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JOHANNINE DUALISM RECONSIDERED: BEYOND THE COSMOLOGICAL-EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT

The persistent debate over the character of Johannine dualism has long been framed as a choice between two dominant positions: a cosmological reading that identifies two ontologically distinct realms (light/darkness, above/below), and an epistemological reading that reduces the dualism to contrasting human responses to divine revelation. This article argues that both positions, despite their genuine textual support, impose an anachronistic dichotomy onto the Johannine corpus. Drawing on close exegesis of John 1:1–18, 3:1–21, 8:23–47, 17:6–19, 1 John 4:7–8, and Revelation 12, and engaging the contributions of Jörg Frey, Jan van der Watt, and Catrin Williams alongside the classical scholarship of Bultmann, Dodd, Brown, and Lincoln, this article proposes a third framework: incarnational-relational dualism. This framework holds that the Johannine polarity is neither a metaphysical division between two realms nor a merely cognitive-ethical distinction, but rather a differentiation between two modes of existence constituted by one's participation in or rejection of the incarnate Logos. The proposed model is distinguished from the doctrine of perichoresis and from Chalcedonian categories, to which it is related but not reducible. Implications for Johannine hermeneutics and pastoral theology are considered.

Keyword: Johannine Dualism, Cosmological Dualism, Epistemological Dualism, Johannine Theology, Light and Darkness Motif

INTRODUCTION

Few questions in Johannine studies have proven more durable or more theologically consequential than the question of dualism. The pervasive oppositions that structure the Johannine corpus—light and darkness (φῶς, phōs, and σκοτία, skotia), life and death (ζωή, zōē, and θάνατος, thanatos), truth and falsehood (ἀλήθεια, alētheia, and ψεῦδος, pseudos), above and below (ἄνω, anō, and κάτω, katō)—have attracted sustained scholarly attention for more than a century. The central interpretive question concerns the ontological status of these polarities: do they describe two fundamental orders of reality, or do they describe two modes of human cognition and moral response?

The two dominant answers to this question have generated rich scholarship and have illuminated genuinely different dimensions of the Johannine text. Yet neither has succeeded in offering a fully adequate account of all the relevant data. The cosmological reading captures the undeniable ontological weight of the Johannine prologue and the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation, but struggles to account for the way in which the incarnation positively affirms created matter and renders untenable any simple division of reality into superior and inferior realms. The epistemological reading rightly foregrounds the Johannine insistence on decision, witness (μαρτυρία, martyria), and the cognitive-ethical dimensions of response to revelation,

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but fails to account for the language of new birth (γέννησις ἐκ θεοῦ, gennēsis ek theou), ontological transformation, and the real agency of Satan (ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, ho archōn tou kosmou toutou, the ruler of this world) in John 12:31, 14:30, and 16:11.

Crucially, even the most sophisticated recent scholarship on Johannine dualism has not fully resolved this impasse. Jörg Frey's landmark studies—Die johanneische Eschatologie and a series of subsequent articles—have done more than any other modern scholarship to clarify the apocalyptic-Jewish roots of Johannine dualism and to distinguish it from both Gnostic cosmological dualism and simple moralistic epistemology. Frey rightly identifies the Johannine polarity as an "eschatological-ethical" dualism shaped by Qumran-style apocalypticism rather than Greek Platonic metaphysics. Yet Frey's account, for all its exegetical precision, does not place the incarnation itself at the center of the dualistic structure. The question this article pursues is whether the event of incarnation—ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο (ho logos sarx egeneto, "the Word became flesh") in John 1:14—functions not merely as the occasion for revelation that triggers an epistemological decision, but as the ontological ground for a new participatory mode of existence that the Johannine corpus describes as union with Christ (μένω ἐν, menō en, "abide in").

This article proposes what it calls "incarnational-relational dualism" as a more adequate framework. The contention is that the Johannine polarity is ultimately a differentiation between two modes of existence defined by one's relationship to the incarnate Son: those who are born ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ (ek tou theou, from God) through the Son and abide in him, and those who remain ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου (ek tou kosmou, from the world) or ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου (ek tou diabolou, from the devil) through their rejection of the Son. This framework integrates the ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of Johannine dualism without collapsing any of them.

