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Item Type	Article
Authors	Foskett, Mary F.
Publisher	Institute of Sino-Christian Studies ; Institute of Comparative Scripture and Inter-religious Dialogue, Minzu University of China
Rights	Institute of Sino-Christian Studies (ISCS) ; Institute of Comparative Scripture and Inter-religious Dialogue, Minzu University of China
Download date	2026-11-20 00:24:43
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166799

Journal of Comparative Scripture 4 (2014): 99-120
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ISSN: 2225-6474

Beginning a Comparative Reading of Johannine Dualism
对约翰神学的二元论的比较阅读

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Abstract

A brief review of Johannine scholarship reveals how dualism in the Fourth Gospel is often viewed as a metaphysical and ethical problem by New Testament interpreters. However, a comparative reading enables the interpreter to see a more dynamic dualism in John's Gospel than may first meet the eye. Considering dualism in Confucian perspective enables the reader to begin to see more clearly often overlooked aspects of the Fourth Gospel.

Keywords: Confucian, Creation, Dualism, Fourth Gospel, Gospel of John, Johannine

To interpret the New Testament gospels is no easy task. As is the case when engaging any ancient foundational text, interpretation must negotiate the document's simultaneous familiarity and strangeness. To complicate matters further, Christian readers are easily lulled into expecting the meaning of the canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) to be self-evident. Because of the prominence that the New Testament gospels enjoy in Christian tradition and the religious authority which that same tradition assigns to them, Christian readers often take the gospels for granted and read them as uncomplicated repositories of truth. Thus one of modern biblical scholarship's primary tasks has been to illumine the complexity, richness and challenge of interpreting and appropriating New Testament texts as continuing sources of meaning and value.

In some instances, critical biblical scholarship leads to new and important crossroads in interpretation. At other times, it brings readers face to face with major roadblocks. Recent approaches to New Testament interpretation, particularly feminist criticism and cultural studies, have demonstrated both kinds of outcomes. For example, feminist interpretation of the figure of Mary Magdalene and the gospel texts in which she appears has presented readers with the choice of either continuing to cast Mary as a penitent prostitute or adulteress, as western Christianity has largely characterized her, or as the first witness to the resurrection and an apostle to the men who constituted the so-called "Twelve," the inner circle of Jesus' closest followers. In this example, feminist biblical scholarship challenges readers to take on responsibility for discerning how they will sift through the textual

"data" of the gospel narratives, the long history of Christian interpretation, and readers' own constructions of gender to arrive at an understanding of Mary Magdalene.

In other examples, feminist interpretation exposes significant roadblocks to ethical appropriation of the New Testament and maps new ways around them. For example, Barbara E. Reid and Teresa J. Hornsby read the story of the woman who anointed Jesus in Luke 7:36-50 in such a way that exposes the gender bias that undergirds the text's rhetoric and guides the history of its interpretation, but they don't stop there. Their feminist readings also find within Luke's story clues to other ways of understanding the scene, ones that enable the reader to sever the long thread of interpretation that kept the text tethered to its gender biased reception.[1]

Another approach to interpreting thorny texts reads comparatively across scriptural traditions to gain potentially new insights into texts that have been obscured rather than illumined by familiar lines of disciplinary or traditional inquiry and reflection. This paper examines how a Confucian perspective may help readers grapple with the interpretation of a New Testament gospel. Can a comparative reading render more visible signals or hints in a Gospel narrative that readers can explore to conceive of an interpretation that is consonant with the Gospel and also fresh?

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[1] Barbara E. Reid, "Do you see this woman? A Liberative Look at Luke 7:36-50 and Strategies for Reading Other Lukan Stories Against the Grain," in Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickestaff, eds., *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (London:Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); Teresa J. Hornsby, "The Woman is a Sinner/The Sinner is a Woman, " in Levine and Blickenstaff, eds., *Feminist Companion to Luke*.

