For God so Loved the World

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For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. - John 3:16

John 3:16 is widely regarded as the best-known Bible verse. Its meaning is also widely debated. The verse is one among others at the center of a theological question concerning the extent of those who God intends to save. Some believe that the Son of God came to earth to save every person; others disagree. This paper is focused on John 3:16 in the context of this debate.

Two features of the debate motivate this paper. The first is that the side of the debate which I favor has spent more time rebutting objections or attempting to undercut arguments for another view than articulating a detailed positive case for its own interpretation of John 3:16. The second feature is the fact that there are subtle distinctions that are present in the literature but their significance has been elusive, and so defenses, criticisms, and articulations of a view can become confused. Both sides continue to regard the other's interpretation of the verse as perpetually dissatisfying.

The goal of this paper is to provide a positive case for an interpretation of John 3:16 in the context of the debate about the extent of God's salvific love. The literature surrounding this verse is massive. I make no attempt to be exhaustive over every work on the topic. The works and arguments I have chosen to discuss are those that pertain to building the positive case rather than indicating everything I believe to be incorrect in other work. In addition, there are persuasive arguments in favor of the view I hold about the larger debate but which have no place in this paper. By making as focused of a case as I can, I hope to address neglected areas and advance the evidence for one interpretation, even if the larger debate remains.

Section 1 reviews interpretations of John 3:16 in the context of the debate concerning who God intends to save. Section 2 discusses issues related to the epistemology of interpretation. Sections 3 - 6 present the case for my interpretation, which holds John 3:16 to be evidence of God's universal salvific love but not for every person. Section 7 refines and summarizes the view advocated in this paper. Section 8 closes by illustrating how John 3:16 remains an evangelistic passage.

1. The landscape of interpretations

In this paper, the key issue concerning John 3:16 is whether God's salvific love extends to every person. More precisely, it is whether John 3:16 is evidence that God the Son came to earth for the purpose of saving every person.[1] There are two parts in this verse from which authors argue in the affirmative. Arguments from one part depend upon arguments from the other part, as I will show. This exercise in argument reconstruction is somewhat artificial in the sense that it involves a logical division of arguments which authors themselves might not cut. The purpose of the division is to put the central matter of importance into focus so the relevant views can be identified more clearly.

The first part from which authors argue that God's love extends to every person is the presence of "whoever believes". Steve Lemke is one author who develops an argument from this expression.[2] Lemke writes, "The Greek word *pas*, meaning 'all' or 'everyone,' which is found in 1 Tim 2:4 and in 2 Pet 3:9, in all the standard Greek dictionaries means 'all'!" (123) He then presents passages in support of the claim, "This same all-inclusive Greek word *pas* (translated as "everyone," "all," or "whosoever") is used repeatedly in the New Testament to offer an invitation to all people who would respond to God's gracious initiative with faith and obedience" (124). As evidence from the fourth gospel, along with other New Testament texts, Lemke cites John 1:7, 9; 3:15-16; 4:13-14; 6:40; 11:26; and 12:46.[3]

The above argument is unsuccessful. It does not follow from the above two points that John 3:16 implies God intends to save every person. An invitation to *all people who would respond to God's gracious initiative with faith and obedience* is not the same as an invitation to *all people who would or would not respond to God's gracious initiative with faith and obedience*. Only the the latter implies an invitation to every person. Furthermore, the mere presence of *pas* in John 3:16 does not imply that God has a certain intention toward every person. John 1:7, which Lemke cites, says, "He [John the Baptist] came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him." The pronoun in the prepositional phrase "through him" refers to the Baptist and not the light. As C. K. Barrett notes, it "must

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[1] This precision covers the possible view that God's salvific love *extends* to every person but it is not intended by God to *save* every person, such that the view yields a negative answer.

[2] Lemke (2010), 122-25; citations from Lemke in the body of this text refer to these pages.

[3] Lemke ends his discussion by noting, "the New Testament often uses a form of *hostis*, which when combined with *an* or *ean* is an indefinite relative pronoun best translated as 'anyone,' 'whosoever,' or 'everyone' and refers to the group as a whole, with a focus on each individual member of the group." (125) Some argue that the same concept is present in John 3:16 even though *hostis* is missing from this verse.

refer to John; men do not believe *through* Jesus but *in* him."[4] So the quantifier, "all", in "all who might believe through him" should not be understood to say that the Baptist came as a witness so that every person everywhere throughout all of time might believe through him. That would be false. Lemke's argument requires an additional premise so that the scope of *pas* extends to every person.

The missing premise is *"God so loved the world" means God loves every person.*[5] This phrase "God so loved the world" is the other part of the passage from which some argue God intends to save every person. According to this line of argument, because God loves every person, He sent his Son so that whoever believes may have eternal life. Defenders of this argument put the point in different ways but they all intend the same meaning by "world": that it is every human person.[6] Only when this argument about "world" is presented can Lemke's argument appear to be cogent. Without "world" to contextualize the domain of "all" to every person, the argument from the "whoever believes" part of John 3:16 remains incomplete.[7] In fact, Lemke cites 1 John 2:2 as evidence of God's universal love for all persons in the context of that argument, even though *pas* does not appear there but "world" does. What is important about the logical distinction of the arguments is that the success of arguing for God's intention to save every person from John 3:16 depends upon how one interprets "world" in John 3:16. For that reason, the focus this paper is upon "For God so loved the world".

The landscape of interpretations of this phrase in John 3:16 can be gleaned by considering possible substitutions for "the world" and then determining whether the meaning of the verse has changed. I will provide two examples from the literature. Both examples

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[4] Barrett (1978), 160.

[5] More precisely: *in John 3:16* "God so loved the world" *means* or *implies* that God loves every person. Even if the expression were elsewhere (and it is not), it would not necessarily be the case that John 3:16 means that. Obviously, sameness of meaning is not determined by sameness of expression alone. Alternatively, someone might suggest the view is implied by what it does mean.

[6] According to Vines (2010), 17, "world" "refers to the sum total of all people". In Peckham (2015), 200, Peckham is clear that "world" refers to each human person: "God is the primary source of love and draws humans toward himself… Indeed the "God of love" (2 Cor. 13:11) so loved the world that he gave his beloved Son, seeking reciprocal relationship with each one (John 3:16)." I hereby drop the qualification that it *human* persons are the focus.

[7] Mounce (2018) is another source that argues from "whosoever believe". Mounce writes, "we do have an indefinite construction in John 3:16 with the use of πᾶς and an articular imperfective participle (πᾶς ἡ πιστευών) used to indicate a generic, 'general utterance' (see Wallace, 615f.). Just do a search for that construction and you can see it is universal in intent." But even this does not settle the matter, which explains why Mounce clarifies, "he actually loves the entire world, hence requiring an indefinite construction."

suggest that the meaning of the text has changed once "the world" is given a substitution which the author does not believe to be plausible.

The first example is from R. L. Dabney. According to Dabney's discussion of John 3:16, some "make 'the world' which Christ loved, to mean 'the elect world;' and we reach the absurdity, that some of the elect may not believe, and perish."[8] Dabney's thought is that if "the elect" were substituted for "the world", then the division of "the world" into two groups in John 3:17 leads to the absurdity that the elect might be condemned.[9]

D. A. Carson provides a second useful example although he is not explicit about the idea of substituting terms. Consider his argument that "the world" cannot refer to the elect:

> I know that some try to take *kosmos* ("world") here to refer to the elect. But that really will not do. All the evidence of the usage of the word in John's Gospel is against the suggestion. True, *world* in John does not so much refer to bigness as to badness. In John's vocabulary, *world* is primarily the moral order in willful and culpable rebellion against God. In John 3:16 God's love in sending the Lord Jesus is to be admired not because it is extended to so big a thing as the world, but to so bad a thing.[10]

According to Carson, "world" does not refer to the elect but refers to people who are in the state of condemnation by God. In his commentary on the fourth gospel, he clarifies that "the 'world' in John's usage comprises no believers at all. Those who come to faith are no longer of this world; they have been chosen out of this world (15:19)."[11] If "the world" refers to all of those in the state of condemnable wickedness, then that comprises all humans in need of a savior, regardless of whether they are elect or not. By substituting "sinners" for "the world", it is appropriate to affirm that God sent his Son in order to save every person. This is supported by Carson's clarification of the Lamb taking away the sins of the world in John 1:29, which he says "is all human beings without distinction."[12] By contrast, substituting "the elect" for "the world" obscures God's great love for *sinners.*

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[8] Dabney (1996), 525.

