

WHY ARE THE HEAVENS CLOSED?
THE JOHANNINE REVELATION OF THE FATHER
IN THE CATHOLIC-GNOSTIC DEBATE

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Years ago when I wrote about ascent traditions and the Gospel of John, I noticed that the author of the Fourth Gospel worked hard to cordon off the heavens and discourage ascent journeys to the Father.¹ Although I had noticed this, I was not able to answer completely the question ‘why?’ Except for the descent and ascent of Jesus, the heavens are impenetrable in this Gospel (3.13). No one has seen God except through the revelation of the Son who descended and made the Father known (cf. 1.18; 5.37; 6.46). When Jesus ascends back to the Father, humans cannot follow him to the place where he is going, except eschatologically when he returns to take his devotees with him (cf. 7.33-34; 8.21; 13.33, 36; 14.3). It was my curiosity, my desire to answer more fully the question ‘why?’, that took me back to the Gospel of John to study it anew. Perhaps my years working on other materials had taken me to a different height, a place that might allow me a wider view, a broader horizon to gaze at my subject and penetrate the question.

I was not looking to unearth the secret that I found lurking in the Gospel of John. I was unaware that, within this Gospel, there was a skeleton in the cupboard, a secret so disturbing to mainstream Christians in antiquity that it was silenced by burying it beneath centuries of biblical interpretation and retranslation. I did not know that this secret continued to lie dormant in the modern commentaries whose academic authors claim, like Cyril of old, that ‘no one will show us such a reading in the holy and divine scriptures!’ Although I had studied the Gospel of John previously, like most members of the academic community I have been trained in a traditional reading of the Gospel, and I did not consider

¹ April D. DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospels of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature* (JSNTSup 157; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001).

my training to be important methodologically. I did not realise that I was reading the Gospel of John in a certain way because I had been trained to read it that way and no other way. I did not realise that this training was blocking my ability to penetrate the Fourth Gospel and its history.

This time, when I sat down to study the Gospel of John, something had shifted for me. Was it my recent work on the *Gospel of Judas*, which views mainstream Christianity in an unusual way?² The author of the *Gospel of Judas* believes that mainstream Christians think they are worshipping the true God, while, in reality, they have been duped by the demonic powers. The god they are worshipping is the god of the Hebrew Bible, a lesser demonic god who rules this world. The true God, they do not know. In the wake of my study of the *Gospel of Judas*, the God-language put into the mouth of Jesus by the Johannine author stood out vividly. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus consistently calls God 'my Father' or 'God *the* Father' as if he were making a distinction between his God and someone else's god. This is particularly vivid in John 8, where the author struggles with his self-identity as a follower of Jesus against those he identifies as 'the Jews' who are 'unbelievers'.

John 8 is a painful testament to the emergence of anti-Semitism within the early church at a time when Christianity and Judaism were defining themselves as independent religious traditions, while claiming allegiance to a common scripture and history. The dialogue is racist, dangerous, and painful. It is, I had noticed, the type of argument that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* makes against other Christians whom he thinks are unknowingly worshipping the god of the Jews, a demon, instead of the true God preached by Jesus. Did the author of the Gospel of John have something similar in mind? Was he assuming a tradition that had theologically spliced god so that the real God had become something other than the Jewish god who was viewed as no more than a demon?

These questions resonate more fully when a careful narratological analysis is made of John 8. In this chapter, Jesus explains that his words are trustworthy because he is telling 'the Jews' what he has seen when he was with his Father who resides in a far off heaven. He contrasts his relationship with his Father with their situation: 'and you do what you have heard from *your father*' (8.38). Are we being presented with two fathers, two gods – one the Father of Jesus and the other the Father of the Jews?

This seems to be the logical flow of Jesus' argument, which was set up earlier in the chapter when Jesus tells the Pharisees, 'I bear witness to myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness to me'. They ask

2 April D. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, rev. edn, 2009).

Jesus, ‘Where is your Father?’ And Jesus retorts, ‘You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father also’, suggesting that Jesus’ Father is not the god whom ‘the Jews’ worship (8.18-19). Jesus stresses this contrast by arguing in the subsequent narrative that *his* Father God is different from the god that ‘the Jews’ consider to be *their* father. ‘The Jews’ refuse this distinction, saying that Abraham is their national father, while their God is the ‘one Father’. Jesus disagrees. If they were Abraham’s children, he says, they would not be seeking to kill Jesus. Instead of imitating Abraham, they do what their father did. If the God Jesus is preaching was indeed their father, they would have loved Jesus instead of attempting to murder him (8.39-43).

If the God Jesus preaches is not their father, than who is? Jesus replies, according to the standard English translation, ‘You are of your father the devil’. The passage, in English translation, goes on to read that ‘the Jews’ carry out the desires of their father who was a murderer, a liar, and the father of lies (8.44 [RSV]). Or does it? When a careful study of the Greek is made, the reading of the passage is quite different from its standard English translation in two significant places, and both have to do with the issue of two gods:

<i>NA²⁷</i>	<i>RSV</i>	<i>Author’s Translation</i>
8.44a ὕμεις ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ	8.44a <u>You are of your father the devil.</u>	8.44a <u>You are from the father of the Devil.</u>
8.44b καὶ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν θέλετε ποιεῖν.	8.44b and your will is to do your father’s desires.	8.44b and you want to carry out the desires of your father.
8.44c ἐκεῖνος ἀνθρωποκτόνος ἦν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς	8.44c He was a murderer from the beginning;	8.44c That one was a murderer from the beginning,
8.44d καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ οὐκ ἔστηκεν, ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ἀλήθεια ἐν αὐτῷ.	8.44d and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him.	8.44d and he did not stand by the truth, because there is no truth in him.
8.44e ὅταν λαλήῃ τὸ ψεῦδος, ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων λαλεῖ,	8.44e When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature,	8.44e When he lies, he speaks from his own characteristics,
8.44f ὅτι ψεύστης ἐστὶν καὶ ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ.	8.44f <u>for he is a liar and the father of lies.</u>	8.44f <u>because he is a liar and so is his father.</u>

In 8.44a, the Greek is clear: ὑμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ. With the article preceding πατρός, the phrase τοῦ διαβόλου is a genitive phrase modifying the nominal phrase ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς. Thus: 'You are from the father of the Devil'. If the statement were to mean, as the standard English translation renders it, 'You are of the father, the Devil', then the article preceding πατρός would not be present. In this case the word 'father' would be in the predicate position and could be expanded with an appositional phrase τοῦ διαβόλου, a grammatical decision the author of John makes in 8.56 with reference to 'Abraham, your father' ('Αβραάμ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν).³

This literal reading is confirmed by 8.44f, which straightforwardly acknowledges the presence of two beings, the Liar and his father: ὅταν λαλήῃ τὸ ψεῦδος, ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων λαλεῖ, ὅτι ψεύστης ἐστὶν καὶ ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ. The text reasons that the Devil lies since his nature is that of a liar. Why? Because not only is the Devil a liar but his father is also a liar. The standard English translation is not only peculiar, but strained, reading αὐτοῦ as a genitive 'it' referring to an unnamed singular antecedent such as 'lying' or 'falsehood'. Thus, ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ is rendered in the standard English translation idiosyncratically, 'the father of lies'.

When I turned to the standard modern Johannine commentaries, I noticed that the Greek text is continuously veiled by the scholars, and a straightforward discussion of the passage is sidestepped by them. In the commentaries, the passage generally is translated appositionally and idiosyncratically, 'You are of the father, the Devil', while the literal translation, 'You are from the father of the Devil' (*if* mentioned at all), is trivialised as 'also possible', and then quickly explained away as the purview of the Gnostics.⁴

3 R. W. Funk, *A Beginning-Intermediate Grammar of Hellenistic Greek* (SBL SBS 2; 3 vols.; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 2nd edn, 1973), 1: §§128; 129.5; 2: §547; BDF, §268; cf. Mark 1.4//Matt 3.1; Acts 12.12; Phlm 3.

4 E.g. J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928/1963), II, p.313; D. Walter Bauer, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1933), pp.127–8; Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), pp.343–4; William Barclay, *The Gospel of John* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955/1975), II, p.29; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction With Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 2nd edn, 1978), pp.348–9; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. George R. Beasley-Murray; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), pp.318–9; J. N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (London: A. & C. Black, 1968), pp.230–1; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Seabury, 1980), II, p.213; Ernst

Something was going on with this verse, something with a long history that had hidden the simplest reading of the verse. The result of my research on this verse and its extended history has uncovered a strident dispute between two interpretative communities over the meaning of this verse, from our earliest sources on the Gospel of John to the present-day academic commentaries. As I have unraveled this dispute, I have come to reassess the origin of the Gospel of John and its theology, and the relationship of this Gospel to the formation of early orthodoxy and Gnosticism.

1. Four ‘Conversations’

The first extant commentaries on the Gospel of John written by Heracleon (*ca.* 160–180) and Origen (*ca.* 230–250) leave the impression that John 8.44, ‘You are from the father of the Devil’, was a hotly contested passage, and with good reason. For the Gnostic Christian, it was gospel proof – the very words of Jesus – that the God of the Jews was a lesser demonic god different from the Father-God whom Jesus preached. In the Gnostic community, God the Father had been elevated to a transcosmic location, a place beyond the traditional cosmos. At the same time, the God of the Jews had been identified with a lesser demonic god ruling the world. John 8.44 came into play as definitive teaching from Jesus that supported this theology.