METHOD

The argument proceeds through four interdependent methods. First, grammatical-historical exegesis of key texts in the Greek provides the evidential foundation; attention to lexical range, syntactical structure, and the semantic weight of particular verbs (especially γινώσκω, ginōskō, "to know"; μένω, menō, "to abide"; and γεννάω, gennāō, "to beget/be born") is essential because the case for incarnational-relational dualism rests on fine-grained lexical distinctions that are not visible in translation. Second, biblical-theological synthesis across the Johannine corpus treats the Gospel, the Johannine Epistles, and Revelation as a coherent body of theological reflection, while acknowledging the ongoing scholarly debate about their common authorship; the methodological wager here is that patterns of thought and imagery that recur across the corpus are theologically significant regardless of source-critical questions. Third, intertextual analysis situates Johannine language in the context of Second Temple Jewish literature (particularly the Dead Sea Scrolls), Pauline theology, and the Synoptic tradition; this comparative dimension is necessary both to establish what is distinctive about Johannine dualism and to guard against anachronistic readings. Fourth, critical dialogue with secondary literature provides both the foil against which the proposed framework is developed and the scholarly resources from which it draws.

The limits of this approach should be stated honestly. The grammatical-historical method cannot by itself determine the theological significance of a text; it establishes the range of meanings that are linguistically possible, not which meaning the author intended or which is most theologically fruitful. Biblical-theological synthesis across the Johannine corpus

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presupposes a degree of coherence that some scholars dispute. And intertextual analysis risks the genetic fallacy: showing that Johannine language resembles Qumranic or Hellenistic parallels does not establish dependence or identity of meaning. These limits are acknowledged throughout the argument, and the proposed framework should be evaluated as an interpretive hypothesis that best accounts for the available data, not as a final resolution to the questions this article addresses.

THE STATE OF THE DEBATE

The Cosmological Approach

The cosmological interpretation of Johannine dualism received its most influential formulation in Rudolf Bultmann's magisterial commentary on the Fourth Gospel. For Bultmann, the Johannine opposition between light and darkness, world above and world below, reflects a thoroughgoing Gnostic dualism in which the human soul is a divine spark imprisoned in a material world alien to its true nature. Bultmann's traditionsgeschichtlich reconstruction posited a pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth as the primary background for Johannine Christology. While this reconstruction has not survived the scrutiny of subsequent scholarship—in part because the Gnostic texts Bultmann relied upon are demonstrably later than the New Testament—his basic interpretive instinct, that Johannine dualism is primarily cosmological in character, has been widely influential.

C. H. Dodd offered a different cosmological reading, locating the background not in Gnosticism but in the Platonic tradition mediated through Philo of Alexandria. On Dodd's reading, Johannine dualism reflects the Platonic distinction between the eternal realm of ideal Forms and the temporal, mutable world of appearances. The Logos of John 1 is the Philonic Logos as the mediator between the transcendent God and the created order. This reading accounts well for certain features of the Johannine prologue—particularly the language of the Logos as the agent of creation through whom "all things came to be" (πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, panta di' autou egeneto, John 1:3)—but it struggles with the decidedly non-Platonic affirmation that this eternal Logos became σάρξ (sarx, flesh).

The discovery and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls shifted the discussion significantly. Scholars such as John J. Collins and James H. Charlesworth demonstrated that Jewish apocalyptic literature, particularly the Community Rule (1QS), exhibits a dualism closely parallel to that of the Fourth Gospel: a cosmic opposition between the "Spirit of Truth" (רוּחַ הָאֱמֶת, ruach ha-emet) and the "Spirit of Falsehood" (רוּחַ הָעַוְלָה, ruach ha-avlah), and between the "sons of light" (בְּנֵי אוֹר, benei or) and the "sons of darkness" (בְּנֵי חֹשֶׁךְ, benei choshekh). This discovery established that the dualistic framework of the Johannine corpus could be explained from within Jewish apocalypticism without recourse to Gnostic or Platonic borrowing.

The most sophisticated contemporary advocate of a cosmological-apocalyptic reading is Jörg Frey. In Die johanneische Eschatologie and a series of programmatic articles, Frey argues that Johannine dualism is best understood as a "realized eschatological dualism" with roots in Jewish apocalypticism. On Frey's account, the Johannine polarity is not between matter and spirit (as in Gnosticism) nor between temporal appearances and eternal ideals (as in Platonism), but between two aeons or orders of existence: the present world order under the power of sin and death, and the order of divine life already present in Jesus. The decisive contribution of Frey's work is his demonstration that Johannine eschatology cannot be cleanly separated from

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its dualistic structure: the "already" of salvation in Christ is simultaneously the "not yet" of a world still lying ἐν τῷ πονηρῷ (en tō ponērō, in the power of the evil one, 1 John 5:19). Frey's account is genuinely illuminating, and this article accepts his critique of both Bultmannian Gnosticism and simple Platonic readings. However, as the analysis below will argue, Frey's framework does not adequately account for the way in which the incarnation itself—and not merely the revelation that comes through the incarnate one—constitutes the ontological ground of Johannine soteriology.

