

For God did not so love the whole world – only Israel! John 3:16 revisited

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Abstract

*John 3:16 is probably the most popular and widely proclaimed proof-text for God's love for all of humankind – the "world". This interpretation of the verse is based on a meaning for which the Greek word *cosmos* can be used, but the word is used to denote many other meanings as well. The one interpretation of *cosmos* as "world" is then read into all instances where *cosmos* appears, including John 3:16. This position is held and defended by some in an almost fanatical manner by some. However, if this verse is exegetically considered in its primary context, the Fourth Gospel, it becomes clear that John 3:16 does not speak of God's universal love of all of human kind. Far from it. The verse indeed has a completely different meaning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish, but have everlasting life.

There can be no doubt that this verse in the Gospel of John is seen by the majority of Christianity as *the* central summary of the content of the Christian Gospel. It is popularly regarded as the best-known verse of Scripture. According to information in the Bibles distributed world wide by the Gideons to hotels, hospitals, doctors' and dentist's rooms, et cetera, this verse has been translated in some one thousand two hundred languages, and in the version of the Gideons' Bibles available in South Africa, John 3:16 is given in translation in no less than twenty-three languages! And to this day, in popular

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Christianity, both in mainline and Charismatic/Pentecostal traditions John 3:16 is unquestioningly seen as *the* central verse of the Bible: John 3:16 could be called the hub around which Christmas revolves – the loving Father gave a Gift of love which, when received in faith, holds for every person the outcome of being with God in eternity – living forever while those who reject God’s love by declining the gift die forever. The most blessed assurance and most terrible prospect under the same roof so to speak!

No-one should be blamed for reading this simplistic “meaning” in the text-segment – the very words of the translated versions let us believe as we do: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish, but have everlasting life.* The main thrust in traditional exegesis, then, duly enunciates God’s salvific beneficence towards all of humankind (the “world”) by sending Jesus to earth. John 3:16 may well, in these perspectives, be regarded the *piece de resistance* for setting the tone to world wide evangelism because John 3:16 “clearly declares” that all of humankind is taken up in God’s saving grace – as it is “indicated” by the word “world”.

The traditional interpretation of the verse in the sense of a worldwide and universal evangelistic understanding of these words is common to the majority of commentaries and exegetical works: Compare [chronologically] Henry (1721:888); Guthrie, Mottyer, Stibbs & Wiseman (1970:937); Burns (1974:111); Barclay (1975b:137-138); Guthrie (1975:636); Hastings (1976:191-192); Lange (1976:133-134) and Dodd (1978:197, 371). Barclay (1975:137) even stipulates about the *world*: “It tells us of the *width* of the love of God. It was *the world* that God so loved. *It was not a nation*”

It is the contention of this article that the time has come to re-examine this particular verse with the aid of social scientific categories and against the back-drop of the social and cultural world of the first century in which this Gospel came into being and in which the community which created this verse functioned. The question we wish to answer is: is the traditional interpretation of this particular verse still tenable? And especially worrying in this respect is the understanding and translation of the word “cosmos”.

When it is considered that *cosmos* appears some 78 times in the Fourth Gospel the critical question should be put whether the usage of this word in 3:16 does indeed support the popular message: That God loved *humankind* and that every person in all the world, wherever, whenever, who comes to faith, that is, *begins* to believe in Jesus and “... receives Jesus as personal Saviour”, becomes a Christian, is “... born again ...”, thereby receives *eternal* life and, consequently, gets the assurance that, when she/he dies, she/he goes to heaven.

We contend here that this verse does not support the traditional interpretation at all: the way in which the community which created the Gospel of John understood this verse is far removed from our current understanding

of this verse, and this we will attempt to prove by introducing the social sciences and some semantic categories in conjunction with more traditional historical-critical exegesis.

However, while contending that traditional interpretations of this verse are untenable, we must also at the outset say that this is not an attack against the fundamentals of Christianity. Christians can still with confidence say, and believe, that God sent his Son to this world to save those who believe in Him. We are merely saying that having examined this verse in its grammatical, literary, social and cultural context, it is clear that this particular verse does not support that traditional notion, and cannot be used to support the idea that God so loved the whole of humankind!

If there is the wish to express this notion, it is fine, but John 3:16 should not and cannot be used as substantiating quote for this at all. It is not the ultimate “proof-text” whereby the excellence of the Good News is stated once and for all with regard to the universal range of salvation made known in the Gospel. John 3:16 is not a timeless soteriological adage addressed to all of humankind in every age, but it is an utterance which was specifically directed to the first readership-audience, John’s community, as both a reassuring statement and a serious warning.

In arguing this, we will take a comprehensive look at the verse and the context of the verse and we will be utilising social scientific categories as well as grammatical, historical, literary and semantic observations. In short, we will try to take a comprehensive look at John 3:16 and continuously ask the question: were the words of John 3:16 a timeless statement *cum* invitation *cum* promise on becoming a Christian, logically, then, aimed at a universal audience till kingdom comes, or were it meant as a sorely needed exhortation, based on the immutable love of God, of a specific and identifiable group of Christians to remain faithful to Jesus? It is our contention that every reading of the verse, be it social scientific, historical, grammatical or theological, contributes to refute the “traditional” or “romantic” reading of this verse.

2. COMPREHENSIVE READING OF JOHN 3:16

2.1 Exigency for the document.

Why was the Gospel written? Would a close reading of the verses where the purpose of the writing of the Gospel is also taken into account perhaps also shed light on such a crucial verse such as 3:16? We believe that this is the case.

