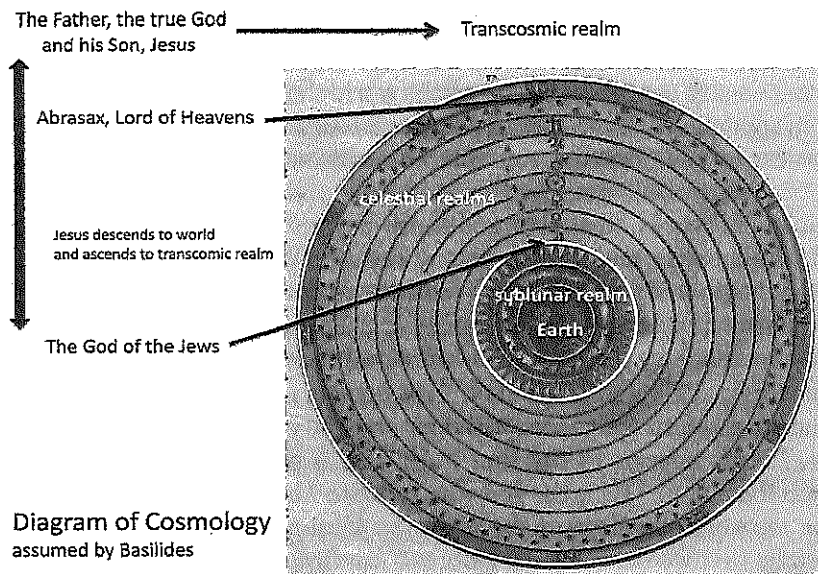


Figure 1.2 Cosmology assumed by Basilides. Illustration by April D. DeConick. Copyright: the author.

What we have though is something very early in the development of Gnostic traditions, a shift that represents the Gnostic tradition immediately prior to Basilides (see Fig. 1.2). According to Irenaeus’ description of Basilides’ system, Basilides posited a transtheistic God largely derived from the philosophical tradition, an “unborn father” from whom “Nous” is birthed along with a number of other powers who live outside the heavens.<sup>104</sup> The lowest of these powers create and populate the highest heaven with angels, who in turn create and populate a second heaven beneath the first. This proceeds until 365 heavens are fashioned.<sup>105</sup> The lowest of these heavens, the 365th, is the one “visible to us.” It is populated by angels who create the world and everything in it.<sup>106</sup>

Their chief is the God of the Jews and the Lawgiver. Each of his angels was the representative of a nation on earth. Because he was the chief of the other angels in his heaven, ruling over them, he desired to have all the nations on earth be subject to his chosen people, the Jews. When the unborn Father perceived that all the other nations would be slaughtered as a result of the archontic war, he sent down Nous as the Christ to deliver all those who believed in him from the world creator via the crucifixion.<sup>107</sup>

But that is not all. Irenaeus reports that there is another figure in Basilides’ system, the astral Lord Abrasax who is the chief over the 365 heavens, since his name numerically adds up to 365 in Greek.<sup>108</sup> Epiphanius also thinks that Abrasax is the power ruling the heavens and their angels, and suggests that if one were to work back up the chain of heavens, it would suggest that Abrasax was the chief creator of everything.<sup>109</sup> Pseudo-Tertullian mistakes this fact,

identifying the creator of Nous with Abrasax, and then offering an awkward explanation of the name: that Abrasax was the name given to the father of Nous in honor of the 365 heavens and the world that the angels had created.<sup>110</sup>