The earliest reference to a group of Gnostics using John 8.44 in this way comes to us via Hippolytus (*ca.* 200–230) who quotes from the writings of an unnamed Peratic teacher. The Peratics were an early or

Haenchen, *John 2. A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7–21* (trans. Robert W. Funk; Philadelphia: Fortress 1984), p.29; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB 29/29A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), I, pp.357–8.

The only commentary I am aware of that takes seriously the literal translation is by Adolf Hilgenfeld, which led him to develop an argument that the Gospel of John was a Gnostic treatise representing a transition between Marcionism and Valentinianism (Adolf Hilgenfeld, *Das Evangelium und die Briefe Johannis* [Halle: C. A. Schwetschke, 1849], pp.145–77). Gustav Volkmar (*Der Ursprung unserer Evangelien nach den Urkunden, laut den neuern Entdeckungen und Verhandlungen* [Zurich: J. Herzog, 1866], p.76) and Georg Heinrici (*Die Valentinianische Gnosis und die heilige Schrift* [Berlin: Wiegandt & Grieben, 1871], pp.187–90) responded positively to Hilgenfeld. Most twentieth-century commentators, however, have overlooked his work and have upheld the ‘authority’ of the appositional translation, maintaining an unbroken line in the transmission of catholic tradition.

mid-second-century Gnostic group known to Clement of Alexandria (*ca.* 190–215) and Hippolytus.⁵ The Peratic teacher specifically quotes John 8.44, relying on it to demonstrate that Jesus differentiated between gods. He argues that, whenever the Saviour said ‘Your Father in heaven’, Jesus meant the transcendent God, the God who was the father of Jesus and who lived outside the traditional universe in another world. Jesus, the Son, was identified with the serpent Draco, the star constellation at the top of the celestial dome. Since Draco’s orientation turned regularly so that it appeared that his head was pointed upwards sometimes and downwards other times, the Peratics thought that this constellation functioned mechanically like a revolving doorway, bringing spirits down into the universe at birth from the world of the Father, and at death transferring them out of the universe back into the world of the Father.

The reference to ‘Your father was a murderer from the beginning’ (John 8.44c) was used by the Peratic teacher as indisputable evidence for the existence of ‘the ruler and artificer of matter’, who would take the spirits distributed by the Son and reproduce them in the material world. The demiurge was a murderer from the beginning because his work always ended in corruption and death.⁶

The catholic exegete would have nothing of this. So troubling were the implications that the Devil had a father and this father was the Jewish god, that the phrase τοῦ πατρὸς (John 8.44a) was suppressed in some manuscripts of the Gospel of John, leaving the reading ‘you are from the Devil’.⁷ It is clear, however, that the earliest readings of this passage included the reference to the Devil’s father, and that the catholic exegetes had to deal with it. We are fortunate enough to have preserved in the ancient literature four ‘conversations’ between different Gnostics and their catholic detractors about this verse: Heracleon and Origen; the ‘Other Sects’ and Epiphanius; the Archontics and Epiphanius; and Mani and the catholics. The evidence from these conversations demonstrates that there existed fairly standard, yet competing, interpretations of John 8.44 that belonged to two emerging interpretative communities: the catholic and Gnostic communities. Not surprisingly, neither agreed with the other.

1.1. Heracleon and Origen

It is clear that the earliest reading of this passage included the reference to the Devil’s father. Heracleon, through the writings of his catholic

5 Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 7.108; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.12.1–17.13.

6 Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.17.7.

7 K sy^s bo^{ms}.

opponent Origen, provides us with our earliest known commentary on this passage. He quotes 8.44, ὑμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστὲ, not only to support a split theology, but also to discuss anthropology.⁸ He argues that there is a certain group of people – the choikics (the dust people, those created from the ‘earth’ or ‘dust’) – who cannot hear Jesus’ word because they are ‘from the father of the Devil’ made ‘from the *ousia* of the Devil (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ διαβόλου)’.⁹ He seems to be arguing that, because these people have the same father as the Devil, they are kin. Therefore the choikics are created out of the same *ousia* from which the Devil was created. Their nature is made clear by Jesus, who rebukes them, telling them that they are neither the children of Abraham nor the children of God. Heracleon appears to think that this justifies calling the choikics ‘children of the Devil’, even though he also thinks that the Devil never sired anyone.¹⁰ The affinity of nature seems to come from the fact that both the Devil and the choikics were sired by the same father, out of the same substance (see Diagram 1 [overleaf]).

The choikics – because they are created of the same *ousia* as the Devil – are of a different nature from two other groups of people identified by Heracleon: the psychics (the soul people) and the pneumatics (the spirit people).¹¹ The choikics, says Heracleon, are clearly distinguishable in John 8.44a as the group of people that Jesus is addressing.¹² Likewise, the second group of people, the psychics, is distinguishable in 8.44b.

8 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.168, 211 (see A. E. Brooke, *The Commentary of Origen on S. John's Gospel* [2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896], II, pp.63, 71). There have been a number of attempts to understand Heracleon's anthropology: Werner Foerster, *Von Valentin zu Herakleon: Untersuchungen über die Quellen und die Entwicklung der valentinianischen Gnosis* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1928); François Sagnard, *La gnose valentinienne et le témoignage de Saint Irénée* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1947); Gilles Quispel, ‘La conception de l'homme dans la gnose valentinienne’, *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 15 (1947), pp.249–86; idem, ‘Origen and the Valentinian Gnosis’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 28 (1974), pp.29–42; Hermann Langerbeck, *Aufsätze zur Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967); Elaine Pagels, ‘The Valentinian Claim to Esoteric Exegesis of Romans as a Basis for Exegetical Theory’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 26 (1972), pp.241–58; Ekkehard Mühlenberg, ‘Wieviel Erlösungen kennt der Gnostiker Herakleon?’, *ZNW* 66 (1975), pp.170–93; Barbara Aland, ‘Erwählungstheologie und Menschenklassenlehre: Die Theologie des Herakleon als Schlüssel der christlichen Gnosis?’, in Martin Krauss (ed.), *Gnosis and Gnosticism* (NHS 8; Leiden: Brill, 1977), pp.148–81; Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Born from Above* (HUT 29; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

9 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.168 (Brooke, II, p.63; English translation mine).

10 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.218 (Brooke, II, p.72).

11 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.170 (Brooke, II, p.63).

12 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.198 (Brooke, II, p.69).

They are referred to by Jesus in his remark, 'You wish to do the desires of your father' (τὰς ἐπιθυμίας τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν θέλετε ποιεῖν).¹³ They are like the Devil who does not have a will, but has desires.¹⁴ People in this group can become the Devil's children, not because the Devil sired anyone (οὐχ ὅτι γεννᾷ τινὰς ὁ διάβολος), but because 'they became *homoioussios* with the Devil by doing his works' (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ διαβόλου ποιῶντες ὁμοιώθησαν αὐτῷ).¹⁵ They become the Devil's children through adoption (θέσις).¹⁶ These people, by loving the desires of the Devil and doing them, become children of the Devil *like* him in substance.¹⁷ This group appears to be only a portion of the psychics, because Heracleon reasoned that it must follow from this that there also exist children of God by nature and by adoption.¹⁸ He appears to be referring respectively to the pneumatics and the psychics who resist the Devil's desires.

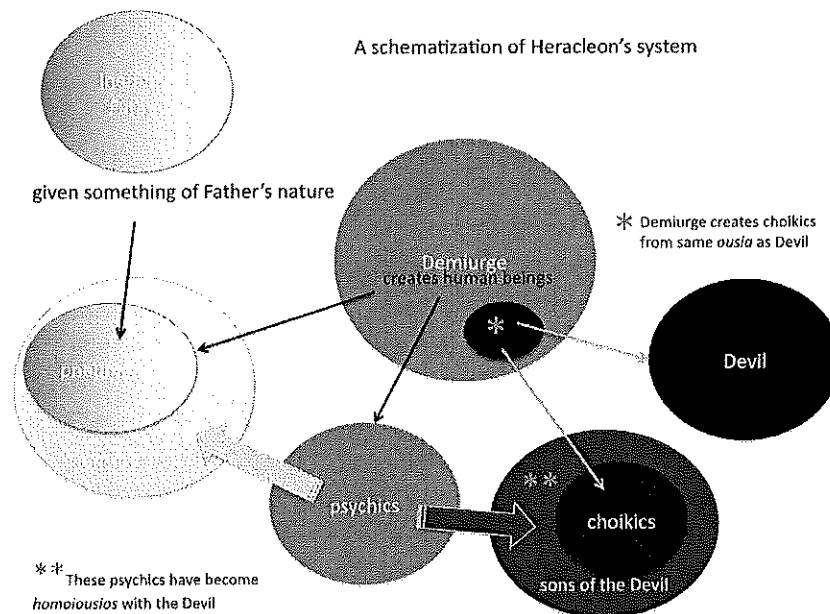


Diagram 1

- 13 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.211-14 (Brooke, II, p.71).
 14 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.211 (Brooke, II, p.71).
 15 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.218 (Brooke, II, p.72).
 16 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.213 (Brooke, II, p.71).
 17 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.214 (Brooke, II, p.71).
 18 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.213 (Brooke, II, p.71).

To support his interpretation that some psychics can be called ‘children of the Devil’, even though the Devil never sired anyone, Heracleon identifies three generic ways that a person can be described as someone’s child: the physical generation of a child makes the person a child ‘by nature’ (φύσει); to do the will of another makes the person a child ‘by intent’ (διὰ τὴν γνώμην); some people are deemed ‘children of darkness’ or ‘children of lawlessness’ by ‘value’ (ἄξιον) because they have done some of the works of darkness or lawlessness.¹⁹ What he appears to be saying is that the psychics are neither sons of the Devil nor sons of God by nature, but rather by adoption because they have aligned their intentions and their actions correspondingly with the Devil or God.

