

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

SALVATION AND JUDGMENT IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN: AN
EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF JOHN 3:14-21

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¹⁴“and just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, in this way the son of man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ in order that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For in this manner God loved the world, therefore he gave the only begotten son, in order that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“For God did not send the son into the world in order to judge the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ The one who believes in him is not judged; the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness more than the light, for their works were evil. ²⁰“For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, in order that his works may not be exposed. ²¹“But the one who does the truth comes to the light, in order that his works may be manifested, because they have been done in God.” (John 3:14-21 translation my own)

Introduction

“Guilty or not guilty?” The words land heavily upon the ears of the accused as he/she stands before the judge waiting to hear his/her sentence. This courtroom imagery is what is often brought to mind when many imagine the judgment of God. We (or at least many in conservative circles) see ourselves as the accused standing before God, the great judge, waiting to hear our sentence, waiting to see if he sends us to Heaven or Hell. To be fair, this judgment imagery is not wholly unwarranted in the biblical text (e.g. Matthew 25:31-33).¹ Yet, this picture of judgement does not and should not sit well with many Christians. How can a God who is love and promises to be gracious, condemn and send away those whom he has called to himself? Many on the basis of this question, along with an appeal to God’s love, might opt for universalism: that God will not condemn anyone and will save all regardless of their position towards him. However, neither of these are the Johannine image for judgement or salvation. The Fourth Evangelist, in the Gospel according to John, gives us a balanced view of salvation and judgement between these

1. I do not believe that this is how this text should be viewed, and I think it can be interpreted consistently with my argument in this paper. I simply offer this as an example of how it has been viewed by many.

two extremes. I argue that John 3:14-21 provides a summary of John's² view of salvation and Judgement that paves a middle path between the two extremes, by declaring God's love for the world and saving intentions, yet also allowing people to reject his saving purposes, and by doing so, judge themselves.

I will begin by laying out John's view of salvation and judgement through a detailed analysis of John 3:14-21. I will then proceed to analyze other passages in John that further this interpretation. We will end answering possible reconciling seemingly contradictory passages in John's Gospel.

Salvation and Judgement in John

John 3:14-21 can be called the thesis statement of John's gospel for it lays out the two alternatives of salvation and judgement set before those who encounter Jesus. By doing so, this pericope becomes the lens thorough which to interpret the various reactions to Jesus in the gospel. Verses 14-21 should be understood as a coherent unit, but it can be divided into two smaller units. Verses 14-17 lay out John's view of salvation, while 18-21 deal with the alternative of judgement. We will look at these respectively. First we turn to verses 14-17.

Salvation, John 3:14-17

When most people hear "John 3," their minds immediately go to John 3:16, perhaps the most well-known and quoted verse of the Bible. While John 3:16 is important for John's view of salvation it is only part of the passage, and can only be fully understood in the larger context of verses 14-17. In order to present the image of salvation he has in mind, John begins by

2. While John may not be the author of the fourth gospel, since authorship does not affect interpretation, I will simply refer to the author as John.

connecting the work of Christ with the role of the serpent in Numbers 21:5-9. As Moses lifted up the serpent on a “standard (σημείον in the LXX, literally “sign”)”³ (Numbers 21:8, NASB)⁴ so that anyone bitten may look to it and live, “in this way (οὕτως) the son of man must be lifted up” (John 3:14). The serpent that is raised up did not have the power to give life of itself to those bitten. This is made clear by a “midrash” on the passage found in Wisdom of Solomon 16:7, “for the one who turned toward it was saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by you (God), the savior of all” (NRSV).⁵ The Israelites are not saved by the image of the serpent, but by the act of trust (or belief as John says) in looking to it. Thus the imagery of the lifting up of the serpent and looking to it in order to live becomes the paradigm with which to understand the work of Christ for salvation in 3:15-16.

