

A THEOLOGY OF FACING PERSECUTION IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Summary

This article examines how John crafts the narratives and discourses to address the issue of fear and secrecy and to guide his audience/readers on how to face persecution. It is proposed that: first, John uses dualistic language with the rhetorical purpose of bringing across ironies, exposing underlying motives of characters, and heightening the impossibility of a middle ground; second, he deliberately portrays a few characters ambiguously to reflect the complexities of life – one cannot and should not easily classify everyone neatly into dualistic categories; and, third, John has a distinctive emphasis on divine providence with regard to facing persecution.

1. Introduction

Although scholars have written on the persecution faced by the Johannine community and whether such experiences were reflected anachronistically in the Gospel,² this article takes a different approach

¹ The author is currently a Langham Scholar and is grateful to the Langham Partnership for the support received.

² E.g. Barnabas Lindars, 'The Persecution of Christians in John 15:18-16:4a' in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G. M. Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar*, eds William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 48-69; J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (3rd edn; NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Edward W. Klink, 'The Overrealized Expulsion in the Gospel of John' in *John, Jesus, and History, Vol. 2: Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Paul N. Anderson et al. (SBLSym, 44; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007): 175-84; Jonathan Bernier, *Aposynagōgos and the Historical Jesus in John: Rethinking the Historicity of the Johannine Expulsion Passages* (BibInt, 122; Boston: Brill, 2013); Jonathan Bernier, 'Jesus, Ἀποσυνάγωγος, and Modes of Religiosity' and Craig A.

by examining how John deliberately crafts the narratives and discourses to guide his audience/readers on how to face persecution. We will begin by defining key terms used in the Gospel pertaining to this article and by stating the scope and method of our study. Subsequently, we will attempt to understand John's theology of facing persecution by examining: (1) his characterisation of responses to 'the fear of the Jews'; and (2) the texts pertaining to persecution in Jesus' farewell discourse. As the Gospel is replete with dualistic language, we will also attempt to see how John uses the dualistic framework of the Gospel in his theology of persecution and the rhetorical effect it might achieve.³

2. Definitions, Scope, and Method

The Gospel of John is well known for its frequent use of opposite terms, such as 'light/darkness', 'above/below', 'truth/lie', 'life/death', etc., and the use of such terms carries special theological significance. Although scholars usually describe this phenomenon as 'dualism',⁴ Bauckham distinguishes between the concepts of 'duality' and 'dualism', and correlates them as follows:

It may be useful to reserve the term 'dualism' for the various forms that the polarity of good and evil takes in Jewish and Christian literature and to use the term 'duality' for forms of thinking that divide reality into two contrasting, but not opposed, categories, such as Creator and creation ... any form of belief that God is rescuing or will rescue his creation from

Evans, 'Evidence of Conflict with the Synagogue in the Johannine Writings' in *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper et al. (RBS, 87; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017): 127-54; Lian Wang, 'Johannine View of Persecution and Tribulation', *Lutheran Mission Matters* 25 (2017): 359-70.

³ I am grateful to my student J. W. Sun, who suggested that I examine the rhetorical effect of the dualistic framework on the theology of persecution in the Gospel of John.

⁴ See e.g. Judith Lieu, 'The Nature and Characteristics of Dualism in the Johannine Corpus', *Phronema* 14 (1999): 18-28; David E. Aune, 'Dualism in the Fourth Gospel and the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Reassessment of the Problem' in *Neotestamentica et Philonica*, ed. David E. Aune et al. (NovTSup, 106; Leiden: Brill, 2003); John Painter, 'Monotheism and Dualism: John and Qumran' in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. G. Van Belle et al. (BETL, 184; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005): 225-43; Stephen C. Barton, 'Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism' in *Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008): 7-10; Jörg Frey, 'Recent Perspectives on Johannine Dualism and Its Background' in *Text, Thought, and Practice in Qumran and Early Christianity*, ed. Ruth A. Clements et al. (STDJ, 84; Leiden: Brill, 2009): 127-57.

evil requires that the dualism and the duality are distinguished, as well as correlated.⁵

For the purpose of this article, I will adopt the above distinction when describing these opposite terms, but will use the adjective ‘dualistic’ to refer to either of these concepts.

Another three terms we will need to explain in the Gospel of John are ‘the Jews’ (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι), ‘the rulers’ (οἱ ἄρχοντες), and ‘the world’ (ὁ κόσμος). Mason and Esler have shown that, in the Graeco-Roman world, Ἰουδαῖος (‘Judaean/Jew’) is understood as an ethnic term, referring to a people whose members ‘were associated with a place, and with the laws and customs that had taken formative shape there in the homeland’, regardless of where they live.⁶ In the Gospel of John, its characterisation is multifaceted and diverse,⁷ and von Wahlde observes three different senses when the term is used: (1) the inhabitants of Judaea; (2) an ethnic, national, or religious entity; and (3) a group of religious authorities.⁸ As Tolmie notes, ‘the Jews’ have ‘a continuum of responses to Jesus, varying from belief in him on the one hand, to total rejection of his identity and a cunning strategy to kill him on the other’.⁹ In the following scriptural passages that we are studying, ‘the Jews’ refers to the Jewish authorities who oppose Jesus in the narrative world of the Gospel, of whom the Pharisees and the chief priests are their representatives.¹⁰

⁵ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015): 123.

⁶ Steve Mason and Philip F. Esler, ‘Judaean and Christ-Follower Identities: Grounds for a Distinction’, *NTS* 63 (2017): 493-515, esp. 503.