Heracleon also uses John 8.44 to discuss the nature of the Devil. He reads the passage to assert that the nature of the Devil is falsehood, error and ignorance. Because of his nature, it is impossible for the Devil to ‘stand in the truth’ or ‘have the truth in himself’. His nature, since it is falsehood, makes the Devil incapable of ever speaking the truth. So he is a liar and also the father of falsehood. The Devil is ‘unfortunate rather than blameworthy’, Heracleon concludes.²⁰ The one to blame is the Devil’s father who invested him with his being and created him.²¹

Origen states that Heracleon also commented on John 4.21, the words that Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman: ‘Jesus says to her, “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father”’. Heracleon identified the mountain with the Devil and his world, which he thinks is only one part of the entire created order. Alluding to Rom 1.25, Heracleon taught that the mountain is ‘a deserted dwelling of beasts’ which the Gentiles and those who lived before the Law used to worship. The reference to Jerusalem was read to reflect ‘the creator whom the Jews served’.²² Their worship is fleshly and erroneous, paying homage to the Creator who is not the Father.²³ In this passage Heracleon is clearly identifying the allegiance of certain parties to the Devil, the Demiurge, and the Father.

It is obvious from Origen’s own commentary on John 8.44 that Heracleon was not the only one interpreting John 8.44 in this direction. Nor was Origen alone in his response, which he presents from four main angles. First, Origen argues that the words ὑμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστὲ are ambiguous. He admits that the literal or plain (δηλόω) reading of the text – Heracleon’s view – suggests that ‘the Devil has a

19 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.215-16, 218 (Brooke, II, pp.71–2).

20 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.252-54 (Brooke, II, p.78).

21 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.202 (Brooke, II, p.69).

22 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.95-97 (Brooke, I, p.262).

23 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.117-18 (Brooke, I, p.266).

father' (ἔχει ὁ διάβολος πατέρα), and that those whom Jesus addresses here appear to be derived from this father. The other meaning, which Origen considers better (βέλτιον), is that the addressees are said to be 'from this father' (ὕμεις ἐκ τοῦδε τοῦ πατρός ἐστε), and that the father signified is the Devil.²⁴

Origen struggles to give credibility to this second 'better' option, which reads 'of the father' as a predicate and 'the Devil' appositionally. The trouble with this reading is that, if the text were to say 'from the father, the Devil' and not 'from the father of the Devil', the presence of the genitive article preceding 'the father' should not be there (which it is!). To read the sentence as Origen desires – 'from the father, the Devil' – means that he has to stretch the rules of Greek grammar and syntax, something with which he is not completely comfortable. Origen explains in a circular fashion that the presence of the genitive before 'the father' has made the meaning ambiguous. He goes on to say that the true meaning of the passage – 'from the father, the Devil' – would appear much more clearly if the first genitive τοῦ were erased (ἀμφίβολον μὲν οὖν ἂν τὸ λεγόμενον, καὶ εἰ περιήρητο τὸ πρότερον ἄρθρον τὸ τοῦ, πλὴν μᾶλλον ἀνεφαίνετο σαφέστερον τὸ βούλημα τοῦ ῥητοῦ)!²⁵

Origen knows that he faces opposition to this reading from other Christians who argue that there is no ambiguity. Although Origen does not mention the names of all his opponents, he states that the person who reads the text as 'from the father of the Devil', and thinks that Jesus is addressing the sons of the Devil's father with his words, supports his reading by pointing to Jesus' additional words, 'When he speaks lies, he speaks from his own, because he is a liar and also his father' (John 8.44e–f). The opponent argues, according to Origen, that the liar is the Devil, and another, in addition to the Devil, is the father of the liar.²⁶ This position assumes that there are two beings mentioned by Jesus: the Devil and his father the liar.

Origen does not respond to his opponent's reading of John 8.44f ('because he is a liar and so is his father') by rendering it: 'because he is a liar and the father of falsehood'. Rather Origen mentions this alternative reading, but discards it, stating that it is an idiosyncratic (ιδίως) way to read the Greek.²⁷ He appears to be concerned about this alternative reading because it is one that Heracleon uses to argue that the Devil is an unfortunate character whose father is to blame for evil. So Origen stays

24 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.171 (Brooke, II, p.64).

25 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.172 (Brooke, II, p.64).

26 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.172 (Brooke, II, p.64).

27 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.253 (Brooke, II, p.78).

away from this rereading and argues that ‘the lie’ refers to the Antichrist, not the Devil, while the Devil is the liar, the father of the Antichrist.

There appears to have been some dispute about this interpretation among catholics, as Origen clarifies his interpretation explaining that the Antichrist is not a lie by nature but by his own choice. There is no need for his colleagues to take offence, nor is it necessary for them to argue that the statement, ‘when he speaks a lie, he speaks of his own’, refers to all liars. Nor should they assert that the words ‘his father is a liar’ refer to the fact that everyone who lies is the father of the lies that he speaks. Origen finds his colleagues’ argument partially convincing and lets it stand as a testament to the ambiguity of the passage.²⁸ Elsewhere he relies on this position when he suggests that, because we are human, ‘we are liars, just as the father of the lie is a liar’. Therefore we should expediently flee ‘to become “gods”’.²⁹

Later Origen takes up the discussion again as he investigates further ‘what the lie is and its father’. He reassesses the situation and concludes that ‘the lie’ is ‘every evil and deceitful spirit’ (including the Antichrist?) whose father is the liar, the Devil.³⁰ They conduct themselves wickedly like their father, not because these spirits have been spawned by the Devil but because they have acted wickedly like the Devil.³¹

This must have been a popular catholic interpretation, since Clement of Alexandria (*ca.* 190–215) applies John 8.44 to the concept of prophecy, arguing that God is not the author of evil, the Devil is. The false prophets are not from God, but are the prophets of the liar. Tertullian (*ca.* 213) appears to know this interpretation as well, declaring that the Devil is ‘a liar from the beginning’, as are the men whom the Devil influences, like his opponent Praxeas, who served the Devil in Rome by driving away true prophecy and putting flight to the Paraclete.³²

The second of Origen’s four major arguments against Heracleon consists of a declaration that the passage does not refer to any group or groups of people that are ‘by nature’ children of the Devil. Because John 8.41 states that the Jews ‘do the works’ of their father, and 8.44 says that they ‘wish to do the desires’ of their father, it is demonstrative of the fact that they are children of the Devil because of their sinful actions.³³ For further support, he quotes 1 John 3.8-10:

28 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.173-75 (Brooke, II, p.64).

29 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.266 (Brooke, II, p.78).

30 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.256 (Brooke, II, p.78).

31 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.262 (Brooke, II, p.78).

32 Tertullian, *Prax.* 1.

33 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.97-105, 176-85, 192-94, 219 (Brooke, II, pp.52, 64–67, 68, 72).

He who commits sin is of the devil, for the devil sins from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was that he might destroy the works of the devil. Everyone who has been born of God does not commit sin, for his seed abides in him, and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil. No one who is unjust is of God, nor one who does not love his brother.³⁴

Third, Origen argues that all souls are created with imaginative capabilities, similar intellectual faculties, and the ability to remember.³⁵ From this he concludes that they must therefore share the same nature. His opponents disagreed, asserting that dissimilar substances like gold, silver, tin, lead and wax can all be stamped in the same manner by the same seal to make similar impressions. In this case, different natures can be stamped into souls, which all have the abilities to be purposeful, intellectual, and memorial. Although Origen admits that this is a very persuasive argument, he points out that the analogy does not work because the impressions are not identical but distinct since one will be gold, another silver, and so forth.³⁶

The fourth defence Origen mounts is his reading of the middle segment of John 8.44, 'He was a murderer from the beginning, and he did not stand in the truth, because truth is not in him'. It appears that both Origen and Heracleon agree that the 'murderer' is to be identified with the Devil. Irenaeus (*ca.* 185) also follows this interpretation of 8.44.³⁷ According to Origen this identification is clear from the story of Adam and Eve in which the first couple died immediately on the day that the murderous Devil deceived Eve through the serpent, although he modifies this elsewhere in his commentary.³⁸ He states that the Devil is a murderer not because he killed a particular individual, but because he killed the whole human race insofar as 'in Adam all die'.³⁹ The Devil as the murderer from the beginning is further identified by Origen with the 'ruler of this world', which he then qualifies: 'I mean, of course, ruler of the earthly region'.⁴⁰

The point of difference between Origen and Heracleon appears to be over what it means to say that the Devil 'did not stand in the truth, because truth is not in him'. As we have seen, Heracleon took this to

34 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.97-105 (Brooke, II, pp.52-5).

35 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.203-6 (Brooke, II, pp.70-1).

36 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.208-10 (Brooke, II, p.71).

37 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.22.2; 5.23.2.

38 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.221 (Brooke, II, p.72).

39 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.224 (Brooke, II, p.72).

40 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.226 (Brooke II, p.72).

mean that the Devil's very nature was falsehood and ignorance; therefore he was unfortunate rather than blameworthy. The one that should be blamed is the Devil's father who created him in this way.⁴¹ Origen says that he and other catholics do not understand the passage to mean that the Devil was false by nature or that it was impossible for the Devil to have stood in the truth at one time.⁴² In fact, the Devil has been deceived by himself and accepts as truth his own lies, making him worse than everyone else who has been deceived by him.⁴³

1.2. The 'Other Sects' and Epiphanius

During Epiphanius' discussion of the Cainites, he quotes his own idiosyncratic version of John 8.44 as he tries to argue against the Cainites whom he says taught that people are good or bad by nature not by choice. But as soon as he quotes the passage, he is sidetracked and provides us with a full description of how 'other sects' (αἱ ἄλλαι αἱρέσεις) (not the Cainites) interpret John 8.44.