In John, the act of the Israelites looking to or “beholding” (ἰδὼν in the LXX) the serpent becomes explicitly “believing” in verse 15. The Israelites looking to the serpents in order to “live” (Numbers 21:8) is a type for “believing in the son of man” in order to have “eternal life.” This is the first use of the phrase “eternal life” in John, which is a dominant metaphor for marking a change in human existence or condition.⁶ As the Israelites look to the serpent to be healed bodily from the deadly bite of the “fiery serpents,” so now those who look to or “believe” in the son of man are moved from the state of death and sin,⁷ brought about by the first serpent in the garden, to the new state of “eternal life.” This parallel is made more explicit in verse 16.

3. Brown conjectures that this may be one of the origins of the language of “signs” in the Gospel of John. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (AYB 29; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 133.

4. All biblical quotations, except for John 3:14-21, are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

5. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 133.

6. Gail R. O’Day, *NIB* 9:552.

7. That mankind is already in the state of death and sin is made clearer in the verses to follow and in other passages in John which will be looked at below.

The postpositive *γὰρ* marks verse 16 as a further exposition of the actions of “lifting up” and “believing” in verse 14-15. The initial *οὕτως* often translated “so” and taken to mean “to what extent” or “how much” is not a statement about the extent of God’s love, but rather means “in what way/ manner” God loves. Namely, in reference to Moses offering the serpent as a way to life for the Israelites. So now, “in this way/manner (*οὕτως*) God loved the world, therefore (*ὥστε*) he gave the only begotten son” as a way to eternal life for the world.⁸ God’s “giving” of the son “has the entire mission of the son in view.”⁹ Not only does the giving refer to the incarnation, but also, as signaled by *οὕτως*, the “lifting up” of the son (i.e. his death) is also meant.¹⁰ Thus the son of man, most explicitly in the act of being lifted up, is God’s gift to the world intended for its salvation. God loved the world by offering it life through the son. The use of “world” (*κόσμος*) here in verse 16 is essential in that it emphasizes the universal scope of God’s love and saving intention. God’s giving of his son is for the *whole*¹¹ world; he has given the son to be lifted up that *anyone* may believe. As the lifting up of the serpent in Numbers 21 was intended for the healing of *anyone* who was bitten, so the lifting up of the son of man is intended for *anyone* bitten by death and sin. Yet, this should not be taken as a statement of universal salvation. While God’s intention is the universal salvation of the world, the scope of its effect and benefits are immediately limited by “belief.” Belief is the condition to “having eternal life.” Verse 16 restates belief as the way to eternal life/salvation given first in verse 15, “that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life,” but then “advances the argument by naming the alternative to eternal life: to perish.”¹² Thus, God’s intention in giving the son is that

8. To support this further, *οὕτως* is the same word used in verse 14 to refer to the lifting up of the son of man which is now elaborated on in verse 16 again introduced by *οὕτως*.

9. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 51.

10. Brown sees Isaiah 53:12 as a possible background for the language of “giving.” Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 134.

11. Italics for emphasis.

12. Gail R. O’Day, *NIB* 9:553.

everyone in the world may have eternal life, but for one to receive eternal life they must look to/ believe in the son or else they will perish. The intention of God is even more clearly stated in the next verse.

Verse 17 unequivocally states God's good intention for the giving and sending of Christ, namely "that the world might be saved through Him." This is the starting point of John's view of salvation. In this middle path given by John, God's offer of salvation is intended for all; it is universal in scope and not aimed at one particular group, and God is not an angry wrathful judge waiting to destroy the world. Rather God loves the world and has acted in the son "that the world might be saved." The purpose of God's giving and sending and the son's being lifted up is precisely to offer the world salvation. Yet, by presenting the world with this gracious offer of eternal life, the offer of salvation inevitably carries condemnation and judgment (*κρίσις*) for those who reject it.