The Epistemological Approach

The epistemological approach represents a different lineage of interpretation, shaped more by existentialist and social-scientific concerns than by history-of-religions inquiry. On this reading, the Johannine polarities describe not two orders of reality but two modes of human response to divine revelation. J. Louis Martyn's influential reconstruction of the Johannine community as a group in painful conflict with the synagogue provided a sociological underpinning for this reading: the "we/they" language of the Johannine texts reflects communal boundary-marking, not metaphysical cosmology.

Andrew T. Lincoln has developed the epistemological dimension most rigorously through his analysis of the Johannine trial motif (μαρτυρία, martyria, "witness/testimony"). On Lincoln's account, the entire narrative of the Fourth Gospel is structured as a cosmic lawsuit in which the claims of Jesus are tested by the witness of multiple parties: John the Baptist, the works of Jesus, the Father, Scripture, and the Spirit-Paraclete. The dualism of the Gospel is the dualism of verdict: those who accept the witness and believe are on the side of light and truth; those who reject it are on the side of darkness and falsehood. Judith Lieu's commentary on the Johannine Epistles extends this analysis: the "tests" for genuine faith in 1 John (confession of the incarnation, love of the brothers, keeping the commandments) are epistemological-ethical criteria for distinguishing those who belong to God from those who belong to the spirit of error.

Jan van der Watt's work on the family language of the Fourth Gospel contributes an important relational dimension to the epistemological approach. Van der Watt has shown that the Johannine corpus is saturated with family metaphors: believers are children of God (τέκνα θεοῦ, tekna theou), born from above; Jesus is the unique Son (μονογενής, monogenēs); the community is constituted by the love that characterizes the Father-Son relationship. On van der Watt's reading, the Johannine dualism is ultimately a distinction between two families: the family of God and the family of the devil (John 8:44). This family metaphor, van der Watt argues, operates primarily on the level of social identity and ethical practice rather than metaphysical substance.

The epistemological approach rightly foregrounds elements of the Johannine text that the cosmological approach tends to minimize: the emphasis on decision (John 3:18–21), the centrality of witness and confession (1 John 4:2), and the practical-ethical dimension of walking in light rather than darkness (1 John 1:6–7). However, the approach has significant limitations. Most seriously, it struggles to account for the language of new birth (John 3:3–8; 1 John 3:9), which appears to describe a genuine ontological transformation in the believer and not merely a change in cognitive orientation or social belonging. The claim that "everyone who has been born of God does not keep sinning, because his seed abides in him" (πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ, ὅτι σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ μένει, 1 John 3:9) is difficult to interpret as a merely epistemological or sociological statement.

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The Research Gap

Both approaches, despite their genuine contributions, rest on a dichotomy that the Johannine text itself resists. The division between "ontological" and "epistemological" is a post-Kantian philosophical distinction that maps poorly onto the categories of first-century Jewish-Christian thought. In the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism, "knowing" (יָדַע, yada') God is never a merely cognitive activity; it involves covenant relationship, obedience, and love. The Johannine corpus inherits this tradition: γινώσκω (ginōskō) in John 17:3 defines eternal life as knowing the Father and the Son—a knowing that is simultaneously relational, participatory, and transformative.

Frey's work represents the most sophisticated attempt to move beyond this dichotomy, but even his account does not fully address what this article identifies as the central hermeneutical datum: the incarnation itself, as an ontological event, creates the conditions for a new mode of existence that is neither a cosmic separation between two realms nor a merely cognitive reorientation, but a genuine participatory union with the incarnate Son. The Johannine formula μένω ἐν (menō en, "abide in") is not simply a metaphor for cognitive alignment or ethical imitation; it describes a mutual indwelling that the Gospel itself compares to the relation between the Father and the Son (John 15:9–10, 17:21–23). The question is whether the theological content of this formula can be articulated in a way that does justice to both its ontological weight and its epistemological-ethical dimensions without collapsing into either a Gnostic cosmology or a reductively cognitive account.

Catrin Williams's work on the Johannine Logos Christology adds a further dimension to this gap. Williams has argued that John 1:1–18 presents the Logos not merely as a cosmological principle or a revelatory agent, but as the one who uniquely embodies and mediates the identity of Israel's God. The prologue's claim that the Logos became σάρξ (sarx, flesh) is therefore not an embarrassment to be explained away within a cosmological framework, but the theological center around which the entire Johannine dualism is organized. Williams's insight, this article argues, points toward the incarnational-relational framework proposed here: the dualism is constituted by the incarnation, not merely illuminated by it.