According to Epiphanius, these other sects assert from John 8.44 that 'the father of the Jews is the Devil' (πατέρα μὲν τῶν Ἰουδαίων εἶναι τὸν διάβολον) and that 'he has another father' (ἔχειν δὲ πατέρα ἄλλον) and 'his father has a father too' (καὶ τὸν αὐτοῦ πατέρα πάλιν πατέρα).⁴⁴ I read Epiphanius' discourse as the slogans of distinct yet unnamed Gnostics who developed them from their enrapture with John 8.44, a text which they interpreted to refer to three characters. They appear to be reading John 8.44a in a multivalent fashion. When read appositionally ('You are from the father, the Devil') it shows that 'the father of the Jews is the Devil'. When read as a standard genitive phrase ('You are from the father of the Devil'), they argued that this proves that the Devil 'has another father'. They understood 'that one' in John 8.44c to refer to the Demiurge (not the Devil) and so were able to read John 8.44f as a reference to the Demiurge (the liar) and his father (the other liar). Thus the slogan repeated by Epiphanius: 'his father has a father too'.

41 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.202, 252-54 (Brooke, II, pp.70, 78).

42 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.252 (Brooke, II, p.78).

43 Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 20.244 (Brooke, II, p.77).

44 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 38.4.2-3; see also Karl Holl, *Epiphanius II: Panarion haer.* 34-64 (ed. Jürgen Dummer; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, rev. edn, 1980), pp.66-7. All further references to Epiphanius' *Panarion* follow Holl, *Epiphanius II*, and idem, *Epiphanius III: Panarion haer.* 65-80 (ed. Jürgen Dummer; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, rev. edn, 1985).

This final slogan is a distinctive teaching: the Demiurge has a father, and if this father is reflected in their reading of John 8.44f, as appears to be the case, then this father is a liar too. In the majority of Gnostic traditions, the Demiurge has a mother, Sophia, but no father. The lack of a father, in fact, is one of the reasons for his deformity. There is only one Gnostic tradition of which I am aware that claims Ialdabaoth has a father. It is the tradition preserved by *Pistis Sophia* in a myth that recounts the activities of Authades, the disobedient ruler of the thirteenth aeon, who brings forth the great lion-faced Ialdabaoth and establishes him in Chaos. By doing this, Authades means to trick Sophia (whom he despises) into leaving his realm. When she peers down into Chaos, she sees Authades' light in the lion-faced beast. Because Sophia is attracted to light, she desires it. So she descends into Chaos where Ialdabaoth captures her and steals her own light from her. This disables her so that she cannot return to her home in the thirteenth aeon, a place outside of the universe but below the Kingdom of Light.⁴⁵ Given that *Pistis Sophia* is conventionally dated to the late third century or early fourth century CE, it is quite plausible that Epiphanius (ca. 320–403), in his discussion, may be reflecting knowledge of Gnostics familiar with the domain of mythology preserved in *Pistis Sophia*.

Epiphanius elaborates upon his description of the sectarians' interpretation of John 8.44 by explaining (and feigning disbelief) that, when they say, τοῦτον πατέρα τοῦ ἐκείνου πατρὸς εἶναι, they are tracing the Devil's ancestry 'to the Lord of All (ἐπὶ τὸν πάντων δεσπότην), the God of the Jews and Christians and all people (θεὸν Ἰουδαίων καὶ Χριστιανῶν καὶ πάντων)', who is 'the Lawgiver through Moses and he who has done so many miracles'.⁴⁶

Of course Epiphanius considers this interpretation of John 8.44 to be erroneous. He is happy to provide the correct one, along with his own quotation of the disputed passage. It is impossible to know what Epiphanius' Greek version of this verse actually said, because what he quotes is radically different from the version of John 8.44 quoted by Heracleon and Origen. Epiphanius knows that certain groups are arguing that John 8.44a refers to the father of the Devil and he himself admits that the Devil's father needs to be identified. So, one of his strategies to handle this text appears to have been to refashion the passage in such a way that the reference to the father of the Devil is erased. In all the cases where Epiphanius refers to John 8.44a, he does so by stating that the Lord says, 'You are the sons of the Devil', or some like-variation:

45 *Pistis Sophia* 1.30-31, 39, 50.

46 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 38.4.4 (Holl, II, p.67).

John 8.44a	ὕμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ,	You are from the father of the Devil.
<i>Pan.</i> 38.4.2.31-32	ὕμεῖς υἱοὶ ἐστέ τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν τοῦ διαβόλου	You are sons of your father the Devil.
40.5.5	ὕμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ Σατανᾶ ἐστέ	You are from Satan.
40.6.7	ὕμεῖς τέκνα ἐστέ τοῦ διαβόλου	You are children of the Devil.
66.63.1	ὕμεῖς υἱοὶ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ	You are sons of the Devil.
66.63.11	ὕμεῖς υἱοὶ ἐστέ τοῦ διαβόλου	You are sons of the Devil.

He then tries to prove that the reference to the Devil in John 8.44a is a reference to Judas, whom Jesus calls ‘a devil’ and Satan according to the Gospel.⁴⁷ Judas, he says, was not the Devil ‘by nature (φύσει), but by intent (γνώμην)’.⁴⁸ To strengthen this position, Epiphanius quotes Jesus’ words from John 17.11-12, although his version differs substantially from the conventional Greek, which says nothing about the Father being the Lord of heaven and earth:⁴⁹ ‘Father, Lord of heaven and earth, keep those whom you have given me. While I was with them I kept them, and none of them is lost except the son of destruction (ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας)’.⁵⁰ He also refers to Matt 26.24 to show that Judas was a free agent operating on his own volition as the Devil.⁵¹ He says that it is known from every ancient source that the Lord was referring to Judas when he spoke to the Jews in John 8.44.⁵²

This allows him to move to his next proposition: because the Jews and Judas were like-minded and they trusted Judas rather than Christ, Judas became the father of the Jews. Epiphanius says that the Jews are like Eve who trusted the serpent and turned away from God. He quotes his reworked version of John 8.44 as foolproof evidence: ὕμεῖς υἱοὶ τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ.⁵³

Epiphanius then asks: if Judas is the Devil, who is the Devil’s father? He reflects on this question, reasoning that the Devil’s father has to be the liar who came into existence before Judas (ὁ πρὸ αὐτοῦ ψεύστης ὑπάρχων).⁵⁴ In this way he exegetes John 8.44f, which he consistently says refers to the liar (the Devil) and the liar’s father:

47 John 6.70; cf. Luke 22.3.

48 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 38.4.5-6 (Holl, II, p.67).

49 This invocation is from Matt 11.25.

50 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 38.4.7 (Holl, II, p.67).

51 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 38.4.8 (Holl, II, p.67).

52 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 38.4.9 (Holl, II, p.67).

53 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 38.4.9-10 (Holl, II, p.67).

54 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 38.4.12-13 (Holl, II, p.68).

John 8.44f	ὅτι ψεύστης ἐστὶν καὶ ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ.	because he is a liar and so is his father.
<i>Pan.</i> 38.4.2.1-2	ὅτι ψεύστης ἐστίν, ὅτι ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ ψεύστης ἦν	because he is a liar, because his father was a liar.
38.4.2.3-4	ὅτι καὶ ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ ψεύστης ἦν	because also his father was a liar.
40.5.5	ὅτι καὶ ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ ψεύστης ἦν	because also his father was a liar.
40.6.7	ὅτι ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ ψεύστης ἐστίν	because his father is a liar.
40.6.7	ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ ψεύστης ἦν	his father was a liar.
66.63.2	ὅτι ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ ψεύστης ἦν	because his father was a liar.
66.63.11	ὅτι ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ ψεύστης ἦν	because his father was a liar.

Who is the father of the Devil according to Epiphanius? He says that this can be no one other than Cain, whom Judas imitated.⁵⁵ His interpretation is entirely dependent on the position that Judas is Satan or the Devil not by nature but by intent. He became the Devil by imitating Cain, who was a liar and murderer. Cain too was imitating his father, and it is not Adam whom Epiphanius has in mind. It is the Devil again who appears here to be both Cain's father and son.⁵⁶

1.3. The Archontics and Epiphanius

Epiphanius is not done with John 8.44. The verse turns up two books later in his account of the Archontics, a group which he traces back to the Gnostic teacher and hermit Peter who lived in a village near Hebron during the reign of Constantius and his student Eutactus. According to Epiphanius' account, in the Archontics' scheme of things, the archon Sabaoth was an autocrat, ruling over the lesser archons and their angels from the highest celestial sphere, the eighth heaven.⁵⁷ These Gnostics believed that the Devil was the son of Sabaoth, and that Sabaoth was the God of the Jews. His son, the Devil, did not live in the heavens, but on earth where he was more wicked than Sabaoth. They concluded that the Devil did not resemble either Sabaoth or the supernal power they called 'Father', who was inapprehensible. The Devil was a left-hand authority.⁵⁸

55 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 38.4.13 (Holl, II, p.68).

56 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 38.5.1-3 (Holl, II, p.68).

57 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.2.6 (Holl, II, pp.82-3).

58 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.5.1-2 (Holl, II, p.85).

