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What's Going On Here?

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The Secret of God's Plan—Studies in
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Kosmos-Men or Men for the Kosmos

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KOSMOS IN JOHN

Kosmos is a key theological term in the Gospel of John. The author of the Fourth Gospel chose this term to signal his concept of men without God, men in need of God, men in rebellion against God, men who would decide against God when confronted with His Sent One. The Christian church has often found it easy to look out into the world to see what John was talking about. The overtones of the English word "world" as a translation of "kosmos" have helped the church deceive itself theologically.

John develops and defines what it means to be kosmos by offering some well-focused theological portraits. With subtlety and skill he depicts men who are more or less of the kosmos in conversation and action. A dogmatic definition of the kosmos can always be outmaneuvered, as it seeks to zero in with a Law message. Theological argumentation is, after all, the church's home ground. When we in the church look closely at these Johannine theological portraits, however, we recognize, against our will, too many old friends, too many of the church's men. In fact, the Fourth Gospel's candid camera seems to have caught us just yesterday, or the day before, or at the last convention or conference, acting as if we belonged to the kosmos position, as if we were of the kosmos, as if we drew our strength and took our cues from what it means to be kosmos.

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To interpret John theologically is to see the kosmos in action in the face of God's address. To interpret ourselves theologically is to see ourselves in action in the face of God's address. Do we, the church's men, belong in John's rogues' gallery? Praise God, we are also allowed to be freed and healed once again by that same love that God calls us to bear to the kosmos. We expect to be freed and given God's life as we are God's agents of freedom and life.

KOSMOS CONVERSATION

As men come into dialog with Jesus and converse with one another about Jesus, John snaps kosmos pictures.

The kosmos wants a guarantee before it believes. It will not risk a losing cause. Its characteristic posture is the demand for a sign. Amazed at Jesus' spring temple cleaning, kosmos-men want proof of His right to act (John 2:18). With proper insurance and a no-risk guarantee, they might go along with anything. The kosmos had a good thing going with teacher Moses, a guaranteed bread allowance from heaven. Before listening to a new teacher, the kosmos wants to know what investment the prophet demands (6:28). Challenged outright to believe in Jesus, whom God has sent, the kosmos wants a sign of good faith, an assurance of further performances (6:30) and continued benefits. If the signs are present, the kosmos offers belief. (2:23)

The kosmos wants full explanations to religious questions. Its quest for the "how" is, moreover, a will to be master of its

situation. If the religious quest is reasonable and its results a sure thing, the kosmos is ready to act. Confronted, however, with a Spirit as uncertain as the wind—one who cannot be controlled or relied upon to protect men's interests—the kosmos prefers reliable predictions and the ability to explain how (3:9). Excited about the personal nourishment that food for the body provides, the kosmos misses Jesus' food for thought and concerns itself with the "how" of getting food through flesh. (6:52)

The kosmos knows the facts of life. It already knows the future, what can happen and what cannot happen, what need not be tried, expected, hoped for. It knows the limits of God's power—this side of the grave, as we say. The kosmos knows what to expect from Nazareth (1:46) and how long it takes to build a temple (2:20). It knows a good meal when it smells one (6:26), and it knows how God will or will not raise up the Messiah (7:27, 41, 52). The kosmos knows how God spoke to Moses and expects Him to say nothing new (8:29). It knows that Christ will live forever and certainly not get involved in losing causes (12:34). The kosmos considers itself fully informed about Jesus (7:28): it knows His father Joseph (6:42); it knows that Jesus has not studied enough to speak so well (7:15); it knows where He came from (7:27); it knows how much one can expect of a man of His age (8:57). In actual fact the kosmos cannot see beyond its own nose; it is hopelessly confused by the way things look to its crossed eyes. Judging according to the flesh (8:15), the kosmos concludes that Jesus is a Samaritan and has a demon (8:48), or that He is mad and has a demon (10:20), that He breaks the Sabbath

and cannot be from God (9:16), that He is a sinner (9:24). Blinded itself, the kosmos cannot see that through Jesus a blind man sees. (9:18)