The Gospel of John (also known as the Fourth Gospel) serves as an apt starting point for examining such possibilities. John's story of Jesus ranks among Christian readers' most favored New Testament texts. Not only is it the key canonical source for later theological reflection on what was eventually formulated as the doctrine of the incarnation, John's Gospel is also the text that recounts such beloved narrative scenes and discourses as the Wedding at Cana and the Farewell Discourse. Yet this Gospel is also one of the thorniest for thoughtful readers of the New Testament to interpret. It is laden with difficulties, particularly for feminist readers and others interested in moving beyond the heavy strictures imposed by the Gospel's binary world order. Dualism, that is, the organization of reality into corresponding opposites, permeates John's narrative. As Judith M. Lieu and others observe, the Gospel's "dualistic shape, light vs. darkness, truth vs. falsehood, truth vs. hate, life vs. death, is intrinsic to any account of Johannine thought."[2] John's dualism "is a function of – and to that extent derivative of – the revelation and concomitant christology which is the primary subject of the Gospel."[3] It is, in other words, inescapable. The Gospel posits two primary, exclusive spheres of reality – that of the realm "above" and that of the world "below." As Jesus proclaims in John 8:23, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world."

The problem of Johannine dualism reaches beyond metaphysics to ethics. By squeezing almost all of reality into a series of polar

[2] Judith M. Lieu, "The Nature and Characteristics of Dualism in the Johannine Corpus," *Phronema* 14 (1999): 18.

[3] Ibid., p.19.

opposites, it seemingly coerces readers to judge themselves and others as being either "from below" or "from above." The apparent underbelly of John's dualism is probably most exposed in its repeated references to *hoi Ioudaioi*, most often translated as "the Jews." John associates the group, *hoi Ioudaioi*, with those whom he describes in negative relation to Jesus in the Gospel's opening verses: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (Jn 1:11). Those who fail to accept Jesus are held out in binary opposition to those who do accept him. That John envisions a sharp divide between his own community and that of *hoi Ioudaioi* is clear enough. What is less clear is the precise identity of this group called *hoi Ioudaioi*. The translation, "the Jews" is woefully inadequate since almost every character in John's narrative world is Jewish, including – most obviously and especially – Jesus and his closest circle of disciples. As Paul N. Anderson underscores,

> …the most literal and accurate identity of *hoi Ioudaioi* is a sociological reference to 'the Judeans' – religious leaders from the South representing the Jerusalem-centered establishment, which stood in opposition to Jesus' northern, rustic, and unofficial claims to authority.[4]

At the very least, John's use of the term frequently appears to refer to a select group among the Jewish religious leadership. As Anderson elaborates:

[4] Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), p. 192.

> …the primary origin of John's presentation of Jewish leaders and their opposition to Jesus is *the dialectical situation of Johannine Christianity*. The first crisis within the Johannine situation involved a set of North-South tenions, whereby the Judean religious leaders (*Ioudaioi* meaning 'Judeans' in a Palestinian setting) not only rejected the northern prophet, but they also resisted his Galilean followers. Those religious tensions are still palpable within the later rendering of the Jesus story. When the Johannine leadership resettled in Asia Minor after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., a new round of Jewish tensions emerged, and here members of the Jesus movement found themselves again at odds with other Jewish religious leaders now in a predominantly Gentile setting. This led to a secondary source of John's dialectical presentation of Jewish leaders in the narrative – the rhetorical and apologetic interests of the Evangelist. At this stage, *Ioudaioi* came to mean 'the Jews,' i.e. those other Jews, in a Diaspora setting.[5]

Anderson's explanation of John's use of *hoi Ioudaioi* goes a long way towards correcting the oft held assumption on the part of Christian readers that the Gospel depicts both wholesale Jewish rejection of Jesus and Jesus' condemnation of Judaism. Neither is the case. However, the fact remains that the hostility that the Gospel attaches to *hoi Ioudaioi* (still often translated, "the Jews") creates for readers a rather pernicious image of Judaism. It is no accident that the long history of Christian anti-Judaism has deep roots in the interpretation and appropriation of John's Gospel. Together, the accumulation of negative rhetoric towards *hoi Ioudaioi* and the various polarities that separate

[5] Anderson, p. 192.

believers from nonbelievers only deepen the impression that John aims to cast in sharp relief a dualism that permeates and drives the Gospel narrative.