The reason for writing the Gospel is stated clearly and plainly in John 20:31: *to foster an ongoing belief in Jesus the Christ, Son of God, whereby the addressees would continue to experience eternal life.* (Some favour an

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aorist reading for the subjunctive *believe* πιστεύζητε while the present πιστεύζητε would be the more plausible as it is supported by the present participle in the second *believe* πιστεύοντες and subjunctive *have* (ἐζητε). The different stances may be argued for or against and elaborated upon at great length, but suffice to say that those who would favour John 3:16 as a “missionary” text for world-wide evangelism would probably also opt for the aorist form of πιστεύω. However, the text-critically based and accepted *present subjunctive* form would indicate an exhortation and support for the addressees to continue believing in Jesus. The probable reason for the writing of the Gospel thus appears to have been an exhortation not to leave John’s community of Christians. The possibility that this group of believers may have experienced (even severe) persecution and marginalisation from/within their society would be ably supported by the Gospel itself – the fears of being banned from the synagogue, the killing of members and the killers believing that they were doing God a favour and, maybe especially, persecution from the synagogue rulers would render enough proof of their social circumstances.

In the life setting of John’s community an exhortation to “remain in Christ” (Jn 15), as a turn of phrase for the community of Christians, would have been especially necessary. As it stands John 3:16 may well have served as a proleptic exhortation *cum* warning to remain/not to leave the community – a sad but imminent possibility that realised some time later as may be gleaned from the Epistles (compare Brown 1984:116). And, as such, it is directed at a very specific group of people, those who have associated themselves with the Johannine group, not humanity in general, and not people who are about to be evangelised. It is aimed at people who are *already* part of the Johannine community and it is an exhortation to remain faithful. It does not refer to all of humanity and very definitely it is not an invitation to potential new believers.

2.2 A grammatical reading of John 3:16

The original (from Aland et al 1988, 253) reads:

3:16 οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ’ ἐχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

A literal/expanded translation with regard to the form and aspect of the verbs would render the following: “for this reason then God *loved* (active, indicative, aorist) the world so that he *gave* (active, indicative, aorist) the only son so that every man *believing* (active, participium, present: believing continuously) in him should not perish (subjunctive aorist) but *have* (active participium present: have continuously) life eternal.”

In these well known words God's immutability with regard to his righteousness and love and the qualities of love are stated. The *traditional* stance on and *kerygma* of these words seem to enunciate the futuristic and eternal aspect of *eternal life* (which would support the "evangelistic" thrust). But, however, while the futuristic and eternal should and cannot be denied, the *life* referred to here, and as it is indicated by the grammar, has largely to do with the present/immediate circumstances of the "world". This is also clear from the context of verse and the thrust of the Gospel itself.

In the more traditional reading of the text the circumstances of the community have been taken *from its textual context*, that is, the text/document in which it has its specific meaning, and relegated to the function it now fills: *a context-less fully universal statement on salvation!* The most basic of exegetical work, parsing the wording and defining the syntax of the original in context with the text of which it is indelibly part of, appears indeed to have been ignored by those wanting to see John 3:16 as a universal soteriological declaration.

If seen in isolation, and on its own, John 3:16's applicability to steadfast faith in Jesus and (already) living eternal life in the here and now, can with some fancy exegetical footwork, doubtlessly be applied to the proclamation of a universal (and futuristic) soteriology. But if these words are taken in their context, and if the grammar is taken into consideration, it is well nigh impossible to reconcile it with what it is made to say – John 3:16 is not, singularly, the proof-text per excellence for universal salvation! In its context it renders something quite the opposite.

2.3 The literary context of John 3:16

The *Jewish atmosphere* of the conversation rendered in John 3 dominates the context – if, that is, one would let the verse speak for itself. The participants in the conversation are one *Nicodemus*, a *Jewish ruler*: an ἄρχων, a well-to-do person, a member of the urban elite (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:81) and *Jesus*, also a Jew and kind of a rabbi, whom Nicodemus approached during night to speak to about what he (Jesus) was doing. The conversation itself centres around becoming a partaker of the kingdom of God (a Jewish concept) by new birth – a subject and theme *which specifically and exclusively encompassed Israel, the people of God*. God's reign over Israel had to be reinstated, and being "children of God" was something to be striven after. Entrance to God's domain, partaking in God's patronage, experiencing new life by faith in the Son of Man (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:83) has but one precondition: to be born anew (ἄνωθεν – from above/once more), thereby acquiring a new birth status and, consequently, a new (and better) honour rating (1998:81) and becoming part of God's kinship group/family or fictive kinship group. The verse does not function in a context where the discussion

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centres around universal categories and universal acceptance of Jesus: it is firmly rooted in the context of the salvation of Israel in general and the acceptance of Jesus by Israel specifically. References to the Son of Man, Moses' raising up of the serpent and belief and unbelief *in Israel* firmly place this utterance in the context of Israel and God and Jesus' dealing with Israel. Jesus' utterance in John 3:16 should then also be understood in relation to this specific context (Jesus and the relationship with Israel) and not against a broader theological context (universal salvation), which (while it may be indeed theologically valid) does not function in this pericope at all.

2.4 A social science reading of John 3:16

If one aims for a comprehensive reading of John 3:16, one also has to look at the social and cultural world of the text, that is the social and cultural world of the first century Mediterranean world, and at the social relationships reflected in the text.