The kosmos wants an appealing prophet, its own kind of man. It likes someone it can understand on its own terms, who speaks its language, who asks for approval as a kosmos-man (5:44). The kosmos wants a man who will fit in with the kosmos, not challenge it, a man who will talk like a kosmos-man and ask for recognition as a kosmos-man (7:18). The kosmos puts a lot of emphasis on its own approval and assumes that any religious peddler will want to apply for a license with it. (7:4)¹

The kosmos has an interest in religion (5:39).² Called into question by a prophet from God and offered living water, the kosmos proposes a forum on the doctrine of worship (4:20). The kosmos is scrupulous about Law and feels threatened when anyone tampers with the

¹ Edwyn Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. Francis Noel Davey (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), p. 311, notes: "Their supreme misunderstanding lies in their distinction between glorious and inglorious, bold and cowardly. There will be a public ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem . . . but it consists in the public exposition of the sin of the world and the provocation of its hatred. . . . There is also a glorious display of power, but it consists in secret obedience to the will of the Father and in the transmission of the truth to the disciples in private . . . and is displayed completely in the death of the Christ."

² Richard Voelkel, *Christ und Welt nach dem Neuen Testament* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1961), p. 422, mentions the studies of Emmanuel Hirsch in which he shows the Jews in John as representatives of that serious and zealous churchliness which "is always in danger of mistaking its membership card for a ticket to heaven."

Sabbath (9:16). It wants to squeeze its life from the Law. It has turned God's Word into its own law and forced it to be the security for the religious life.³ The kosmos also loves its kinship with father Abraham and the past and makes the most of it (8:33). The religious leaders of the kosmos are absolutely certain that the best guides to approved belief are religious leaders, who are always in the know (7:48). Just as surely the religious leaders know that the opinions of a man who has not mastered the niceties of canon law cannot be worth considering (9:34; 7:49). Indeed, the religious leaders like to run every new religious upstart through a colloquy (1:19-28) and occasionally, if necessary, offer one up on the altar of expediency (11:50). No man is worth a temple, and sometimes one has to give up a prophet to save the establishment (11:48). Kosmos religion is prepared to go all out, when necessary, to uproot improper religious attitudes and destroy upsetting religious figures, but it is careful to do so without transgressing its own canons. (18:28; 19:31)⁴

The kosmos has a heart condition and

is unaware of it. It refuses to know the One whom the Father sends (1:10). It does not know the Father either (7:28; 16:3), and never did (8:55). The kosmos rather prefers to define its spiritual condition in terms of the past: sons of father Abraham, indebted to no one (8:33) and loyal disciples of teacher Moses (9:28). Finally, in a stroke of spontaneous insight, the kosmos diagnoses its own condition: it has no ruler but Caesar. (19:15)

KOSMOS ACTION

Challenged by the Sent One from God, who addresses God's questions to it and calls its present existence into question, the kosmos first balks and then, like a bull before a red flag, charges into frenzied action.

In the prolog John says that Jesus' own people do not receive Him (1:11). The kosmos prefers darkness to light because it does evil (3:19). The kosmos, which has turned religion into a profit-making enterprise (2:16), seeks to kill Jesus because God could not possibly be like what Jesus claims to be (5:18). This is the significant point in the kosmos-rejection: not that Jesus blasphemes and that blasphem-

³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), II, 27, remarks: "The decision that arises from the will to exist of and by one's self perverts truth into a lie, perverts the creation into the world. For in their delusion men do not let their quest for life become a question about themselves so as to become aware of their creaturehood, but instead they give themselves the answer so as to have a security of their own. They take the temporal for the ultimate."

⁴ Richard Loewe, *Kosmos und Aion* (Gütersloh: Verlag C. Bertelsmann, 1935), notes that the Jews should have been prepared by the Old Testament for the New Testament dialectic between God and man: "The Greek

seeks God in the eternal world [and] explains Him as an inner worldly idea; the Jew knows the eternal God beyond the world as its creator, ruler, judge, and goal." But the Jews had hardened their beliefs into a powerless nomism. "The weapon of the struggle and protest against secularization was turned into an instrument for mechanizing and rationalizing the concept of God, and therefore in turn became an instrument for secularization" (pp. 61-62). With such an attitude they damned the heathen and humanized and externalized their election-consciousness. Challenged to become free in their life in God's world, we may say, they bound themselves more securely—taking offense at Jesus' new approach to the kosmos problem.

ers must be killed, but that if Jesus is right in His claim that God personally sent Him, if God stands for what Jesus stands for, then their ideas about God have been completely wrong. Who, then, have they been worshiping? It will be easier to put Jesus out of the way than answer that question. The kosmos can only offer to kill Jesus for calling the kosmos into question (7:1; 8:37, 49) or attempt to make Jesus over in its image, insisting He be king of the kosmos (6:15). The presence of Jesus again and again drives the kosmos into action. Plots and threats and continued offense lead inevitably to the cross.