Epiphanius is concerned about the Archontics' persuasive interpretation of John 8.44 and 1 John 3.12, an interpretation which they use to support their anthropogony: Cain and Abel are actually from the Devil's seed (ἐκ τοῦ σπέρματος τοῦ διαβόλου).⁵⁹ Their interpretation is layered. First they read John 8.44a and f as proof that 'the father of the Devil is the lying Archon' (τοῦ δὲ διαβόλου εἶναι πατέρα τὸν ἄρχοντα τὸν ψεύστην).⁶⁰ This lying Archon is Sabaoth. Secondly, they also appear to have been reading John 8.44a appositionally, because they use it as evidence that Cain's father is the Devil: 'his father was the Devil' (πατέρα αὐτοῦ εἶναι τὸν διάβολον) and 'You are from Satan' (ὁμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ Σατανᾶ ἐστε). They also refer to 1 John 3.12 – 'Cain is of the Devil' (τοῦ διαβόλου εἶναι τὸν Κάιν) – in order to provide scriptural evidence that Cain was the Devil's seed. This conclusion is further supported with reference to John 8.44c: 'He was a murderer from the beginning' (ἄπ' ἀρχῆς ἀνθρωποκτόνος ἦν). Like the author of 1 John, they identify the 'murderer' in John 8.44c as Cain, who killed his brother according to the Genesis narrative.⁶¹

So the Archontics were reading the passage as testimony to the existence of Sabaoth as the Devil's father, who is also the father of the liar. The murderer from the beginning was identified as Cain, while the liar was the Devil himself. Cain was the Devil's son. These Gnostics taught that the Devil raped Eve, and from this rape she bore two sons, Cain and Abel.⁶² Apparently they assumed that Cain was the primogenitor of a damned race of humans. These Gnostics also taught that Adam and Eve together conceived Seth and that a higher power snatched him up to protect him from Sabaoth. Once he returned, he sired the saved race, those who are 'Strangers' (ἀλλογενεῖς) in this world.⁶³

Epiphanius insists that this is nonsense. He reiterates the proof texts that tie Judas to the Devil. He understands these texts to be obvious proof that Judas is the Devil of John 8.44, but by intent, not nature.⁶⁴ Cain is the son of the Devil because he copied the Devil's behaviour by lying to Abel and killing him. So Judas and Cain are the liars, and the Devil is their father. He first lied when he spoke through the serpent's mouth to Eve. In fact, Epiphanius thinks that all those who mimic the Devil are sons of the Devil.⁶⁵

59 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.5.3-4 (Holl, II, p.85).

60 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.5.5-8 (Holl, II, pp.85-6).

61 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.5.5-8 (Holl, II, pp.85-6).

62 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.5.3-4 (Holl, II, p.85).

63 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.7.5 (Holl, II, p.88).

64 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.6.2-4 (Holl, II, pp.86-7).

65 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 40.6.5-9 (Holl, II, pp.5-9).

1.4. Mani and the Catholics

According to his opponents, John 8.44 was at the root of Mani's conception of his Gnostic religion. In a (fictional?) 'debate' (ca. 326–330) between Mani and Archelaus, the bishop of Carchar, alleged to have been accurately transcribed by Hegemonius, Mani begins his defence of his religion and its central dogma – that an evil god rules the universe and gave the Law – by quoting three biblical passages.⁶⁶ The first is Matt 7.18: 'a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor a bad tree bear good fruit'. The second is John 8.44: 'the father of the devil is a liar and a murderer from the beginning'. The third is a reference to 2 Cor 4.4, that the god of this world has blinded the minds of people so that they fail to obey Christ's gospel.⁶⁷ Later Mani expounds on John 8.44a–b, 'You are from your father the devil and you wish to do the desires of your father', interpreting it as a reference to the god of the Jews, who is a wicked god whose wicked desires were written down and given to Moses in the form of the Jewish Law. Mani then quotes the rest of 8.44 as proof that the ruler of this world is a liar and a murderer.⁶⁸

Archelaus will have none of this. He replies that the passage refers to the Devil who works in us, who wanted to make us the same as himself by the power of his will. God made every individual with free will, established the law of judgement, and appointed in each of us the ability to sin or not to sin. Even some of the angels resisted God's will. The Devil was one of them and fell from heaven like a bolt of lightning. He struts around on earth deceiving people and urging them to become transgressors like him. Those who obey the Devil are those whom the Saviour referred to in John 8.44a–b.⁶⁹

Mani sees the immediate problem with the catholic line of reasoning dispensed by Archelaus: 'If the Devil comes from God, as you say, then you have said that Jesus is a liar'.⁷⁰ Why? A father is someone who creates something, and he is called father of whatever he has created.⁷¹ If good proceeds from God, and if this God is the creator (as the catholics say), then you make Jesus out to be a liar when he says in John's Gospel that the Devil has a father, and both are liars. Mani tells Archelaus, 'If

66 Mark Vermes and Samuel N. C. Lieu (eds.), *Hegemonius: Acta Archelai* (Manichaean Studies 4; Turnhout: Brepols, 2001).

67 *Acts of Archelaus* 15.6-7 (Vermes–Lieu, p.60).

68 *Acts of Archelaus* 33.1-3 (Vermes–Lieu, p.88).

69 *Acts of Archelaus* 34.1-5 (Vermes–Lieu, pp.94–5).

70 *Acts of Archelaus* 37.1 (Vermes–Lieu, p.96).

71 *Acts of Archelaus* 37.4 (Vermes–Lieu, p.97).

you show me that his father is a liar, and attribute none of this to God, then credence will be granted you on all matters'.⁷²

Archelaus is faced with the full weight of the crux of the argument between the catholic and Gnostic communities. Jesus calls the Devil's father a liar in the Gospel of John. If he is a liar, how can he be the just God of truth that the catholics posit? Archelaus does not despair. He tells Mani, 'I will show you the Devil's father'.⁷³ He explains that the Devil attaches himself to others, like he attached himself to the serpent, Cain and Judas. Through these entities and their actions, the Devil is understood to be a liar and a murderer from the beginning, a point, Archelaus says, even the least intellectual person should be able to discern. Their connection makes Cain and Judas brothers of the Devil as well as fathers of him, since whoever brings forth the Devil from himself and acts according to his desires, has 'sired him and will be said to be his father'.⁷⁴ He follows this argument with scriptural support for the multiple meanings of the term 'father', only one of which is 'naturally sired'.⁷⁵ He even describes Judas' fathering of his crime as a woman's labour, brought on by eating the morsel of bread after the Devil entered him. The bread caused his belly to swell and labour pains to begin, as he began to birth 'an unrighteous conception'. In the end, he had an abortion rather than a full-term birth, because Judas' life ended in remorse.⁷⁶ He then accuses Mani of being the vessel of the Antichrist whose father is Satan.⁷⁷

The conversation between Mani and Archelaus does not end with Hegemonius' record. Epiphanius incorporates long excerpts of the Greek version of Hegemonius' testimony in his description of the Manichaeans. As a result it is not always clear whether the information he relays is from his reading of Hegemonius or from another source. According to Epiphanius, in addition to John 8.44, Mani refers to several texts to demonstrate that the world ruler is evil, rather than the just Lord of the catholic narrative:⁷⁸

A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit; for by its fruit the tree is known (Matt 17.18, 20).

The ruler of this world comes, and finds nothing of his in me (John 14.30).

72 *Acts of Archelaus* 37.1-3 (Vermes-Lieu, p.96).

73 *Acts of Archelaus* 37.2-3 (Vermes-Lieu, p.96).

74 *Acts of Archelaus* 37.5-16 (Vermes-Lieu, pp.97-8).

75 *Acts of Archelaus* 38.1-2 (Vermes-Lieu, p.99).

76 *Acts of Archelaus* 37.15-16 (Vermes-Lieu, p.99).

77 *Acts of Archelaus* 40.1-4 (Vermes-Lieu, pp.104-5).

78 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 66.62.1, 66.1, 66.3, 67.5 (Holl, III, pp.99, 106-7).

The ruler of this world shall be cast down (John 12.31).

The god of this world has blinded the eyes of those who do not believe, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ should shine (2 Cor 4.4).

The whole world lies in the evil one (1 John 5.19).

With special reference to John 8.44, Mani liked to say that 'the creator of heaven and earth is the Devil's father'.

Epiphanius' response begins with the assertion, 'but the text cannot possibly refer to this' (μηδαμῶς δυνάμενον ὅλως ἐπὶ τοῦτο τὸ ῥητὸν φέρεσθαι)!⁷⁹ He makes the argument that the Lord God did not create evil, but that evil is wicked behaviour committed by people. And the source of this evil is the Devil.⁸⁰ When Epiphanius quotes John 8.44a, he quotes his own version of it: 'You are sons of the devil' (ὕμεις υἱοὶ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ).⁸¹ This version reflects Epiphanius' interpretation of the verse; it is not the version of the Gospel of John to which Mani refers and the one we know today from the manuscript tradition.

Epiphanius falls back on the interpretation of John 8.44 he had reported in his discussion of the 'other sects' and the Archontics. He repeats (with the same string of texts as proofs) that the Devil is Judas, a murderer and a liar, who imitated Cain, who in turn imitated the serpent. The Jews are sons of the Devil because they imitated Judas. This designation has nothing to do with their nature. It has to do with the wicked deeds that they chose to commit, imitating Judas' betrayal of Jesus by their rejection of Christianity.⁸²

That John 8.44 was central to Mani's programme is without doubt. Augustine also mentions it. In his own commentary on the Gospel of John, he berates the Jews for changing allegiances; at times they are Abraham's children, at other times God's children. Quoting John 8.44a, he writes that the Jews should listen to the words of the Son of God which identify the Jews as the Devil's children. Then he states that Christians must be wary of this passage because it is used by the Manichaeans to affirm that there exists a certain principle of evil and its family of dark lords who rule this universe. The creator is one of these evil lords, and the Devil and our fleshly bodies originated from him.⁸³ Based on their understanding of this passage – 'the Lord said it!' – they are accustomed to saying that there are two natures: one good and one

79 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 66.63.1-2 (Holl, III, pp.101–2).