It can be argued that John 3:16 should be understood against the background of patronage. Halvor Moxnes (1993:242) refers to Blok who points out that a wide range of apparent different social relationships can in fact be understood from the single analytical construct *patronage*, amongst others, father-son; God-man; landlord-tenant, *et cetera*. As such patron-client relations are "... based on a strong element of inequality and difference in power ..." and the "... basic structure of the relationship is an exchange of different and very un-equal resources". Eisenstadt & Roniger (as referred to by Moxnes 1993:248) summarised the characteristics of patron-client relations:

- There is a strong element of solidarity in the relations between patron and client, linked to personal honour and obligations (reciprocity from the client for instance).
- here may be a spiritual attachment, however ambivalent, between patron and clients.
- Patron-client relations are seemingly binding and long range – ideally of life long endurance. However, such relations between individuals are in principle entered into voluntarily, and can be abandoned voluntarily.
- Patron-client relations are based on a very strong element of inequality and difference in power. A patron has a monopoly on certain positions and resources that are of virtual importance for his client.

Taken from the top, the solidarity between God (from God) and Israel needs no elaboration. God's unwavering, steadfast love for his errant people is a dominant theme throughout the Old Testament and this very verse of the Fourth Gospel is a clear reiteration of God's honour in this regard. The relation God-Jewish people is spiritual rather than temporal but the temporality of this relationship is neither cancelled out nor can it be excluded – when the spiritual was found lacking for not being upheld by the people, the/their temporal circumstances gave testimony thereof.

With regard to God's enduring faithfulness to Israel, the life-long time aspect is outstanding. Contrarily, the unreliability, even fickleness, with regard to Israel's side of (past) relations is no secret. Lastly, the difference in power and the powerlessness of the recipients of God's grace speaks for itself. What God wanted and had to do for "the world" they could not have gone without.

The popular (present day) idea about God's *agápe* is one of God always giving freely, abundantly and without any reciprocal duty with the receiver/s, God never expecting anything in return. This is a wrong interpretation, and not in line with social norms of the first century and is an anachronistic understanding of what is involved in "giving" in the world of the New Testament.

Viewed against the background of patronage in the ancient Mediterranean world, God's "*charis*, his readiness to be a patron ("heavenly Father") is shown despite the fact that God is/was never under any obligation to simply "give in" (Malina 1993b:85). The theological premise, that God takes the initiative in "giving grace" is the indication that God seeks the goodwill and openness (Malina 1993b:85) of the people who are in need of his favour.

The acts of "giving" and "giving-in" are distinctive (compare Malina 1993b:85) and this distinction has to be pointed out briefly. It would seem that "giving" pertains to a balanced reciprocity, an equality between giver and receiver where social equals do not owe each other anything, while "giving-in" has to do with the reciprocity inherent in social inequality (Malina 1993b:85) Reciprocity never presumes the lack of/no obligations on the side of the receiver to the giver, in fact, it presupposes the exact opposite: God's giving-in always comes with an obligation for the receivers (Malina 1993b:85) to reciprocate in some or other form. In John 3:16 the reciprocation amounts to receiving/believing in God's only Son, the Saviour from God, the one who takes away their sin and in so doing they become part of a new fictive kinship group: the family of God.

With regard to description of God's dealings with his people, Israel, in social terms, neither the goodness of God's grace nor the greatness of *agápé* as shown by God, the heavenly Patron, who has the right to expect and demand reciprocity, are minimised in the very least by being described in social terms – fact is that God maintained his relationship with his

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covenant/chosen people – he “gave in” again, this time with the ultimate gift: τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ.

The content of the verse enunciates love of which the source is given as God: *God so loved* (...γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεός). God never acts contrary to his being, so that, consequently, at a certain point in time, God acted in the magnanimity inherent in love towards the Israelite people who experienced a definite and certain need which only he could address from the resources under his control (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:118). When this “act” is translated from the language John used for the specific understanding by his community into language for our understanding, it boils down to the plain fact that God acted sublimely as *Israel’s Benefactor*, as a patron.

Patrons act from, among other motivations, “friendship” (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:118), that is, benevolence and support stemming from an unbreakable attachment – which is the meaning of *love* (1998:87). God’s attachment to his people, Israel, is witnessed to in the fact that he sent his only Son (Malina 1993c:112). The grace of Love is enunciated in the theological vocabulary of grace in the Bible, all about the gracious favours from “... our Father who art in heaven ...” (1993c:102). The act of love is expressed in the aorist: ἠγάπησεν, whereby the purposefulness, even finality, is singularly expressed. The “giving” of the Son is similarly expressed in the aorist (ἔδωκεν) – the love expressed in ἠγάπησεν is not only complemented, but the (obvious) finality in this eschatological occurrence is also stated. But throughout it must be kept in mind that the relationship enunciated here is a relationship not of a universal God with an unnamed people, but of a very specific relationship between the God of Israel and his people, the people of Israel.

The nature of love is spelled out plainly in what was done – *God so loved ... that he gave*: “... γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεός ... ὥστε ἔδωκεν”. The benevolence radiated by this act of giving is perhaps the singularly prominent facet on which the majority of scholars are unanimous – the excellence of God’s loving deed in the giving of the Son is foundational in John 3: 16. The “giving” and ‘sending” of the Son are synonymous – the repeated reference to, or stating that Jesus was ‘sent” (forty three times – Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:118) is typical of *patronage language* (1998:86, 118). Possibly, in keeping with John’s use of anti-language, these references are “astonishingly” (1998:118) common in John as compared to Matthew (twice), once in Mark, Luke (four times) and also once in Paul (1998:118).