Judgement, John 3:18-21

God's offer of salvation through the Christ event ultimately brings judgment. This is not the judgement of a wrathful angry God that many Christians tend to imagine, for God did not come to judge but to save (John 3:17). Rather, it is a self-Judgment brought about by how one reacts to Jesus. While God's intention of giving Christ in order to save the world has been clearly stated, this giving and offer is just that, an offer, it is not forced. As Augustine, commenting on John, says, "As far as it lies in the power of the physician, he has come to heal the sick. Whoever does not observe his orders destroys himself. Why should he be called the Savior of the world unless he saves the world?"¹³ God's offer of salvation entails that those who refuse it remain under the

13. Augustine, *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John* 12.12 (NPNF¹ 7:85).

deadly bite of the serpent. Judgment then is not an action of God but rather a refusal by the individual, for “the one who believes in Him is not judged” (John 3:18), or, as John will later say “has passed out of death into life,” (John 5:24). Yet “the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed...” (John 3:18).¹⁴ Here in verse 18 is a clear expression of John’s realized eschatology with *ἤδη κέκριται, κέκριται* being in the perfect tense. The appearance of Christ and the offer of salvation effect Judgment in the present, or as O’Day states, “God’s gift of Jesus to the world begins the judgment of the world.”¹⁵ This is brought out more clearly and expressed in different terminology in verse 19.

“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world” (John 3:19). God’s offer of salvation is now expressed in terms of light. “Light” in John of course means Jesus (John 1:5, 7-9; 8:12; 9:5). Thus as Brown states, “the very presence of Jesus in the world is a judgment” This is not to say that the purpose of the appearance of the son is judgement (John 3:17), but that “God’s great saving act has become a means of judgment through the perverted reaction of people.”¹⁶ Namely that “men loved the darkness more than the light, for their works were evil” (John 3:19). The appearance of Christ in the world divides mankind. However, this is not the division of the sheep and goats, decided by an angry God that most people imagine with Matthew 25:31-33. Rather the appearance of the son of man reveals what each person really is.

The appearance of Christ in the world, the light shining in darkness, presents the world with two possibilities that are laid out in verses 20-21. The language of “believing” or “not believing” is now expressed in “coming to” or “not coming to the light.” The coming of the light into the world, God’s giving and the lifting up of the son, “presented the world with a critical

14. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 147.

15. Gail R. O’Day, *NIB* 9:553.

16. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 51.

moment of decision.”¹⁷ There are only two alternatives in John’s gospel, each person must either accept God’s offer of salvation by “believing in him” and “coming to the light,” or they judge/condemn themselves by rejecting it. This is the dual effect of the Christ event: salvation and judgment. Both are brought about by Christ’s appearance. As O’day beautifully states, “God’s judgement of the world arises precisely out of God’s love for the world.”¹⁸ Not that judgement is an action of God, but God’s offer of eternal life out of love results in the ultimate death for those who reject it. Verses 20 and 21 each represent one of the two possible reactions to Jesus expressed in the Johannine language of light and darkness. This is the decision everyone must make. As the light shines on a person, (i.e. as one encounters Jesus) the true character of that person is revealed.

Yet, one must be careful not to read verses 20-21 as predetermined categories of “ones who do evil” and “ones who do the truth.” As Brown aptly emphasizes, one’s reaction is dependent on one’s own choice.¹⁹ The way a person reacts to Jesus “is the defining mark of a person’s identity, whether someone is good or evil is revealed solely by the decision he or she makes in the encounter with Jesus, it is not predetermined in advance.”²⁰ A person being “one who does evil” or “one who does good” is not a form of determinism. One is only judged (and this is a self-Judgment) by their reaction to the light, Jesus;²¹ e.g. Nicodemus right before this in John 3:1-12 is one who though in darkness (cf John 3:12) comes to the light and eventually seems to be a follower of Jesus (John 19:39).²² By having one’s condemnation or salvation

17. Gail R. O’Day, *NIB* 9:553.

18. Gail R. O’Day, *NIB* 9:553.

19. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 148.

20. Gail R. O’Day, *NIB* 9:553.

21. In this view there is the possibility of “inclusivism” for those who have not heard the gospel. If the light of the message of salvation has not yet “shined” upon them then judgement has not yet come upon them either (cf John 15:22).