[9] Davis (2018) suggests by similar reasoning that John 3:16 itself would be tautologous because, according to the argument, the elect are defined in part as those who believe and have eternal life.

[10] Carson (2016), 27.

[11] Carson (1991), 205. Carson rejects the division Dabney identifies in John 3:17, which is also proposed by Barrett (1978), 216; cf. Carson (1991), 123.

[12] Carson (1991), 151.

These examples illustrate that theologians take potential substitutions for “the world” and they determine if the substitutions are plausible by whether the verse changes its meaning. The present point is not to dismiss that method but to use it as a heuristic for identifying different interpretations of the phrase “For God so loved the world”. The relevant differences between Lemke and Carson for this paper are differences of nuance. One might emphasize the idea of the world being a state of badness which in turn implies every person, or one might go straight to the universal category of all individuals while nevertheless acknowledging that everyone is a sinner. The views are not necessarily exclusive of each other.

It is worth examining the work of A. W. Pink, who offers another view. He not only recognizes the substitution strategy but defends a view in response to it. In his book, *The Sovereignty of God*, a chapter is devoted to “Objections and Difficulties” where John 3:16 is addressed.[13] After arguing that “world” does not mean the every person, Pink indicates that “world” is used in a general way. What he means by a “general way” is different kinds of people at high levels of categorization, e.g., ethnicities or nationalities. The present contrast in the passage, according to Pink, is between Jews and Gentiles. Unfortunately, Pink devotes only a single paragraph to explaining its meaning in the immediate context of John 3.

> Now the first thing to note in connection with John 3:16 is that our Lord was there speaking to Nicodemus—a man who believed that God’s mercies were confined to his own nation. Christ there announced that God’s love in giving His Son had a larger object in view, that it flowed beyond the boundary of Palestine, reaching out to "regions beyond". In other words, this was Christ’s announcement that God had a purpose of grace toward Gentiles as well as Jews. "God so loved the world", then, signifies, God’s love is international in its scope. But does this mean that God loves every individual among the Gentiles? Not necessarily, for as we have seen, the term "world" is general rather than specific, relative rather than absolute. The term "world" in itself is not conclusive. To ascertain who are the objects of God’s love other passages where His love is mentioned must be consulted.

Apparently few people, perhaps even Pink, found this to be a satisfactory response because he includes an appendix on the meaning of “world”.[14] He explicitly recognizes the substitution strategy there. The appendix begins as follows.

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[13] Pink (1949), from “Objections and Difficulties.”

[14] Pink (1949), appendix ii.

> It may appear to some of our readers that the exposition we have given of John 3:16 in the chapter on "Difficulties and Objections" is a forced and unnatural one, inasmuch as our definition of the term "world" seems to be out of harmony with the meaning and scope of this word in other passages, where, to supply the world of believers (God's elect) as a definition of "world" would make no sense. Many have said to us, "Surely, 'world' means world, that is, you, me, and everybody."

Pink lists seven different possible meanings of "world" with citations throughout the New Testament. He asks, "But how is a searcher of the Scriptures to know which of the above meanings the term "world" has in any given passage?" He answers the question this way.

> This may be ascertained by a careful study of the context, by diligently noting what is predicated of "the world" in each passage, and by prayerfully consulting other parallel passages to the one being studied. The principal subject of John 3:16 is Christ as the Gift of God. The first clause tells us what moved God to "give" His only begotten Son, and that was His great "love;" the second clause informs us for whom God "gave" His Son, and that is for, "whosoever (or, better, 'every one') believeth;" while the last clause makes known why God "gave" His Son (His purpose), and that is, that everyone that believeth "should not perish but have everlasting life." That "the world" in John 3:16 refers to the world of believers (God's elect), in contradistinction from "the world of the ungodly" (2 Pet. 2:5), is established, unequivocally established, by a comparison of the other passages which speak of God's "love.

In my opinion, this appears to be a promissory note. When one looks at Pink's commentary for the careful study by the context, the details on this point are not more robust than what is said above. In addition, one finds that he also regards aspects of Carson's view to be attractive.[15] The trouble is that Pink appears to endorse three different views about the meaning of "the world" but it is unclear how the reader is supposed to put them all together into a single unified interpretation. This can add to the attraction of alternative interpretations.

The different interpretations one might propose for the phrase "For God so loved the world" can be summarized as follows. The *individualist* interpretation is that God's love for the world is God's love for every person. The *redemptive* interpretation is that God's love for the

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[15] Pink (1945), from notes on John 3. "There was every reason why the world should have been condemned. The heathen were in an even worse condition than the Jews. Outside the little land of Palestine, the knowledge of the true and living God had well nigh completely vanished from the earth. And where God is not known and loved, there is no love among men for their neighbors. In every Gentile nation idolatry and immorality were rampant."

world is God's love for fallen humanity. The *ethnonationalist* interpretation is that God's love for the world is God's love for all kinds of ethnicities or nationalities. Finally the *elective* interpretation is that God's love for the world is God's love for the elect. Each of the names are merely descriptive for reference in this paper rather than being evaluative judgments. Furthermore, no view is called "universal" because several arguably satisfy some sense of universality. Some of these views can be coherently combined. How an author describes the meaning of the verse may depend on which meaning is taken to be fundamental to the context of John 3. Now that the landscape of interpretations has been presented, the next section discusses methodical matters for how to arrive at a plausible interpretation.

2. Evidence for interpretations

What sort of evidence more or less strongly supports an interpretation? This section discusses evidential issues pertaining to understanding another person's communication correctly. In order to build a compelling positive case for one interpretation, the reader should be in agreement about how to assess the comparative weight of the evidence.

Consider, then, the evidence put forth by Roger Olson in favor of the individualist interpretation of John 3:16 over the ethnonationalist interpretation. He claims that the ethnonationalist interpretation *contradicts* scripture.[16] As evidence of this, Olson quotes theologian Vernon Grounds:

> "A mere *catena* of passages discloses the fact, for fact it is, that the divine purpose in Jesus Christ embraces not a segment of the human family but the race *en toto*," and "It takes an exegetical ingenuity which is something other than a learned virtuosity to evacuate these texts of their obvious meaning; it takes an exegetical ingenuity verging on sophistry to deny their explicit universality."[17]

Although it is true that general data about how words or expressions are used in a variety of cases can inform the meaning of a specific case, Olson's evidence does not support the claim that there is a contradiction. A mere *catena* of passages is consistent with exceptions. Furthermore, contrary to what Grounds says, this sort of evidence does not make an interpretation rise to the level of obviousness in any sense that adds justification for that interpretation. If one attempts to justify an interpretation of a text by appeal to another text

[16] Olson (2006), 65.

[17] Olson (2006), 65, footnote 6.

from which a meaning is inferred, the appeal itself *presupposes* sufficient similarity of contexts or concepts to make the inference plausible. In the case of John 3:16, the similarity is usually assumed, which is why authors attempting to justify their interpretation of John 3:16 go to passages like 1 Timothy 2:4 or 2 Peter 3:9 without any argument. Without that presupposition, the relation to other passages and the consequential meaning are not obvious. Those passages found elsewhere may be evidence for an interpretation in John 3:16, but not all passages that are thought to bear on the meaning of John 3:16 are equally good evidence.

When an interpretation of the words or actions of another person occurs (or even of oneself), the interpreter's degree of reliability depends on the extent that he or she can empathize with the interpreted person at some moment in time. This means, roughly, that the interpreter can put himself or herself into the perspective of the writer or agent and access the reasons that motivate the action or writing.[18] An illustration where this occurs is in the discipline of history. Historians interpret texts based in part on their ability to get into the mind of the writers or actors surrounding some past events. The more information the historian knows about the events and how persons respond helps the historian discover (or create) a more compelling narrative of the reasons for why something happened or why someone engaged in certain behavior. This point about empathy suggests that as interpreters become more distant from or less capable of understanding the original context of the words or behavior to be explained, the more challenging it is to have reasonable confidence in an interpretation.

It is not always a simple matter of what constitutes the relevant context. The relevant context is any of the information that holds significance for determining the meaning of a word, expression, sentence, or collection of sentences. What constitutes a unit of thought in a text (a pericope) and what constitutes the relevant context that informs one's interpretation of a certain verse require interpretive judgments. For example, John 20:31 says that the signs Jesus performed are "written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." How much does the meaning of John 3:16 depend on understanding the purpose of the book? Does one's interpretation of John 20:31 act like a filter for the possible meanings of John 3:16? Some people suggest that every verse in the Bible is in some sense about Jesus. Is that how an interpretation of John 20:31 should bear on one's understanding of John 3:16? If one takes a certain interpretation of that passage and then uses that as a guide or a governing principle of interpretation for everything else in the fourth gospel, then one is putting a certain amount of confidence into how tightly coupled the meaning John 3:16 is to a passage much later in the book.