Johannine scholarship has, of course, examined the problem of anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel. In *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of The Gospel of John*, Adele Reinhartz asks whether she, a Jewish New Testament scholar, can find a friend in John.[6] Taking on a series of reading positions – that of the compliant reader, resistant reader, sympathetic reader and engaged reader – Reinhartz views the Gospel narrative from multiple perspectives. She finds that a compliant reading only plays into the narrative's problematic ethical dualism; a resistant reading tries to get the upper hand on John's dualistic rhetoric but finds no way to transcend it; and a sympathetic reading gives credence to the historical context (such as that which Anderson envisions) that makes sense of John's harsh rhetoric but finds no way to directly counter its (un)ethical implication. An actively engaged reading, Reinhartz's final approach to John, seeks to maintain a dialogue with the Gospel while acknowledging and respecting the christological divide that separates the reader and the author. Reinhartz's reading leads her to conclude that John's cosmological exclusivism makes it very difficult for her to sustain a genuine friendship with the Gospel. With that conclusion, her study models the kind of intellectual integrity and discursive openness that is necessary if contemporary readers of the Fourth Gospel are to find their way forward in engaging John in

[6] Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

increasingly pluralistic contexts. Reinhartz's reading of John directly confronts the hard rhetorical line that it draws and lays bare problems regarding the ethical ramifications of an exclusivist theology that pivots around issues of identity.

Yet, however evident scholars may suggest Johannine dualism is, it would be an error to argue that it is simple. New Testament readers have queried the dualism that undergirds the Fourth Gospel and noted both its complexity and nuances. While similarities exist between John and Jewish intertestamental literature (1*QS* 3.13-4.26, *TLevi* 19, *TJudah* 20), the Gospel's dualism is yet distinctive. John's universe is complicated by the claim that God loves the world that is "below" (3:16). It is not cast off by God but continues to be the object of divine concern. Furthermore, as Lieu importantly notes, John's characterization of the world is steeped in ambiguity. The frequent use of *ek too kosmou* (of/from the world) demonstrates the degree to which "the world" is often determined by response to the Word and not simply by metaphysics.[7] John also contends that the world itself came into being through the Word, rendering an exclusive distinction between the creation and God untenable. As Miroslav Volf argues, the Gospel opens with the

> …the affirmation that God through the Word created everything that is not divine (1:3). As a consequence, the creation as a whole can be properly described as 'what is his [the Word's] own' (1:10). All the oppositional dualities within creation and between creation and God exist ultimately on account of

[7] Lieu, p. 22.

God's creative activity.[8]

Together these observations lead readers to a puzzle that lies at heart of the Fourth Gospel:

> …this dilemma is expressed most sharply in the paradox – or contradiction – of 'flesh' in John: he word became flesh (1.14) and believers must eat flesh (6.51-53) and yet the flesh avails nothing, for it is the spirit which is life-giving (6.63)…The same dilemma is also conveyed by the Johannine miracles with their physical excesses (2.6; 11.39,44) yet capacity to act as vehicles of the manifestation of divine glory and as signs.[9]

Neither John's construction of "the world" nor the narrative's understanding of "the flesh" lend themselves to a simplistic worldview. Clearly, the dualism in John's Gospel is quite complex. Thus New Testament scholars continue to examine the Fourth Gospel in the context of ancient Judaism, Gnosticism and Christianity to probe further the contours of its dualistic underpinnings. With that said, it may also prove fruitful to begin considering how dualism functions in other religious traditions. Instead of searching for signs of influence or precise parallels between traditions, a comparative approach can explore whether the process of engaging the questions and frameworks of one tradition can yield a fresh interpretation of a text drawn from

[8] Miroslav Volf, "Joannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism," *Modern Theology* 21 (2005): 192.