22. John 3:14-21 is the lens with which to view all the reactions to Jesus in the Gospel of John, all must react in one of these two ways, accepting or rejecting God’s offer of salvation.

dependent upon one's own self-judgment in reaction to the light, John avoids the extreme of the wrathful angry God who is waiting to *send* people to Hell when they sin. Instead judgment for John comes down to the decision one makes in reaction to God's offer in Jesus. As Beasley-Murray aptly summarizes, "before the light men separate themselves, they either approach it or move away from it. The former move into the light of salvation the later depart from it into deeper darkness."²³

Summary of John's View

Thus John 3:14-15 gives a summary of John's view of salvation and judgment that stands as a middle path between the extremes of universalism and the fearful judgment of a wrathful angry God. John clearly states God's purpose and saving intention in the Christ event, namely "that the world might be saved" (John 3:17). John places the "universal" salvation of every person within the scope of God's intention and act, God loved the *world*, not only parts of it. Yet John avoids the jump to universalism in that God does not force his offer of salvation upon people. God's act is to lift up the son of man as a way to eternal life for those in death, but to gain this eternal life one must "believe in him (the son of man)" (John 3:15). God's intention is universal but its affect is not. God has preserved human freedom and allows men to reject his offer. However, just because God's act does not result in the salvation of all does not mean that the only alternative is the judgment of a wrathful angry God who *sends* people to Hell. John avoids this extreme as well by having the judgement be a self judgement. Judgement is not an action of God, "God did not send the son into the world in order to judge the world" (John 3:17). Rather judgement is simply the necessary outcome for those who reject the healing of the physician as Augustine says.

23. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 51.

Judgement is merely the result of people's refusals to look to the one who was lifted up for their healing and life. Thus, John presents a balanced view between the two extremes by having salvation intended and offered to all but not forced (i.e. universalism), and yet not having God rejecting and casting people away whom he initially called to himself. God allows people to go away from him and reject him.²⁴ The question to which we now turn is whether this understanding of the passage is consistent with other passages in John's gospel. We will first look at passages in support and then turn to look at those that seem to contradict what we have seen.

Other Passages in Support

There are two key passages worth noting that further clarify and support the above interpretation: John 3:36; 12:44-50.²⁵ The first, John 3:36, comes not long after our passage and picks up on the exact theme on which John 3:14-21 ends, namely the dual alternatives of the Christ event. As Beasley-Murray states, "they (3:14-21, and 3:36) both expound the eschatological polarity inherent in the Christ event. The redemptive revelation took place that men may have life under the saving sovereignty of God; the inexorable complement of that is Judgement."²⁶ However, the verse is not simply a restatement of the same theme but clarifies certain aspects.

Verse 36 begins with the same promise and offer of salvation," the one who believes in the son has eternal life" (John 3:36 translation my own), but now the alternative is stated in slightly different language: "the one who disobeys the son will not see life" (Translation my

24. God freely allowing people to go away from him leads to the question of what happens to these people in the "final judgment." Universalism says that God eventually brings all to himself. On the other hand, if one upholds a view of "Hell" (not the classical view of a place of eternal torment caused by God), as C.S. Lewis imagines, Hell viewed as a mercy where God allows those who flee from him to still exist and remain in their own free choice. Hell is locked from the inside. Then this connects well with the self judgement of John.

25. Other passages worth consideration are: John 8:24; 15:22.

26. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 55-56.

own). Now the antithesis of “believe” is “disobeys” (*ἀπειθῶν* this is the only occurrence in John) instead of the expected “not believed.” Yet, this is not inconsistent with verses 20-21, with “the ones who do evil” and “the ones who do the truth,” where one’s choice to believe or not believe arises out of one’s behavior and actions. As Brown states, with the present tenses of “believe and “disobeys,” “John is not thinking of a single act but of a pattern of life.”²⁷ However, this should not be taken to suggest that John is proposing a works based righteousness. This is made clear by the comparison with Numbers 21, which demonstrates the helplessness of the one who is bitten to heal himself. Along with this the use of the term “disobey” seems to link with the next passage to be looked at below, John 12:50, where the command of God is eternal life, thus to not believe is to “disobey” his command.²⁸