Incarnational-Relational Dualism: A Proposed Framework

Incarnational-relational dualism holds that the Johannine polarity is ultimately grounded in and structured by the event of incarnation and its soteriological consequences. The primary opposition is not between two metaphysical realms (cosmological), nor between two modes of cognition (epistemological), but between two modes of existence that are constituted by one's participatory relationship to the incarnate Logos. Those who are born ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ (ek tou theou, from God) through the Spirit (John 3:5–8) enter into a new mode of existence characterized by union with the Son (μένω ἐν, menō en), genuine knowledge of God (γινώσκω, ginōskō), love of the brothers (ἀγαπάω, agapaō), and the keeping of the commandments. Those who remain ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου (ek tou kosmou, from the world) or who identify themselves with the devil's family (John 8:44) inhabit a contrasting mode of existence marked by blindness (John 9:39–41), hatred (1 John 2:9–11), and the rejection of truth.

The ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of this dualism are not three separate things; they are dimensions of a single reality viewed from different angles. The person who is

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born from God knows God, loves the brothers, and keeps the commandments—not because knowing produces loving which produces obeying, but because all three are dimensions of the one participatory reality of union with Christ. This is why 1 John 4:7–8 can state simultaneously that "everyone who loves has been born from God and knows God" (πᾶς ὁ ἀγαπῶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται καὶ γινώσκει τὸν θεόν, pas ho agapōn ek tou theou gegennētai kai ginōskei ton theon): the new birth (ontological), the knowing (epistemological), and the loving (ethical) are co-extensive, not sequential.

Distinction from Perichoresis

The language of mutual indwelling (μένω ἐν, menō en) in the Johannine corpus inevitably evokes the patristic doctrine of perichoresis—the mutual interpenetration of the divine persons of the Trinity. The comparison is instructive but the distinction is crucial. Perichoresis, as developed by John of Damascus, describes the coinherence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the single divine essence: each person fully contains and is contained by the others, without confusion or separation. The Johannine μένω ἐν language applied to the believer-Christ relationship (John 15:4–7; 1 John 2:24; 1 John 4:13) is analogous in its form but different in its soteriological logic. When Jesus says "abide in me and I in you" (μείνατε ἐν ἐμοί, κἀγὼ ἐν ὑμῖν, meinate en emoi, kagō en hymin, John 15:4), he is not describing an identity of essence between the believer and the Son. The believer is not divine; the μένω ἐν describes a participatory relationship in which the creature genuinely shares in divine life through the Son, not a homoousion that removes the ontological distinction between Creator and creature.

This distinction matters for the proposed framework because incarnational-relational dualism is not a claim that believers are ontologically identical with Christ or that the divine-human boundary is dissolved. The dualism remains real: those ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ (ek tou theou, from God) are genuinely different from those ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου (ek tou kosmou, from the world), but the difference is a relational-participatory one, not a difference of substance. The framework draws on perichoretic logic—mutual indwelling is a real ontological relation, not a metaphor—while refusing to collapse the creature-Creator distinction that makes the language of gift and grace intelligible.

Distinction from Chalcedonian Categories

Chalcedonian Christology describes the hypostatic union: in the one person (ὑπόστασις, hypostasis) of the Son, two natures (φύσεις, physeis)—divine and human—are united without confusion (ἀσύγχυτος, asynchytos), change (ἀτρέπτος, atrepтos), separation (ἀδιαίρετος, adiairetos), or division (ἀχώριστος, achōristos). The incarnational-relational framework proposed here is related to Chalcedonian categories but is not reducible to them. Chalcedon answers the question of who Christ is in himself; the Johannine framework addresses the soteriological question of what the incarnation makes possible for those who believe.

The Chalcedonian settlement is the necessary Christological foundation for the Johannine soteriology, but it does not exhaust it. Because the eternal Son has genuinely taken on human flesh—and not as a temporary appearance or a partial union—the incarnation creates the conditions for genuine human participation in divine life. The σάρξ (sarx, flesh) that the Logos assumed is real human flesh; the union is permanent and not merely didactic. This is why the Johannine text emphasizes, against docetist teachers, that the one who came "in the flesh" (ἐν σαρκί, en sarki, 1 John 4:2) is the very same one who is the eternal Son. The docetist error, on

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the Johannine framework, is not merely a cognitive mistake; it destroys the soteriological possibility of union with the incarnate Son. The test for the "spirit from God" is therefore a test for the ontological ground of salvation itself.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The Prologue: John 1:1–18

The prologue of the Fourth Gospel is the natural starting point for any analysis of Johannine dualism because it establishes the cosmic scope and the Christological center of the Gospel's theological project. The opening words—Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος (En archē ēn ho logos, "In the beginning was the Word," John 1:1)—echo Genesis 1:1, signaling that what follows is a new creation narrative. The Logos is the agent through whom all things came into existence (John 1:3), and in him was life (ζωή, zōē) that was the light (φῶς, phōs) of humanity (John 1:4).

