

## The Meaning of “Desires of the Flesh” in 1 John 2:16 and Its Relevance for the Theology of the World in 1 John

by Jonathan M. Cheek<sup>1</sup>

In a letter to his pupil Wormwood, Screwtape writes that “the Enemy’s servants have been preaching about ‘the World’ as one of the great standard temptations for two thousand years. . . . But fortunately they have said very little about it for the last few decades.”<sup>2</sup> This letter was published in 1942. Unfortunately, the situation has not changed much since then. A few leading evangelical leaders have bemoaned the lack of biblical teaching on the world in churches today.<sup>3</sup> David F. Wells, however, points out that “worldliness is so frequently being missed, or misjudged, in the evangelical church today: it takes theological sense, theological judgment to recognize it, and that is precisely what has disappeared from the church.”<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Gundry agrees, asserting that “the sense of embattlement with the world is rapidly evaporating among many evangelicals”<sup>5</sup> and that evangelicalism has experienced a “blurring of the distinction between believers and the world.”<sup>6</sup> Kevin DeYoung points out that “Christians used to talk about worldliness and fear its creeping influence,” but if modern Christians express concern about worldliness, they are “bound to hear barely muffled laughter.”<sup>7</sup> In summary, James K. A. Smith suggests that “our affirmation of creation slides into an affirmation of the world, which then slides toward an affirmation of ‘the world’ even in its distorted, misdirected configurations.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan M. Cheek completed the PhD in Theological Studies from BJU Seminary in 2019. His dissertation was titled “Genesis 3:15 as the Root of a Biblical Theology of the Church and the World: The Commencement, Continuation, and Culmination of the Enmity Between the Seeds.”

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 50.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes like the World*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 31; R. Kent Hughes, *Set Apart: Calling a Worldly Church to a Godly Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 10; C. J. Mahaney, “Is This Verse in Your Bible?” in *Worldliness: Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World*, ed. C. J. Mahaney (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 22; Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 1–10; Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2018), 12.

<sup>4</sup> David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Jesus the Word According to John the Sectarian: A Paleofundamentalist Manifesto for Contemporary Evangelicalism, Especially Its Elites, in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 73.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap Between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 37.

<sup>8</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 190.

This failure to understand “worldliness” is primarily a theological rather than a sociological issue.<sup>9</sup> An accurate understanding of worldliness depends on a well-developed biblical theology of the world, but this is lacking in scholarly literature.<sup>10</sup> Biblical theology depends on accurate exegesis of scriptural texts. D. A. Carson argues that “it is impossible to have any sort of responsible biblical theology apart from careful, responsible exegesis. Moreover, responsible exegesis of entire texts . . . is the working material of biblical theology. . . . Inevitably, the exegesis largely controls the biblical theology.”<sup>11</sup> It is, therefore, essential to gain an accurate understanding of the biblical text in order to understand biblical theology accurately.

Arguably, the key NT text describing the world is 1 John 2:15–17. This passage identifies three key elements that comprise “all that is in the world”: “the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life.”<sup>12</sup> The desires of the eyes and the pride of life are generally understood in a straightforward way; the first of these categories, though, “the desires of the flesh,” has engendered significant discussion and is often misunderstood by interpreters. Interpreters present essentially three different senses of “flesh” for the use of *σάρξ* in 1 John 2:16: (1) fallen sinful nature, (2) man’s human nature (in contrast to what is divine), and (3) the physical body. The latter sense receives almost no support in scholarly literature, and no commentaries have presented a well-developed argument establishing this sense. Several strong arguments, however, make this the most likely interpretation.

This article will examine the arguments for the different senses of “flesh” presented in the scholarly literature on 1 John 2:16 in order to determine the most likely meaning intended by the author. This paper will then show how the third sense of “flesh” fits appropriately with and helps to clarify the theology of the world presented in 1 John. A correct understanding of “the desires of the flesh” in 1 John 2:16 and how this interpretation fits with the concept of the world in 1 John will set the groundwork for a clearer understanding of the biblical concept of the world.

### *The Use of Σάρξ in the NT*

Scholars have produced numerous in-depth studies of *σάρξ*.<sup>13</sup> Though the different senses of *σάρξ* overlap to some degree and are not mutually exclusive, it is important to understand that the NT

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<sup>9</sup> Wells comments, “This sense of the term as it appears in the New Testament signifies not a sociological reality but a theological reality” (37).

<sup>10</sup> Randy Leedy comments, “What appears to remain lacking is a reasonably well-developed biblical theology of the world and worldliness.” *Love Not the World: Winning the War Against Worldliness* (Greenville: BJU Press, 2012), 5. For an introduction to a biblical theology of the world, see Jonathan M. Cheek, “‘The Nations’ and the ‘World’: Progressive Development in Biblical Theology,” *Gloria Deo Journal of Theology* 2 (2023): 1–43.

<sup>11</sup> “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *NDBT*, ed. T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 91.