The results of disobeying are that the person “will not see life” and the “wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36). These statements help to clarify John’s view even further. First, the present tense of remains (*μένει*) is another evidence of John’s realized eschatology, the wrath has already begun and is realized now. This is consistent with 3:14-21 where the appearance of Christ in the world, the light shining in darkness, causes the judgement to come when people reject it. When there is no life offered, no light, all remain under the deadly bite of the serpent and in darkness, but they have not sinned for they have no option (John 15:22). But with Christ’s entry into the world, when the light of salvation comes offering life to a world that is already dead, those who refuse to accept the offer of life “remain” in the darkness and wrath and have sin (cf John 8:24; 9:41), but those who believe “pass out of death into life” (John 5:24). As Ambrose beautifully states, “when, then, anyone believes, the wrath of God departs and life arrives.”²⁹

27. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 162.

28. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 162.

29. Ambrose, *Two Books Concerning Repentance* 1.12.53 (NPNF² 10:338).

Before looking at the next point of clarification, it is important to comment here on John's use of the phrase "the Wrath of God" (*ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ θεοῦ*). This is the only appearance of *ὀργή* in John's gospel. Generally, when people hear the word wrath they imagine this in connection with an angry God of judgement, or something like Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the hands of an angry God." However, John's use of wrath should not be understood in this way. Rather as O'Day notes, "the wrath of God" is simply analogous to the language of perish and condemnation in 3:16-18.³⁰ Thus John's use of "wrath" should not be read as adding to John's position laid out in 3:14-21 and is not in conflict with it.

The second point of clarification on John's view given by 3:36 is seen in the future tense of *ὄψεται*. It could be argued that John's image of salvation and judgement in 3:14-21 is only concerned with present Judgement (given his realized eschatology), and that all will be saved in the end. However, the use of the future tense of *ὄψεται*, "will not see life" and even the idea of "remaining" makes it clear that the future Judgement is also in view. Unless one looks to/ believes in the son they "will not see life" and "remain" in judgment. As Beasley-Murray nicely summarizes, "present eschatological realities anticipate a future eschatological consummation."³¹ Thus for John while it seems that the possibility of coming to Christ (i.e. the light) remains open, it is not the case that the self judgement in reaction to Jesus will have a different outcome in the final judgment. For John, the decision one makes in reaction to an encounter with Jesus is not going to change given that one's choices to believe or not believe proceeds from one's pattern of life and who one really is (cf. John 3:20-21).³²

30. Gail R. O'Day, *NIB* 9:560.

31. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 54.

32. See also Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 148-149. The reaction to Jesus "makes it apparent what a man is."

The second key passage that supports the above interpretation of John 3:14-21, is John 12:44-50. This is really John's second treatment of the theme. Some have suggested that this section is merely a different preservation of the same tradition found in John 3:14-21 that was inserted here.³³ Even if this is the case the final editor decided to keep and include both, and we will deal with the final form of the text. It is true that 12:44-50 restates many of the major points found in 3:14-21: Believing in the son (cf. John 3:15-16; 12:44, 46), Light and darkness (cf. John 3:19-21; 12:46), intention of salvation and not judgement (John 3:17; 12:47), and sending of the Son by the Father (John 3:17; 12:44, 49).³⁴ While many of the same themes are reaffirmed in this passage, it is not simply a restatement of chapter 3. Brown has aptly pointed out that while John 3:14-21 is most explicitly concerned with realized eschatology, John 12:44-50 (along with 3:36) is concerned with final eschatology. This is most clearly seen in verse 48. The future tense of *κρινεῖ* paired with "on the last day" makes it clear that the "final judgment" is in view.³⁵ Again, as in 3:36, there seems to be no distinction in John's mind between the realized eschatological judgment and the final judgment.