⁷ D. Francois Tolmie, ‘The Ἰουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel: A Narratological Perspective’ in Van Belle, ed., *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*, 377-99 esp. 378; Ruben Zimmermann, ‘“The Jews”: Unreliable Figures of Unreliable Narration’ in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt et al. (WUNT, 314; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013): 71-109, esp. 106-109. For detailed discussions, see e.g. Urban C. von Wahlde, ‘“The Jews” in the Gospel of John: Fifteen Years of Research (1983-1998)’, *ETL* 76 (2000): 30-55; R. A. Culpepper, ‘The Gospel of John and the Jews’, *RevExp* 84 (1987): 273-88; Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (2nd edn; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014): 87-100; Alicia D. Myers, ‘Just Opponents? Ambiguity, Empathy, and the Jews in the Gospel of John’ in *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018): 159-76.

⁸ Urban C. von Wahlde, ‘Narrative Criticism of the Religious Authorities as a Group Character in the Gospel of John: Some Problems’, *NTS* 63 (2017): 225-45 esp. 232.

⁹ Tolmie, ‘Ἰουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel’, 397.

¹⁰ The issue of whether the Gospel of John is antisemitic is beyond the scope of our discussion. For detailed discussions, see e.g. William R. Farmer, *Anti-Judaism and the*

‘The rulers’ of the Jews are mentioned only four times in the Gospel (3:1; 7:26,48; 12:42).¹¹ They consist of Pharisees and chief priests, who are historically part of the Sanhedrin (11:47).¹²

There are two different senses when ‘the world’ is used in the Gospel.¹³ First, it may refer to the physical world created by God the Father into which the Son entered as the incarnate word (e.g. 1:9-10). Second, it may refer to humanity as a whole – the object of God’s love and salvation (e.g. 1:29; 3:16-17). When used in this second sense, John characterises ‘the world’ as being in opposition to the Father and the Son, refusing to accept the light and preferring to remain in darkness (3:19-20). Nonetheless, some in ‘the world’ who are chosen by Jesus respond to the light by believing in Jesus and are transferred from being ‘of the world’ to ‘not of the world’ (15:19; 17:14,16; cf. 5:24).

As this study focuses on describing John’s theology of how Jesus’ disciples should face persecution, we will concentrate on: (1) discerning the moral and theological implications of using dualistic language in depicting responses to facing persecution, rather than a comprehensive study of dualism/duality in the Gospel or how these dualism/duality may be classified; and (2) examining the characterisation of the disciples’ response to persecution, rather than a full-fledged study of the individual characters. We will also assume that the policy of ‘casting out from the synagogue’ as existing in the narrative world, rather than a historical defence of whether it happened during the time of Jesus. In order to do the above, we shall use a synchronic approach to describe John’s theology and a narrative approach to interpret the texts.

Gospels (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999); R. Bieringer et al., eds, *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); R. Alan Culpepper et al., eds, *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context* (RBS, 87; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017).

¹¹ We will not be discussing the ruler of the/this world (12:31; 14:30; 16:11) because it refers to the devil and not to humans, and thus is not within the scope of this paper.

¹² Cornelius Bennema, ‘Identity and Composition of Οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι’, *TynBul* 60 (2009): 251; Susanne Luther, ‘The Authorities: Indeterminate Complex Identities’ in Hunt, ed., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 375-76.

¹³ Lars Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel: Parallelism, Function, and Context* (WUNT II, 220; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006): 155-213; Christopher W. Skinner, ‘The World: Promise and Unfulfilled Hope’ in Hunt, ed., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 61-62; Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 74-85.

3. Dualistic Characterisation of Responses to ‘the Fear of the Jews’?

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, which note Jesus’ direct instructions on how the disciples should respond to persecution and describe the various positive and negative responses to persecution *in general*,¹⁴ the Gospel of John rarely has such similar direct instructions, but has a few indirect references and episodes describing *specific* characters’ response to persecution because they were afraid of the Jews (7:13; 9:22; 19:38; 20:19). They will be ‘cast out from the synagogue’ if they confess that Jesus is the Christ (9:22; 12:42; cf. 16:2). In this section, we will examine these episodes (9:1-41; 12:23-28,42-43; 19:38-40) so as to discern the theological significance of the dualistic language that is employed in relation to facing persecution and whether there is a corresponding dualistic characterisation of specific individual characters.

3.1 *The Blind Man and His Parents*

This episode begins with the disciples asking Jesus about the cause of the man’s blindness (9:2). Rather than explaining the cause, Jesus states the purpose instead: in order that God’s works may be revealed through the healing of the blind man (9:3). Jesus then explains the significance of the healing miracle, which transcends from a physical to a spiritual reality: those who admit that they are blind will see the light of the world while those who think they can see (i.e. deny that they are spiritually blind and in darkness) will actually remain blind and in darkness (9:39-41).

The contrast between the response of the blind man and his parents to the Pharisees is noteworthy.¹⁵ His parents’ claims are framed in terms of ‘we know’ [that our son was truly blind from birth] and ‘we do not know’ [who opened our son’s eyes] (9:20-21) – a cognitive duality that is not in opposition.¹⁶ However, the narrator reveals that

¹⁴ Triple tradition: Mark 4:14-20 (//Matt. 13:21//Luke 8:13); 8:38–9:1 (//Matt. 16:24-28//Luke 9:23-27); 10:29-31 (//Matt. 19:29-30//Luke 18:29-30); 13:9-13 (//Matt. 10:16-35,34-39; 16:24-28; 24:9//Luke 12:11-12). Mark and Matthean tradition: 14:26-31 (//Matt. 26:31). Double tradition: Matt. 5:10-11,43-45 (//Luke 6:22-23,27-36); 10:26-33 (//Luke 12:4-9).

¹⁵ See also Andy M. Reimer, ‘The Man Born Blind: True Disciple of Jesus’ in Hunt, ed., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 437; Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 255.