[9] Lieu, p. 23.

another. Thus this paper takes a first step in considering whether insights from Confucianism can help readers look at Johannine dualism from a new vantage.

Re-Framing Johannine Dualism

Key to this paper is how Confucianism models a dualism where neither absolutism nor antagonism has the last word. The more fluid perspective that underlies the Confucian worldview may help interpreters of the Fourth Gospel look again at Johannine dualism. The polarities to which Confucian dualism alludes are *abstractions*, not absolute binaries, and they facilitate philosophical reflection. As Kwee Swan-Liat suggests, "To the Chinese 'one', 'two', and 'many' are only abstractions in the conception and explanation of reality… The phenomenal world is denoted as *wan wu*, the 'ten thousand things'."[10] In this light, dualism is not constituted by independently existing absolutes. Rather it brings into view a continuum along which pairs of opposites are mutually located. The Confucian concept of a "middle" position or way grows out this orientation. The wise or noble person practices the self-cultivation associated with the Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhong-yong*). Whereas "(p)olar dualisms are constituents of common beliefs," the noble person views the whole from the center, so as to "pivot between poles" and conduct oneself in a manner that maintains

[10] Kwee Swan-Liat, "Dualism and Wholeness in a Chinese Perspective." *Zeitschrift für Missionwissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 66 (1982): 120.

"the whole in a dynamic equilibrium."[11] In everyday existence, this practice yields a life free of excess and cultivation of the virtues of wisdom (*zhi*), kindheartedness (*ren*) and courage (*yong*).

As Mary Evelyn Tucker observes, in Confucianism cultivation of the self does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it takes place "in a world of meaningful relationships" that are "grounded in nature, situated in the body, and reciprocal with all life forms. Cultivation implies evoking and establishing resonances with the human and the natural worlds."[12] Life finds meaning in this comprehensive worldview where "the ultimate context for the human is the '10,000 things,' nature in all its remarkable variety and abundance."[13] Such pluralism is constitutive of the wholeness and dynamism of nature that is vital to Confucianism. Key texts such as the *Book of Changes*, *Mencius*, *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Great Learning* all lend witness to this important perspective.[14] Human dealings are located in the dynamic and pluralistic context of nature and the cosmos to which philosophical abstractions, like dualism, point.

What Confucianism allows us to imagine is a dynamic dualism, one meant to underscore, rather than to capture or reify, the wholeness of human existence. Clearly, the Fourth Gospel is not a Confucian text and Confucian worldviews ought not be imposed or transposed onto

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11 Kwee, p.122.

12 Mary Evelyn Tucker, "Confucianism and Deep Ecology," in *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*, eds. David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press: 2001), p. 135.

13 Ibid., pp. 129-130.

14 Ibid., p. 130.

the Johannine narrative. Nevertheless, a Confucian perspective may help illumine interpretive possibilities in the Gospel, reminding us to attend to the cosmology that serves as the context for Johannine dualism. Indeed, the Gospel's understanding of creation is the starting point for John's narrative. Perhaps "beginning" a comparative reading of the Gospel's own "beginnings" will enable us to "begin" imagining an alternative reading of its dualism, one that the text itself may not fully articulate or realize, but that contemporary readers can pursue and utilize.

As scholars have noted, the origins of Johannine dualism may very well lie in John's particular use of biblical creation imagery. Jeannine K. Brown's comments about John's prologue (1:1-18) aptly represent what Johannine scholars have long observed:

> The evangelist cites the first words of Genesis 1 from the LXX, *en arche* ("in the beginning"), and by so doing evokes the story of creation as the starting place for his Gospel about Jesus. Not only does John introduce the themes of life and light (*zoe* and *phos* [1:4-5]), which are clearly derived from Genesis 1 (vv. 3, 14, 20, 24 LXX), but his use of logos evokes the recurring Genesis language of "God said" in the creative activity (*eipen ho theos* [Gen 1:6, 9, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28 LXX]). Certainly, the language of all things coming into existence via the *logos* (John 1:3) directly connects John's introduction to the creation account of Genesis 1.[15]

[15] Jeannine K. Brown, "Creation's Renewal in the Gospel of John," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72 (2010): 275-290.