John 12:44-50 also serves to clarify that believing removes one from darkness, and then makes it explicit that to not believe is the "rejection" of God's offer of salvation in Christ (12:48). Next Jesus says that "the word I spoke is what will judge him" (48). This is not to be taken to mean that it is some other force judging the person. Rather, "the word will judge him," simply means that because God has offered salvation and the person has rejected it, it has become judgement for them (cf John 15:22). Thus we find in 12:44-50 a restatement of John's view of salvation and Judgment that remains consistent with the view 3:14-21 presented above. Having

33. See Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 490. for discussion

34. See Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 147. for a comparison chart of 3:16-19 and 12:46-48.

35. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 148.

given examples of other passages in John that support this interpretation of John 3:14-21, the focus of this paper now shifts to looking at seemingly contradictory passages to this understanding of John's view.

Possible Objections/Contradictions

There are three main passages that deserve attention here that seem to contradict the above reading of John: John 5:21-30; 9:35-41; 12:30-32. The first passage, 5:21-30, seems to suggest that Christ is the one who judges, and not the self judgement that has been suggested above, for "judgement has been given to the son" (22) and "I judge" and my Judgement is just" (30). Yet these must be understood in the larger context. "Judgment has been given to the son" in the sense that the son and the father are equally honored (23). Thus those who hear and believed are not judged (24), but the one who does not "honor" or "believe" does come into judgement. The judgment is the son's in the sense that he is the one who has given "his word" and the people have rejected it; the Judgement is still a self-judgement in reaction to the "word" (24) of Jesus. Along with this, verse 30 must be read in connection with verse 29: "As I hear, I judge." This should not be taken to mean that Christ is the one who is dividing and separating people. Rather Christ stands as a "dividing wall," and "as he hears" (30) "those who have done good deeds" and "those who have done evil deed" (29) so they are divided before him. The language of "doing good" and "doing evil" directly links verse 5:29 with 3:20-21 in that the deeds of the person indicate the decision they make, or in this case made, in response to Jesus, the ones who do good believe, the ones who do evil do not believe. Thus "Christ's Judgment" in verse 30 is merely his

affirming the decisions people have already made in response to him.³⁶ A second problem raised by 5:21-30, is that 5:25 seems to suggest universal salvation in that “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.” Yet, again while the scope of God’s proclamation is universal the effect is not, for as suggested in 5:24 hearing is not enough, they also must believe. Along with this, it is assumed that those who hear are those who “do good/the truth” and are of God. (cf. 3:21; 18:37)

The next passage that seems to contradict the above interpretation and in which the wording stands in direct contradiction to 3:17, is John 9:35-41, most specifically verse 39: “for judgement I came into this world.” The wording of this verse seems hopelessly irreconcilable with 3:17 and 12:47, but again the context provides a solution. As has been seen, salvation and judgment are the two possible alternatives to the appearance of Christ. Thus while salvation is the intention (3:17), judgment remains a possible outcome. Jesus’ words in 9:39 are intended for the Pharisees who claim “to see” thus meaning that the light has already come upon them and therefore they are judged because they have not believed and have seen, if they “were blind” (i.e. had not yet heard or seen the light) they would not be guilty (9:41; cf 15:22). Thus, that Jesus “has come for judgment” is spoken in reference to those who have already judged themselves (i.e. the Pharisees 9:40-41). The status of the Pharisees is directly contrasted with the blind man that has just seen Jesus and believes (38).

The third passage that must be synthesized is John 12:30-32. The statement in verse 32, “I will draw all men unto me” seems to suggest the idea of universal salvation, that God will in the future save all. This seems especially clear given the future tense of *ἐλκύσω*, “will save.”

36. I believe this is also the way in which to read the division of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-33, consistently with John’s view of salvation and judgement. There seem to be many parallels between 5:21-30 and Matthew 25:31-33 that are worth further study.