The recipient/s of God’s love in Jesus is clearly designated – τὸν κόσμον. John’s description of the Gospel has to do with the Word became flesh and his repeated descending from and returning to the Father above. In the Baptist’s introduction of Jesus to Israel (Jn 1:29-31) he identifies a certain need that Jesus was to address: to take away *the sin of the world*. As it was alluded above and will be shown, the author’s use of the term “world” is not

simply his way to refer to humanity in the universal sense, but, depending on the context in which “world” is referred to, in the Gospel of John it can refer to:

- *the physical world* (for instance 1:10),
- *Israel* as God’s chosen humanity (1:10 read with 1:11), and
- *Judeans* (8:26).

Particular care has then to be exercised in defining which particular meaning was conveyed in a particular occurrence/usage of the word. The precept, the reason for Jesus’ commission stated in John 1:29, to take away the sin of the “world”, is reiterated in John 3:17: he did not come to condemn but to save the *world*. These and other references to the *world* are universally as well known, accepted and proclaimed as John 3:16 is appropriated as the proof-text of Jesus’ being Saviour of all of humankind. But, is that the “Gospel truth” in the context of the Fourth Gospel? A good look would reveal that these instances lay in the same category as John 3:16 because the references to *the “world”* in John do not indicate humankind in general, but *mostly refers to God’s people in Israel*. So, for instance, in John 18:20 Jesus clearly indicates who the “world” in the activities of Jesus was, with whom his coming was preoccupied. Consequently, the statement in John 18:20 could be taken as a good indication of John’s general usage of the term “world” – the τὰ ἴδια in John 1:11 is identified so clearly with the world in 18: 20 that there could not be any mistake about what/who “world” was when he says:

ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ ἰησοῦς, ἐγὼ παρρησίᾳ λελάληκα τῷ κόσμῳ· ἐγὼ πάντοτε ἐδίδαξα ἐν συναγωγῇ καὶ ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ, ὅπου πάντες οἱ ἰουδαῖοι συνέρχονται, καὶ ἐν κρυπτῷ ἐλάλησα οὐδέν.

Jesus answered him, “have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together; I have said nothing secretly.”

Christendom’s secure foothold in European and American (not forgetting the South African) societies quite positively results in having Christendom regarded as a “European” religion – whence the popular, but undiscerning insistence on and application of Jesus’ use of *cosmos* in John as referring to the *universe*. It is commonly assumed that in John 3 Jesus was teaching Nicodemus precisely on this point: that he was the saviour of all men. If this be so, then John, in fact, contradicts Matthew and Acts which state the obvious: Jesus came for the salvation of his own people.

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The majority of the occurrences of *cosmos* in John make it impossible to understand anything else than God's concern with the Israelite people. If, for instance, the numerous references to the "world" in John 17 were so compared, then Jesus clearly states that his disciples came from the world (Jn 17:6, 14); at one stage, if he came to be the universal saviour according to the traditional stance on John 3:16, he denies his mission, for if he would not pray for the universe ("world" – Jn 17:9), it may be suspect that he would also die for all of humankind. If, however, "the world" here is taken as a referral to them that have incessantly persecuted him and were about to put an end to him, the reference makes sense.

It may be ventured that the "world" referred to in John, then, has almost al-ways to do with Judeans, as is the case in John 3:16, and Malina & Rohrbaugh's emphatic dictum on *cosmos* (1998:246) stressed here may not be out of place: "What "world" never refers to in John is all human beings, the whole human race". Again we must make the point that God's providence for all of humankind is not in dispute here (or anywhere in this study, for that matter,) but the dogmatic misappropriation of a Bible verse has to be criticised.

The exclusive role of Israel's Messiah is inextricably intertwined with God's gift to "the world". Jesus was 'sent" by God, the heavenly Patron, to God's own (τὰ ἴδια – Israel/the "world") whose religious leaders refused to acknowledge (honour) him. Clearly Israel is meant here. John's account of the repeated, antagonistic ways in which the *Ioudaioi* assailed Jesus (and, at times, attempted assassination even though it failed) makes it difficult to accept that John would have been alternating in referring to the Judeans in one place and the rest of humankind in another, especially as the context in which "world" is used here makes no provision for a universal reference. The happenings recorded in John took place within the land of the Jews – the "world" in John. There are no universal categories at play here.

Despite the negative challenges by the "world" or Israel, God's gift in the Son was not overturned. In all the excellence thereof, God's love was, then, *merciful love* (rendered *steadfast love* in the New Testament). This value was dominant in governing human interactions in Mediterranean social relations as John Pilch (1993:161-163) shows that the Hebrew *hesed* ("loving-kindness" in KJV and ASV) (1993:161) renders almost strictly the meaning of an enduring loyalty – "Because kinship is one of the major social institutions in this culture, and family-centeredness a major value, steadfast love draws its meaning primarily from interactions in this social context" (Pilch 1993:161). Since the Mediterranean world was conflict-ridden in competitive power plays, no certainty about anything or, for that matter, anyone, outside a person's family circle would have been likely to have existed. The only certain and reliable source of support was family (Pilch 1993:162). God shows himself as the supremely faithful Father who gave, even and despite the reprehensible,

repeated rejection endured by the “Gift”. In the context of the ancient Mediterranean world it is inconceivable that, given the context of God’s interaction with his own people/Israel, that the author would allude to God’s merciful love towards any other group of people, and certainly there is no chance that a universal, unspecified, undefined totality of humanity would be at stake here. Again, one can argue *dogmatically* that God’s grace encompasses all of humankind, but this passage in John can certainly not be used to substantiate this argument.