The significance of the opening prologue to the Gospel cannot be overestimated. It concisely articulates all of the key themes that John will develop as his story unfolds. As D. Moody Smith notes,

> In 1:1-5 and 1:9-11 there is a remarkable chainlike sequence of terms in which the last word of one strophe becomes the first word of the next. Translating literally:
>
> In the beginning was the *word*
> and the *word* was with *God*
> and *God* was the *word*. (v. 1)
> In him was *life*
> and *life* was the *light* of human beings; (v. 4)
> And the *light* shines in *darkness*,
> and the *darkness* has not overcome it. (v. 5)[16]

In its very opening, then, the Gospel posits the creative role of the divine Word or *logos* in bringing into being all things, that is, everything apart from the divine itself. Johannine scholars see in this portrayal of the *logos* a clear parallel with the figure of personified Wisdom (*sophia*) found in the Wisdom of Solomon and other ancient Jewish texts. Here in the Fourth Gospel, the concept of *logos* is constructed in such a way that it draws on both Jewish tradition that emphasizes Wisdom's role in creation and Hellenistic popular

[16] D. Moody Smith, *John*. Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), pp. 47-48.

philosophy that understands the *logos* as the rational and immanent principle that governs the universe.

Richard Bauckham argues that John draws on Genesis 1:3-5 in a manner that is similar to what readers of *Joseph and Asenath* find in that ancient Jewish narrative. Whereas JosAs 8:9 refers to God "who gave life to all (things) and called (them) from darkness to light, and from error to truth, and from death to life," the Gospel builds on the creation language in John 1:1-4 to add in 1:9, "the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." Like JosAs, John effectively conflates creation imagery of light and darkness with notions of truth and error, and life and death.[17] The Gospel's appropriation of Genesis provides the narrative its dualistic framework.

Yet with its declaration of the incarnate *logos*, John's prologue also demonstrates that the Gospel's metaphysical dualism is not absolute. John's *logos* co-exists with the God with whom it could not enjoy a more intimate relationship ("the word was God," v. 1). It becomes, in Jesus, incarnate, or enfleshed. Jesus, in his very being, bridges the divide between heaven above and the world below. Thus the foundational verse in John's opening prologue declares, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son full of grace and truth" (v. 14). As Moody Smith contends, "The entire prologue is full of terms and concepts that will be unpacked in the course of the Gospel, but in this sentence about

[17] Richard Bauckham, "Qumran and the Fourth Gospel: Is There a Connection?" in Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *The Scrolls and the Scriptures: Qumran Fifty Years After*. JSP Supplement Series 26; Roehampton Institute London Paper 3 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 275-276.

every other word is crucial: Word, flesh, lived, we, glory, son, father, grace, truth."[18] The notion that in Jesus, the Word has become flesh – that is, human – is the central premise of the Gospel.

It is this claim, the Gospel's *raison d'etre*, that underscores the absence of an absolute dualism in John. John claims that God enters and interacts with history, and not just human history, but the history of creation. The Word, having "tented" (*skenoo*) or dwelt in the midst of the created order bridges the divide between the earthly and heavenly, the human and divine, the created and the generative. And in a manner reminiscent of the tent of meeting where ancient Israel is said to have gathered to encounter the God of Moses, the incarnate Word is, for John, the site where creation can now encounter the God being revealed in Jesus ("we have seen his glory").

As Stephen C. Barton argues, John's dualism is dynamic, not static. He writes, "(t)he dualism, rather, is one of soteriological and christological *movement*: the penetration of a world in darkness – ignorant of God, blind to the truth, disobedient to God's law – by the life-giving light of the divine Logos now incarnate in Jesus."[19] Barton reminds us that the primary image that John introduces here is one of penetration, that is, of active movement, not absolute contestation. Readers who attach rigid and permanent opposition to John's imagery may be prematurely reading into the text and its worldview the flashpoints between Jesus and his opponents, some of whom are

[18] Ibid., p. 58.