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[18] Stueber (2006); Kögler and Stueber (1999) are excellent resources on this for understanding empathy in the social sciences, history, and folk psychology. The literature on empathy is quite large and the details of how exactly it works are peripheral to the present discussion.

Interpretive judgment is also required when one associates two concepts from different contexts and ascribes that association to the mind of the author. An example of this appears in attempts to understand the *logos* of John's prologue (John 1:1-18). What sort of background did John have in mind when writing the prologue? Might John have borrowed from Philo of Alexandria, or the Wisdom literature, or the Old Testament? Interpreters look for evidence of how John uses the concept of the *logos* in the text, they find correlations in other works, and then they attempt to extrapolate a shared meaning to the extent that is thought to be plausible. Because the author of the gospel, for instance, does not tell the reader exactly how the word is being used or what the background is, interpreters have to make judgments of what the most likely candidates are and go from there.

The requirement that judgments of contextual or conceptual relevance are themselves based in interpretative judgments need not result in interpretive skeptical despair or flight toward postmodern literary theory. Instead, what is required is careful attention to the features that would increase empathetic understanding between an interpreter and an author. For example, if an author uses an expression only in circumstances that have a certain feature, that is a good sign that understanding the meaning of that expression by the author requires taking note of that feature's presence or absence. If the author employs certain conventions repeatedly in some places but not others, the repeated presence of that convention may be a good sign that the author is attempting to draw your attention to something. Successfully interpreting an author is complicated because the motivations of authors vary and their reasons can be complex, even elusive to themselves. Of course an author can also indicate how their own writing should be understood. But that is less often available; even when it is available the explanatory text is subject to all of the same interpretive and probabilistic judgments.

Since confidence in the correctness of an interpretation should increase relative to the degree that a reader can empathize with an author, it is unsurprising that knowing information about the intended audience, the author's biographical details, and details surrounding the context (e.g., linguistic and historical) in which the work was written can increase reasonable confidence in an interpretation. This fact explains why readers from very different places and times can often comprehend quite a lot about what a text is saying. There can be a sufficient amount of overlap in social customs, in human behavior, in the symbolism and concepts passed down through time, that readers do not all have to become professional theologians or scholars of various periods to understand ancient texts. On the other hand, readers make assumptions that can distort their understanding of a text. This explains why those who eschew deeper study do so at their own peril. Even professionals who study the details of and around a text can bring mistaken assumptions or make bad inferences, and not just about the

text but about the data they use to understand the text. Professionals can be caught in the grip of a false theory and therefore know less about what a text means than a non-specialist. Finally, the role of empathetic understanding explains why a text can become more illuminating or more confusing over time for a single interpreter. New information, attention to certain details previously ignored, or stress upon certain data can present the text in a new light - that is, a more closely aligned or further distanced perspective between the reader and author.

Another important mechanism to understand a text is to ask critical questions. The reader asks critical questions about a text and then attempts to explain why answers to those questions are plausible or not. Sometimes this involves going to other texts. For example, in John 13:1-15, Jesus washes the disciples' feet. One author, Lydia McGrew, asks why Jesus does this even though John 13 does not explain why Jesus does this. She considers some explanations and finds a plausible explanation based on details mentioned in Luke 22:24-27.[19] The specific details of this story are not as important as what McGrew is doing, namely explaining the presence or absence of details to which the author does not himself draw the reader's attention. There may be pieces of a text that strike one as odd, unexpected, or confusing. There might be patterns in the text that illuminate parts of a narrative or the text's structure. The reader needs to determine, insofar as it is possible, whether these are coincidental or intentional. An interpreter who increases in empathetic understanding reduces the amount of engaged perplexity over the details. Based upon which explanations appear to be plausible, one considers which of those explanations is the best.

It should now be apparent why the citation of a *catena* of passages to support an interpretation of a specific text is weak evidence. It is only loosely tied to data that increases empathetic understanding.[20] Because the features that would increase empathetic understanding are abstracted from the mere citations of other texts, what a person believes about a text may be based on which texts are regarded as most fundamental to explain or even what an interpreter happens to encounter first. The more reliable approach focuses on what evidence would justify an interpreter's understanding of a text by empathizing with the author.

This section started with an example of how someone might argue for an individualist interpretation of John 3:16. That argument amounted to finding other verses that one considers to be sufficiently like John 3:16. This cross-reference approach was not discounted. Instead an

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[19] McGrew (2017), 48-49.

[20] The cross-reference approach is more strongly suited for developing a systematic theology. This is not a criticism of systematic theology in favor of biblical theology. Systematic theology does provide evidence and open interpretive possibilities for exegesis. But I fear that uncritical reliance upon systematic theology can lead to less plausible interpretations.

explanation of the importance of empathetic understanding was provided. This supports that the above cross-reference or proof-texting approach is weak evidence, for it does not by itself support the justification of connecting two or more passages.[21] The reader can now see why citations of the Johannine literature would be better evidence of the meaning of John 3:16 than, say, the Pauline letters, unless the Pauline letters (or any other text) had directly commented on the passage in John. Moreover, even texts within the fourth gospel that are closer to the context of John 3:16 are better evidence for its meaning than just any text that happens to be found in the Johannine writings, such as 1 John 2:2. The next section will begin to look more closely at conditions that better inform readers about the perspective of the author of the fourth gospel.

To begin to understand the perspective of the author, it helps to know something about the intended audience for whom the text is written. This fact about interpretation is suggested by the empathetic approach. If the intended audience of this paper were young children, the paper would be a colossal failure. The concepts and examples, much less the size of certain words, would not be comprehendible by such a person. Likewise being able to understand the intended audience of a text allows an interpreter to reverse-engineer one's understanding of what an author may be trying to convey. It is for that reason I begin with this issue.[22]

3. The audience

The literature on the identity of the intended audience of the fourth gospel is complicated. Scholarship on the identity of the audience often refers to it as the "Johannine community" and there is disagreement about who exactly comprises that community. There are numerous pieces of evidence or approaches from which scholars argue for their preferred answers. Some scholars attempt to find which sources influenced the text as a way of identifying that community. Some argue from what they consider to be the purpose of the text.

To get a sense for how complicated this literature is, consider the range of diverse groups identified as potential influences on the author of the fourth gospel.[23] Some authors point to Philo of Alexandria as an influence. Some authors propose that John was a Palestinian Jew who should be sharply distinguished from Philo. Some propose Hellenistic influences,

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[21] The astute reader will recognize that I did not say it is no evidence at all.

[22] It is often reasonable to begin with the author rather than the audience. I do not here because as far as I can tell there is agreement between myself and others in this debate that the author of the fourth gospel is John, son of Zebedee. I also do not see what relevant points hang on this fact.

[23] C.f. Barrett (1975) for a survey of these views.

even Stoicism. Some intentionally avoid appealing to non-Christian influences altogether. Some look at the backdrop of Gnosticism and the mystery religions. How might one gain confidence about who the actual influences were?

One approach to determining who the actual influences were is to begin with examining the purpose of the fourth gospel. D. A. Carson has been one of the leading voices in defending the view that the purpose of the fourth gospel is evangelistic, specifically to evangelize Jews and Jewish proselytes; he argues for this from considerations around John 20:30-31.[24] Carson is acutely aware of the significance of this connection between the purpose of the book and the identity of the audience. He concludes his paper on the purpose of the fourth gospel with the remark that it "may have some further bearing on the confidence with which some reconstructions of the history of the Johannine community are currently being undertaken."[25] More recently, Hwang and van der Watt have argued that the audience is to be understood primarily as Diaspora Jews and proselytes specifically in light of the question of the purpose of the book.[26]

The evidence for alternative influences is impressive. As a result, these authors have to say something about the diversity of potential influences, which is a view endorsed by a scholar like C. K. Barrett.[27] Carson writes that Barrett "objects to this thesis [about the primarily evangelistic purpose] largely because he finds other emphases than Jewish ones in the Fourth Gospel. But that is scarcely an impediment to the thesis. Diaspora Judaism was nothing if not syncretistic. Barrett's evidence is carefully marshalled; his conclusion is not entailed by it."[28] In other words, the audience of Jews have a certain amount of complexity in their beliefs, practices, and history. Carson writes elsewhere, "This is not to say that Barrett is entirely wrong. The early Christians were aware that they were expanding outward into a frequently hostile set of world-views, and the most farsighted of them, however evangelistic their vision, were quick to distinguish between the 'world' and those whom the Father had given to the Son (to use John's expressions). But even such polarization means that influence has been exerted. John's effort to communicate the truth to men and women far removed from Palestine ensured

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[24] Carson (1987). Also see Carson (1991), 87-95.