80 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 66.62.8-13 (Holl, III, pp.100–1).

81 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 66.63.2 (Holl, III, p.101).

82 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 66.63.9-12 (Holl, III, pp.102–3).

83 Augustine, *Tract. Ev. Jo.* 42.9-10.

evil. The Lord identifies those who cannot hear his message with those people who are not God's.⁸⁴

To argue against the Manichaean reading of John 8.44, Augustine writes that humanity's nature is not evil by design, but has been corrupted by an evil will. He attempts to provide proof for this by stating that the Jews are children of the Devil by imitation, not by birth. The Devil did not come from an evil father, but originated in the same way as the other angels. While the other angels maintained their obedience to God, the Devil did not. This disobedience in fact is what turned him into the Devil.⁸⁵

Delightfully, Augustine preserves the Manichaean response to the catholics. The Manichaeans answer the catholics directly from scripture by asking them, with reference to John 8.44a, 'Let us suppose as you say that the Devil was an angel, and he fell, and with him sin began. But who then was his father?' The catholics reply, 'Who among us ever said that the Devil had a father?', a reply that only makes sense if the catholics are reading John 8.44a appositionally. The Manichaeans know this and therefore they point to the remainder of the Johannine passage, rejoicing that the Lord said – and the Gospel declares – that the Devil 'was a murderer from the beginning, and did not abide in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks of his own; for he is a liar, and *his* father'. Augustine complains that the Manichaeans' response is persuasive because of its literalness, which makes sense to those whom Augustine calls 'simpletons'.

But Augustine is not a simpleton. He wants to clear this up once and for all. He says that the meaning can be gained from the words themselves: 'The Lord called the Devil the father of falsehood'. It is apparent that Augustine reads John 8.44f in the same way as Heracleon had done: αὐτοῦ is understood as a reference to an unnamed singular antecedent ('falsehood'), instead of as a straightforward reference to the Devil and *his* father. He argues further against the position that the text refers to anyone who lies as fathering a lie, because people are not responsible for fathering the lie, only for uttering the lie. It is only the Devil who fathers them. In summary fashion he states that God the Father begat him as his son of truth, but the Devil fell and begat his own falsehood, hearing it from no one. The Devil as the serpent is the murderer from the beginning whose first crime was to slay Adam. 'And he did not abide in the truth. There is no truth in him.' This means that he fell away from the truth that he had possessed at one time.

84 Augustine, *Tract. Ev. Jo.* 42.15.

85 Augustine, *Tract. Ev. Jo.* 42.10.

2. Interpretative Trends

Much was at stake with the interpretation of John 8.44, and this was recognised very early in the Christian tradition. For obvious reasons, the interpretation of this verse resulted in a debate between the catholic and the Gnostic communities. Both communities appear to have been aware of the various ways in which the Greek text of John 8.44 was being read and then interpreted.

2.1. A Literal Reading of John 8.44a: 'You are from the father of the Devil'

John 8.44a appears to have had a 'plain' or literal reading ('you are from the father of the Devil'), as did John 8.44f ('because he is a liar and so is his father'), from which the Gnostic communities benefited and which the catholic communities needed to explain. The Gnostic communities could (and consistently did!) point to this passage as words of Jesus confirming the existence of a god who fathered the Devil, a god whom the Jews worshipped but which was not the god whom Jesus worshipped. This god was considered to be a wicked deity who fathered the Devil and a certain portion of humanity from the same substance. Heracleon is thus able to argue that the choikics are made from the same *ousia* as the Devil, while also maintaining (true to the Christian tradition) that the Devil never sired anyone. The Gnostic interpreters associated either the Devil or the Demiurge with the 'liar' and the 'murderer from the beginning', and the lying father with the Demiurge or an Authades-type god.

2.2. A Literal Reading of John 8.44f: 'Because he is a liar and so is his father'

None of the early catholics prefers the plain reading of John 8.44a, but, early in the tradition, they do claim the plain reading of John 8.44f, 'because he is a liar and so is his father'. They develop four main explanations of the text. First, the lie/liar is identified with the Antichrist, and the Devil with 'his father'. In this case, the Devil is also 'the murderer from the beginning'. Origen said that the 'lie' that is spoken by the Devil is the Antichrist, so the Devil is the father of the lie as well as the liar and the murderer from the beginning. Origen thinks this identification is clear from the story of Adam and Eve, when the serpent killed the whole human race. Second, the lie/liar refers to any evil spirit whose father is the Devil. Associated with this is Clement of Alexandria's interpretation that false prophets are the prophets of the Devil, the liar. Third, Origen knows of catholics other than himself who argue that the liar is anyone

who lies, and the liar's father simply means that the liar has fathered the lie. He is not convinced by this line of reasoning, but lets it stand in his commentary as testimony to the passage's ambiguity. Fourth, there appeared a tradition that associated Judas and Cain with this passage. Epiphanius testifies to it, but his narratives are not consistent. In one narrative, he argues that Judas is the Devil who is the liar, and that his father, who also is a liar, is Cain. In another narrative he says that Cain's father is the Devil, so that Judas and Cain are the liars and the Devil is their father. This confusion may be the result of Epiphanius' knowledge of the *Acts of Archelaus*, which identify the Devil with the liar and the murderer from the beginning. The Devil attaches himself to Cain and Judas. Cain and Judas are brothers as well as fathers of the Devil, because whoever acts out the wishes of the Devil has sired the Devil. Some Gnostics appear to be familiar with these traditions. Epiphanius reports that the Archontics said that the Devil was the liar and Cain, his son, was the murderer from the beginning, the primogenitor of a damned portion of humanity.

These four interpretative strategies are responsive to the Gnostic reading, which claimed, matter-of-factly, that the lie/liar was the Devil and that he had a father who was also a liar. Only Epiphanius' 'other sects' appear to have made the interpretative leap that the Devil's father was the liar; that father had another father who was also a liar. In this latter case, we appear to be seeing a Gnostic tradition similar to that found in *Pistis Sophia*, with Authades as the arrogant father of Ialdabaoth.

2.3. An Idiosyncratic Reading of 8.44a: 'You are from the father, the Devil'

As for the oppositional reading of 8.44a, 'from the father, the Devil', this is the one that the catholics use exclusively, even though they confess that this particular reading ('from the father, the Devil' rather than 'from the father of the Devil') would be clearer if the genitive article before 'father' were erased. Their ultimate concern is that the scripture cannot say 'from the father of the Devil', so they plead that another reading of the text is necessary, one that they regard as 'better' than the plain reading. They are so certain that the text means 'from the father, the Devil' that they freely render it as 'You are sons of the Devil', and attribute these words to Jesus instead of the words found in the scripture. They are uneasy about quoting the Greek text in the form it appears in the biblical passage itself. As a result they tend to substitute for it what they think the passage should say by liberally paraphrasing the passage whenever they refer to it.

Heracleon appears to have read 8.44a in a multivalent way, in its plain sense as support for a Demiurge and appositionally as support for his position that a portion of humanity were sons of the Devil. These people were created by the Demiurge from the same substance as the Devil. From this multivalent reading Heracleon could argue that they were created from the same *ousia* as the Devil, even though they were not sired by him. The 'other sects' mentioned by Epiphanius appear to have been reading the text in a similar multivalent fashion: to show that the father of the Jews is the Devil and to prove that the Devil has another father.

2.4. An Idiosyncratic Reading 8.44f: 'Because he is a liar and the father of it'

As for the idiosyncratic reading of 8.44f – 'because he is a liar and the father of it (i.e. falsehood/lies)' – this was not originally developed or favoured by the catholics. It appears to have originated with Heracleon, who used it to argue that the Devil's nature is falsehood, error and ignorance. Because of this we should understand the Devil to be an unfortunate character. We should not blame him for evil. Rather his father, the Demiurge, should be blamed since it was he who created the Devil and invested him with his wickedness. This line of reasoning appears to have been so persuasive that the catholics avoided this idiosyncratic reading until Augustine, who is the first catholic I am aware of who preferred it. He appears to have realised that the force of the Gnostic argument for the existence of the Devil's father was strongly tied to 8.44f ('because he is a liar and *his* father') and the Manichaeans emphasised αὐτοῦ to make this point. Augustine marks this as the 'simpleton' reading and then retranslates it a manner similar to Heracleon. Thus the Devil is the father of falsehood, but, insists Augustine, this falsehood was not begotten by God. Rather the Devil fell and begat his own falsehood.

3. The Secessionists and the Johannine Epistles

How early can we trace the dispute over the 'authentic' reading and meaning of John 8.44? Are Heracleon and the Peratic commentator our earliest sources for the literal or plain reading of the Greek text, that is, for its reference to the Devil's father as a god other than the Father preached by Jesus? It has long been recognised that 1 John 3.11-12a ('For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, and not be like Cain who was from the Evil

One and murdered his brother’) refers to John 8.44, although most modern commentators consider it to be a casual allusion or an independent use of a shared Johannine tradition.⁸⁶ Given what I have learned about the history of interpretation of John 8.44, I have become convinced that 1 John 3.11-12a is neither of these, but an intended reference to John 8.44. In fact, the entire epistle appears to me to have been written as an exposition on John 8.12-55, in order to dispute an interpretation of this passage espoused by the Johannine secessionists. To understand the secessionists’ position, it is necessary to read the epistle against the grain and determine the type of exegesis to which the presbyter is responding.