Even Hippolytus' "Egyptian" rendition of Basilides' system posits two cosmic rulers in addition to a supreme non-existent God who is "supramundane."<sup>111</sup> Abrasax who governs the fixed stars and the planets, is called the "Great Ruler." He is "ineffable and more powerful than the powerful and wiser than the wise, and superior to any beautiful things you might mention," although he is ignorant of anything outside the universe.<sup>112</sup> He lives at the top of the universe, just under the firmament that separates universe from the world-beyond where the supramundane God dwells. The creation of the celestial spheres is attributed to Abrasax.<sup>113</sup> His domain extends from this universal firmament down to the moon.<sup>114</sup> The air and the earth are ruled by another figure, "much inferior to the first Ruler." He is the creator of all that lies beneath the moon.<sup>115</sup> He is the god who spoke to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>116</sup>

The recovered theology of the Gospel of John provides us with a piece of the puzzle that we did not have before. It confirms that the growth of some Gnostic traditions has its roots in Jewish traditions, as Christianity was emerging and beginning to shape its own identity from its Jewish past and present. In this particular strain of Gnosticism, the bifurcation of the Jewish God into a "beneficial" astral Lord and a "malicious" sublunar ruler appears to have occurred prior to the grafting of the supramundane Platonic god into the system. It also suggests that the sublunar ruler of this world was a separate entity

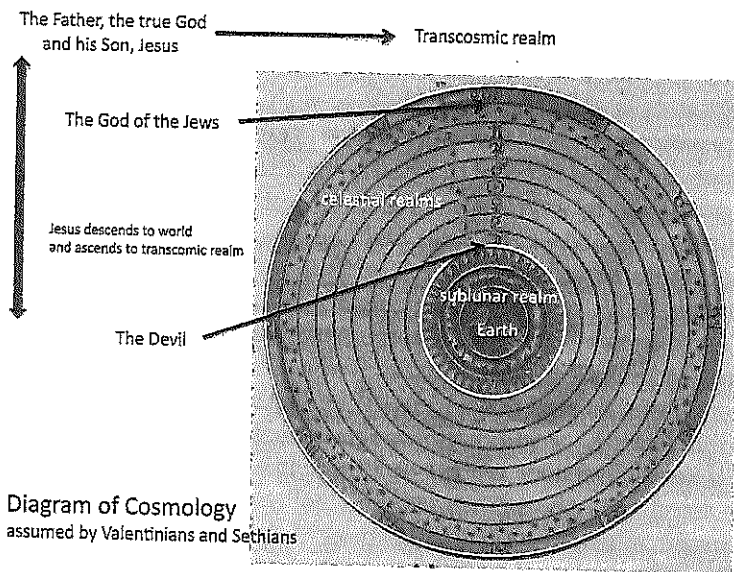


Figure 1.3 Cosmology assumed by Valentinians and Sethians. Illustration by April D. DeConick. Copyright: the author.

from Satan in some of the earliest Gnostic traditions. Only later do some of the Gnostic traditions tend to consolidate the two cosmic rulers and locate in the highest heaven one chief archon, the God of the Jews, who is responsible for the creation of the world and humanity. In the case of some Valentinians, this archon appears with more beneficial characteristics, like the Abrasax deity. In other Gnostic traditions, like the Sethian, this chief archon is more in line with the Johannine sublunar ruler, "the father of the Devil" (see Fig. 1.3).

All of this said, and yet I have not even begun to unpack the further implications that this information has for the origins of the Gospel of John. Who were these betwixt people and how can their *transitional* theology be accounted for? All I can say for now is that I think Cerinthus really is lurking in the bathhouse.

