Gospel of John: Dualism and Eschatology

I. Dualism in John

A. One of the distinguishing characteristics of John is the frequent use of dualisms
   1. He contrasts opposites: light/darkness; life/death; from above/from below; truth/lie; sight/blindness
   2. He contrasts the state of believers and unbelievers in stark symbolic black and white terms.

B. These contrasts powerfully summarize the transforming benefits of the salvation that Jesus brings:
   1. Light vs. Darkness:
      a. The world is in darkness: Unbelievers are in bondage to sin and spiritually blinded (3:19; 1:5)
         (1) The one who continues in sin is spiritually blinded and does not know where he is going (12:36)
         (2) The heart of sin is unbelief and hatred for Jesus (3:19-21).
         (3) People in darkness will die in his sins and face the full consequence of sin which is death (8:24).
      b. Jesus is the light of the world and reveals truth to humanity (3:19).
         (1) Jesus is the one true source of light – only in Jesus do we find light (1:9).
         (2) When a person believes in Jesus he is delivered out of darkness into light (8:12; cf. 12:36).
   2. Life vs. death
      a. To those who believe in Jesus, he gives life and delivers them from death, the consequences of being
         in bondage to sin (8:51)
      b. He who believes in Jesus already has eternal life (5:24; 3:36)
   3. Flesh vs. spirit
      a. Flesh is not sinful as in Paul. The Word became flesh, i.e. he took on ordinary human form (1:14).
      b. Flesh represents human weakness and impotence.
      c. The flesh cannot bring eternal life and salvation (1:12-13; 3:6)
      d. One must be born by the Holy Spirit to see the kingdom of God (3:3, 5)
      e. God wants worship empowered by the Spirit of God (4:24)

C. Johannine dualism is a different type than in the Synoptics:
   1. Synoptics: stress a temporal dualism – this age vs the age to come.
   2. John is primarily a spacial dualism (Heaven vs. earth, the sphere of God and sphere of the world; 8:23 –
      you are from below, I am from above; cf. 3:12, 13, 31; 6:33, 62).
   3. John also has a spiritual dualism: contrast between 2 realms and 2 states of affairs (life and death, light
      and darkness).
   4. John also has an eschatological dualism
      a. A new order has come (realized eschatology): the Law came through Moses, but grace and truth came
         through Jesus (1:17).
      b. The great day of salvation has come: “Abraham rejoiced to see my day” (8:56)
      c. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament messianic hope.
         (1) His life and especially his death fulfill the messianic prophecies (5:39)
         (2) Most of the OT quotations are clustered in the passion narrative
         (3) Even the unbelief of the Jews fulfills OT predictions (12:37-41).
   5. Jesus replaces the temple and Jewish institutions.
      a. That which was pointed to by the OT system has been fulfilled in Jesus.
      b. Temple worship will be replaced with worship in the Spirit (4:20-24).
      c. He is Lord of the Temple. His resurrected body replaces the Temple, which will be destroyed (2:18-23).
      d. His death replaces the sacrificial system (1:29).
      e. He is the focus of the true people of God (15:1; cf. Ps. 80:7-17; Is. 5:1-7; 27:2ff; Jer. 2:21; 12:10ff;
      f. He replaces and fulfills various Jewish feasts and institutions (Sabbath (5:16-18), Passover (6:4),
         Feast of Tabernacles (8:12–"light of the world") and Feast of Dedication (10:22-42)).
      g. Thus there is a strong realized eschatology in John.

Copyright © 2002 Dr. Harry A. Hahne
D. “The world” (*cosmos*)
1. This is very important in John, rare in Synoptics.
2. The world is primarily the realm of humanity and human affairs in contrast to the realm of God.
3. It is used in several senses:
   a. The whole created order (11:19; 16:21). There is no cosmological dualism, i.e. a sense of the created order being evil or fallen in itself (1:3).
   b. The dwelling place of humanity into which Jesus has come (6:14; 9:39; 11:27; 18:37) and from which he will depart (13:1; 16:28).
   c. All humankind (12:19; 18:20; 7:4; 14:22). God loves the world (3:16-17) and sent his Son to save it (12:47).
   d. Sinful humanity in rebellion against God and alienated from God.
      (1) This is the distinctively Johannine way of speaking.
      (2) This refers to the human way of doing things in contrast to God’s way.
      (3) The rule of this world is the devil (12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. 1 Jn 5:19).
      (4) The world does not know God (17:25), is wicked (7:7) and rejects and hates God’s Son (1:10; 7:7; 15:18).
4. Believers were part of the world as rebels against God, but Jesus rescued them out of the world (5:19)
   a. The world is in sharp contrast to Jesus disciples.
   b. Believers still live in the world, but they are not to take part in the values, lifestyle and sinful rebellion of the world (17:11, 14-15).