The first dualistic opposition appears in verse 5: καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν (kai to phōs en tē skotia phainei, kai hē skotia auto ou katelaben, "and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"). The verb κατελάβεν (katelaben) is semantically ambiguous: it can mean "to overcome," "to seize," or "to comprehend." This ambiguity is not accidental. The darkness cannot overcome the light (cosmological dimension), and it cannot comprehend or receive the light (epistemological dimension). The two dimensions are present simultaneously from the very first statement of the Gospel's dualism.

The climactic statement of the prologue—ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο (ho logos sarx egeneto, "the Word became flesh," John 1:14)—is the hinge on which the entire framework turns. The choice of σάρξ (sarx) rather than ἄνθρωπος (anthrōpos, human being) or σῶμα (sōma, body) is theologically significant. Σάρξ in the Johannine vocabulary elsewhere carries connotations of weakness, mortality, and creaturely limitation (John 3:6, 6:63); it is precisely the most material, most perishable aspect of human existence. The affirmation that the eternal Logos "became" this is the most anti-dualistic statement conceivable within either a Gnostic or a Platonic framework. It does not merely say that the Logos appeared in flesh (as docetism would have it) or that the Logos inhabits a human body while remaining unaffected by it (as Apollinarianism suggests). It says that the Logos underwent a genuine becoming—a real entry into the conditions of creaturely, mortal, embodied existence.

This incarnational affirmation does not dissolve the dualism; it reframes it. The opposition is no longer between two metaphysical realms (as in Gnosticism or Platonism) but between the incarnate Logos and those who receive or reject him. Verse 10 captures the paradox: ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω (en tō kosmō ēn, kai ho kosmos di' autou egeneto, kai ho kosmos auton ouk egnō, "he was in the world, and the world came to be through him, and the world did not know him"). The world (κόσμος, kosmos) is the good creation of the Logos—not a fallen or inferior realm by nature—but it stands in the posture of not-knowing. The not-knowing is not a metaphysical feature of the world's ontological constitution but its moral-spiritual condition: created matter is not intrinsically opposed to the Logos, but the world as a historical-social reality has turned away from its Creator.

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The Nicodemus Dialogue: John 3:1–21

The dialogue with Nicodemus develops the dualism through the language of birth. The condition for entering the kingdom of God is stated emphatically: ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ (ean mē tis gennēthē anōthen, ou dynatai idein tēn basileian tou theou, "unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God," John 3:3). The adverb ἄνωθεν (anōthen) is famously polyvalent: it means both "from above" and "again." Nicodemus's misunderstanding assumes the second meaning (a second physical birth); Jesus intends the first. The opposition ἄνωθεν / ἐκ τῆς σαρκός (anōthen / ek tēs sarkos, "from above" / "from the flesh") in verses 3–6 is the vertical dimension of the Johannine dualism, but it is not a Platonic or Gnostic opposition between a higher spiritual realm and a lower material one. "Flesh" (σάρξ, sarx) here is not evil matter but the sphere of creaturely limitation; what is born from flesh is flesh—it participates only in the order of created, mortal existence. What is born from the Spirit (ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος, ek tou pneumatos) participates in a new order of existence—divine life—without ceasing to be embodied and material.

Verses 14–16 introduce the Christological grounding of this new birth. The Son of Man must be lifted up (ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, hypsōthēnai dei ton huion tou anthrōpou, John 3:14), a verb that in the Fourth Gospel refers simultaneously to crucifixion and exaltation. The new birth from above is not achieved by human effort or ascent to a higher realm but by the lifting up of the incarnate Son. The soteriological mechanism is incarnational: it is because the Logos has become flesh (John 1:14) and been lifted up in that flesh (John 3:14) that believers can be born ἄνωθεν (anōthen, from above).

Verses 19–21 then give the epistemological-ethical dimension its proper place: the judgment (κρίσις, krisis) consists in this, that the light has come into the world and people have loved darkness rather than light (John 3:19). The choice of σκότος (skotos) over φῶς (phōs) is described as a moral decision rooted in the desire to hide evil works from exposure. This is not a cosmological fate but a moral response. Yet the framework within which this decision is made is the incarnation: it is because light has come into the world in a specific historical event—the incarnation of the Logos—that the decision has the weight it does. The epistemological-ethical dimension is thus not primary; it is the existential consequence of the prior ontological event.