## NOTES

1. Funk (1973: 1.88-128, 129.5; 2.547); Blass *et al.* (1961: §268). Cf. Mk 4:1//Mt. 3:1; Acts 12:12; Phlm 3.
2. DeConick (2013).
3. Cf. Origen, *Commentary on John* 20.172 (Brooke 1896: 2.64).
4. Cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 38.4.2 (Holl 1980: 2.66); 40.5.5 (Holl 1980: 2.85); 40.6.7 (Holl 1980: 2.87); 66.63.1, 11 (Holl 1980: 3.101, 103).
5. Cf. Origen, *Commentary on John* 20.173-5 (Brooke 1896: 2.64).
6. Cf. Origen, *Commentary on John* 20.256 (Brooke 1896: 2.79).
7. Cf. Origen, *Commentary on John* 20.266 (Brooke 1896: 2.80).
8. Cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 38.4.13 (Holl 1980: 2.68); 38.5.1-3 (Holl 1980: 2.68); 40.6.2-9 (Holl 1980: 2.86-7).
9. Augustine, *Commentary on John* 42.9-15.
10. Cf. T. C. de Kruijf (1980: 47-63); Strecker (1996: 108-9); Lieu (2008: 18, 134-5, 148, 246-7).
11. I align my own interpretative work on the Epistles with the methodological sophistication established by Brown (1977: 379-93; 1978: 5-22; 1979a; 1979b). I am not convinced by the recent shift in Johannine scholarship that the Gospel of John was not known to the author of the Epistles or that the Epistles were not a polemical response to a schism that occurred over hermeneutics (cf. Lieu 2008: 9-18; Hakola 2009: 17-47). Differences between the Epistles and the Fourth Gospel are not evidence for independence. In this case, differences represent emergent hermeneutic structures among users of the Fourth Gospel and the cordons of theological territories that were being established by them.
12. 1 Jn 5:19-20.
13. 1 Jn 2:29.
14. 1 Jn 3:1; 4:7-8, 10-12, 16-17; 5:3.
15. 1 Jn 5:3.
16. 1 Jn 2:7; 4:17-21.
17. 1 Jn 4:10.
18. 1 Jn 2:7-11.
19. For more details, see DeConick (2013).
20. 1 Jn 3:4-10.
21. 1 Jn 3:7-12.
22. 1 Jn 3:15.
23. 1 Jn 3:8, 10.



24. 1 Jn 4:6.
25. 1 Jn 2:4; 4:20.
26. 1 Jn 1:8.
27. 1 Jn 1:10.
28. 1 Jn 1:7, 9; 2:2, 5; 4:10; 5:6-7.
29. 1 Jn 2:20, 27; 3:24; 4:13.
30. 1 Jn 2:5; 3:3. 1 Jn 2:27; 3:7-12.
31. 1 Jn 2:4, 22.
32. 1 Jn 4:20.
33. 1 Jn 2:4.
34. 1 Jn 2:6.
35. Cf. 1 Jn 2:12-14
36. 1 Jn 2:17.
37. 1 Jn 2:16-17; 3:1.
38. 1 Jn 2:18; 4:3.
39. 1 Jn 1:9; 2:1-2; 5:14-15.
40. 1 Jn 2:2; 4:10; 5:6-8.
41. 1 Jn 3:19-24; 4:7-19.
42. 1 Jn 4:2; 2 Jn 7.
43. Cf. Bultmann (1973: 62-3); Brown (1979: 147-64); Strecker (1996: 134-5); Lieu (2008: 10, 23, 169).
44. See my full critique and suggestions for a new system in DeConick (2007: 1-23).
45. DeConick (2007: 19-20).
46. For a summary of various scholastic readings of this passage, see Lieu (2008: 209-14).
47. 1 Jn 5:8.
48. Wisdom of Solomon 7:27.
49. Mk 1:10.
50. Mt. 3:16; 27:50; Lk. 3:22; 23:46; Jn 1:32-33; 19:30.
51. Jn 6:14.
52. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.26.1 (Rousseau & Doutreleau 1979: 344-7).
53. Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against Heresies* 3.1.2-3 (Kroymann 1954: 1405-6).
54. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.26.1 (Rousseau & Doutreleau 1979: 344-7).
55. Jn 8:12.
56. Jn 8:23.
57. Jn 8:19.
58. Jn 8:19.
59. Jn 8:38.
60. Jn 8:39-41.
61. Jn 8:41.
62. Jn 8:42.
63. Jn 8:44.
64. Jn 8:54-5.
65. Jn 17:3.
66. Jn 17:25.
67. Jn 3:16-19; 7:29; 17:18, 21, 23, 25.
68. Jn 7: 34; 13:1, 3; 17:8, 11, 13; 18:37.
69. Jn 17:14.
70. Jn 3:27, 31; 6:38, 41-2.
71. Jn 3:31.
72. Jn 3:31.
73. Jn 6:32-3, 48-51, 58.
74. Jn 12:28-32; 17:4.
75. Jn 4:42; 16:33.