II. Eschatology

A. Since John’s major interest is in the life of the individual believer, eschatology is downplayed.
1. Where the heart of the message of Jesus in the Synoptics is the kingdom of God, in John it is the offer of life to the individual.
2. The kingdom of God is only mentioned twice (3:3, 5), but the focus is on the individual’s entrance into the kingdom through the new birth by the Spirit.
3. However, even though John emphasizes a vertical (spacial) dualism (above/below), he does not ignore a horizontal (temporal) dualism – it just is not as significant as in the Synoptics.

B. There is a strong realized eschatology in John.
1. A significant salvation historical shift has taken place and a new order has come.
   a. The day of fulfillment of the OT promises has come (8:56).
   b. The Law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus (1:17).
2. There is also a personal realized eschatology for the one who believes in Jesus.
   a. When a person believes in Jesus he has eternal life now as a present possession (5:24)
   b. Believers participate in the resurrection life now because Jesus is the resurrection and the life (11:25-26).

C. There is an element futuristic eschatology as well.
1. The individual’s present participation in the benefits of the future life guarantee that he will see that future life as well.
   a. The personal realized eschatology of the believer that gives him eternal life now guarantees that in the future he will not face eternal judgement (5:24). “Judgment” and “eternal” speak of futuristic eschatology.
   b. An individual’s new birth by the Spirit guarantees his entrance into the kingdom (3:3, 5)
   c. Much of the futuristic eschatology focuses on the individual’s participation in the great eschatological events, rather than describing the events in themselves.
2. Most of the usual eschatological events are alluded to, even though they aren’t the focus.
   a. The “last day” is mentioned with a cluster of eschatological events (6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24).
   b. At the final resurrection Jesus will raise everyone from the dead (5:25-29; 6:39, 44, 54).
   c. At the final judgment, Jesus will judge everyone (5:29).
   d. All who believe in Jesus will live forever, but the unrighteous will face eternal punishment and the
e. The life Jesus offers now is the eternal life of the Age to Come (12:25).

f. Jesus will return again
   (1) Bultmann and Robinson claim that the coming of the Holy Spirit replaces Jesus’ Second Coming (14:16, 18).
   (2) But he also can allude clearly to his own eschatological return (14:3; 21:22-23).

3. John’s theology contains both realized and futuristic eschatology
   a. The future eschatological blessings are certain because the believer already experiences some of these benefits now. The present possession of eternal life would mean nothing if it did not anticipate the future bodily resurrection.
   b. The future judgment of the wicked is already anticipated in the fact that the wicked have rejected Jesus and thus are already condemned (3:18). This does not deny the future judgment, but the eschatological fate of a person is determined by his response to Jesus now.

D. Although the language is different, the dual aspects of life in John correspond to the present and future aspects of the kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels.
1. In the Synoptics, the kingdom is present now as individual’s submit to God’s reign and in the future the reign of God will be universal.
2. In John the individual experiences life now which guarantees his future escape from eternal judgment and participation in life forever after the resurrection.
3. In both cases believers participate now in some of the benefits of the future blessings.
4. But there is a significant difference of focus:
   a. The Synoptic interest in the kingdom stresses the change of the ages as God’s reign comes into the world. The focus is on the kingdom as a whole and the individual is invited to submit to that reign.
   b. In John the focus is on the life that the individual receives through faith in Christ, which is experienced now and guarantees the future participation in that life. The focus is on the individual who participates in these great eschatological events
5. These two viewpoints are compatible and contribute to a fuller understanding of the teachings of Jesus.