[25] Carson (1987), 651.

[26] Hwang and van der Watt (2007).

[27] Barrett (1975).

[28] Carson (1991), 92. It is worth noting that when Carson says Barrett's conclusion is not entailed by carefully marshaled evidence, this means that Barrett's conclusion is not a necessary consequence of the evidence. But of course it is not *entailed* by the evidence since the evidence does not entail *any* of the positions. The evidence has a *probabilistic* or at least *non-deductive* relation to the possible positions in this domain.

that, if he was at all thoughtful in his task, he would not simply parrot the received traditions, but try to cast them in ways that would make them most easily understood."[29] Hwang and van der Watt suggest that those of Samaritan descent may have been part of the Johannine community, and non-Jewish Greeks may have also been part of the larger intended audience.[30] This response expands the immediate audience to be composed mostly of a certain background, yet still diverse.

How might the above views be significant for interpreting John 3:16? Recall that Carson understood the world as those under God's condemnation for their sinfulness. In his commentary on John 3:16, he writes:

> All believers have been chosen out of the world (15:19); they are not something other than 'world' when the gospel first comes to them. They would not have become true disciples apart from the love of God for the world. Even after the circle of believers is formed and the resurrection has taken place, these Christians are mandated to continue their witness, aided by the Spirit, in hopes of winning others from the world (15:26–27; 20:21). In other words, God maintains the same stance toward the world after the resurrection that he had before: he pronounces terrifying condemnation on the grounds of the world's sin, while still loving the world so much that the gift he gave to the world, the gift of his Son, remains the world's only hope.[31]

Carson's view about the purpose of the book informs his interpretation of the passage, such that John 3:16 is an evangelistic passage aimed at sinners. From this perspective, to replace "the world" with "the elect" is to miss the point. The concept of election is tangential to the concept of sinfulness; the concept of sinfulness is related to election but election puts God's activity at the forefront of the reader's mind. By contrast, John's use of "the world" in the redemptive interpretation puts sinfulness front and center. For that reason the redemptive interpretation shows John 3:16 has significance for every person whereas the elective interpretation misses this. It is probably correct to say that scholars who rely on the cross-referencing approach discussed earlier are assuming something like this view of the purpose of the fourth gospel when they refer to passages about God's desire for all men to be saved.[32]

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[29] Carson (1991), 61.

[30] Hwang and van der Watt (2007), 689, cf.the conclusion on 695.

[31] Carson (1991), 205.

[32] Keener (2003), 569.

An alternative view that has gained traction among scholars is skepticism about the existence of a Johannine community.[33] These scholars challenge the consensus view that the gospels - the Synoptics and John - were written for distinct communities. Rather, they argue that "it is probable that the Gospels were written for general circulation around the churches and so envisaged a very general Christian audience."[34] Once again, the details supporting this position are complicated and merit further investigation by the reader. Several lines of evidence are raised against the consensus view, such as that mobility and communication among churches in the Roman world were high; the early Christian movement thought of itself as a worldwide movement; the fact that Christian leaders known about in the New Testament moved around.[35] From such evidence, Richard Bauckham asks, "Why do scholars so readily assume that the author of a Gospel would be someone who had spent all his Christian life attached to the same Christian community, when the real evidence we have about early Christian leaders suggests that he would more likely be someone who had spent much time traveling around various churches or someone who had spent some time established as a teacher in more than one church?"[36] If it is true that the gospels were intended to be widely circulated in the way scholars of this view argue, then consideration of audience alone suggests that John's use of "the world" may indeed be a useful generic for capturing different audiences, whomever the readers may be.

It is apparent that the details concerning how to interpret John 3:16 from the purpose of the book or the intended audience depend on controversial and complicated issues. Fortunately, these issues do not need to be settled because all of the views covered imply that there is a broad range of people for whom the text is intended to be read, even if the immediate audience in somehow narrowly construed. If the fourth gospel was intended to be widely shared among diverse groups, the ethnonationalist interpretation may be correct when it interprets God's love for the world in John 3:16 as for different kinds of people, both Jew and Gentile. Recall the quote from Carson earlier that "John's effort to communicate the truth to men and women far removed from Palestine ensured that, if he was at all thoughtful in his task, he would not simply parrot the received traditions, but try to cast them in ways that would make them most easily understood." This claim about John's effort to be understood by a broad audience is just as easily accepted by scholars who are skeptical of a Johannine community. Both sides admit of evidence that lends prima facie plausibility to one of the

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[33] Bauckham (1998).

[34] ibid, introduction paragraph 2. Kindle locations 17-18.

[35] ibid, chapter 1.

[36] ibid, Kindle locations 332-335.

interpretations, that is, the ethnonationalist interpretation. By contrast, Carson, Hwang and van der Watt not only bear the burden of convincing readers of their view about the purpose of the fourth gospel, but also that readers of the gospel should be thinking of later passages when interpreting passages much earlier in the text. The ethnonationalist interpretation requires less justificatory work because it relies upon shared belief about the evidence of the intended audience.

The reader should understand what this line of evidence supports and what it does not. I am not suggesting that advocates of other views are not up to the task for offering additional evidence. Carson provides that argumentation by appealing to John 15:19 when explaining the meaning of John 3:16. It is not impossible that Carson could be correct about this; cross-referencing other internal texts provides evidence after all. Nor should the evidence regarding the audience be thought to *require* the ethnonationalist interpretation. But the evidence for the ethnonationalist interpretation is not nothing at all; it has at least *some* evidence for it.

The next section will consider another line of evidence. If the meaning of "the world" in John 3:16 were part of a separate unit of thought and the passage's meaning could adequately be determined from that unit, then a specific interpretation might have the best total evidence. The proper interpretation depends on an array of considerations that have varying evidential value. Identifying the structure of a text and the more locally connected units of thought assist the reader to be more discriminating about what counts as being more evidentially significant. The next section will take a brief tour into the structure of the fourth gospel.

4. The structure

There is much agreement about the structure of the book as it pertains to identifying a contextual unit more closely connected to John 3:16. This does not imply that authors all agree about how to structure the book all the way through, or even of the passages in closer proximity to John 3:16. But it can be shown that there is wide agreement about the boundaries of the unit of thought surrounding John 3:16, fuzzy though those boundaries may be. It follows that there can be shared agreement about the parameters within which the evidence may tip the scales in favor of one interpretation. If the scales remain even or indeterminate, then readers need to judge whether it is appropriate to go to a wider context or to live with the indeterminacy of meaning among competing interpretations.[37]

[37] Living with indeterminacy of meaning among competing interpretations in the context of the extent of God's salvific love would be a significant shift among scholars. But I think the evidence in fact tips the scales in favor of one interpretation.

At the highest level of abstraction concerning the structure of the fourth gospel, some authors propose that in between the prologue (John 1:1-18) and epilogue (John 21:1-25) sits two subsections, John 1:19-12:50 and 13:1-20:31. Although there is disagreement over the details, the boundaries can be tightened more closely to John 3 than the first twelve chapters. In her recent commentary on John, Marianne Meye Thompson suggests that the "first four chapters of John constitute a thematic and narrative unit.…"[38] Barrett, by contrast, begins in chapter two: "2.13-4.54 forms a whole, in which we see Jesus first as the fulfilment [sic] of all that the Temple represented; next as the fulfilment of apocalyptic and Pharisaic Judaism (3.1-21), and of what the Baptist foretold (3.22-36); then in relation to heretical Judaism (4.1-42) and to the Gentile world (4.43-4.54)."[39] A third view begins earlier in chapter two and ends at 4:54, enclosed by the two miracles at Cana. Craig Blomberg describes the third view as follows.