"From Above" and "From Below": John 8:23–47

The dialogue in John 8 provides the sharpest vertical formulation of the Johannine dualism. Jesus declares to his opponents: ὑμεῖς ἐκ τῶν κάτω ἐστέ, ἐγὼ ἐκ τῶν ἄνω εἰμί· ὑμεῖς ἐκ τούτου τοῦ κόσμου ἐστέ, ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου (hymeis ek tōn katō este, egō ek tōn anō eimi; hymeis ek toutou tou kosmou este, egō ouk eimi ek tou kosmou toutou, "You are from below; I am from above. You are from this world; I am not from this world," John 8:23). Read in isolation, this appears to be a straightforwardly cosmological statement: Jesus and his opponents belong to two different ontological realms. But the broader context of the discourse qualifies this reading decisively.

The key interpretive passage comes in verses 42–47, where Jesus explains the basis of the distinction. Those who are truly from God would love Jesus (εἰ ὁ θεὸς πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἦν, ἠγαπᾶτε ἂν ἐμέ, ei ho theos patēr hymōn ēn, ēgapate an eme, "If God were your Father, you would love me," John 8:42), because Jesus comes from God. Their failure to love Jesus reveals that God is not their Father. In verse 44, Jesus makes the relational-genealogical claim explicit: ὑμεῖς ἐκ

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τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ (hymeis ek tou patros tou diabolou este, "You are from your father the devil"). This statement should not be read as a metaphysical claim about the ontological constitution of Jesus's opponents; they are not, in any Gnostic sense, composed of different matter from believers. The claim is relational: through their rejection of truth and their alignment with the one who "does not stand in the truth" (John 8:44), they have placed themselves in the devil's family.

What is notable here is that the opposition between "from above" and "from below," read in its full context, is constituted not by metaphysical substance but by relational allegiance to or rejection of the incarnate Son. The language of family (πατήρ, patēr, "father"; τέκνον, teknon, "child") that Van der Watt has analyzed so carefully is precisely the language of constitutive relationship: one's identity is determined by who one's father is, and one's father is determined by who one loves and obeys. The incarnation is the occasion for this determination: the coming of the Logos into the world forces the decision that establishes relational identity.

The High Priestly Prayer: John 17

John 17 is the most concentrated theological text in the Gospel for the themes of incarnational-relational dualism. The prayer reveals the ontological structure of the new community as participatory inclusion in the Father-Son relation. Jesus prays for the disciples' unity using the trinitarian relation as the template: ἵνα πάντες ἓν ὦσιν, καθὼς σύ, πάτερ, ἐν ἐμοὶ κἀγὼ ἐν σοί, ἵνα καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἡμῖν ὦσιν (hina pantes hen ōsin, kathōs sy, pater, en emoi kagō en soi, hina kai autoi en hēmin ōsin, "that they all may be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us," John 17:21). The disciples' unity is modeled on (καθώς, kathōs, "just as") the Father-Son unity, and it consists in their being included within that relation (ἐν ἡμῖν, en hēmin, "in us").

This is the strongest support in the Gospel for the participatory ontology of the proposed framework, and it is also the point where the distinction from perichoresis matters most. The disciples are included ἐν ἡμῖν (en hēmin, in us)—in the Father-Son relation—not as equal divine persons but as creatures drawn into the life that belongs properly to the Trinity. The grammar is important: the disciples' unity is modeled on the divine unity (καθώς, kathōs) but is not identical with it. The analogy preserves both the genuine participatory reality (they are truly in the Father and Son) and the ontological asymmetry (they are there as creatures, by grace, not by nature).

The dualistic dimension of the prayer is equally important. Verses 14–16 state that the disciples are οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου (ouk ek tou kosmou, "not from the world") even as Jesus is not from the world. Yet verse 15 immediately qualifies this: Jesus does not pray for them to be taken out of the world (ἄρῃς αὐτοὺς ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου, arēs autous ek tou kosmou), but to be kept from the evil one (ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ, ek tou ponērou). The disciples' non-worldly identity is not expressed through spatial or ontological withdrawal from the created order but through mission within it. Verse 18 makes this explicit: as the Father sent the Son into the world, so Jesus sends the disciples into the world. The incarnation is the paradigm for mission: the Logos did not remain in the realm above but entered the world below; the disciples are not to flee the world below but to enter it as witnesses.

