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Cosmos and Microcosm in the Fourth Gospel: A world order overcome by a new paradigm

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Introduction

The word kÒsmoj appears in the Johannine corpus with unusual frequency compared to the rest of the New Testament. Brown counts 14 instances of kÒsmoj in the Synoptics combined, while the fourth gospel alone uses the word 78 times. These instances, combined with the 24 occurances in the Johannine epistles and the 3 occurances in the Apocalypse, make up 105 of the total 185 occurances of kÒsmoj in the New Testament (1966, 1:508). The Theolological Dictionary of the New Testament (*TDNT*) counts 46 occurances of kÒsmoj in the Pauline corpus, so Paul, with John, shares an understanding of the importance of this word (s.v. "kÒsmoj"). In every instance except one[1] it is translated as "world."

Provenance of the concept of kÒsmoj

Where does this concept of the world come from? This author's working assumption is that the fourth Gospel was written by an evangelist well-familiar with the Jewish religion, therefore the first place one must look for the source of such imagery would be Judaism, both as expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the 1st century Palestinian/Hellenistic Judaism evidenced in the LXX, Rabbinical traditions and Philo.

When one examines the Hebrew scriptures as translated into Greek in the LXX, one discovers that kÒsmoj is carries two primary connotations. In some instances Ð kÒsmoj toà oÙranoà is used to translate "the host of heaven (Gen 2:1; Deut 4:19, 17:3; Isa 24:21, 40:26)." It is also used in the sense of "adornment" (Ex 33:5; Jer 2:32, 4:30; Ez 7:20; 16:11, 23:40). However, because Hebrew did not have a word for universe, kÒsmoj was not used to convey such a concept in the portion of the LXX translated from Hebrew (*TDNT)*, s.v. "kÒsmoj").

The LXX does attest to an understanding of kÒsmoj consistent with the New Testament sense of "world" in the later writings composed in Greek. Here kÒsmoj appears with much greater frequency than in the translations of earlier Hebrew writings and carries the fluid sense of "universe," "earth," "inhabited earth," and "humanity" (*TDNT*, s.v. "kÒsmoj").

[1] 1 Peter 3:3 where it is used in the sense of "adornment."

The radical evolution of this word from the LXX as translated from Hebrew to the LXX as written in Greek indicates that this word, as used in the New Testament, derives its nuances not so much from Hebrew sources, but from another source. The next logical suggestion would be the Hellenistic use of the term.

The history of the word kÒsmoj in Hellenistic sources explains the highly varied connotations the word carries. It's etymology is uncertain, but it appears initially to have implied a sense of building or establishing. As such it is used early on to refer to a structure (e.g. †ppou kÒsmon the structure of the Trojan Horse in Homer's *Odyssey* (8.492)). When the structure refers to something made up of men kÒsmoj signifies the order that exists between men (e.g. the order in which rowers sit in a boat, (Hom. *Od*., 13, 76)). It is used generally in the sense of order (e.g. kat¦ kÒsmon "according to the proper order" or "fitting"). The object of beauty, and thus adornment, especially of women, was linked in Greek thought with the concept of order and proportion, thus Homer's *Iliad* speaks of gunaike‹oj kÒsmoj (14.187). Nuances such as military formations and beauty are then evidenced by the use of kÒsmoj in LXX as translated from Hebrew.

However, Pythagoras used kÒsmoj in a new way to describe the world. Before Pythagoras, kÒsmoj referred to the order inherent in the cosmic system. After Pythagorus it came to mean the totality of that which is held together by this cosmic order. Likewise Plato used kÒsmoj to refer to the universe which he also called tÕ Ólon or tÕ p©n due to the fact that all things are brought together by this universal order (*TDNT*, s.v. "kÒsmoj").