The position of the Johannine presbyter amounts to an early version of the catholic hermeneutic that I have tracked in this essay, a hermeneutic developed in order to tame the plain or literal reading of John 8.44. The epistle opens with a reference to John 8.25: ‘They said to him, “Who are you?” Jesus said to them, “Even what I have told you *from the beginning* (τὴν ἀρχὴν ὅτι καὶ λαλῶ ὑμῖν).’ Keying into this passage, the presbyter declares that he and his supporters (in opposition to the secessionists) testify and proclaim Jesus as the manifestation of eternal life.⁸⁷ They know who he is. He is the ‘word of life’ that they have heard *from the beginning* (ὁ ἦν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς).⁸⁸

The presbyter then unfolds several aspects of this proclamation, the ‘truth’ that he and his supporters have heard from the beginning. These aspects are summarised by him twice, in 1 John 2.12-22 and 5.18-20, where he addresses his supporters and praises them for correctly understanding certain subjects. From this praise we can reconstruct the subjects that were of concern to him. First, he is anxious about the understanding of the identity of the true God and about God’s relationship to evil and the Devil. Second, he is concerned about the problem of sin, particularly whether or not believers are sinners. Third, he wants the identity of the ‘liar’ to be known. Fourth, he is concerned about different views regarding Jesus’ nature and role in salvation. These concerns appear to have been generated by the presbyter’s interaction with the secessionists (prior to their secession) and involved a clash of interpretations over John 8.44.

86 Cf. Theo C. de Kruijf, ‘Nicht wie Kain [der] vom Bösen war...[1 Joh 3,12]’, *Bijdragen* 41 (1980), pp.47–63; Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp.108–9; Judith M. Lieu, *I, II, & III John: A Commentary* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2008), pp.18, 134–5, 148, 246–7.

87 Cf. John 1.4; 3.16, 36; 5.24.

88 1 John 1.1-3; cf. 5.11-12.

3.1. The Nature of the Father, the True God

The presbyter claims that he and his supporters 'know' the Son and the 'true' God, his Father (1 John 5.19-20). He appears to be touching upon Jesus' conversation in John 8.12-51 where a number of gods are in play. In particular, he is referring to John 8.19 where Jesus tells his opponents: 'You neither know me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.'

Who is the true God? Throughout the epistle, the presbyter wants to make the case that the true God is free from evil. He and his supporters claim to have heard from Jesus that 'God is light and in him is no darkness at all'. This may represent their interpretation of John 8.12, 'I am the light of the world'. In 1 John 2.29, the presbyter claims that God is 'righteous' and that his righteousness assures kinship between himself and those who act piously. God's nature is sinless, as are those people who do not commit sin and are born as his children (3.9). The Father is associated with love and righteousness; he is a just God whose laws are to be obeyed.⁸⁹ The presbyter reassures his readers that God's laws are not miserable (βαρύς, 5.3). There will be a judgement, but the believer who is constant in his or her obedience to God's laws has nothing to fear (2.7-11; 4.17-21). Believers can depend on this because God's love was made apparent when he sent his Son into the world as 'expiation for our sins' (4.10). The presbyter is particularly concerned to demonstrate that Jesus' commandment – to love one another – is the central law of God, and that even though it is a 'new' commandment, it is already part of the old law (2.7-11).

The presbyter is concerned with the secessionists' theology. They appear to be claiming that they know about the 'true' Father; he is not the traditional god who gave the laws to the Jews. In all likelihood they were teaching that the Jewish God gave 'miserable' laws that were to be obeyed, because he himself was wicked and associated with the 'darkness' and 'the world'. The secessionists appear to have been emphasising that the God preached by Jesus was to be contrasted with the Jewish God of the Law. Jesus' Father was a God of love who gave a 'new' commandment, to love one another, while the God of the Jews was a malicious god who gave the old Mosaic laws to burden people. The presbyter and the secessionists agree on the loving nature of the Father, while disagreeing over the identity of the god that the Father actually is. The presbyter views the Father as the Mosaic god. The secessionists do not.

89 1 John 3.1; 4.7-8, 10-12, 16-17; 5.3.

3.2. Human Nature, Fixed or Not?

The presbyter wishes to make it known that one's affiliation with God or the Devil has nothing to do with a fixed nature. Through a direct reference to John 8.44, and in line with the later catholic interpretation of this passage, the presbyter states that physical parentage does not determine whether a person is born from God and considered a child of God, or is 'from the Devil' (ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστίν) and considered a child of the Devil. Rather this is determined by deeds.

Here the presbyter is quoting the appositional reading of John 8.44a ('you are from the father, the devil) to prove his point: the person who does right is righteous, and the person who commits sin is 'from the Devil'. The presbyter then associates the 'murderer from the beginning' (John 8.44c) with the Devil. He thus explains that sinners are the Devil's children 'because the Devil has sinned from the beginning' (ὅτι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ὁ διάβολος ἀμαρτάνει) and sinners have imitated him (1 John 3.8).

The presbyter continues to reveal the message that he and his supporters 'heard from the beginning' (ἠκούσατε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, 3.11). We should 'not be like Cain who was from the Evil One and murdered his brother' (3.12). Why did he murder Abel? Because Cain's deeds were evil (3.7-12). Cain's murder is expanded by the presbyter to include any hatred that one brother has for another (3.15).

This reading of John 8.44 is an early version of the catholic hermeneutic that read the text appositionally – 'from the father, the Devil' – and identified the Devil as the murderer from the beginning whom Cain copied. The Devil's children are identified as those, like Cain, who copy the Devil and commit sin (3.8, 10). They do not have the 'spirit of truth' but the 'spirit of error' (4.6). They can be identified because they are liars (like the Devil and Cain), who say they love God but then hate their brothers (2.4; 4.20).

This position is expanded at length in the epistle. The presbyter is concerned about his opponents who appear to have said that believers are not sinners, but have a fixed nature that make them children of God. 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1.8). He says that such a statement – 'we have no sin' – makes the Son a liar, and his word not part of their community (1.10). This is a clear reference to a clash over the interpretation of John 8.24, where Jesus states, 'I have told you that you would die in your sins unless you believe I am he'. The secessionists appear to have understood this passage to mean that believers were part of a sinless generation, while the presbyter thought that the text meant that even believers had sin, but their relationship with Jesus had absolved them of that sin.

So, a doctrine of expiation is mentioned by the presbyter.⁹⁰ The presbyter appears to think that the believer gains God's spirit and is born into God's family through an anointing ritual.⁹¹ This birth means that God's nature now lives within the believer and absolves him or her from sin. The presbyter talks about his followers being 'perfected' and 'purified' (2.5; 3.3). Thus 'he cannot commit sin because he is born of God' (3.9; cf. 2.27; 3.7-12). It also means that the believer is protected from future assaults by the Devil (5.18).

The presbyter's exegetical response to his opponents gives us insight into the position of the secessionists and their reading of John 8.44. The secessionists appear to have been claiming that they knew the 'true' Father preached by Jesus, and were part of a sinless generation connected to him by nature. They appear to have identified this 'pure' and 'perfected' generation with the church. Opposing this generation was another generation that consisted of the children of the Devil, a sinful generation associated with the Devil via a fixed nature. They appear to be assuming that the Devil and his wicked generation were created by the other Father, the miserable god who was the Lawgiver and God of the Jews.

3.3. The Liar Identified

The presbyter wants to be certain in identifying the 'liar' of John 8.44d and f, and, in so doing, he reads 8.44f naturally, as do the other early catholic exegetes: '(8.44d) He did not stand by the truth, because there is no truth in him... (8.44f) because he is a liar and so is his father'. The 'liar', according to the presbyter, is anyone who disobeys God's commandments, including the worst offender, the Antichrist, who denies the Father and the Son (2.4, 22).

The Liar is the person who says that he loves God while hating his brother (4.20). He is the person who claims to 'know' God, but disobeys God's commandments: 'the truth is not in him' (2.4). All of these people have the Devil as their father and walk in darkness, lying and not living according to the truth (2.6). They do not know the true Father or Jesus as they claim they do. They have not overcome the Devil but are his children (cf. 2.12-14).

The presbyter plays with John 8.23, where Jesus contrasts his detractors with himself. It reads: 'You are from below, I am from above. You are of this world, I am not of this world'. The presbyter uses this statement to posit that the secessionists are 'of this world'; they are not 'of the Father' (2.16). He associates 'this world' with lust and pride and

90 See 1 John 1.7, 9; 2.2; 4.10; 5.6-7.

91 See 1 John 2.20, 27; cf. 3.24; 4.13.

ignorance of the Father (2.16-17; 3.1). The presbyter also uses John 14.30 against the secessionists. He understands Jesus' allusion to Judas' imminent betrayal – 'the ruler of this world is coming' (ἔρχεται γὰρ ὁ τοῦ κόσμου ἄρχων) – to be a reference to the Antichrist (ἀντίχριστος ἔρχεται) (2.18; 4.3). The presbyter says that his opponents, as antichrists, have finally come into the world.