However, this again, if read in context, fits well with the interpretation of 3:14-21 laid out above. Verse 32 contains the third mention of the lifting up of Jesus in John's gospel. While the language of "lifting up" is found in 3:14-21, I have saved the discussion for here. The language of the "lifting up of the son of man" (3:14; 8:28; 12:32) most clearly refers to Jesus' death on the cross. This is made expressly clear by the parallel with the lifting up of the serpent in 3:14 and by 12:33. Yet, as Brown notes, *ὁψωθῆναι* is also used in Acts to refer to Jesus' ascension.³⁷ Thus, "in John 'being lifted up' refers to one continuous action of ascent [...] it is the upward swing of the great pendulum of the incarnation corresponding to the descent of the Word which became flesh."³⁸ The descending and ascending of the son of man (cf John 3:13-14) is the neo-platonic theme of descent from and return to God, and the "lifting up" of Jesus from the earth provides the way of return back to God through which Jesus "draws all men to himself (i.e. God)" (12:32).³⁹ Through his "lifting up" Jesus has provided the way of salvation, an offer of life to "all" (*πάντας*). *Πάντας* emphasizes again the universal scope of God's saving intention as in 3:14, 16. Yet as in chapter three, the universal scope of God's intent is limited by one's own response. Belief in Jesus is still a necessity; Jesus' "drawing" is not forced. This is clearly seen in several places in the immediate context.

First, the voice of the father speaks out of Heaven and is heard by the people (12:28-29) and Jesus responds saying that the voice has come for the sake of the people and that "now judgment is upon this world" (31) because people have heard the voice (cf 15:22). Thus, because the people have "heard," they are presented with the moment of decision: either judgement by

37. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 146.

38. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 146.

39. While John seems to play on the neo-platonic language of descent and return, one must be careful not to read this as the Gnostic myth, with Jesus as the revealer breaking into the world and providing a way of escape. For in John's view the world is not evil and destined for destruction, God loves it and intends to save it (3:16).

rejecting, for “now judgement is upon them” (31), or they can accept the offer of salvation/ eternal life (that will be open and available “when (ἐάν)” Jesus is lifted up (12:32)) by believing, which is the next necessary step after hearing (cf 5:24).

Second, 12:35-36 also makes the necessity of belief clear. The language of light and darkness that is in 3:19-21 reappears with Jesus commanding to walk in the light so that they will not be overtaken by darkness (35). Then most explicitly Jesus commands “believe in the Light (i.e. Jesus cf John 1:5-9) so that you may be sons of light” (36). This command to “believe” comes directly after “drawing all to myself” (32). If Jesus words were meant to be universalist (in the sense that God will save all regardless of their stance towards him) then this command to believe would be meaningless. Also verse 35-36, are Jesus’ answer to someone questioning his status as “Christ” and the “son of man” i.e. not believing (34). Thus, verses 35-36 are Jesus’s response with the command to believe.

Beyond the immediate context given by 12:28-31 and 35-36, John 12:44-50, though not immediately after still provides context for verse 32 in that it as a general response to all who do not believe or openly acknowledge Jesus (12:42-43). As shown above, 12:44-50 emphasizes belief as the means by which to have eternal life and be drawn to Christ (cf. 12:46). Thus while 12:32 might sound universalist (in that God will save all), it remains simply a restatement of God’s universal intention of drawing all men to himself, the belief or rejection by each person is still the deciding factor, God does not force his offer. In this way 12:32 can be read consistently with the above interpretation of 3:14-21.

While many of these passages may seem hopelessly contradictory one must trust that the author or final editor was competent and intentional in their writing and selection, and when theses seemingly contradictory passages are read in light of “John thesis” or Schema of 3:14-21

it becomes apparent that the gospel of John maintains a consistent view of salvation and judgement throughout.

Conclusion

John 3:14-21 lays out the dual alternatives of the Christ event, salvation and judgement. John's position stands as the middle ground between the extreme of universalism and the extreme of the contradictory God who both loves and calls and is wrathful and sends away. John's view offers a loving God with the beautiful intention of saving all people if only they would "believe," Yet it is a God who preserves human freedom by allowing people to reject his gracious offer thus avoiding universalism. The second extreme is avoided in that judgment for John is not an action of God but rather self-judgement, a self-inflicted condemnation by the people who reject God's offer of eternal life. John's middle path is a gracious light to the many Christians today who have often misunderstood God's intentions and are afraid of God, and it is a revealing light of judgement to those who would make human life arbitrary by claims to universalism.

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