¹⁶ In fact, the duality of ‘know’ and ‘do not know’ is recurrent in this passage, depicting the blind man, his parents, and the Pharisees (9:20-21,24-25,29). See also

the parents do know who opened their son's eyes, but they claimed they do not know only because they were afraid of the Jews (9:22a). They did not want to speak about Jesus in public lest they be cast out from the synagogue for associating themselves with Jesus (9:22b).¹⁷ In reality, this apparent cognitive duality is actually a dualism of truth and lie. By refraining from talking about Jesus in public, although they were not cast out of the synagogue, they have aligned themselves with the side of lies – darkness and sin.¹⁸

In contrast, despite the Pharisees' hostility, the blind man made a courageous stand and confessed his understanding of Jesus as one who is from God (9:30-33).¹⁹ In doing so, although he was 'cast out' from before the Jewish authorities (9:34),²⁰ he has aligned himself with the

Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004): 278; James L. Resseguie, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel' in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner (LNTS, 461; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013): 6-7, 15.

¹⁷ See also D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991): 369; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997); Köstenberger, *John*, 288; Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 251. Bennema makes a helpful distinction regarding the reactions due to 'the fear of the Jews': (1) refrain from speaking about Jesus in public (7:13; 9:22); (2) reluctance to confess faith in Jesus publicly (12:43; 19:38); (3) avoidance of being seen in public as disciples of Jesus (20:19). For reaction (1), one may not need to be a believer. Although it is clear that the blind man's parents are 'non-confessors', it is not clearly indicated in the narrative if they have believed in Christ, unlike those rulers mentioned in 12:42-43. Contra Michael Labahn, 'The Parents of the Man Born Blind: The Reason for Fear without True Reason' in Hunt, ed., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 449.

¹⁸ Cf. 8:44. See also Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols; AB 29; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), vol. 1: 365.

¹⁹ See also Bennema, 'Identity and Composition of Οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι', 343; Labahn, 'The Parents of the Man Born Blind', 450.

²⁰ Klink notes that, although there is no clear indication where the blind man was cast out from, it is likely that it refers to being cast out from the synagogue (cf. 9:22). Edward W. Klink, III, *John* (ZECNT, 4; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016): 449. See also Köstenberger, *John*, 292-93; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010): 564. On the other hand, Brown (*Gospel According to John*, 375) thinks that this does not refer to being cast out from the synagogue. However, given the link to 9:22 and the fact that formal legal interrogations take place at the synagogue, it is likely that Klink is correct. See A. Runesson, 'Synagogue' in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green et al. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013): 904; Kenneth D. Litwak, 'Synagogue and Sanhedrin' in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green et al. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013): 266.

side of truth – light and salvation.²¹ The rhetorical goal of this contrast marked by dualistic language is to encourage the audience/readers to emulate the blind man, but not his parents.²²

From the above analysis, we can see that, from the physical duality of the blind man receiving sight (seeing/blind) and the cognitive duality of his parents (knowing and not knowing), John reveals the spiritual dualism of light and darkness beneath the surface: the blind man is in the light while his parents are still in the dark.²³ Confessing to be associated with Jesus in the face of opposition bears the cost of being ‘cast out’, but ends up moving out of darkness into light. Refraining from confession by lying for fear of opposition avoids the cost of being ‘cast out’, but ends up remaining in darkness. Bennema sums up the characterisation of this blind man aptly:

Amid persecution (even because of it), the man is able to progress in faith and demonstrate true discipleship, and thus become an example for later generations. He represents the person who is open to faith, defends Jesus before his accusers, and develops a saving understanding and belief while facing persecution.²⁴

3.2 Seeking Whose Glory – Divine or Human?

In this section, we will first examine the sayings of Jesus in 12:24-26 in relation to John’s short commentary on the rulers who believe in Jesus (12:42-43). Subsequently, we will examine the characterisation of two of these rulers in the Gospel: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

3.2.1 Divine or Human Glory

In the following, I shall demonstrate that the three short sayings of Jesus below are indirectly related to the disciples’ response to the persecution that they shall face.

²⁴Unless the kernel of wheat falls onto the earth and dies, it remains as one grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵The one who loves his life

²¹ The prologue makes it clear that Jesus is the true light that gives life to those who believe in him, such that they may become children of God (1:4-11). See also Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 247-48.

²² Bennema, ‘Identity and Composition of Oī Ioudaīoi’, 343; Labahn, ‘The Parents of the Man Born Blind’, 448.

²³ Many scholars see the connection between physical and spiritual sight in John 9:39, e.g. Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 377-78; Köstenberger, *John*, 278; Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 247; Klink, *John*, 450-51. However, they do not connect the parents’ knowledge with spiritual knowledge.

²⁴ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 256-57.

loses it, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶If anyone serves me, let him follow me; and where I am, the one who serves me shall also be there. Anyone who serves me, my father shall honour him. (12:24-26)

They are framed by divine glory in the form of an *inclusio*:

- A. Glorification of the Son (12:23)
- B. The disciples' life through death and honoured service (12:24-26)
- A'. Glorification of the Father (12:27-28)

Regardless of whether 12:24 is referring to the death of Jesus²⁵ or to the disciples' response to following Jesus,²⁶ the connection between verses 24 and 25 is that fruitful and everlasting life is the outcome of one's sacrificial death and not a consequence of the effort to preserve one's life.