> John 2–4 forms a literary unit within the Fourth Gospel, with 3:1-15 and 4:4-42 as the central dialogues of this section. Following John's prologue (1:1-18) and introduction to the Baptist, Jesus, and their first disciples (1:19-51), Jesus performs the first of his signs, which, along with his discourses, will dominate the first major segment of his gospel (chaps. 2-11). Chaps. 5-11, however, focus primarily on Jesus' ministry by sign and discourse at the various festivals in Jerusalem. Chaps. 2–4 are thus set apart not merely by these geographical and conceptual disjunctions but also by the inclusio of the two miracles at Cana (2:1-11 and 4:43-54), the only two signs in John's Gospel explicitly enumerated (2:11, 4:54). What is more, each of the pericopes in these three chapters contributes to introducing the radical newness of Jesus' person and work vis-à-vis much contemporary Jewish practice and belief: water into wine (2:1-11) parabolically symbolizing the new joy of the kingdom, the cleansing of the temple (2:12-25) focusing on the new worship centered in the resurrected Jesus (as against the limitations of temple or certain holy places — cf. further 4:20-24), the conversation with Nicodemus (3:1-15) calling attention to the new birth which he needs to experience, with the appended commentary (3:16-21) and material on Jesus and the Baptist (3:22-36) elaborating the themes introduced in this dialogue. Chap. 4, finally, combines the lengthy episode of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (vv. 1-42) with the

[38] Thompson (2018), 40. She writes, the unit "introduces Jesus, appropriate designations for him, and the gifts that he brings; epic differing but complementary witnesses to him; and show that his work brings to fruition God's promise to create, through the Spirit, a holy people who offer true worship," ibid.

[39] Barrett (1978), 196.

> healing of a presumably Gentile official's son (vv. 43-54) so as to stress a new, universal scope to Jesus' mission.[40]

If evidence from the first four or second through fourth chapters could inform the meaning of "For God so loved the world" in John 3:16, then that might constitute better evidence than going to John 15:19 or John 20:30-31. But why are structural matters evidence? How much theological significance does the structure of a text have for interpreting John 3:16, if any at all?

Joseph R. Dongell provides a plausible answer. He writes:

> Structural analysis involves dividing a discourse into segments that can then be shown to form larger units of text. The necessary outcome of forming such clusters of passages is that major breaks are established within the discourse separating one cluster of passages from another. When interpreters differ in how they join or separate the material within a discourse, they usually differ also in what sense they make of the discourse as a whole. Structural analysis and interpretation are closely intertwined.[41]

The discussion of empathetic understanding supports what Dongell writes here. Interpreters must contextualize what sort of inputs pertain to the reasons that motivate and give content to another's assertions. This is partly a pragmatic activity because there need to be limits to the extent of reflection about interpreting another if any response is ever to be given. Interpreters may include the wrong inputs or they might not include enough. Nevertheless, discerning contextual boundaries guides reliable interpretation.

Dongell proposes an analysis with the boundaries between John 1:19 and 4:54. According to that analysis, the unit of thought begins with the disciples coming to faith in Jesus and it moves by a sequence from Jew to Samaritan to Gentile, where the Gentile is the royal official of 4:46-54. The upshot is that "Jesus is thereby demonstrated as qualified to be Savior of the world."[42] Dongell earlier writes that "If Jesus is to play a central role in God's redemption of the whole world (3:16), and if the Samaritans' declaration that Jesus was the Savior of the whole world is true (4:42), then Jesus must demonstrate a capacity to deal with the whole of humanity."[43]

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[40] Blomberg (1995), 3-4.

[41] Dongell (2014), 114.

[42] ibid., 128.

[43] ibid., 124-25.

An attractive feature of Dongell's structural analysis is that it fits with the narrative that Jesus is uniquely positioned as the Son of God around whom a holy people would be gathered from different segments of society. In John's prologue, Jesus is said to be rejected by his own people, and only those who believe in his name are given the right to become children of God. (1:11-12) Jesus is described as the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). What follows is an expansion on that thought culminating in the broadest category of Gentiles in chapter four. Dongell could extend the starting boundary to the prologue as well because it is evidence of Jesus' unique position to be the savior of the world. He is identified as one with a special relationship to the Father. (John 1:1-3) Both the unique role of Jesus and the globalization of his mission are captured in this structural analysis.

The upshot is that one can stay within the boundaries of passages localized around John 3:16 in order to determine the meaning of "For God so loved the world." But interestingly, this is further evidence of the ethnonationalist interpretation because the section in which John 3:16 resides is distinctively organized around considerations emphasized by that interpretation. The considerations are tangential to the debate about the extent of God's salvific love, but they are clearly relevant.

If the first four chapters are organized around concepts tied to the ethnonationalist interpretation, then one should expect there to be features of the text that draw the reader's attention to concepts that would be associated with different kinds of people; this type of association can be called "symbolic". The next section will highlight these concepts that a reader of the 21st century is likely to miss without further study.

5. The symbols

One can see the development of the positive case for an interpretation of John 3:16 as a series of concentric circles, each of which represents wider or narrower circles of contextual evidence. At the outermost circle is a discussion of the intended audience and possible influences on the fourth gospel. Inside that circle is another focused on the structure of text surrounding John 3:16. The inner circle provided boundaries to tighten the context for identifying better evidence for the meaning of "the world" in John 3:16 rather than just anything in the Bible or Johannine literature. This section covers evidence within a yet further embedded circle focused on the details (e.g., imagery, familiar myths, places of significance) presented within the boundaries of that structure. It builds on the previous section that suggested the structure encompass a narrative from Jew to Samaritan to Gentile, and that Jesus is uniquely positioned to save different kinds of people.

Identifying global concepts with wide applicability for diverse audiences is not limited to the first four chapters. Thompson's commentary, from which this section draws heavily, indicates the presence of such symbolism throughout the gospel.[44] She writes, "John's basic symbols are universal, fundamental to human life, and part of the landscape of the ancient Mediterranean world: life, water, light, food; vines; sheep; friendship…. For example, some of John's language, such as being 'born again,' is found in Greco-Romans, but not Jewish, literature." (Thompson, 20) This section will identify global allusions and references within the first four chapters.

A few caveats are in order. There is a danger that this interpretive endeavor might lead one to extrapolate meanings that the author did not intend, but that danger existed in the previous two sections as well. The reader should not presume that a general hermeneutical approach is being employed here like the allegorical or typological methods, according to which objects, events, or persons are allegories or types of some deeper message. The approach rather follows the empathetic approach discussed in Section 2. In applying that approach, it is assumed (that is, not argued) that the author is a rhetorical master capable of using the language of ambiguity to draw in a diverse audience to his message. The reader must judge how plausible these associations are in light of the total evidence, paying careful attention to what appears to be contextually relevant. Are the persons, objects, places, and details chosen by the author of symbolic significance or are these historical anecdotes that happen to correlate to other cultural themes? The reader who is convinced that the author is employing implicit symbolism throughout should be reflecting upon the question of whether the occurrence and frequency of these symbols are more likely given one of the possible interpretations considered in Section 1.

In the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus preceding John 3:16, Jesus tells Nicodemus that a person must be "born again", which is also translatable as "born from above" (3:3). When Nicodemus expresses bewilderment at this expression, Jesus clarifies that it is "being born of water and the Spirit" (3:5), which is contrasted with being "born of the flesh" (3:6). Readers of the gospel should not be as puzzled because the author has already informed them of these concepts, as I will now argue.

In the first chapter, the reader is told that the true light - the Word - has come into the world and was rejected by his own, i.e. Israel (1:11). Those who did receive him were given "the right to become children of God," (1:12) and they "were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (1:13) It is not physical birth or descent that qualifies one to be a child of God but rather being begotten by God, which is manifested in belief in the

[44] Page citations of Thompson in the body of this paper all refer to Thompson (2018).

Son. Although the concept of being *born again* is a Greco-Roman concept, Jewish readers of the first chapter would be familiar with *being children of God*. Thompson notes:

> In several places in the Old Testament, the "children of Israel" are called "the children of God." [Ex 10:20; Deut. 4:44, 45; 33:1, Judg. 10:8] In Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, Jubilees expresses the hope that when God creates a new Spirit for the Israelites, they will all be called "the children of the living God" (Jub. 1.23-25). In the Psalms of Solomon, the Messiah brings together a holy people who are all "children of God" (*huioi theou*, 17.27). According to John, God has sent his Son, and God will send his Spirit to accomplish this work of creating and calling together the children of God. The children of God are those "begotten of God" (1:13), by the agency of the Spirit (3:3, 5), because they have "believed in his name." Ultimately it is the death and resurrection of Jesus that will precipitate and enable the ingathering not only of Jesus' own people, but also of all people, the "children of God who had been scattered" (11:52; cf. 3:15; 10:16; 12:32, 47; see also 7:35). (Thompson, 31)

For this reason, Thompson can plausibly suggest that "John reshapes the identity of the 'children of God,' neither linking that identity to ethnic heritage nor denying it to any on that basis." (Thompson, 32)

This reshaping of the concept of the identity of the children of God is further alluded to in the first chapter. John the Baptist, who acts a witness for Jesus, denies that he is the messiah, that he is Elijah, and that he is a prophet. (John 1:19-28) Thompson considers this to be important because "the three roles — Messiah, Elijah, prophet — are all 'final' figures expected to lead and teach Israel, and to gather the tribes of Israel together." (Thompson, 45) John the Baptist's baptism with water points to the cleansing work that the Son of God provides. So by the time the reader reaches the statement that Jesus takes away - to remove or purify - the sins of the world in John 1:29, the reader has already been primed for the global significance of Jesus's coming.