This Hellenistic concept of kÒsmoj as universe, world and humanity made its way into the thought of Palestinian Judaism. The later writings included in the LXX include this concept of the kÒsmoj (cf. Wis 7:17; 9:3; 4 Macc 16:18). Philo also shows a sophisticated understanding of the Hellenistic concept of kÒsmoj, distinguishing between the visible world and the world of ideas—the kÒsmoj oátoj and the kÒsmoj nohtÕj. (The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (*EDNT*), s.v. "kÒsmoj"). If this Hellenistic concept of kÒsmoj influenced Jewish thought in this way, it reasonable to also recognize Hellenistic influences on the fourth evangelist.

kÒsmoj: a symbol in flux

How is one to understand the word kÒsmoj as it is appears in the Gospel of John? That question has occupied exegetes and eisegetes for centuries. At the heart of the problem is the fact that John himself does not seem to use the word consistently. It's meaning is difficult to pinpoint, mirroring the fluctuations of the word's meaning in secular sources.

Kysar recognizes this shifting significance. In some instances kÒsmoj appears as a neutral or even positive word describing the creation itself. The world was created through the Word (John 1:10); God loves the world (John 3:16), and Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17). The fact that John can use kÒsmoj in this way contradicts any suggestion that John has adopted a docetic notion of the inherent evil of the physical world. The physical world is created and loved by God (1993, 61).

However, kÒsmoj also stands on the negative pole of Johannine dualism. In these cases, Kysar ascribes to it a spatial/spiritual meaning, calling it "the realm of unbelief." "It symbolizes that way of being—that way of living—which is opposed to God and the divine plan of salvation for humans (1993, 61)."

If kÒsmoj is the negative pole of a dualistic pair, what then is the positive pole? Kysar calls it "the domain of the divine." "The distinction," writes Kysar, "is between the world as the human natural region over against the uncreated, divine realm. The first is dependent and created, while the second is independent and uncreated." The analogy is then drawn in this way: being in the world is to being with the Father as earth is to heaven as below is to above (1993, 62).

This below/above dualism as related to the world and the realm of the divine leads one to believe that John is speaking of a cosmic, vertical dualism. However, while admitting that the Johannine community might have believed in a two story universe, Kysar argues that the dualism between this world and the realm of the divine is less ontological and more intellectual. Being of this world means buying into a "phony kind of self-understanding." By calling us to be in the world but not of the world, Jesus challenges us to accept ourselves as creature and thus dependent rather than continuing to live in this world's delusion of independence (1993, 63-64).

Ignacio Luis Grohar, in his article "El 'mundo' en los escritos juanicos: un ensayo de interpretación" also recognizes the fluidity of the concept of kÒsmoj in not only the Gospel but all the Johannine writings. He argues that this complex symbol carries with it three fundamental distinctions. First, in his use of kÒsmoj as the world as created by God through the Word, John stresses that the world comes from the hands of God and as such it is good (1985, 227).

In the second sense, kÒsmoj reveals to us a world "darkened and in conflict with its Creator . . . a humanity separated from God by sin."[2] The goal of God's relationship with this kÒsmoj is return and restoration. Jesus, God's envoy, enters the world and calls for a decision. "The acceptance of his word and his person in faith is the decision which leads them to life or definitively locks them in the darkness of error because of their rejection (1985, 227)."

In the third sense kÒsmoj again takes on a spatial/spiritual dimension as what Gohar calls "an anti-divine realm [un espacio antidivino] (1985, 227)." This realm is personified by its ruler which is portrayed in the Johannine writings in stark contrast to Jesus, God's envoy from the realm above. Jesus tells the truth from the beginning (John 8:37, 40, 45-46); he imparts real life (John 10:10); and he is the truth (John 14:6). The ruler of this world, however, is sinful from the beginning (1 John 3:8); murderous from the beginning; and the father of lies (John 8:44) (1985, 223).