Although these sayings do not directly mention persecution, it may be inferred from their literary context for the following reasons. First, the association of guarding one's self-interest against opposition (i.e. loving one's life) with 'glory and honour' here also appears subsequently in 12:42-43, which is clearly related to the fear of persecution. Second, there are a number of connections between 12:23-28:33-34 with the prophecy of Peter's martyrdom in 21:18-19:²⁷

'If anyone serves me, he must follow me' (12:26a)	Jesus commissions Peter to serve him by pastoring his sheep (21:15-17) and commands Peter to follow him (21:19)
'where I am, there will my servant be also' (12:26b)	Jesus died at the hands of those who opposed him. Likewise, Peter shall also be martyred (21:18)
Jesus' death was glorifying to God (12:23, 27-28)	Peter's death will also glorify God (21:19)
'He [Jesus] said this to indicate what kind of death he was going to die' (12:33-34)	'He [Jesus] said this to indicate what kind of death he [Peter] shall glorify God' (21:18-19)

²⁵ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2 vols; WBS 36; Dallas: Word, 2002), vol. 1: 211; Klink, *John*, 551-52.

²⁶ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 438; Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 689.

²⁷ See also Köstenberger (*John*, 380), who briefly notes the honour in 12:24 in connection to Peter's martyrdom. Van Belle has also demonstrated connections of Peter's martyrdom with 12:33-34. Gilbert Van Belle, 'Peter as Martyr in the Fourth Gospel' in *Martyrdom and Persecution in Late Antique Christianity*, ed. J. Leemans (BETL, 241; Leuven: Peeters, 2010): 281-309, esp. 287.

The dualities depicted in 12:25-26 are ‘love/hate’ and ‘life/death’.²⁸ They intensify the irony involved in facing persecution: those who hate their lives by confessing Christ and bearing the shame of condemnation and excommunication will actually receive eternal life and honour from God. To die for Christ is glorifying God. The effect of the irony is achieved by maximising the distance between the opposites using the duality of ‘love’ and ‘hate’²⁹ compared with the less polarised language used in the Synoptic Gospels (cf. Matt. 10:39; 16:24; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:23; 17:33). These dualistic expressions bring across the irony that everlasting life is actually obtained through death.³⁰

John ends this discourse with Jesus’ call to believe in him – the light (12:35-36a) – followed by a summary (12:36b-50) with regard to the people’s responses to the signs and words of Jesus (1:19–12:50).³¹ The crowd did not believe in him despite the many signs Jesus had performed. Nonetheless, John emphasises that many of the rulers believed in him (12:42a). However, like the parents of the blind man, these rulers were afraid of the Pharisees. In order to avoid being cast out of the synagogue, they chose not to confess their faith in Jesus publicly (12:42). The narrator explained the reason for their behaviour: ‘for they loved human glory more than divine glory’ (12:43), which may be understood as ‘they loved one’s own honour more than God’s praise’.³² ‘Love’ and ‘glory’ in 12:43 connect back to ‘love’ and ‘honour’ in 12:25-26.

Two of these rulers who may have believed in Jesus are named in the narrative: (1) Joseph of Arimathea and (2) Nicodemus. In order to tease out John’s characterisation of these two disciples, we will need to examine carefully how John depicts them – do Joseph and Nicodemus love human glory more than divine glory?

²⁸ Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 122.

²⁹ Resseguie, ‘Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel’, 6.

³⁰ Cf. Köstenberger, *John*, 378.

³¹ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (BNTC, 4; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005): 5.

³² The genitives τῶν ἀνθρώπων and τοῦ θεοῦ may denote source (‘coming from’) or possessive (‘belonging to’). The former would mean these rulers prefer to receive praise from people rather than praise from God. The latter would mean that they prefer to guard their own honour rather than God’s honour. It seems to fit the context better to take the ἡ δόξα τῶν ἀνθρώπων to mean ‘one’s honour’ and ἡ δόξα τοῦ θεοῦ to mean ‘praise from God’. See also Jouette M. Bassler, ‘Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel’, *JBL* 108 (1989): 641.

3.2.2 Joseph of Arimathea

Joseph of Arimathea is only mentioned once in the narrative and John gives few details about him. It seems reasonable to assume that John had expected some of his audience/readers to know at least some of the existing Gospel tradition (e.g. 3:24), whether oral or written.³³ Nonetheless, it will be better for us to study this character initially without merging with the material from the Synoptic Gospels so that we may be more attentive to John's distinctive characterisation of Joseph.

From John's Gospel alone, all we know about the identity of Joseph is that he was from Arimathea and he was a secret disciple of Jesus, because he was afraid of the Jews (19:38). This 'fear of the Jews' calls to mind the similar situation faced by the blind man's parents (9:22) and those rulers who had believed in Jesus (12:42). Bennema reminds us that 'This fear of "the Jews" should not be underestimated, since the consequences for professing openly that Jesus was the Messiah were severe. Jesus even warns his followers that they could be killed (16:2).'³⁴

Some interpreters think that John's characterisation of Joseph is negative, because 'secret' and 'fear of the Jews' seem to connect Joseph with the rulers mentioned in 12:42-43, but they see the 'courageous' act of Joseph in requesting Pilate for Jesus' body as redressing this negative characterisation.³⁵ However, unless we assume the readers' knowledge of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50), John had not mentioned Joseph as a ruler of the people. In addition, it is noteworthy that John also uses the phrase 'fear of the Jews' to describe why the disciples gathered behind locked doors

³³ Church tradition shows that John knew the other three gospels (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.24.7-8; 6.14.7). See also Richard Bauckham, 'John for Readers of Mark' in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998): 147-71. Even if John and his audience did not know the Synoptic Gospels, they would have known the other gospel traditions. See Wendy S. North, 'John for Readers of Mark?: A Response to Richard Bauckham's Proposal', *JSNT* 25 (2003): 466; Edward W. Klink, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (SNTSMS, 141; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 180-82; Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 28.

³⁴ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 342.

³⁵ E.g. Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 629; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 358; Köstenberger, *John*, 554-55; Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 343-44; Klink, *John*, 817-18.