76. Jn 1:9; 8:12; 9:5; 10:9-10; 12:35-6, 46.
77. Jn 1:3-4, 10.
78. Jn 12:31-2.
79. Jn 16:11.
80. Jn 14:30.
81. Jn 1:18; 5:37; 6:46.
82. Jn 7:28; 8:12-44; 8:54-5; 14:7-8; 16:2-3.
83. Jn 9:28-9.
84. Jn 16:2-3.
85. Jn 4:21-4.
86. Jn 2:16.
87. Jn 2:21.
88. Origen, *Commentary on John* 10.210-28.
89. Jn 1:17.
90. Jn 12:49-50; 13:34.
91. Jn 6:32; 7:19; 10:34.
92. Jn 15:18-25; Pss. 35:19; 69:4.
93. Jn 5:46-7.
94. Jn 5:46-7; 6:31-51; 7:19-24; 7:38; 12:37-41.
95. Jn 8:56; 12:41.
96. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.30.11 (Rousseau & Doutreleau 1979: 378-81); 2.35.2, 4; 4.35.1. Cf. Ptolemy's letter to Flora preserved in Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33.3.1-7.10 (Holl 1915: 450-57).
97. Origen, *Commentary on John* 6.29 (Borret 1969: 250).
98. Jn 17:15.
99. Jn 6:70-71.
100. Jn 6:65-71.
101. Jn 13:27.
102. Jn 12:31-2.
103. Jn 4:22.
104. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.24.3 (Rousseau & Doutreleau 1979: 324-7); cf. Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against Heresies* 1.5 (Kroymann 1954: 1402); Epiphanius, *Panarion* 24.1.7 (Holl 1915: 257).
105. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.24.3 (Rousseau & Doutreleau 1979: 324-7); cf. Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against Heresies* 1.5 (Kroymann 1954: 1402); Epiphanius, *Panarion* 24.1.8-9 (Holl 1915: 257).
106. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.24.4 (Rousseau & Doutreleau 1979: 326-9); cf. Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against Heresies* 1.5 (Kroymann 1954: 1402); Epiphanius, *Panarion* 24.2.3 (Holl 1915: 258).
107. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.24.4 (Rousseau & Doutreleau 1979: 326-9); cf. Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against Heresies* 1.5 (Kroymann 1954: 1402); Epiphanius, *Panarion* 24.2.5-3.5 (Holl 1915: 259-60).
108. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.24.6 (Rousseau & Doutreleau 1979: 330-31); cf. Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against Heresies* 1.5 (Kroymann 1954, 1402); Epiphanius, *Panarion* 24.7.2 (Holl 1915: 263-4).
109. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 24.7.1-4 (Holl 1915: 263-4); 24.8.3 (Holl 1915: 264).
110. Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against Heresies* 1.5 (Kroymann 1954: 1402).
111. Hippolytus, *Refutation* 7.23.2 (Marcovich 1986: 292).
112. Hippolytus, *Refutation* 7.23.3 (Marcovich 1986: 292).
113. Hippolytus, *Refutation* 7.23.7 (Marcovich 1986: 293).
114. Hippolytus, *Refutation* 7.24.3 (Marcovich 1986: 294).
115. Hippolytus, *Refutation* 7.24.3-4 (Marcovich 1986: 294).
116. Hippolytus, *Refutation* 7.25.4 (Marcovich 1986: 295).



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