Considering the fact that the Gospel narrative continuously “operated” on more than one level, that of Jesus’ experience to which the experience of John’s community may be equated, the realisation of God’s immutable goodness and faithfulness had to have had an encouraging and comforting effect on the first audience of the Gospel: If not even the ingrate disregard of the “world” could cause God to change, how much more reason to believe was there for the members of this community: to continue steadfastly to believe in God’s only Agent who gives life. And this is a strong incentive to remain part of the Johannine community.

Ancient Palestine and the Johannine community were fully part of the Mediterranean social and cultural system and governed by the same value system and social codes. Pilch (1993:162) reiterates a quite relevant (albeit negative) example from the Old Testament where Hosea reports God’s complaint that “... here is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land ... Swearing, lying, murder and adultery break out” (Hs 4:1 as translated by Pilch 1993:162). This, indeed, is a saddening picture of the breakdown in-group solidarity and the consequences thereof among Israel – where everybody thinks about himself only, in fact, exhibiting an individualism totally anomalous within the national (Jewish) sub-culture and wider (Mediterranean) cultural lore of the day. God’s righteous desire, contrarily, is not a religious show (for example, sacrifice at the temple) but a true and enduring loyalty towards each other, unfazed even in the face of ingrate rejection – of which John 3:16 may be just about the most telling example.

Given the reasons for Jesus’ quest for social reform among God’s people (and, undoubtedly, no less, their deep and genuine spiritual rebirth from “above” without which, undeniably so, any social reform would have been doomed to failure) stated by the Fourth Evangelist, namely that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of Israel, the obvious would be that there existed a situation of *sin* with the Jews. Sin always indicate being separated, loosened off from God (compare Is 59:2-4.) and, consequently, “*lost*”, as Israel was separated from their God (for the umpteenth time) and the seriousness of this separation was so dire that *God sent no less than his only son to remedy the situation*. Israel’s national situation was shamefully sinful – despite being able to practice their religion and enjoying some rudiments of political freedom under client kings employed by the Romans, they were in

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bondage. Their claims to honour, their special relationship to the Lord *God* (Is 43:1-7), was not borne out by evidence that God was on their side (Ps 44:1-8) (see Plevnik 1993:97) and, for all practical reasons, their defeat proved God's "abandonment" and, resultantly, their sin. "Sin", as was pointed out above, is a serious disposition and a direct opposition to *agápé*, it is suggestive of and in reality consists in a loss of freedom, being bound to or fettered by something that impairs decent living or being in the right relation to others. This was Israel's experience in both their national situation and the religious state of affairs at the time of Jesus.

Thus defined, it is also clear that what is at stake here is not the sins of all of humankind through all of time and space, but that the allusion is to the people of Israel. The sin of the "world" equals the sin of Israel, not the sin of all of humanity!

The embodiment of love was in the only son. The original τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ (Aland *et al* 1988:253); τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ (Textus Receptus 1985:174) was for the greater part in the history of the Church translated as and proclaimed as the "only *begotten* son ..." as may be seen in KJV and ASV; in Dutch it is given as "... eeniggeboren Zoon ..." (Dutch Staten Vertalen 1900:980) and in the first Afrikaans translation 1933/1953 "... eniggebore Seun" More recent translations (correctly) give the Greek as "... only son ..." (NRSV, RSV, BBE) and the 1983 Afrikaans "New" translation "... enigste seun". An elaboration on the correctness of "only" versus "only begotten" is not necessary. Louw & Nida (1988:591) (specifically with regard to Jn 3:16) give the meaning of μονογενῆς simply as "... pertaining to what is unique in the sense of being the only one of the same kind or class – "unique, only". Israel's God has no other mediator between him and his people: the μονογενῆς υἱὸς is the sole embodiment of the God of Israel's merciful dealings with his people, chronicled in John.

On Israel's part there existed then the negative and very grave situation called sin (Jn 1:29) and they were in serious need of a *saviour*. God is all-powerful and able to save – as he has demonstrated and done so many times in Israel's past -- and his willingness to bestow grace once more is demonstrated in "giving" his only Son to act as Broker on God's behalf. Jesus, then, was indeed God's gift-with-strings-attached (Malina 1993b:85) to the "world" –the physical "embodiment" of God's *agápé*. God's gift in the son had to be honoured by his people in a fitting way. "Gift" was a widely used term in ancient patronage parlance whereby a gift is indicated to which the expectancy was attached that the receiver will recompense in some or other (equivalent) way. The word speaks of favouritism (a very strong, even dominant aspect in patronage see Malina 1993b:84) and, expectantly so, Malina indicates the meaning to pertain to a gift given by a patron in a powerful position, but it is a "favor-with-strings-attached" (1993b:85). It is not given in a thoughtless way – certain and definite reciprocation was *de rigueur*.

From a social-scientific perspective God's patronage towards Israel is clear as it was axiomatic that God is the ultimate benefactor and patron (Moxnes 1993:257). Jesus, then, was the agent/broker sent from God as the singular μεσίτης who mediates access to the patron and in proclaiming the kingdom Jesus presented himself to the Jews in this capacity (Malina 1993c:136), acting as their mediator.