It is into this world of open hostility that Jesus sends his disciples. Gohar writes:

> Jesus sends his disciples into the world—for whom he refuses to pray (John 17:9) because it has already been condemned in the person of its ruler (John 16:11)—not to change it but in order to challenge [or defy Sp. "desafiar"] it so that it might be convinced of its malice (John 18:8-11) and to overcome it. In this perspective "the only hope that remains for the world is precisely to stop being the world[3]" (1985, 226).

Brown likewise recognizes the different senses in which John uses the word kÒsmoj. It can be used to describe the God's creation, the universe as it relates to man, or even "a creation capable of response." It can relate to the universe under humanity's direction, or even human society. Of the world Brown writes "Yet it is clear in Johannine thought the world has not become evil in itself, but rather is

[2] All quotations from this article appear as translated by this author.
[3] Gohar credits this quotation to Barrett as cited by R. Brown.

evilly oriented and dominated." And in the second half of the Gospel it becomes clear that the world is not only lost in darkness, but in hostile opposition to Jesus. There is therefore a fundamental incompatibility between the world and Jesus' disciples as well as between the world and the Spirit which Jesus sends to his disciples (1966, 1:508-509).

The Development of kÒsmoj in the Fourth Gospel

How then does this fluid symbol evolve in the Gospel of John? The answer lies in the progression from kÒsmoj as the beloved creation of God to kÒsmoj oátoj as the world actively opposed to God.

The Gospel of John begins with the world as loved and created by God through the Word. Gohar has already pointed out the positive connotation this word carries in the early stages of the Gospel. Into this beloved creation Jesus comes as the light of revelation (John 1:9). The goal of this revelation was to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29), to give his flesh as bread for the life of the world (John 6:51), to dispel the darkness (John 12:46) and to bring sight to the blind (John 9:39).

However, early on we discover a fundamental incompatibility between the light and the world into which it is sent. The Prologue announces it proleptically, saying that the world failed to understand, recognize and receive this light (John 1:5, 10, 11). The reason for this failure is simple: the world does not understand the light because the world cannot understand the light. The world does not know the Father who sent the light (John 17:25) nor is it capable of knowing, seeing or receiving the Spirit of truth which testifies to Jesus and guides into all truth (John 14:17).

But there is a further development of the concept of the world. Not only is there the world as created by God and the world as oblivious to God, but also the world as actively opposed to God. Because the light of truth reveals the lies which the ruler of this world has told from the very beginning (John 8:44) the world hates the light (John 7:7). What is more the world hates the disciples whom Jesus sends into the world (John 15:18-19). It is this aspect of kÒsmoj as the world hostile to God that Jesus often clarifies with the adjective oátoj. The phrase "the world" is the world of creation, the world of ignorance and the object of God's saving love. But "this world" is used always in a pejorative sense. The

one possible exception to the pejorative use of the phrase "this world" is John 11:9 where John writes, "Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world (NRSV).'" The phrase "the light of this world" here could be understood as refering to Jesus. However, as Brodie points out, this illustration speaks of the light twice, once as the light of this world (v 9) and once as simply the light (v 10) (1993, 391). It appears that this may be a form of Johannine dualism: if the light of this world is capable of keeping travelers from stumbling, how much more will the true light rescue the disciples from the fate of the one who does not have the true light within him? Jesus says repeatedly that he did not come to judge or condemn the world, but rather to save it (John 3:17, 12:47). However *this* world and its ruler already stands under judgement (John 9:38, 12:31, 16:11). Clearly there is a difference between the world and this world.

A New Connotation?

Many of the Hellenistic connotations of kÒsmoj have apparently made their way into the Johannine usage of the term. We have seen kÒsmoj as universe, as humanity and as sinful humanity in the fourth gospel. But there is one connotation of kÒsmoj which has been ignored or denied by the dictionaries which seek to explain the significance of kÒsmoj in the John—the sense of kÒsmoj as cosmic order. Earlier, the way in which kÒsmoj was used by Homer to describe the systematic order of military formations was discussed. kÒsmoj was linked with the concept of nÒmoj when it was used to denote the Spartan Constitution (Guthrie 1962, 2:346). *TDNT* makes it explicit when it states that nowhere in the New Testament is kÒsmoj used in this way (s.v. "kÒsmoj"). However, could kÒsmoj as cosmic order explain the clear distinction between the world which is the object of God's loving offer of salvation and this world which stands condemned already?