(20:19,26).³⁶ John does not give any negative comment with regard to the disciples' secret meeting. Furthermore, as Michaels notes, even Jesus himself acted in secrecy before 'his hour' came (7:1-10; 8:59; 11:54-57; 12:36).³⁷ Jesus exercised discretion as to when he should hide from the public and thus tactically prevented his premature arrest or death. Therefore, I would argue that acting in 'secret' and 'fear of the Jews' in itself does not carry a negative connotation. There is only a negative connotation when people respond to such fear by lying (9:22-23) or by preferring human glory to divine glory (12:42).

Therefore, is Joseph's action of requesting Pilate for the body of Jesus and burying him 'courageous'? Did he come out of secrecy into light? In the Synoptic Gospels, both Mark and Luke identify Joseph as a member of the council who looked forward to the kingdom of God (Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50-51).³⁸ Mark adds that Joseph was 'respected' by others while Luke adds that he was 'a good and righteous man' who had not consented to the plot to kill Jesus. Matthew mentions that he is a rich man and a disciple of Jesus (27:57). Knowledge of these details from the Synoptic Gospels will cause the audience/readers to associate Joseph with the rulers who believed in Jesus mentioned in 12:42. While Mark and Luke portray Joseph favourably, John seems to be ambiguous in his portrayal, because there is no explicit negative comment given like the one in 12:42. Contrarily, Bennema thinks that John finds the reluctance to publicly confess Jesus due to 'the fear of the Jews' 'unacceptable'.³⁹ However, I would argue that, though this seems to be the case in 12:43, John does not comment on Joseph negatively like the way he does on the blind man's parents, who lied because of their fear.

Unlike Mark (15:43), John does not describe Joseph as courageous, but as fearful.⁴⁰ Both Bennema and Lyons suggest that the likelihood of

³⁶ See also Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003; repr., 2010): 1157; Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 979; Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 342.

³⁷ Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 979.

³⁸ Although both Mark and Luke use the term βουλευτής, 'council', to describe Joseph's affiliation, this 'council' very likely refers to the Sanhedrin (συνέδριον). Josephus (*Ant.* 20.1.2; *War* 2.15.6; 2.16.2) also uses both terms interchangeably. See William J. Lyons, *Joseph of Arimathea: A Study in Reception History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 10-11.

³⁹ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 343.

⁴⁰ William J. Lyons, 'Joseph of Arimathea: One of "the Jews," but with a Fearful Secret!' in Hunt, ed., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 657.

exposing Joseph's identity as a disciple might not be high, since Pilate and 'the Jews' might have regarded him as a representative of 'the Jews', who earlier on had requested the crucified bodies to be removed before the beginning of Sabbath in the evening (19:31).⁴¹ However, his act of burying Jesus in a new tomb instead of a common grave for criminals outside the city might arouse suspicion from 'the Jews' should they find out, though it remains unclear in the narrative if his identity was eventually exposed.⁴² Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that Joseph took the risk of his association with Jesus being made known and acted courageously despite the opposition. If he had loved human glory more than divine glory, he would not have taken the risk. In summary, John's portrayal of Joseph of Arimathea is more ambiguous than obviously positive or negative.

3.2.3 Nicodemus

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews (3:1).⁴³ This character appeared three times in the narrative. In the first instance, he had visited Jesus at night (3:2). Considering the Gospel's pervasive use of the dualistic language of day/night and light/darkness, this statement is perhaps of some significance,⁴⁴ but John does not clearly comment on it here.⁴⁵ In view of the controversy between 'the Jews' and Jesus at the temple earlier (2:14-21), he could have done so in order to avoid the trouble of being associated with Jesus. During this visit, Nicodemus acknowledged that Jesus was from God because of the signs he had performed (3:2). This could be a hint that Nicodemus was among those who disagree with the Pharisees who thought Jesus could not be from

⁴¹ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 344; Lyons, 'Joseph of Arimathea', 652.

⁴² Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 344. For ancient sources indicating the Jewish practice of burying criminals at a common grave outside the city, see Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1157-58; Craig A. Evans, 'Family Buried Together Stays Together: On the Burial of the Executed in Family Tombs' in *The World of Jesus and the Early Church: Identity and Interpretation in Early Communities of Faith*, ed. Craig A. Evans (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2011): 89.

⁴³ The prepositional phrase ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων may mean 'one of the Pharisees' or sent 'from the Pharisees'. R. A. Culpepper, 'Nicodemus: A Travail of New Birth' in Hunt, ed., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 254. It is more likely that it means that he is a Pharisee, given that: (1) 'the rulers' are members of the Sanhedrin comprising of Pharisees and chief priests; (2) he was a teacher (3:10); and (3) he appears to know the Law well (7:51).

⁴⁴ Gabi Renz, 'Nicodemus: An Ambiguous Disciple? A Narrative Sensitive Investigation' in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, ed. John Lierman (WUNT II, 219; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006): 261.

⁴⁵ Bassler, 'Mixed Signals', 638.

God (9:16).⁴⁶ However, there is no clear indication in his dialogue with Jesus whether he believed or not (3:1-21).⁴⁷

In the second instance, when the Pharisees claimed that no one from among the rulers or Pharisees believed in Jesus (7:48), Nicodemus was depicted as defending Jesus from condemnation without a proper legal hearing (7:51). In view of John's earlier comment, 'no one dared to speak publicly about Jesus for fear of the Jews' (7:13), Nicodemus' defence seems to put him in positive light.⁴⁸ John depicted Nicodemus' rhetorical question as expecting a negative answer: 'No! The Pharisees should not condemn Jesus without hearing his legal defence.'⁴⁹ Similarly, John depicts the Pharisees retorting Nicodemus with another rhetorical question, expecting him to say that he is not from Galilee (7:52).⁵⁰ The pragmatics of the question are: since you [Nicodemus] are not from Galilee, why are you even showing support for Jesus? Nonetheless, again, John does not clearly indicate if Nicodemus has believed in Jesus at this point in time.