The role of Jesus' mediatorship/brokerage is clear from 1 Timothy 2:5 as Louw and Nida (1988) directly refer to it in their explanation of μεσίτης as:

40.6 μεσίτης m: a person who acts as a mediator in bringing about reconciliation – “mediator, one who reconciles.” εἷς γὰρ θεός, εἷς καὶ μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων, ἄνθρωπος χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς “there is one mediator between God and people, the man Jesus Christ” 1 Tm 2:5. A mediator may be spoken of in a number of different ways, often idiomatically, for example, “one who stands in the middle,” “one who speaks to both,” “one who cuts palavers,” or “one who causes arguments to cease.” It is also possible, however, to regard μεσίτης as being related to the process of causing agreement between the parties in question. For this aspect of the meaning of μεσίτης, see 31:22.

And 31.22 reads:

μεσίτης m: (derivative of μεσίτεύω “to bring about an agreement,” 31.21) one who causes or helps parties to come to an agreement, with the implication of guaranteeing the certainty of the arrangement – “go-between, mediator.” διαταγῆς δι’ ἀγγέλων ἐν χειρὶ μεσίτου (the Law) was put into effect through angels by a mediator.

(Gl 3:19)

With regard to Jesus' being God's celestial mediator/broker the Fourth Gospel states that the son of man came from *above* (Jn 3:13), that is, *from God*, and he is able also to ascend again (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:84-85) because of his descent (from “above”) as, in fact, the Fourth Gospel is a record of his descending and ascending.

The implications are clear: only someone from the sky regions (“above”) will be able to return because that is where he came from (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:85). When the Baptist, then, announced that Jesus was the celestial Lamb of God (Jn 1:29) who takes away “... the sin of the world ...” (Israel's sin) he was not referring exclusively to what Isaiah (Is 53) wrote about the suffering of the Ebed-Yahweh (viewed and proclaimed by many as

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an exclusively Messianic prophecy and therefore, almost as a matter of fact, also connect it to Jn 1:29), but more probably to describe from whence Jesus came as well as his brokerage in God's service (compare also Malina & Rohrbaugh's 1998:50-52; treatment of the subject "Lamb of God" in John 1:29-34.)

All of this is also indicative of the fact that there is a very specific and long standing relationship between the parties. Patronage relationships were not established between parties totally unknown to each other. Quite the contrary, patronage relationships were established between parties who have had dealings in the past, like God and Israel. This is also a very strong indirect argument against reading John 3:16 in the traditional, universal and anachronistic way: what is at stake in John 3:16 is the continuation of a long standing relationship, not the establishment of a totally new patronage relationship with a yet to be defined, unknown universal group of people! Such a reading of the text of John 3 would have been inconceivable to a first century Mediterranean person and even more so to the readership-audience of the Fourth Gospel. An examination of the response to God's love further strengthens this point.

The response to love is spelled out plainly in reciprocal terms common to patronage language, honouring thereby what was conveyed *de rigueur*, as no response would indicate a sheer equality (as pointed out above) between the giver and receiver (Malina 1993b:85). The fitting response is clear: ἴνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν "... *whosoever believeth in him*" The continual/ontinued acceptance/continuing to believe God's Agent/Broker is given as the fitting and required reaction to God's merciful outreach to "the world". It is especially significant that the response is indicated as a continuance (πιστεύων being a present participle). From the witness of John 1: 11 it is clear that there was a definite initiative present in the coming/sending of the Word *to his own people* (τὰ ἴδια – *whereby the coming of the Word can hardly be mistaken as intended for all of humankind*). John 1:11-12 has to do with the fitting and ideal reciprocal response by the intended receivers (or, rather, beneficiaries) – acceptance of the Word. In 1:11 the Patron/Broker's initiative is enunciated, whereas the acceptance of the Word-became-flesh shifts to the (intended) audience of the Gospel – what will their response be? With regard to the *reaction* on the part of the intended beneficiaries, this is where the relevance of John 1:12 comes into its own. As such, although not verbatim, John 1:11-12 has a direct bearing on 3:16 with regard to the ideal response.

Faith, to accept, to come to believe, as Louw & Nida (1988:372) render λαμβάνω, likewise had a strong social import as it referred inter alia to the value of reliability, of honouring, within the field of interpersonal relations, and, like *agápé*, also may be regarded as the social glue that binds one person to the other (Malina 1993a:67). This acceptance was socially manifested in external behaviour of loyalty, commitment and solidarity (1993b:68) which has

close ties with the personal and group attachment simply known and referred to as “love” and the “companion” value of personal and group allegiance or trust known as “hope” (1993b:68). Where acceptance enunciated love, loyalty and commitment, the obverse, rejection, logically, spoke of hate, untrustworthiness, seeking you own good above that of others. This kind of behaviour was totally out of keeping with the high group-solidarity value.

The relevance and importance of faith occupied centre stage in the Fourth Gospel. The initial coming to believe in Christ was of utmost importance, best described in the idiom of John 3:3, but in the end the enduring, progressive perseverance in faith/to remain faithful, (and, thereby, to honour and act honourably) was the singularly most important paradigm for writing the Gospel – the exhortation of the readership-audience to remain faithful was both the hub and periphery of the author’s reason for writing. Even though they most probably also included non-Jewish members, the enduring of their faith in Jesus (as the Christ, the son of God) was the specific tenet the author had or wanted to get across, and he exploited the (negative) response from the Jerusalemite Jews to the hilt, for whoever in his/her right mind would have been keen to be compared to or identified with people who, due to their murderous actions and slanderous motives, even though they professed faith in Jesus, were unmasked as having the devil for their patron along with an eagerness to comply with their patron’s murderous and defamatory wishes? (compare Jn 8:30, 31, 44). The logical opposite, to continue believing in Jesus, clearly was to be the preferred course of action.