In his work Theology of the New Testament, Bultmann writes eloquently of the perversion of creation into the pejorative "world" of the Fourth Gospel. He describes the fourfold essence of this kÒsmoj as darkness, falsehood, bondage to sin and existence under the sway of death. It has been perverted into this non-existence because it has been deluded. The fact that Jesus enters the world as light and truth indicates that humanity is searching for light and truth. But instead of doing so in a way which

reveals to them their creaturehood and dependence on God, humanity proposes an answer of their own making which they hope will give them security. They choose instead independence (1954, 2:15-17, 26-27). The pejorative "this world" refers to humanity perverted by the quest for independence. But what if instead imputing a spatial/spiritual connotation to kÒsmoj in this sense (i.e. the *realm* of unbelief) we allowed it to have an cosmic/spiritual significance (i.e. the *principle* of unbelief which orders existence apart from God.) A world order of unbelief would appear to be more consistent with Kysar's explanation of this world as a "way of being" or a "phony kind of self-understanding" than the spatial notion of a realm of unbelief he proposes for the phrase (1993, 62-64).

One important aspect of this connotation of the word kÒsmoj is the fact that the Greeks understood man and woman to be a little world in themselves—a mikrÒj kÒsmoj or "microcosm." The concept can be traced back to "pre-philosophical man" as it is connected with the concept of earth as mother (Guthrie 1962, 2:358). It is outlined explicitly as early as Anaximenes of Miletus who was credited by Diogenes as teaching that "Just as our soul . . . which is air, holds us together, so breath and air surround the whole cosmos." The analogy of macrocosm and microcosm is made explicit because air is seen as both the divine source of creation and the stuff of the human soul (Guthrie 1962, 1:131-132). Diogenes Laertius ascribes this concept of microcosm to the Pythagoreans, citing Alexander Polyhistor who claimed to have found in some Pythagorean notebooks the teaching that the soul is a ¢pÒspasma or "torn-off fragment" of the *aither* which is the source of the cosmos. Likewise Plato seems to credit the Pythagoreans as the source of his axiom "All nature is akin." (Guthrie 1962, 1:201-202, 209). The atomists further developed the idea of man as microcosm in the 5th century. In Democritus the phrase " mikrÒj kÒsmoj " first appears applied to man, although it is unclear whether he coined the phrase or used a phrase that is no longer attested in extant sources (Guthrie 1962, 2:471). In *Philebus*, Plato teaches that our physical bodies are made up of the four elemental masses—water, air, fire and earth and our souls likewise are a small mirror of the larger soul which unites the world (Guthrie 1962, 5:215). In the *Timaeus*, he teaches that these four elements of the cosmos which make up our bodies are "borrowed to be repaid (Guthrie 1962, 5:309)." And Aristotle states the idea of macrocosm and microcosm explicitly in *De Anima* when he writes "Just

as in all nature, so in the soul (Guthrie 1962, 6:324)." Heraclitus and the Stoics continue to develop the idea of microcosm by understanding the wold as "an animate and conscious continuum each part of which affects all others by its *sympathy*, its 'sharing of experience' with the others (Encyclopedia of Philosophy (*EP*), s.v. "macrocosm and microcosm")."