[19] Stephen C. Barton, "Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism," in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser, eds., *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 13.

Jewish, that occur later in the narrative.

The prologue situates the world (*kosmos*) as both the object of divine creation and the location where the incarnate *logos* chooses to dwell (v. 10). As such, the world is far from being intrinsically or absolutely evil. In fact, as John 3:16 famously makes clear, the world is loved by God. But John also contends that the world is in darkness and witnesses both the acceptance and the rejection of Jesus. The language of creation with which the prologue opens, and the image of an incarnate *logos,* leads to the climactic statement in the prologue – the promise of rebirth and ongoing intimacy between the human and the divine. Those who receive Jesus and believe in his name receive "power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (1:12-13). John's interpretation of the creative role of the *logos* paves the way toward a new way of conceiving the relationship between the human and divine. The dualism John employs enables his audience to see more clearly the re-creation and re-birth to which the Gospel seeks to bear witness. In John, as in Confucianism, dualism functions as a useful abstraction that illumines the whole, which in John's case, is revealed in the fullness of the incarnation and in the person who is reborn as a child of God.

The birth imagery that John employs in the prologue is developed in the dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisee, Nicodemus, in John 3. There John emphasizes the duality of flesh and spirit ("What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit," v.7) and rebirth through the Spirit ("Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above,' v.8). He also alludes to the mysterious

movement of the Spirit, which acts as a kind of midwife ("The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit," v.8). Thus John 3 envisions a rebirth of the human, one that depends on the movement of the divine spirit, reminiscent of the wind moving across the face of the waters in Genesis 1:2. This reconceiving of the human person is, for John, intrinsic to his notion of eternal life. As John 3 repeatedly asserts, whoever believes in Jesus "may have eternal life" (vv.15, 16).

John reconceives humanity in light of his interpretation of creation and the incarnate *logos*. Several moments in the Gospel speak to this kind of transformation on a grand scale, while notably disregarding judgement of those who do not embrace the Johannine vision: "You judge by human standards; I judge no one" (8:15); "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice" (10:16); "I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world" (12:46-47). The dynamism of creation, rebirth and generosity without judgment, together with the bridging of the human and the divine in a way that transforms both is present in the Gospel. This dimension of the narrative opens the door to a gospel that is less rigid than the narrative's dualism at first suggests.

On the other hand, no sooner is the gentle word extended, than it is taken away. For immediately follow his statements about

non-judgement, Jesus adds in chapter 8, "Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me" (8:15-16), and then in chapter 12, "The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge… (12:48). Together with other instances where the Gospel condemns *hoi Ioudaioi* or judges those who have rejected or failed to embrace Jesus, the rhetoric shifts back. The breakdown occurs when the Gospel's ontology is reduced to epistemology, when the power of incarnation comes to depend solely on a particular way of believing by a particular group of people in a particular historical moment (as in, "who knows what when?").

When the gospel message becomes inextricably tied to identity politics and the debate between two very similar, but different groups, a philosophical abstraction becomes reified, rigid and absolutist. When "belief" directs the text's focus on the creative activity of the Logos to a preoccupation with human knowledge of the divine and of other humans, the gospel message becomes anchored to and limited by the horizons of human knowing. The question before us now is whether interpreters can exercise the tenacity to hold onto the gestures towards openness that John presents at various moments in his Gospel.

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摘　要

对《约翰福音》学术史做一个简短回顾就可看出，其二元论常被新约学者们视为一个本质的和伦理的问题。然而，对它的比较阅读却使得诠释者们看到一个更加生动的二元论。考虑到儒家视野下的二元论，它能使读者更清晰地看到这第四部福音书中的那些常被人忽视的方面。

关键词：儒家、创造、二元论 、《约翰福音》、第四福音