Life, like faith and love, is a dominant theme in the Fourth Gospel (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:41) with Jesus constantly engaged in the act of giving life, beginning with his changing of water into wine and ending with his dying. The first and last *semeia* respectively serve as a good example: water is an inert liquid but wine is a “living” liquid with ‘spirit’ – Jesus gave “spirit” to the water; Lazarus was *really* dead: in ancient Jewish lore it was believed that someone could be brought back to life within three days after death by the intervention of a “saviour from death” when she/he united spirit and body once more. But of a τεταρταῖος (literally “fourth-day-man”) like Lazarus here, the people clearly understood that there was no chance whatsoever for such a person to be brought back to life. Despite, however, what their culturally shaped beliefs held them to accept, this τεταρταῖος emerges from the tomb on Jesus’ call and, even though still swathed in grave-clothes, he was given a new lease on life. Ironically, the fact that Lazarus had this lease precisely served as the rationalisation Jesus’ enemies appropriated as reason for him to have to also die.

Jesus’ giving life presents a stark and unmistakable contrast to his religious opponents whose attempts to take life (Jn 5:18; 7:1, 19, 25; 8:37, 40, 44) clearly identify their patron, the one whose wishes they were doing.

For God did not so love the whole world – only Israel!

Their apparent victory, taking Jesus' life, in the end only serves an expedient purpose whereby, being raised on the cross, he gives to "the world" his spirit "from above" (πνεύμα – "wind" – compare Jn 3:5) and the water of new life from his side, the elements from which men are born ἄνωθεν that they might have life continuously (ἵνα ... ἔχητε Jn 20:31) in his name (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:41). The purpose of Jesus' crucifixion in John, then, stands prominently and unmistakably enunciated: he did not die because God "wanted" him dead as a propitiation for sin, but, in dutiful obedience to the commandment of the Father (Jn 10:18), he laid down his life in order to take it up again – an almighty deed which no man could ever hope to imitate or achieve on his own – Jesus died to rise again. But all of this takes place against the background of God's dealings with Israel, not against the backdrop of a universal salvation: "... and as *Moses* lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, 3:15, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3:14-15).

The beginning of eternal life is prominent in the theological/dogmatic "use" of John 3:16 whereby the *commencement / beginning* of eternal life, being "born again" in the turn of speech of John 3:3, is over-familiar. The present participle for *believing* (πιστεύων) and the present subjunctive *having* (ἔχῃ), however, emphatically state another (and radically different) fact about eternal life as Jesus is reported here to have said – he referred not to a beginning, but the *continuance* in faith and thereby *having life*. Likewise, the aorist deponent subjunctive ἀπόληται, while it would not exclude such a reference, in the context of the Gospel's premise (Jn 20:31) it does not appear to indicate a futuristic perishing, but a voluntary act of unbelief with an inescapable and tragic outcome in the present: life from Jesus is cut off. As such, John 3:16 is juxtaposed with John 20:31, but also in close and constant relation to the μείνατε imperatives in John 15:4, 6. The use in John 3:16, respectively, of the aorist for the negative and the present for the positive is significant: a ceasing/cutting off and losing as opposed to a continuance and gain. For members of the Johannine community who might have contemplated to leave the community it should have held a definite and certain incentive against doing just that.

The meaning conveyed in John 3:16 for the individual is unmistakable, perhaps even more so because individualism was uncommon to Mediterranean group-centered persons. Brown (1984:84) specifically states that the ecclesiology of the Beloved Disciple's heritage is "... distinguished by its emphasis *on the relation of the individual Christian to Jesus Christ*" (italicisation original). Malina & Rohrbaugh's emphasis (1998:12) on the prolific and emphatic use of the singular "you" in John (sixty times as opposed to eighteen in Mt, ten in Mk and twenty six in Lk) also underscores the interpersonal dimension demonstrated by Jesus in his conversation with individuals.

Why the strong emphasis on the individual? The probability should not be summarily dispelled that this feature may have been directed to individual members who were leaving John's community. The disheartening situation narrated in John six, where the majority of Jesus' disciples were turning away, may provide a not improbable scenario for the writing of the Gospel as set out in John 20:31. This scenario is probably referred to in the situation alluded to in the first Epistle of John where the members who were leaving the community, in other words, not continuing to believe on the name of the Son of God (1 Jn 5: 13 – *KJV*) and thereby remaining in Jesus (Jn 15), believing his words (Jn 15:7, 10, 12, 14) and, consequently, did not continue in having life. They are denigrated for not having been true members in the first place (1 Jn 1:19 – refer Brown 1984:116). Despite calling someone a "brother" that person's leaving the community is seen as nothing less than a "... sin unto death ..." (1 Jn 5:16) and, therefore, siding with the Iscariot.

Remaining with the Johannine group (μείναιτε in the Jn 15 imperatives) would not only have been a clear and unequivocal demonstration of love *cum* loyalty for Jesus, but also, even especially, would have promoted the same among the members whereby their social standing would have improved, even if they only honoured fellow members thereby. But, alas, judging from the general tenor of the Epistles written approximately a decade later than the Fourth Gospel (Brown 1984:110), an internal split could not be averted and, as a result, the Epistles focus on a secession from within the community (1984:110), eventually leading to the expulsion of some members (1984:116). The seriousness of this situation necessitated apocalyptic language whereby the departure of former members had them branded as "Antichrists" (1 Jn 2:18-19).