In the third instance, Nicodemus is depicted as accompanying Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus (19:40), bringing with him a lot of spices to embalm Jesus' body (19:39). Once again, John did not indicate clearly if Nicodemus was a believer or a disciple of Jesus.⁵¹ The ambiguity seems to be deliberate,⁵² leaving the audience/readers to assess for themselves whether Nicodemus is a disciple of Jesus.⁵³

⁴⁶ Steven A. Hunt, 'Nicodemus, Lazarus, and the Fear of "the Jews" in the Fourth Gospel' in *Repetitions and Variations in the Fourth Gospel: Style, Text, Interpretation*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle (BETL, 223; Leuven: Peeters, 2009): 203. See also Keener, *Gospel of John*, 787; Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): 349.

⁴⁷ See also Culpepper, 'Nicodemus', 253.

⁴⁸ In this respect, Nicodemus is similar to the blind man in John 9.

⁴⁹ The negative particle μή in both Nicodemus' and the Pharisees' question in 7:51-52 indicates that a negative answer is expected.

⁵⁰ Contra Renz, 'Nicodemus', 266; Culpepper, 'Nicodemus', 258, who think that the Pharisees suspect Nicodemus to be a disciple of Jesus. If they had suspected so, the narrative would have used the negative particle οὐ in expectation of a positive answer that Nicodemus is from Galilee (i.e. identified himself with Jesus).

⁵¹ In the third instance, Nicodemus is no longer described as 'belonging to the Pharisees' (19:39; cf. 3:1; 7:50). This may be a hint that he is no longer identified with the Pharisees.

⁵² See also Bassler, 'Mixed Signals', 643-45; Renz, 'Nicodemus', 282-83; Craig R. Koester, 'Theological Complexity and the Characterization of Nicodemus in John's Gospel' in Hunt, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, 166.

⁵³ It is no wonder that scholars are divided in their understanding as to whether Nicodemus is portrayed as positively or negatively. See e.g. Renz, 'Nicodemus', 274-79; Koester, 'Theological Complexity', 179 nn. 27-28.

Although Nicodemus may have wanted to avoid public notice of his association with Jesus by coming to him at night in the first instance (3:2), his act depicted in the second and third instances shows that he took the risk of being associated with Jesus.⁵⁴ The narrative may also leave the audience/reader wondering if Nicodemus' act of embalming on the day of Preparation—before evening—alludes to 9:4 and 12:35, portraying him as doing God's work during the day and walking in the light.⁵⁵ Therefore, it is not clear at all if Nicodemus should be included among those rulers who love human glory more than divine glory.⁵⁶ The status of Nicodemus remains unresolved in the Gospel.⁵⁷

3.3 Summary

From our analysis above, we may arrive at the following conclusions. On the one hand, dualistic language is used in the teachings of Jesus in 12:24-26 to bring across the irony of life through death, and these teachings are indirectly related to the disciples' desired response when facing persecution. For the blind man and his parents, as well as the rulers who believe in Jesus but are afraid to make a public confession of faith, John also uses dualistic language to characterise their responses to persecution, revealing motives that would otherwise not be obvious.

On the other hand, for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, their characterisation appears to be ambiguous, defying to be classified neatly into dualistic categories. It is not at all clear if Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus belong to the category of rulers who 'love human glory more than divine glory' (12:43). They could have been so by visiting Jesus at night or by being a disciple secretly. However, if they had been so, they would not have taken the risk of opposition to bury Jesus in a new tomb or speak for Jesus among the Pharisees who opposed him.⁵⁸ Koester makes an apt conclusion from his observation of John's ambiguous portrayal of the characters:

⁵⁴ Contra Hunt, 'Nicodemus', 201-203. Nowhere in the narrative did John associate Nicodemus with 'the fear of the Jews' or hint that he was timid in 7:50-52.

⁵⁵ Koester, 'Theological Complexity', 179.

⁵⁶ Contra Hunt, 'Nicodemus', 205.

⁵⁷ Culpepper, 'Nicodemus', 259.

⁵⁸ See also Koester, 'Theological Complexity', 165-81. Bryant notes that church tradition portrays both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus suffering for their faith, the former being imprisoned and the latter losing his status as a member of the

The gospel sometimes makes sharp contrasts between belief and unbelief, yet its characters often resist easy categorization. If dualistic statements create clear categories like light and darkness, the gospel's approach to character portrayal recognizes that life is more complex. Readers cannot use the dualistic categories to define a character's response to Jesus without also asking how a character's response to Jesus might redefine the categories.⁵⁹

Therefore, John neither *always* uses dualistic language to characterise individuals nor *always* portrays public confession as the consistent desired response to 'the fear of the Jews'.⁶⁰

4. Dualistic Expressions in Persecution Texts and Divine Providence

In this section, we will examine the discourse on why the world persecutes those who are not of the world (15:18-23 and 16:1-4a,32-33) and then Jesus' prayer for the disciples (17:11-18). These passages occur in the Farewell Discourse (chs 13–17), in which Jesus predicts that his disciples will face persecution and explains the causes, but barely addresses how the disciples should face persecution. Dualistic language pervades these passages, among which 'the world' is characterised as strongly opposing the disciples, who are 'not of the world'.

4.1 *The World Persecutes Those Not of the World*

John uses the prepositional phrase ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου frequently to demarcate Jesus and his disciples from the rest of humanity, who reject and opposes Jesus (8:23; 17:14,16) – the former is 'not of the world' and the latter is 'of the world'.⁶¹ Jesus explains that, because the disciples are associated with him (15:19-21), 'the world' will treat the disciples in a manner similar to how they treat him – with hatred (15:18-19) and thus persecution (15:20).⁶² 'The world' treats them so because they do not know God the Father (15:21; 16:3). The disciples'

Sanhedrin. Bob Bryant, 'The Secret Believer in the Gospel of John', *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 27 (2014): 71.