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Love as Ontological Marker: 1 John 4:7–8

First John 4:7–8 provides perhaps the most theologically compressed expression of the incarnational-relational framework: ἀγαπητοί, ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστιν, καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀγαπῶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται καὶ γινώσκει τὸν θεόν. ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν οὐκ ἔγνω τὸν θεόν, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν (agapētoi, agapōmen allēlous, hoti hē agapē ek tou theou estin, kai pas ho agapōn ek tou theou gegennētai kai ginōskei ton theon. ho mē agapōn ouk egnō ton theon, hoti ho theos agapē estin, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born from God and knows God. The one who does not love has not known God, because God is love").

Three observations about this text are crucial for the proposed framework. First, ἀγαπῶν (agapōn, "the one who loves") is not a cognitive or volitional category but an ontological-relational one: the loving person is identified as one who has been born from God (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται, ek tou theou gegennētai) and who knows God (γινώσκει τὸν θεόν, ginōskei ton theon). The three—loving, being born from God, knowing God—are co-constitutive, not sequential. Second, the negative formulation is equally instructive: ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν οὐκ ἔγνω τὸν θεόν (ho mē agapōn ouk egnō ton theon, "the one who does not love has not known God"). The aorist ἔγνω (egnō) refers to a past event of knowing that never occurred; the absence of love is evidence of an absence of transformative encounter with God. Third, the grounding of all this in ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν (ho theos agapē estin, "God is love") is significant: love is not a quality that God happens to possess but an ontological description of what God is. To be born from God and to know God is therefore to be conformed to this love, to participate in what God essentially is.

The dualism in this passage is between those in whom love is present as the evidence of new birth and those in whom it is absent as the evidence of non-knowing. This is simultaneously an ontological distinction (new birth versus its absence), an epistemological distinction (knowing God versus not knowing God), and an ethical distinction (love versus its absence). The proposed framework accounts for this integration; a purely cosmological or purely epistemological reading cannot.

The Cosmic Conflict: Revelation 12

The Book of Revelation poses a distinctive challenge for any interpretation of Johannine dualism, and the cosmological approach is strongest precisely here. The vision of Revelation 12 presents an unmistakably cosmic conflict: a woman clothed with the sun (γυνὴ περιβεβλημένη τὸν ἥλιον, gynē peribeblēmenē ton hēlion) confronts a great red dragon (δράκων μέγας πυρρός, drakōn megas pyrros) who is identified as "the ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὁ καλούμενος Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς, ὁ πλανῶν τὴν οἰκουμένην ὅλην, ho ophis ho archaios, ho kaloumenos Diabolos kai ho Satanas, ho planōn tēn oikoumenēn holēn, Revelation 12:9). The dualism here is not between two human responses to revelation; it is between a personal divine agent and a personal satanic agent in genuine cosmic conflict.

The cosmological reading is right that this conflict is ontologically real: Satan is not merely a metaphor for human ignorance, and the dragon's war against the woman and her offspring (Revelation 12:17) cannot be reduced to an epistemological category. Richard Bauckham, in both The Climax of Prophecy and his more recent Gospel of Glory, has argued that the

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Johannine Apocalypse presents the sovereignty of God and the Lamb as the ultimate theological claim against the false sovereignty of Rome and the devil. The cosmic conflict in Revelation 12 is real, and any adequate account of Johannine dualism must acknowledge it.

Yet the decisive verse for the proposed framework is Revelation 12:11: αὐτοὶ ἐνίκησαν αὐτὸν διὰ τὸ αἷμα τοῦ ἀρνίου καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς μαρτυρίας αὐτῶν (autoi enikēsan auton dia to haima tou arniou kai dia ton logon tēs martyrias autōn, "They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony"). The cosmic victory over the dragon is achieved not through a counter-cosmic power but through the blood of the Lamb—that is, through the incarnate and crucified Christ—and through the witness (μαρτυρία, martyria) of the saints. The mechanism of victory is incarnational and testimonial. The dragon is defeated precisely at the point where the incarnate Son "was slaughtered" (ὡς ἐσφαγμένον, hōs esphagmenon, Revelation 5:6), and the saints participate in this victory through their faithful witness, even at the cost of their lives.

Furthermore, the contrast between Babylon (Βαβυλών, Babylōn) and the New Jerusalem (Ἰερουσαλὴμ καινή, Ierousalēm kainē) in Revelation 17–21 is revealing. Babylon is not a realm of inferior matter but a historical-political reality: the imperial city that claims divine sovereignty and persecutes the saints. The New Jerusalem is not an escape from the material world but the renewed creation—it descends from heaven to earth (Revelation 21:2), and in it the tabernacling presence of God fills the material world (Revelation 21:3). The eschatological resolution of the Johannine dualism is not the soul's escape from matter but the transformation and renewal of creation through the presence of God. This is consistent with the incarnational framework: because the Logos became flesh, the dualism is resolved not by the dissolution of the material but by its transformation.