The allusion to global significance appears in the calling of the first disciples. Among the first followers are Andrew, Simon Peter, and Philip; all are from Bethsaida. (John 1:44) Based on a description by Josephus, Thompson writes, "this was a Greek-speaking or bilingual area, with a population of both Jew and Gentile. Andrew (*Andreas*) and Philip (*Philippos*) are both Greek names, and Simon is a Greek form of the Hebrew name *Simeon*." (Thompson, 51)

The second chapter is replete with hints that draw the reader's attention to the expansion of the children of God beyond Jewish identity. At the wedding at Cana, Jesus'

mother tells him that the hosts have run out of wine. (John 2:3) Unless the reader has noticed some of the above points about Jesus being uniquely different from the rest of humanity, his response can appear bizarre, even rude. He replies, “Woman, what does this have to do with me?” By identifying his mother as “woman,” Jesus is distancing his connection from her. Jesus elsewhere in the fourth gospel tells John the Beloved to care for his mother instead of his brothers. (John 19:26) Jesus is stressing that new bonds are created that extend beyond natural ties.

The miracle of turning water into wine is notable for its connection to other themes with which readers of the gospel might have been familiar. The choice to turn water into wine in abundance has significance in both Jewish and non-Jewish settings. From Jewish, the prophetic literature (Amos 9:13-14; Isaiah 25:6-9; Jerermiah 31:10-14). From the non-Jewish pagan world, wine was connected to festivals for Dionysus. Readers familiar with the Dionysian story - and there is no reason to think all readers should have been so familiar - could have understood the wedding narrative as “Jesus’ sign as surpassing the acts of the pagan deities.” (Thompson, 64)

Others are not convinced of this connection. Carson writes, “Older attempts to interpret this sign as a Christianized version of the Dionysus myth … or of related stories have largely been abandoned in the light of evidence that the alleged parallels are wholly inadequate. Other backgrounds have been proposed, equally interesting and equally unconvincing.”[45] The strength of Carson’s response, as far as I can tell, rests entirely upon the intended use of those parallels. It might be argued that the author was attempting to draw entirely from a preceding myth, as if to plagiarize so that Jesus satisfies the properties of divinity as specified by pagan myths. The evidence for this suggestion *is* wholly inadequate, for the evidence of similar mythology does not itself establish the events are fictional; it is possible that they are fiction but it would require much more argumentation. What is not inadequate is the suggestion that the author was attempting to use myths and events that would inform readers of diverse backgrounds about Jesus’ unique ability to satisfy abundantly. (cf. John 4:14) The differences in the stories are tolerable, even welcomed, provided they could clue a reader into the special significance of Jesus by something with which they were familiar. If the gospels were intended

[45] Carson (1991), 167.

to be widely circulated, this explanation of differences would be unsurprising. The differences are important, but so are the parallels.[46]

The second event symbolic of the global character of God's people is Jesus' clearing of the temple. According to John 2:14-16, "In the temple [Jesus] found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, 'Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade.'" The temple was a symbol of Jewish and national religious identity. But this event occurs in the court of the Gentiles. According to Andreas Köstenberger, the selling of animals in the court was an obstruction to its purpose. He explains:

> This was contrary to the vision underlying Solomon's construction of the original temple (cf. 1 Kings 8:41–43). As the prophet Isaiah expresses God's desire, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations," not merely Israel (Isa. 56:7). By selling sacrificial animals and setting up their currency exchange in the court of the gentiles, the outer area of the temple, the merchants in effect torpedoed gentile worship in the only place where it was possible. And that flew in the face of God's, and Jesus's, desire for the temple to become a place of worship, not just for Israel, but for people from all nations.[47]

By the time the second chapter is finished, the reader is well-primed with numerous examples to suggest that Jesus has a salvific role far beyond the boundaries of Palestine. It is ironic that Nicodemus, a Jewish leader with a common Greek name, finds it difficult to understand the expression "born again." The reader, by contrast, is positioned to see what Nicodemus does not.

Consider, next, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. This occurs in the "town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph." The reader is told that "Jacob's well was there." (John 4:5-6) This detail about the well might merely be an

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[46] The parallels even within the pagan tradition have their differences. According to Keener, "Although most pagan parallels to miracle worker stories first appear in third-century literature, after accounts of Jesus' miracles had become widely known, the known powers of Dionysus, Asclepius, and others before their apotheosis refutes in advance any possible suggestion that pagans had no pre-Christian stories of healers. Indeed, given the passage of sufficient time, Greek and Roman tradition often transferred miracles from one character to another, and sometimes intensified them." Keener (2003), 254.

[47] Köstenberger (2013), 61-62.

interesting fact to transition the narrative to a conversation where Jesus asks the woman for water. But this is unlikely because details about the fact that the well is Jacob's and the land given to Jacob by Joseph play no explicit role in the story. It is more likely that the author is attempting to draw attention to something implicitly in background that the audience could understand. According to Thompson, "references to Jacob and his well, and to the land he gave to Joseph, remind the reader that this conversation takes place in territory once inhabited by the patriarchs — and that Samaritans and Jews share a common ancestry." (Thompson, 98)

The conversation becomes more explicit about globalization when it turns to the difficult relation between Jews and Samaritans. When Jesus requests a drink, the woman responds, "'How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?' (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)" (John 4:9) After Jesus reveals that he knows intimate details about the woman's life (4:16-18), the woman announces that she believes Jesus to be a prophet. (4:19) But due to the strained relationship, she remarks that they are bound to different religious practices: Samaritans worship on the mountain where they are conversing but Jews worship in Jerusalem. (4:20) Jesus responds, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (4:22-24) Jesus then reveals to her that he is the Christ. (4:26) This story fits the continued theme from the first chapter, that Jesus has come to gather a people not built on a foundation of ethnic identity; people of different ethnicities can receive living water from the same spring.

What should be apparent to the reader of this paper is that the author of the fourth gospel has provided a series of breadcrumbs that bring to mind the global significance of Jesus. It is unnecessary at this point to reflect upon the story of the royal official who was identified in the previous section as a Gentile. (John 4:46-54) The reader has enough information to see the significance of that pericope. The remainder of this section considers an important objection.

Advocates of the individualist or redemptive interpretations may have nodded in agreement throughout this section. They might suggest that none of this entails that the meaning of "world" in John 3:16 is primarily about different kinds of people. Recall that they might explain the presence of Jesus' global mission to different kinds of people as an *implication* of their own views. According to this line, the diversity of ethnicities in the narrative assumes the theological doctrine of God's desire to save each and every sinner. Consider what Carson writes:

> From this survey it is clear that it is atypical for John to speak of God's love for the world, but this truth is therefore made to stand out as all the more wonderful. Jews were familiar with the truth that God loved the children of Israel; *here God's love is not restricted by race.* Even so, God's love is to be admired not because the world is so big and includes so many people, but because the world is so bad: that is the customary connotation of *kosmos* ('world'; cf. notes on 1:9).[48]

Carson is suggesting that God's love traverses racial boundaries *because* the meaning of "world" customarily connotes something that would be true of every person. That is, because God's love is aimed at every person and there are different races, the extent of God's salvific love is not restricted by race. So, the thought goes, the evidence raised in this section is not inconsistent or in conflict with the redemptive interpretation. It appropriate to take a customary meaning, apply it like Carson does, then see where it leads. Given only the assumption that *kosmos* has as its primary content the notion of sinfulness, Carson's interpretation is plausible.