⁵⁹ Koester, 'Theological Complexity', 168.

⁶⁰ Contra Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 158, 343.

⁶¹ Depending on the context, the prepositional phrase ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου could mean 'belonging to the world' (e.g. 8:23; 17:14,16) or 'out of the world' (e.g. 15:19).

⁶² See also Wang, 'Johannine View of Persecution and Tribulation', 361-63.

association with Jesus is described in terms of election – Jesus chose them (15:19),⁶³ thereby separating them ‘from the world’ (ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου).⁶⁴ Jesus reiterates this separation and animosity using the dualistic language of ‘love/hate’ and ‘of the world/not of the world’ in two antithetical statements: ‘If you were *of the world*, the world would love you as its own; but because you are *not of the world* ... therefore the world *hates* you’ (15:19). These two groups are mutually exclusive and in opposition, thus dualism is portrayed here. It leaves no room for a person to be on the fence or to be identified with both. The fact that ‘the world’ hates the disciples confirms that they are ‘not of the world’.

In 16:1-4a, John expresses Jesus’ explanation regarding the form of persecution and the *purpose* of him saying ‘all these things’ to his disciples with an *inclusio*:⁶⁵

A. ‘These things I have said to you’ – *purpose*: so that you will not fall away (16:1)

B. Forms of persecution: casting out of the synagogue and killing (16:2a)⁶⁶

B’. Reasons for persecution: mistaken notion of serving God by killing Jesus’ disciples (16:2b) and not knowing God (16:3)

A’. ‘These things I have said to you’ – *purpose*: so that you will recall I have said so (16:4a)

⁶³ This concept of election (6:70; 13:18; 15:16,19) in John seems to emphasise divine initiation and suggest predestination rather than human choice. Yet, John also portrays human responsibility and choice in their response to Jesus (e.g. 1:11-12; 3:15-21). See also Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009): 458-63; John H. Wright, *Divine Providence in the Bible: Meeting the Living and True God, Vol. 2: New Testament* (New York: Paulist, 2010): 188-91, 199.

⁶⁴ As Thompson notes, ‘being “of” something (e.g. *of the world*) has to do with identity and allegiance’. Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015): 332. See also Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 409.

⁶⁵ See also Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1025; Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 413; Klink, *John*, 672.

⁶⁶ In the Farewell Discourse, animosity is presented as coming from ‘the world’, which consists of both Jews and Gentiles who oppose Jesus (Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel*, 127). Being ‘cast out of the synagogue’ by the Jews and ‘killing the disciples as a form of worship to God’ by Jews and Romans in early Christianity may be understood as representing alienation from one’s original community and opposition from religious and political groups respectively (Thompson, *John*, 336-37).

How would recalling what Jesus said about persecution help the disciples not to fall away? How would knowing the form and reasons of persecution help them not to fall away? In these texts, Jesus does not directly explain or describe how the disciples should respond to persecution. Although the immediate context provides no clear answer, we may perhaps infer that the Holy Spirit, which is given to the disciples after the resurrection (20:21), will remind them of what Jesus had said (14:26) and thus lead them to believe the truth of Jesus' words (16:4; cf. 2:22; 13:19; 14:29). His words include: (1) everlasting life is obtained through dying for Jesus (12:24-26); (2) they can still experience peace in tribulation because Jesus has overcome the world (16:33); and (3) God will keep them from falling away (17:11-12).⁶⁷ Knowing the forms and reasons of persecution will perhaps help them be mentally prepared. These words and knowledge will motivate them not to fall away in face of persecution.

Between these two persecution texts that we have discussed above (15:18-25; 16:1-4), Jesus mentions the Holy Spirit testifying for him and gives a mandate to the disciples to testify for him (15:26-27). There is no clear indication in the text regarding the relationship between facing persecution and testifying for Jesus. Their association is at most indirect. Testifying to the truth and for Jesus is what disciples ought to do (e.g. 19:35; 21:24), whether they face persecution (e.g. 9:10-33) or not (e.g. 4:39-42).

Later in the discourse, Jesus pronounces that 'the time is coming and has come' for his arrest leading to his death (16:32; cf. 7:30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1). Jesus predicts that this is also the time the disciples will abandon him and flee 'each one to his own' and be scattered (16:32). Once again, John introduces the purpose of 'these things I have said to you': 'so that you may have peace in me'. The dualities used here, 'in me/in the world' and 'peace/tribulation', produce a stark contrast: 'in me you may have peace' and 'in the world you have tribulation' (16:33). In the face of persecution and suffering, fear is inevitable. However, Jesus' victory over the world is the basis of the disciples' courage and experience of peace (16:33). This seems to be the only instance in the Gospel where Jesus directly instructs his disciples on how to face persecution – with courage. This comes as no

⁶⁷ See also Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 532; Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 412-14.

surprise, for John has been portraying ‘the fear of the Jews’ as a consistent challenge faced by the crowd and his disciples.

4.2 *Divine Providence*

In John 17:11-19, Jesus prays specifically for his disciples with regard to the persecution that they will face. This passage may be divided into three sections:

ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ‘in the world’ (17:11-13)

Entreaty 1: The Father to keep them in his name – purpose: so that they may be ‘one’ like Jesus and his Father⁶⁸

The Son’s work:

Kept and guarded them in his name

Said ‘these things’ to them – purpose: so that they may have Jesus’ complete joy

ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ‘of the world/out of the world’ (17:14-16)

Jesus gave them the Father’s word

They are not of the world; the world hates them

Entreaty 2: The Father to keep them from the evil one and not lift them out of the world

They are not of the world, just as Jesus is not of the world

εἰς τὸν κόσμον ‘into the world’ (17:17-19)

Entreaty 3: The Father to sanctify them in the truth of God’s word

The Son’s work:

Send them into the world

Sanctify them by sanctifying himself

Each section contains an entreaty to the Father, and the structure of first and third sections are similar, with the Son’s work matching the content of the petition (cf. 5:19).