All of the above argues strongly for a very specific understanding of who the "world" was for the author and readership-audience of John. It is a synonym for those to whom Jesus' salvific actions were directed: it alludes to the people of Israel and more specifically the Judeans who persecuted Jesus on one level, and on another level it alludes indirectly to those of the Johannine community who were unfaithful in whatever way. This means the emphasis is always on those who have been in a long standing relationship with God: that is Israel. The emphasis is not on all those who could possibly be converted, all of humanity.

3. CONCLUSION

In context of the Gospel the statement in John 3:16 depicts the incomparable quality of *agápé* in God's unfailing loyalty toward his people, Israel. Despite their sinful disposition, figured forth by their national circumstances wherein they were separated from God in more ways than one, as well as a religion which scarcely honoured him, God did not change, and ἠγάπησεν is then the

For God did not so love the whole world – only Israel!

perfect choice of word and the aorist, concomitantly, the ideal choice of verbal aspect to enunciate God's immutable commitment.

In the alternate language's means of expression peculiar to John, Israel is designated "world" – a designation reserved also for the antagonistic Judean religious leaders who constantly opposed Jesus. This designation would, of necessity, show that they were no less a part of Israel and, overall, despite their shameful conduct with regard to the only Son, God did not love them less.

The sending/giving of the Son as unique Jewish *μείστης*. The heavenly Patron's sole Agent in executing God's gracious intervention in the grave national situation of God's people, designated sin, has profound theological meaning. The definite social implications inherent to God showing his love in sending the Son as Agent of his mercy to bring Israel back into the fold of his reign once more stand out clearly. *Agápé's* inherent, transcendent quality is heightened against the backdrop of the Gospel's narration on the callousness and ingrate reaction generally displayed by the religious leaders (also designated "Jews", "*Ioudaioi*" in John). Viewed against the grace and truth in/with which God's Agent came to God's people, the Jews' conduct stands in stark contrast: grace and truth reciprocated by murderousness and deceit, exemplified by the *Ioudaioi*, the religious leaders. Despite the loftiness of their office and the fervour with which they practised their religious observances they were clients of the father of lies and, in the end, mere stooges of the epitome of evil, the devil himself (Jn 8:44).

As was argued abundantly above, John 3:16 is, almost with no exception, appropriated to substantiate a message on the saving, *universal* grace of God in Christ Jesus and the *commencement* of eternal life if Jesus is accepted as a "personal Saviour" (Jn 1:12). However, this does not seem to be borne out by the original. Instead, the continuation of faith, the logical outcome stemming from believing in God's Agent of salvation (in John's alternate turn of phrase called a "birth from above" or "second birth" or "birth from water and spirit" into the kingdom of God, see Jn 3:3) and resultantly the enduring experiencing of eternal life, is enunciated over and against the certain perishing which is not stated directly in verse sixteen, but made unmistakably clear in the following verse.

In context of the purpose of the Gospel, stated so clearly in John 20:30-31, John's audience is exhorted to continue in their faith in Jesus. The rationale in the Gospel is clear: If God does not give up on/let go of people, even his own errant people who did not deserve his love, how much more would he never stop loving them who received the Son, who, in truth, became sons of God (Jn 1:12) and continue to give eternal life to them who are in his hand (Jn 10:28-29)? God's love is immutable and leaving the community would not change God's loving disposition, but why reciprocate negatively in the face of so much goodness? Why forfeit the experience of a quality of life

so excellent that it is called “eternal life” – a metaphorical reference to no less than God’s (the “eternal”) life – and even in not nearly perfect conditions? Trying to remedy the situation by leaving the community could not and would not have worked, so why aggravate an already dire situation by turning the back on where “life” comes from? God’s love made perfectly sufficient provision in Jesus, something they were already partakers of. Turning away, no longer accepting life in Christ, would have been moronic in the extreme. To these ends John 3:16 makes good sense, as it is, in fact, the only logical way to follow.

All of the above make for a compelling argument to see John 3:16 as alluding to a group of people (Israel) who have had a long standing relationship as clients with God as their heavenly patron and who is urged to continue their faith in God. There is no possibility that this could in the context of the Fourth Gospel refer to an unspecified humanity who have had no dealings with God in the past. To interpret John 3:16 in universal and timeless terms would be to do an injustice to the import of these verses.

The grammatical, literary, historical and social science reading of the verse we presented above have all from different perspectives confirmed that what is at stake in John 3:16, namely Jesus’ coming to Israel, to his own, also referred to as κόσμος by the Evangelist. There is no support whatsoever for the interpretation of κόσμος as “universe” or “all of humanity” or “world in general” in this verse. The various readings have made it clear that κόσμος is used here to refer to Israel, to the group with whom God have had dealings for a long time and who stand in a client relationship to God’s patronage. It is also inconceivable that any Mediterranean group, and specifically the Johannine Community, would have had an understanding of κόσμος similar to what we in the 21st Century have given to the word. This means that the popular understanding of John 3:16 in the sense that the Son was sent to all of humanity, irrespective of time and place, has never had any hermeneutical grounding in the first place and cannot be supported any longer. To read John 3:16 in this way would be to misappropriate this verse to make it say something, which is inconceivable in its ancient Fourth Gospel context. From a theological or dogmatic perspective it may be perfectly true that God’s grace is for all people and that Jesus is the agent of this grace, but this study has clearly shown that this notion cannot be supported by John 3:16.

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