The problem with the explanation is that it is incorrect. The redemptive interpretation explains the *existence* of stories about race, but how it does so is a problem for other things in need of explanation: (1) the *frequency* of implicit and explicit references to ethnic identity throughout the first four chapters; (2) that those references exist in a *structured narrative* that widens its range of groups capable of becoming children of God through the incarnate Son; (3) that the narrative begins in a book expected to be read by a wide variety of people. The third point is significant when one recalls what counts as better evidence for an interpretation is what evidence can be adduced that increases empathetic understanding. The fact that God's love is not restricted by race is a *trivial implication* of the redemptive and individualist interpretations. What is the evidence from the immediate context of John 3:16 that readers should think anything like a trivial implication was behind the author's reasons for writing that text in the way it was written? The ethnonationalist interpretation, by contrast, allows a wider audience to read through the narrative and pick up on how "world" is being used in John 3:16 without first having read and done an analysis of the meaning of "world" throughout the gospel much like a modern-day commentator would. If the issue about ethnicity or race were only a trivial implication, it is hard to see why so much effort was spent by the author crafting this sort of narrative rather than a narrative built around God's salvific love for every person. For these reasons, the ethnonationalist interpretation is the best explanation.

The argument for the ethnonationalist interpretation began with the broadest contextual data concerning the audience of the fourth gospel. Each new step circumscribed the range

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[48] Carson (1991), 205, my emphasis in the first instance.

and type of data to be explained in an attempt to acquire empathetic understanding. The next section will test the conclusion of that argument by examining the linguistic data concerning "the world" against a parallel dispute. By doing this, the reader will have independent lines of evidence to support the conclusion that the ethnoationalist interpretation is the most probable.

6. The world

In *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel*, Lars Kierspel addresses the question, "Who are 'the Jews' in the fourth gospel?"[49] Just as there were different answers to "who is 'the world' in John 3:16," there are different answers to this question. Among the answers are: the religions authorities; inhabitants of Judea; followers of the Jewish religion, not excluding Gentiles or Samaritans; Jewish Christians; or that it does not refer to an existing group at all but is representative of unbelief. (Kierspel, ch. 1) Kierspel's work is written against the post-WWII Johannine scholarship concerned about whether the fourth gospel is anti-Semitic. He argues that "'the Jews' are paralleled throughout the Gospel with 'the world' which makes humanity in general, including Gentiles, the main antagonist against Jesus and the disciples." (Kierspel, 12). This section will bring the results of that study to bear on the topic of this paper.

Kierspel defends the conclusion that "the Jews" are not given a specifically negative connotation by developing two parallels between "the Jews" and "the world."[50] The first type of parallel is called compositional parallelism. This focuses on the structure of the work as a whole and is compared to the synoptics. Kierspel finds that most uses of "the world" appears in the second half of the fourth gospel; "the Jews" is used 71 times and "the world" is used 78 times. (Kierspel, 77-93) The second parallel is called narratological parallelism. This parallel

[49] Kierspel (2006). All references to Kierspel in the body of the paper refer to this work. Kierspel assumes his audience is familiar with Greek, whereas I do not. I thus provide an English equivalent in square brackets. Instances of "[*Jews*]" or "[*the Jews*]" typically replaces "'Ιουδαῖος" and "[*world*]" or "[*the world*]" replaces "κόσμος", ignoring matters of declension, quantity, and the presence of a definite article unless relevant.

[50] Kierspel (2006), chapter 2 presents evidence that "the Jews" is also used in a positive or neutral sense. That evidence is more crucial for his target than mine and thus I ignore it.

finds a balance in the expressions used by different speakers; Jesus uses most instances of "the world" and the narrator uses most instances of "the Jews".[51]

According to Kierspel, this contrast between two different groups is evident in John 3. He writes, "the narrator introduces Nicodemus in 3:1 as the 'ruler of the Jews' … who comes to Jesus to speak to him. Attention to personal pronouns employed reveals that the following dialogue is not only one between two individuals but between two groups of people." (Kierspel, 96) In John 3:1-12, Jesus switches from using pronouns directed at Nicodemus (3:3, 7a, 11a) to using plural second pronouns (3:11, 12). Kierspel suggests that it should be obvious to the reader that Nicodemus as "ruler of the Jews" and "teacher of Israel" represents a larger group. However the character of the chapter changes in the next part. Kierspel writes:

> Verses 13-21 leave the language of personal dialogue between Jewish individuals and groups behind and formulate a creedal summary in which God is the subject, the "only begotten Son" the agent and the world the object of redemptive as well as punitive action (["*world*"] in 3:16, 17, 19). Thus, generally speaking, 3:1-21 develops from a personal dialogue between Jesus and a Jewish leader (3:1-8) to a monologue about the Son and the world (3:13-21) with a transitional we-you (pl.)-dialogue in between (3:7-12). The scope widens gradually from individuals to groups to "the world," a surprising development considering the narrative introduction of the interlocutor (3:1) and the Jewish color of the course up until verse 14. (Kierspel, 96-97)

Interestingly, the switch from singular to plural occurs again in the discussion with the Samaritan woman, ending with the woman saying that Jesus is the savior of the world (4:42). (c.f Kierspel, 97-98) This suggests that the use of "world" in the context of John 3:16 is about groups rather than all individuals or all sinners understood as atomic units that collectively comprise humanity. The theme that the "world" is the object of God's love in John 3:16 follows in later chapters as well. In the bread of life discourse, Jesus gives life to the world, which there should be understood as Jews and Gentiles (John 6). In John 12, the world has gone out after

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[51] Kierspel (2006), 93, provides the following useful table for an example of narratological parallelism:

	Ἰουδαῖος	κόσμος
Jesus (speech)	4	64
Narrator	59	7
Jews	3	6
Gentiles	5	1
Total	71	78

Jesus is followed with a comment about Greeks. Drawing all men to himself is not a contrast of every person rather than some persons, but of all types of people as opposed to the Jews alone.

Sometimes the object of God's love - the world - is described by authors as "humanity." The word "humanity" is ambiguous and authors are not always clear on what they mean. In once sense, *humanity* is an abstraction *apart from* contextually salient conceptual distinctions or identities. Those identities could be one's nationality, race, gender, or some other socially distinguishing feature; there are many ways to conceptually carve up humanity.[52] This sense is the atomistic or individualist sense that uses "humanity" to mean every individual as such. In another sense, *humanity* is an abstraction that *encompasses* all of the categories or groups at that level of generality, whatever the groups may be, without making salient that individuals comprise those groups even though they do.[53] The same issue about ambiguity arises when attempting to say "humanity" is "all people without ethnic distinctions", as Kierspel does. (Kierspel, 177) In one sense, referring to people "without ethnic distinctions" is to be taken individualistically as if the ethnicities were never a feature of reality or our conceptual apparatus; in another sense, it means that no ethnicity cuts a relevant distinction pertinent to having some other feature without also denying the identity to those who hold it. To use a contemporary analogy, the distinction is between not seeing race at all and seeing a mosaic or full pallet of differences.

If Kierspel is correct that groups are the focus of John 3:16, then "God so loved the world" is a pithy way of saying that the extent of God's salvific love is not limited or restricted by the category or group designation into which one happens to be. Although the majority of the evidence is focused on a contrast between Jew and Gentile within the first four chapters, there is also the contrast between Nicodemus (John 3), a respected religious leader who misses the significance of Jesus' teaching, and the Samaritan woman who announces that Jesus is the savior of the world (John 4). The obvious reason for focusing on Jews and Gentiles is that this division was salient in the minds of the readers of the gospel, especially for Jewish Christians. Given this interpretation of John 3:16, God's love for the world in John 3:16 does

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[52] As Bob Wiley from *What About Bob?* distinguished, "There are two types of people in this world: those who like Neil Diamond and those who don't."

[53] The fallacy of division is relevant if one were to argue that what is said of groups must be applied to individuals who make up the groups.

not provide strong evidence that God loves every individual, even that claim could be demonstrated by other passages in other books.[54]

7. The unrestricted-categorical interpretation

The above sections argue that the ethnonationalist interpretation of John 3:16 is most likely what it is intended in John 3:16. However, it was noted that the categories of ethnicity and nationality provide a useful illustration for the readers to understand that none of the categories on which humans place a particular value are delimiters to the extent of God's salvific love. The extent of God's salvific love is determined by the one who is not of the world; it is not determined or restricted by any of the categories within world itself. Since the categories of ethnicity and nationality are merely salient illustrations in John 3, I believe it is more informative to call this the *unrestricted-categorical interpretation.*

The elective interpretation has been absent from the previous sections except for Section 1. That interpretation was introduced by substituting "the world" in John 3:16 with "the elect". The reader may have observed that when Dabney objects to this interpretation, his objection is stated using the concept of the *meaning* of "the world". Carson, however, objects that "the world" cannot *refer* to the elect. This section will clarify why the unrestricted-categorical interpretation can capture the spirit of the elective interpretation without being subject to the objections that Dabney and Carson raise.