Comparative Notes: Convergence With Paul

The proposed framework for Johannine dualism finds an illuminating parallel in Pauline soteriology, which confirms that incarnational-relational thinking is not peculiar to the Johannine tradition but represents a broader New Testament pattern. Paul's central soteriological category is ἐν Χριστῷ (en Christō, "in Christ"), which occurs over ninety times in the undisputed Pauline letters. Constantine Campbell's comprehensive study of this formula has demonstrated that it encompasses locative, instrumental, incorporative, and participatory dimensions—precisely the multi-dimensional quality that is characteristic of the Johannine μένω ἐν (menō en).

Second Corinthians 5:17 provides the clearest Pauline parallel: ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις· τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν, ἰδοὺ γέγονεν καινά (hōste ei tis en Christō, kainē ktisis; ta archaia parēlthen, idou gegonen kaina, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away; see, the new has come"). The person ἐν Χριστῷ (en Christō, in Christ) inhabits a new ontological order—not a different cosmological realm but a new mode of existence constituted by union with the crucified and risen Lord. Romans 12:2 provides the epistemological-ethical corollary: μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοός (metamorphousthe tē anakainōsei tou noos, "be transformed by the renewal of your mind"). As in John's corpus, the ontological transformation (new creation) and the epistemological transformation (renewal of mind) are aspects of a single soteriological reality.

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The difference in emphasis is real and significant: Paul's framework is primarily apocalyptic-temporal (the old age versus the new age), while John's is primarily spatial-relational (from above versus from below, abiding in Christ versus being of the world). But as both Campbell and Frey have observed, these are complementary rather than contradictory frameworks. The Pauline ἐν Χριστῷ and the Johannine μένω ἐν both describe a participatory union with the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord that is simultaneously ontological (new creation, new birth), epistemological (renewal of mind, knowing God), and ethical (walking in newness of life, keeping the commandments). Neither framework reduces to cosmology or to epistemology alone.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the persistent debate between cosmological and epistemological interpretations of Johannine dualism rests on a dichotomy that the Johannine texts themselves subvert. The cosmological approach captures the real ontological weight of the Johannine polarity but tends to read that weight through either Gnostic or Platonic lenses that distort the incarnational center of Johannine theology. Even Frey's sophisticated apocalyptic-ethical reading, which rightly distances itself from Gnostic cosmology, does not place the incarnation itself at the structural center of the dualism. The epistemological approach rightly foregrounds the Johannine insistence on decision, witness, and love as markers of genuine relationship to God, but cannot adequately account for the language of new birth, participatory union, and ontological transformation that pervades the corpus.

The proposed framework—incarnational-relational dualism—holds that the Johannine polarity is ultimately constituted by the event of incarnation and its soteriological consequences. The opposition is between two modes of existence: participation in the life of the incarnate Son through faith, new birth, love, and abiding; versus rejection of the incarnate Son, which leaves persons within the sphere of the world that lies ἐν τῷ πονηρῷ (en tō ponērō, in the power of the evil one). This framework distinguishes itself from perichoresis by preserving the Creator-creature distinction within the participatory relation, and from Chalcedonian categories by focusing not on the ontological constitution of Christ's person but on the soteriological possibilities created by the incarnation for believers.

Several areas invite further research. First, a more sustained engagement with Frey's most recent articles—particularly his account of the relation between Johannine dualism and the Gospel's Christology—is needed to refine the proposed framework's claim to move beyond his position. Second, van der Watt's family-language analysis, while drawn upon here, deserves more sustained integration: the language of divine paternity and filial identity is arguably the most sustained relational framework in the corpus, and its relation to the μένω ἐν (menō en) formula warrants a dedicated study. Third, the patristic reception of Johannine dualism—particularly in Irenaeus, for whom the recapitulation of creation in Christ is central, and in Athanasius, for whom theōsis provides the soteriological framework—would help test whether the proposed incarnational-relational reading has antecedents in the tradition or represents a genuinely novel synthesis.

Finally, the hermeneutical and pastoral implications of the proposed framework deserve attention. If the Johannine dualism is incarnational-relational rather than cosmological or purely epistemological, then neither world-denial nor cognitive assent adequately captures what it means to be on the side of light rather than darkness. What is required is a participatory

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engagement with the incarnate Lord that transforms the believer's ontological status, epistemological orientation, and ethical practice simultaneously—and that commissions the believer not to flee the world but to witness within it, after the pattern of the Son who became flesh and dwelt among us.

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