PILATE, KOSMOS-MAN

Pilate is kosmos-man in bondage to the kosmos: trapped, hemmed in, unable to reach a free decision. He sees his future closed. He cannot risk himself without some guarantee, and he is afraid. He wants to do anything to avoid making a decision and becoming more deeply involved in the very kosmos-bondage which he epitomizes.

As soon as the Jews bring Jesus, Pilate tells them to take Him away and judge Him by their own law (18:31). Cynical about Jewish politics and angry over being disturbed, Pilate skeptically asks if Jesus is a king (18:33). Convinced that there is no truth in the kosmos and enslaved because no truth has freed Him, Pilate dismisses Jesus' witness to him with a rhetorical question (18:33-38). Finding no crime and anxious to be out of his predicament, Pilate suggests Barabbas as an exit, putting more confidence in a kosmos-decision than it deserves (18:39-40). Losing his first round, Pilate then fails in his chance to act in a non-kosmos way—

he gives in and has Jesus scourged (19:1). Still proclaiming Jesus' innocence, Pilate presents Him to the Jews, presuming that this sight will satisfy their thirst for blood (19:4). Pilate has again underestimated the kosmos. A little blood is not enough.

Pilate has no room to move in his kosmos-situation, and in a feeble effort to extricate himself he attempts to pass his responsibility to the Jews (19:6). They pass it back with good measure, adding another charge (19:7). Now Pilate is more afraid at the weight of the decision facing him. What if this is a supernatural being? "Who knows in what form divinity might confront one?"⁵ Now he needs a sign, a guarantee, so that he can be sure as he makes his decision. He asks Jesus the same question the Jews asked: "Where are you from?" (19:9). When Jesus offers no prop for his decision, Pilate becomes angry and desperate. In a classic overstatement he claims to have power over Jesus' life (19:10). Pilate has in fact no power over anything, especially over his own kosmos-situation. Angered at the Jews for crowding him into this bad situation, Pilate again tries to release Jesus, still putting off an absolute decision. (19:12)

Confronted with a direct threat to his standing with his kosmos-superiors, Pilate at last succumbs. With a final feeble attempt to thumb his nose at the kosmos, which has him secure in its grasp, he presents Jesus to the Jews as king; neither he nor they are remotely aware that they are bandying about the One who is Lord over the kosmos. Finally Pilate gives Jesus up to the kosmos (19:16), and himself as

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 14th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), p. 512.

well, for he has been unable to be anything but a kosmos-man. In a final effort to scoff at the petty people who have forced him into this predicament, Pilate insists on placarding Jesus as King of the Jews (19:19,22). Pilate does not realize that it is not he over against the Jews and their king, but he and the Jews in the same kosmos-situation over against Jesus.

KOSMOS ANTITHESSES: MEN OF GOD

Some men respond to God's address in His Son in a way in which the kosmos refuses to respond: they *believe*.⁶ Besides showing us the glories of life from God they highlight the ineptness of the kosmos-response and further define, by negation, what it means to be kosmos.

Non-kosmos-men appear already in the prolog, born from God's will (1:13) and gazing at the *doxa* of the Logos (1:14) — while kosmos-men's eyes are riveted to their own reputations.