This is an interesting use of these two Johannine passages (8.23; 14.30), suggesting that the presbyter's opponents likely had other understandings of them. Were the secessionists arguing that Jesus was not 'of this world' which was ruled by the Jewish god? If so, they would have been among the first Christians to have connected the Jewish Lawgiver, the ruler of this world, to Judas, as we now know was the case with the author(s) of the *Gospel of Judas*.⁹² Given the presbyter's exegetical tendencies to identify the Liar with a figure other than the Devil, it is very likely that the secessionists were like the later Gnostic exegetes. They were saying that John 8.44f identifies the Liar with the Devil and his father with the malicious Lawgiver. This would be consistent with what we already recovered of their arguments about the nature of the true Father. They were saying that the father of the Devil cannot be the God of truth, but must be the malicious Lawgiver, the god of the Jews.

3.4. Jesus' Nature and Role

The final concern of the presbyter centered on the nature of Jesus and his role. The presbyter wants to tie him tightly to the righteous God, the Lawgiver, who will enact judgement. Jesus Christ is an advocate with his Father on behalf of the righteous, a faithful and just God who hears confessions, forgives sins and purifies.⁹³ He can do this because he functions as an expiation (ἰλασμός) for sin.⁹⁴ He came to teach people God's laws, laws by which they will be judged. The greatest of these laws is love toward one's brother.⁹⁵

The presbyter emphasises that only those who confess that 'Jesus Christ has come in the flesh' (Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα) are to be counted among the children of God (4.2; cf. 2 John 7). Never have there been more misunderstood words than these, taken as solid evidence that the secessionists were docetists.⁹⁶ But this is only because our

92 DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*.

93 1 John 1.9; 2.1-2; 5.14-15.

94 1 John 2.2; 4.10; 5.6-8.

95 1 John 3.19-24; 4.7-19.

96 For discussion, see Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (trans. R. Philip O'Hara with Lane C. McGaughey and

'academic' histories of early Christology, even today, have been so controlled by the needs, perceptions, and polemics of conventional Christianity, that the traditional Christological categories have not allowed us to see clearly what was going on.⁹⁷

The cry 'in the flesh' was not the presbyter's cry against the docetism of the secessionists, since he is merely referring to the Prologue of the Gospel of John. There is no literary-critical evidence that 'the Word became flesh' is a later addition to the opening hymn, so the secessionists must have been familiar with it. This means that the problem centred on the interpretation of the Prologue. What did it mean that the Logos became flesh? It appears to me that the presbyter took it to mean ensoulment, that the Logos descended into flesh at Jesus' birth and functioned as Jesus' soul. Or to put it another way, the Logos was born as Jesus' *psyche* in flesh.⁹⁸ Thus I take 1 John 5.6 to be the presbyter's testimony about Jesus' advent. The Logos did not just come down and possess him at his baptism, 'by the water only' (ἐν τῷ ὕδατι μόνον),⁹⁹ rather, Jesus came into being both through water and blood (δι' ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος), the two bodily issues at birth. Jesus' advent through water and blood is proven by the presence of the Spirit, which is one with the water and the blood (5.8). The presbyter's claim is that somehow the Spirit became unified with Jesus' flesh at birth, through the water and blood.

This suggests that the secessionists were arguing that the reference to the Logos becoming flesh should be understood as the possession of the man Jesus by a great Spirit from above, at his baptism, 'by the water only'. This is an entirely different Christological model, and a very old one at that. This model had developed out of the prophetic tradition, which understood that God's Spirit could anoint righteous men, resting in them with every generation (cf. Wis 7.27). This model forms the basis for the Christology in the Gospel of Mark, which uses εἰς to describe

Robert Funk; *Hermeneia*; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), pp.62–3; Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979), pp.147–64; Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, pp.134–5; Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, pp.10, 23, 169–70.

97 See my full critique and suggestions for a new system in April D. DeConick, 'How We Talk about Christology Matters', in David B. Capes, April D. DeConick, Helen K. Bond, and Troy A. Miller (eds.), *Israel's God and Rebecca's Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Waco: Baylor, 2007), pp.1–23.

98 DeConick, 'How We Talk about Christology Matters', pp.19–20.

99 For a summary of various scholastic readings of this passage, see Lieu, *I, II, and III John*, pp.209–14.

Jesus' possession by the Spirit (1.10). But remnants of it are also found in the other Synoptics and the Gospel of John, which all record the descent of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism and the release of his spirit at the crucifixion.¹⁰⁰ The Gospel of John preserves a saying that must have been of interest to the secessionists: 'This is indeed the prophet-who-is-to-come into this world!' (6.14).

It is also the model used by the Gnostic Christian Cerinthus according to Irenaeus, who states that Cerinthus taught that the primary supreme God, the unknown Father, was separate from the ruler of this world.¹⁰¹ Tertullian tells us that Cerinthus taught that this lesser god was an angel who represented the god of the Jews and was associated with the Mosaic Law.¹⁰² Irenaeus says that Cerinthus thought that Jesus was born a normal natural child, the son of Mary and Joseph, but he grew to be more righteous than most men. At his baptism, 'Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove'. From then on Jesus proclaimed the unknown Father and performed miracles. At the crucifixion, however, Christ departed from Jesus, so that Jesus the man suffered and rose again, while Christ the Spirit remained impassible.¹⁰³

I mention Cerinthus as a point of comparison, as the type of Christian theological system that would have been very close to the system of the Johannine secessionists. Taking into account the arguments and positions of the presbyter, it appears that the secessionists were arguing from the literal reading of John 8.44 that the god of the Jews, the Lawmaker, was wicked and the father of the Devil. Jesus' Father, however, was the God of love, the true God. Jesus himself was a man possessed by the Spirit of God, born of water only. This recovery of the secessionists' position suggests that the epistles are our first historical testimony to the 'conversation' between the catholic and the Gnostic interpretations over John 8.44.

The skeleton is out of the closet. The plain or literal reading of John 8.44 appears to be primary, while the catholic reading – responsive and secondary – was put into place to tame the beast. This suggests that the Gospel of John may not have been the original property of the proto-orthodox. The proto-orthodox interpretation appears to be superimposed on the Gospel as a way to domesticate it and redirect it.

100 Cf. Matt 3.16; 27.50; Luke 3.22; 23.46; John 1.32-33; 19.30.

101 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26.1.

102 Ps.-Tertullian, *Praescr.* xviii.

103 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26.1.

4. Closing the Heavens

When I wrote my book *The Voices of the Mystics* in 2001, I understood correctly that the Johannine author had sealed tight the open heaven. No one except Jesus and those he would lead at the *eschaton*, when he came again, could pass through the heavens. Individual mystical ascent to the heavenly Father had been shut down. Jesus and the Father could be encountered in the faithful community through the sacraments, through the reception of the Spirit, which had been sent down from the heavens into the cosmos in Jesus' absence.

What I did not know at the time I wrote my book was *why*. Why was the Johannine author so insistent on this point? My study of John 8.44 has clarified this for me. As I have argued in another publication, the theological system assumed by the Johannine author is a 'transitional' system marked by the bifurcation of the Jewish God into a good just Father who lives in the high heaven and a malicious Lawgiver who fathered the Devil and is the ruler of the world – the earth and its atmosphere.¹⁰⁴ What we have in the Gospel of John is a system where the Father of the Devil rules the world with his son, the Devil, just as the righteous Father rules the heavens with his Son, Jesus. The domain of the Lawgiver is 'the world' – the earth and its atmosphere. He is not the astral Lord. The astral Lord is another god. The God of the Heavens is the supreme Father whom Jesus preached. Unlike later developed Gnostic systems, the supreme Father in the Johannine Gospel is still part of this universe. He is not a transtheistic God. He is not living above or beyond the heavens in some distant pleromic world. We see in the Gospel of John the preservation of a panastral system where the God of worship lives in the highest heaven while the Jewish God lives in the lowest. The God of worship is far away, but he is still in the celestial sphere and immediately connected with creation through his Son Jesus. In terms of the development of Gnostic traditions, this represents a crucial step, the 'missing link' between traditional Jewish cosmology and later Gnostic systems.

In later Christian Gnostic texts, it is a common perspective that the great Power Jesus from the Unknown God is the only Power strong enough to move back and forth between the gods and their separate

¹⁰⁴ April D. DeConick, 'What is Hiding in the Gospel of John: Reconceptualizing Johannine Origins and the Roots of Gnosticism', in April D. DeConick and G. Adamson (eds.), *Histories of the Hidden God* (Gnostika; Durham: Acumen, 2013), pp.13–29.

spheres of dominion. The only way for the faithful to make a similar ascent is through the mediation of Jesus, and this mediation is eschatological or *post-mortem*. Jesus takes the faithful to the Unknown God at the end of time or at death. The individual soul was ignorant, lost, weak, and bound to the rules of a wicked god. Liberation could only come from above through the intervention of a power greater and stronger than the wicked god. This power is Jesus who is the only one who knew and who could hazard the journey across realms and take the faithful souls with him. He also could provide them with specific knowledge and instructions about how to prepare for the journey ritually. Thus, it is true that, eventually, various Christian Gnostic groups do develop series of rituals that allow them to be initiated into the hells and heavens during their lifetimes, rituals that function as trial death journeys. I think that the first inklings of these types of rituals are preserved in the Gospel of John, with its emphasis on new birth through the water and the Spirit, opening entrance into God's Kingdom via a safe and controlled ritual environment.

The people who created the basic metaphysical system preserved in the Gospel of John were panastral theologians. Their theology provides us with the 'missing link' in the formation of later transc cosmic metaphysical Gnostic systems. The architects of the foundational theology of the Fourth Gospel were not catholic Christians, but transitional Christians, *bona fide* ancestors of the second-century Gnostics.

JOHN'S GOSPEL
AND INTIMATIONS OF APOCALYPTIC

Edited by

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