This passage emphasises divine providence. *First, it is the Father and the Son who keep the disciples from falling away.* While the disciples are ‘in the world’, Jesus keeps and guards them, so that not one of them is lost (17:12; cf. 18:9). When Jesus is no longer ‘in the world’ (cf. 16:5, 28), he entreats the Father to keep them (17:11), specifically to keep them from the evil one (17:15).⁶⁹ *Second, it is the*

⁶⁸ Thompson, *John*, 352-53 aptly explains ‘To be kept “in your name” means to be protected and guarded as those who belong to the Father and so are identified, or marked, by the Father’s name ... “they may be one” (John 17:11) anticipates the possibility that people may leave the fold or be cut off from the vine, thus disrupting the unity of Jesus’ community and working against God’s purposes “to gather into one the children of God” (11:52; cf. 1 John 2:19).’

⁶⁹ Ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ: the articular substantive adjective ὁ πονηρός is only used once here in the Gospel of John (17:15). The genitive form may denote ‘that which is evil’

*Father and the Son who sanctify the disciples with the Father's word (17:17, 19) so that they may belong to the Father and testify for Jesus (cf. 15:27; 17:20) in the world.*⁷⁰ For this reason, Jesus entreats the Father not to lift them 'out of the world', because, like Jesus, they are supposed to be sent 'into the world' (17:18). This emphasis on divine providence is consistent with what Jesus proclaimed in 15:5: 'apart from me, you can do nothing'.

Therefore, in Johannine theology, it is not so much what the disciples should do when they face persecution so as not to fall away, but divine providence that keeps them from falling away. Jesus' victory over the world is the basis of their courage (16:33b) as well as their experience of peace (16:33a) and joy (17:13), even in the midst of persecution.

4.3 Summary

In the Farewell Discourses, Jesus explains the cause of persecution: the world does not know God the Father or him and hates him. Therefore, they will also hate the disciples because of their association with Jesus. We find that the questions we raised from studying 15:18-23 and 16:1-4a have been answered in 16:32-33 and 17:11-18. By knowing the nature and cause of persecution ('these things [Jesus] said' in 15:18-23; 16:1-4a,32-33), the disciples are to understand that this cosmic struggle can only be overcome by Jesus' victory and divine providence, on which they must depend. The dualism of 'of the world/not of the world' makes it clear that there is no middle ground. The dualities 'love/hate' and 'peace/tribulation' do not co-exist in the same realm. It is not possible for the world to 'love' and to be at 'peace' with the disciples who are 'not of the world' – only 'hatred' and 'tribulation'. However, it is possible to have 'peace in Jesus' that is not 'of the world' (cf. 14:27) despite facing 'tribulation in the world'.

(neut. sg.) or 'the evil one' (masc. sg.). Given that Satan is personified as 'the ruler of this world' (12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. 13:27), it is more likely that it refers to 'the evil one' here. See also Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 437; Klink, *John*, 721. This entreaty is important, as John depicts 'the devil' as the instigator of the opposition against Jesus (6:70; 8:44; 13:2) (Wright, 'Divine Providence in Johannine Theology', 177).

⁷⁰ 'To be sanctified' is to be set apart for God and his purpose (Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1060; Thompson, *John*, 355). The disciples are set apart by (év: agency or instrumental use) the truth: God's 'Word' – Jesus (1:1, 14; 14:7; 15:3) – and 'word' (17:14), by which they receive God's commission to testify for Jesus.

5. Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can now present a theology of facing persecution in the Gospel of John. Although John uses dualistic language as a rhetorical device to intensify the contrasts of positive and negative responses, to surface the underlying motives of people, to bring across irony, and to portray the impossibility of avoiding persecution by the world, he does not use dualistic categories consistently in his characterisations of individuals and groups.

In the narratives, John presents ‘the fear of the Jews’ as a challenge for those who identify themselves with Jesus. Although John uses dualistic categories such as ‘belief/unbelief’ and ‘of the world/not of the world’ to segregate those who belong to Jesus and those who reject and oppose him, characterisation of individuals and groups do not always fit neatly into these categories. Responses to ‘the fear of the Jews’ are sometimes portrayed negatively (the blind man’s parents, the rulers who believe) and sometimes neutrally (Joseph of Arimathea and the disciples meeting behind locked doors). Acting in secret due to fear of persecution is not consistently portrayed as negative: this is so only when moral integrity has been compromised. Some characters are deliberately ambiguous (Joseph and Nicodemus). This is perhaps John’s way of portraying the complexities of life and his unwillingness to classify everyone easily into dualistic categories.

In the discourses, John addresses the fear of losing honour and life due to opposition to one’s faith in Jesus (12:24-26,42-43). He assures his audience/readers that God will honour those who suffer shame and persecution or even death for Jesus’ sake. Martyrdom brings glory to God. They can overcome their fear with courage because Jesus has overcome the world and gives them peace despite the tribulation (16:33). There is a strong emphasis on divine providence as the key to keeping disciples from falling away (17:11-18). This dovetails with the motif of fear in the narratives and provides a remedial perspective to it.

For John, responding to the fear of persecution by compromising one’s moral integrity is unacceptable. The way to overcome fear of persecution is not to deny the reality of fear, but to face fear with courage that is grounded on Jesus’ victory and God’s providence.