Andrew rejoices to find the Messiah and brings Peter (1:41-42). Philip finds Na-

thanael and tells him that he has found Him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote (a response which is exactly opposite to that of the kosmos, for it used religious books to protect itself from God's address). For Nathanael, Jesus is the king of Israel; for the kosmos He was the negation of all that was held most dear. When Jesus manifests His *doxa* (glory), the disciples, not counting their own *doxa* (reputation) important, believe. (2:11)

He who answers Jesus' call gets new life from above (3:3), but the kosmos recognizes nothing beyond itself. Those who answer God's call in Jesus cease to fight over getting God into their establishment and worship Him in spirit and truth (4:23), that is, in the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection and with the power and life that God provides. Jesus will abide with them (4:39-42). The official does not ask for a certificate from the synagog but takes up his pallet and walks (5:9). The believer hears Jesus' word and confesses and sees that God sent Him. (5:24)

The real work of God is believing in Jesus, whom God sent (6:29); all who are taught of God come to Jesus, eat the living bread He offers, and live forever (6:45, 51). Jesus has the words of eternal life, and the disciple has no wish once again to be of the kosmos (6:68). He knows the truth and is set free by it (8:31-32). The believers hear the shepherd's voice (10:27), follow Jesus (12:26), and escape from darkness (12:46). Long before, Isaiah had looked ahead to see Jesus' glory and spoke of Him (12:41) — in contrast to those who now manipulate the sacred writings in defense of the status quo.

⁶ Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, II, 86, calls faith desecularization, detachment within the world from the world.

Voelkl, p. 438, notes that although for both John and Paul *Entweltlichung* (desecularization) is faith, Paul contrasts faith with good works and self-trust, while John contrasts it with Jewish and Gnostic theology and gives it the meaning of knowing. For both, faith is the recognition of God's action for salvation. For both, love is an essential weapon in the Christian arsenal, and their ethic is neither world-fleeing nor ascetic. One might question Voelkl's distinction between Pauline and Johannine faith. If for John faith is knowing oneself as creature by seeing God's creative action in Jesus Christ, this will mean giving up trying to live on one's own, trying to find religious security through Law manipulation. This is similar to Paul's concern that men do not manufacture their standing before God by reliance on good works.

Chapters 13—17 describe the intense kind of life that is lived out of God. Everything that the kosmos is not and needs to become, this circle of believers is or can be, as they live from the Son.

They are ready for humble service to one another (13:14,34); they love Jesus and keep His commandments (14:15); they know the Spirit and experience His indwelling (14:17). Unlike the kosmos, the believers will see Jesus beyond the crucifixion and live as He does (14:18). They will see His manifestation that is denied to the kosmos (14:21); they will be a home for the Father and the Son (14:23), a home in which the Spirit is teacher and reminder of the presence of Jesus, who leaves His peace with them. (14:26-27)

Cleansed by Jesus' word (15:3), the believers bear abiding fruit (15:4-6). The kosmos cannot take away their joy (16:22), and they love one another with Jesus' love (15:12). Their whole life is a witness to Him who has been and is their Life (15:27). Through the oneness between Father and Son they become one with the Father (17:11). The Father's love for the Son lives also in them (17:26). All their lives the believers are called to share their joy by bringing it to the kosmos, for Jesus sends them back into the kosmos, even as the Father sent Him (20:21). They go not alone, however, but with the Holy Spirit. (20:22)

MEN FOR THE KOSMOS

It is clear that we are called with a Gospel call and given the possibility to draw our life from God through His Son. We epitomize the kosmos when we attempt to create, hatch, grow, or manufacture a life of our own, a life which then demands all

our self-preserving efforts and constant no-risk nursing care. Our freedom is to be men of God, drawing our life from His resources, and no longer men of the kosmos, sucking out a life from ourselves or the law or some other order of man.

With this powerful freedom we are called to live among kosmos-men; we are sent among kosmos-men and into the kosmos as envoys of God's love. The "world" as such never comes under condemnation. Indeed, it is possible only for the believer once again to affirm the world as creation. Hearing and answering God's question, he has stepped back from the world and has seen it properly for the first time. Affirming the world as God's creation and precisely as the sphere of God's creative activity, he then gets busy with the problem of the kosmos. He sets about to bring God's love (or to be an agent of God's love) into the situation in which man is turned in on himself, refusing to hear God's address and openly not acknowledging his Creator.

In the Johannine dramatic circle, God in Jesus affirms His creation and addresses in love the kosmos. Some men, called believers, answer the call from their kosmos-situation. Now knowing for the first time what their existence in the world is all about, they are able to affirm in freedom this existence in the world, as Jesus did, and to let God's love be addressed through themselves to other men still in the kosmos-situation. The world is reclaimed as God's world, and man is called in that world and given the power and the life in that world to live responsibly and to address his fellowmen with God's own love.

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