In is clear that in Greek philosophy, the notion of kÒsmoj refers not only to the organizing principle that stands behind the universe, but also the way that organizing principle is mirrored within man and woman as a mikrÒj kÒsmoj. But can this concept be traced to Jewish and Christian literature of the first century? Research for this paper has turned up enough provisional evidence to justify a closer examination. *TDNT* cites a early Jewish source which reads "The setting up of the tabernacle has such significance that it is equivalent in importance to the creation of the whole world or to the creation of man who is a little world." In the second century C.E., R. Meir writes that the dust from which man was formed was "brought together from the whole world." R. Jose of Galilee writes "All that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He has created (also) in man" (*TDNT*, s.v. "kÒsmoj"). The concept of human as microcosm appears to have made its way into the Hellenistic Judaism of the New Testament period. Furthermore, *EP* indicates that the concept can be found in Gnostic and Hermetic texts, also postulated as possible influences on the Fourth Gospel (s.v. "macrocosm and microcosm").

As for the idea of human as microcosm in Christian literature, the clearest examples are more recent. David the Armenian, a Christian Neoplatonist in the sixth century cites Democritus' idea of man as microcosm explicitly (Guthrie 1962, 2:471). Panayiotis Nellas pushes this concept in Christian literature back to the fourth century, pointing out that this Greek concept was appropriated by the Greek Fathers, citing specifically St. Gregory of Nyssa's On the Creation of Man (1987, 29). However, St. Gregory of Nyssa wasn't uncritical of the Greek concept of human as microcosm, pointing out that to dignify man in this way is to suggest he his akin to the "gnat and mouse." It is far better to point out, not that man is a little world, but rather that man was made in the image of God. This is not to say, however, that humanity, made in the image of God, does not also share the nature of the world (*On the Creation of*

Man, 16). St. Gregory of Nazianzus, a contemporary of the Bishop of Nyssa, is clearer in his appropriation of the idea of humanity as microcosm writing:

> Having decided to demonstrate this, the Artificer of the universe, the Logos, created man as a single living creature from both elements, that is to say, from the nature of both the visible and invisible worlds. On the one hand he took the body from already pre-existing matter, on the other He endowed it with breath from Himself, which Scripture terms the intelligent soul and the image of God (Gen 1:27; 2:7*). He set man upon the earth as a second world, a great world in a little one,* as a new kind of angel, adoring God with both aspects of his twofold being, fully initiated into the visible creation but only partially into the invisible, king of all that exists on earth but subject to the King above, both earthly and heavenly, both transient and immortal, both visible and invisible, situated between greatness and lowliness. . . (*Oration 45, On Easter*, 7, emphasis added.)

It is clear that contemporary Judaism appears to have appropriated the idea of human as microcosm. Likewise there are indications that the Gnostic and Hermetic influences on the Gospel have incorporated such a concept. Furthermore, as early as the fourth century Christian authors have explicitly incorporated this idea into their theology. But can the case be made that Christians in the New Testament had such an understanding? More study is needed in this area before a definitive answer can be given, but one wonders if perhaps the idea of human as microcosm lies in part behind Paul's description of human life ordered by the order (a„ën) and basic principles (stoice‹a) of this world (Ephesians 2:2 and Colossians 2:8, 20). We can say provisionally that this notion of world-order as an organizing principle of fallen human life can be found in the New Testament. A human is a mircrocosm, a small world operating according to the basic nÒmoj of this world.

Thus perhaps the distinction between "the world" and "this world" in John can be explained as the distinction between creation and the world-order that now permeates this world. Thus the world is loved by God and the object of salvation. This world, as a perverted world order, now stands condemned. Jesus has come into the world, but he is not of this world (John 8:23). He is in the creation, but not is not a microcosm of it's current perverted state. Likewise the disciples are to be in the world but not of the world—or in other words, spatially within creation but not ordered by it's corrupt nÒmoj (John 17:15). But what is the alternative to being a microcosm? It appears the alternative posed by the Gospel is that of

deification—a new existence which no longer mirrors the order of this world in a small way, but rather mirrors the being of the Trinity; no longer "out of" the world but rather "in" the Trinity (John 17:21).

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