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[54] Someone might respond that *the elect* is a category. So if God's salvific love for the world were to mean that God's salvific love is not restricted by categories, then God's salvific love would not be restricted to the elect, which is a self-defeating position for anyone who thinks it is restricted in that way. *Response*: This objection is sophomoric. The concept of *the elect* is not a concept that can be ostensibly applied all by itself; rather, its application depends entirely on the application of other concepts which can be applied to others more or less reliably. For example, it is relatively easy to identify someone as a Christian; their self-identification and the meaning of the term commits them to a vague range of beliefs and practices. Of course, the details on which beliefs and practices are relevant is a matter of dispute. But whatever they are, the attribution of *being a Christian* is matter of having some standard in mind and doing an empirical check on whether someone satisfies those. In the case of election, one cannot empirically check whether another is elect or not. Someone can only infer that another is elect if one also believes that another is a genuine Christian. This does not imply that the concept of election is useless, but only to point out that there is a reason why that concept would not be relevant to John 3:16. The concept of election is not pragmatically significant for the meaning of "the world" whereas the concept of ethnicity is, for example. It is not an accident that we do not in the *first instance* identify others as elect *and then* as Christians.

The philosophy of language includes a puzzle about identity statements involving singular terms. Gottlieb Frege wondered how it could be that two co-referring terms (e.g., proper names) might make one expression or sentence trivially true and the other informative.[55]

Hesperus = Hesperus

Hesperus = Phosphorus

Both terms, Hesperus and Phosphorus, refer to the same object, Venus. Only the second expression appears to be informative since the first is an instance of a necessary logical truth - that anything is identical to itself. Frege's explanation for why only the second is informative was that names carry a *sense*, which was Frege's term for a mode of presentation. The sense or mode of presentation is connected in thought by the descriptive content associated with the singular term. For example, “the morning star” is associated with Phosphorus and “the evening star” is associated with Hesperus. Frege held that a term refers by its sense or descriptive content. This view is known as *descriptivism*.

An alternative view about language and reference is called *direct reference theory*. Direct reference views hold that the semantic contribution of some singular term is nothing more than the reference. On this view, both “the elect” and “the world” might have the same semantic contribution if the individuals who comprise the world are the same individuals who comprise the elect. But it does not follow that the substitution of “the elect” for “the world” is advisable so far as one is attempting to convey certain attitudes to the reader. Propositions expressed are not the complete content of our attitudes. According to Francois Recanati, a direct reference defender, a proposition expressed is apprehended under a mode of presentation.[56] The singular terms that refer do so not in virtue of their senses (i.e. descriptive content), but they can still be terms that have senses. Moreover, he points out that co-referential terms may be assented to, thought of, or apprehended under different modes of presentation. "Tully is bald" and "Cicero is bald" express the same proposition, but have different modes of presentation.

Both theories suggest a problem with substituting “the elect” for “the world”. A descriptivist can object that a different proposition is being expressed after that substitution; it is literally changing the meaning of the expression “For God so loved the world". A direct reference theorist can suggest that the problem with substituting “the elect” for “the world” in

[55] Frege (1892).

[56] Recanati (1990), 701.

John 3:16 is not that "the world" refers to the elect, but rather that the mode of presentation has changed and a different attitude is suggested. According to the unrestricted-categorical interpretation, the mode of presentation of "the world" is a rejection of categorial limits on who is a potential object of God's salvific love. This mode of presentation is not suggested to the reader by "the elect".

This difference between a referent and a sense, or a meaning and a mode of presentation, is anticipated by John Owen in 1647. In answering objections from John 3:16 to his view that the salvific love of God does not extend to every individual, he writes:

> Secondly, we understand "the world" to refer to the elect of God only, not considered as it is used in this place as such, but under the notion of what serves to further exalt God's love towards them, which is the end intended here. And this notion is that they are poor, miserable, lost creatures in the world, of the world, scattered abroad in all places of the world, not tied just to Jews or Greeks, but dispersed in every nation, kindred, and language under heaven.[57]

Owen uses a different set of terms than discussed above, but I believe he was aiming at the same distinction between the referent of a term and a mode of its presentation or its sense.

An interesting implication of this distinction is that the controversial expression "for God so loved the world" in John 3:16 does not settle whether the referents are every person or a subset of every person. The determination of the identity of the references for the word "world" requires more than noting the presence of that word. Furthermore, given that the mode of presentation does not settle *who* is the referent, the indefinite sense of "whoever believes" in the second half of the verse does not determine the referent of "the world" to be every individual either. The intended meaning is, rather, whoever of the world believes - regardless of their identity or categorization - is for whom God sent the Son to die so that all those believing may have eternal life and not perish.

8. Evangelium

This paper began with an introduction to the most famous verse in the New Testament, if not the entire Bible. I have argued that the best evidence available supports a version of the ethnonationalist interpretation, which I call the unrestricted-categorical interpretation. Some

[57] Owen (1647), Bk. IV, ch. 2.1.

advocates of alternative views might worry that interpretation loses its significance as an evangelistic text. I will now conclude by showing how that is not so.

The United States is currently under a severe crisis of polarization that covers racial, political, class, and religious identities. This is not unlike the polarization of the first century. Michele Murray documents that pagan Gentiles were attracted to Judaism through natural encounters and engagements. But not everyone welcomed this attraction. Murray quotes the Roman satirist Juvenal (C.55-140 CE) as a critic of Gentile attraction to Judaism, "who complains about the effect of a judaizing father on his child":

> Some, whose lot it was to have Sabbath-fearing fathers, worship nothing but clouds and the *numen* of the heavens, and think it as great a crime to eat pork, from which their parents abstained, as human flesh. They get themselves circumcised, and look down on Roman law, preferring instead to learn and honour and fear the Jewish commandments, whatever was handed down by Moses in that arcane tome of his — never to show the way to any but fellow-believers (if they ask where to get some water, find out if they're foreskinless). But their fathers were the culprits: they made every seventh day taboo for all life's business, dedicated to idleness.[58]

Murray explains the text as follows:

> Juvenal's problem with Judaism is that it is foreign and anti-Roman (a *barbara superstitio*) and he gives expression to the negative attitude found in contemporary Roman literary circles regarding Jewish abstinence from pork, interaction with non-Jews, and the Sabbath (e.g., Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5). The satirist mocks in particular the fact that a son of a Roman would choose to observe Jewish law over and above Roman law (Gager 1985: 58-59). From Juvenal's perspective, by their actions this father and son are traitors to law and order, the most essential components of Roman society; for him this behaviour is baffling and worthy of derision.[59]

This sort of condescension and shaming devalues the life of the other - in this case, the judaizing father - even to the point of making him a traitor to the state.

The polarization in the United States has resulted in people not gathering with those who are different in some personally valued way. One recent study reports that nearly three-

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[58] Murray (2004), 15. The citation of Juvenal is from *Satires* 14.96-106.

[59] ibid.

quarter of the singles in the opposition party would not date a person who supports Donald Trump for POTUS.[60] In 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia held a "Unite the Right" rally. The rally gained national attention when white men carried tiki torches through town chanting how minorities and Jews will not hinder their flourishing. The rally resulted in opposing protesters having a brawl with the white supremacists and one person was murdered by a person driving a car into a crowd. The antipathy extends to public officials, such as police officers (or especially black police officers) who are viewed as traitors to their own race. In some cases, whites were required to kneel before a minority group, repeat aloud the guilt of being privileged, and expressing the shame of their skin. One journalist described it as the "exact same hand gesture that Evangelical Christians use when they are worshipping."[61]

John 3:16 directly addresses these problems. It is not a text that justifies the evangelism toward individuals in the abstract based on God's universal love for every person. Rather, it is that because God's love is not restricted by the categories that differentiate us, the command to love our neighbors with reflection on the work of Christ should lead us to love them. The Son of God is not of this world even though the God-man Jesus is a Jew. Even so, he is a sacrifice for the life of the world. The solution to racism and injustice is not found in this world. Voicing our cultural identities for the purpose of social acknowledgment will cause others to yell louder. Kneeling before others is an act of taking the shame Jesus has already taken on the cross. Responding with "all lives matter" fails to acknowledge the deep pain that some who express "black lives matter" need acknowledged. Holding a sign that expresses disdain for every police officer is a critique of even those who have sworn an oath in good faith to protect others and have done so faithfully. John 3:16 directly confronts us with the great love God has toward those we are least likely to think He could love.

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[60] https://www.newsweek.com/nearly-three-quarters-single-democrats-wont-date-trump-voters-survey-finds-1500225

[61] https://twitter.com/mtracey/status/1268675808715046913

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