<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright ©2016 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>13</sup> Eduard Schweizer, Friedrich Baumgärtel, and Rudolf Meyer, “*σάρξ*,” in *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 7:98–151; Ceslas Spicq, “*σάρξ*,” in *TLNT*, trans. James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:231–41; and Moisés Silva, “*σάρξ*,” in *NIDNTTE*, 2nd ed., ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 4:251–262.

authors are conveying different nuances of meaning in their use of *σάρξ*.<sup>14</sup> For purposes of this paper, it will be sufficient to summarize these previous findings on *σάρξ* in non-Johannine and Johannine biblical writings.

### Non-Johannine Use of *Σάρξ*

Paul uses *σάρξ* much more frequently than any other NT writer. Ninety-one out of 147 total NT uses of *σάρξ* are in Paul's writings, and forty-four of those ninety-one uses are in Romans (26x) and Galatians (18x).<sup>15</sup> Paul uses *σάρξ* in several different senses. Ceslas Spicq notes that, in Paul's writings, "the 'flesh' is constantly mentioned, and with meanings so different that one could almost say that they vary from verse to verse."<sup>16</sup> Paul uses *σάρξ* in reference to the human body in a physical sense (1 Cor 15:39; 2 Cor 7:5). Paul also uses *σάρξ* to refer to mere humanness or a common humanity with other people (Rom 9:8; 11:14; 1 Cor 1:29; Eph 6:12; Col 2:1; Phlm 16). In other cases Paul uses *σάρξ* to distinguish between what is earthly/temporary compared to what is eternal (e.g., Rom 1:3–4; 9:3, 8; 2 Cor 10:3). In many such instances, "flesh" is a neutral reference without pejorative overtones. The other NT writers' use of *σάρξ* are consistent with Paul's use of *σάρξ* with these senses.

Most unique to Paul is his concept of "flesh" in reference to the sinful nature of man that is inclined toward evil: "In Pauline thought *σάρξ* is not merely a ref. to the body as the seat of desire but rather denotes the self as a whole in opp. to God"<sup>17</sup> (e.g., Rom 7:18, 25; Gal 5:13). Paul closely connects "flesh" with evil desires (Gal 5:17–19; Col 3:5; 1 Cor 10:6), in juxtaposition to life by the Spirit, which follows the will of God (Rom 8:4–5; Gal 5:22–23; 6:8). Though the physical body can be seen as one aspect of this sense of *σάρξ*, Paul's primary reference in these uses is not to *σάρξ* as the physical body. The sinful nature of man includes much more than merely his physical body. However, because Paul is unique among NT writers in using this sense, this paper will refer to it as "the Pauline sense."

The other non-Johannine NT writers use *σάρξ* in similar ways to Paul, but they do not use the unique Pauline sense that refers to the "sinful nature of man that is inclined toward evil."<sup>18</sup> "Flesh" may refer to human weakness (Matt 26:41; Mark 14:38), the human body (Luke 24:39; Acts 2:31; 1 Pet 3:18, 21; 4:1, 2, 6; Heb 2:14; 9:10, 13), or to humanity in general (Matt 16:17; 24:22; Mark 13:20; Luke 3:6; Acts 2:17; Heb 12:9; 1 Pet 1:24). Later NT writings, in particular, use *σάρξ* with pejorative overtones, but the sense is still different than Paul's unique sense. In such instances, *σάρξ* seems to refer to sensual, often sexual, sinful behavior. Peter speaks of those who "go after the flesh"

<sup>14</sup> The NT uses *σάρξ* 147 times, and BDAG lists the senses as follows: (1) "the material that covers the bones of a human or animal body," (2) "the physical body as functioning entity," (3) "one who is or becomes a physical being," (4) "human/ancestral connection, human/mortal nature, earthly descent," (5) "the outward side of life." Similarly, Louw & Nida list these possible senses: flesh, body, people, human, nation, human nature, physical nature, and life.

<sup>15</sup> John uses *σάρξ* twenty-three times. All other NT writers use *σάρξ* fewer than ten times each: Peter (9x), Hebrews (6x), Matthew (5x), Luke-Acts (5x), Mark (4x), Jude (3x), and James (1x).

<sup>16</sup> Spicq, 3:235.

<sup>17</sup> Silva, 4:258.

<sup>18</sup> First Peter 2:11 may be seen as an exception to this, though he uses the adjective *σαρκικός* instead of the noun. See discussion in Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 120–21; alternatively, J. Ramsey Michaels argues that *σαρκικός* in 2:11 is a reference to physical desires. *1 Peter*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1988), 116.

in the “lust of defiling passion” (2 Pet 2:10) and of those who “entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error” (2 Pet 2:18).<sup>19</sup> Jude speaks of Sodom and Gomorrah, who “indulged in sexual immorality” and “pursued different flesh” (Jude 7), and of the Christian responsibility to save those whose garments are “stained by the flesh”<sup>20</sup> (Jude 23).

### Johannine Use of σάρξ.

John uses the term σάρξ a total of twenty-three times. Table 1 lists each of these uses of σάρξ in the Johannine literature.

**Table 1. John’s Use of σάρξ**

Reference	Text
John 1:13	Who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the <b>flesh</b> nor of the will of man, but of God.
John 1:14	The Word became <b>flesh</b> and dwelt among us.
John 3:6	That which is born of the flesh is <b>flesh</b> , and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
John 6:51	The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my <b>flesh</b> .
John 6:52	How can this man give us his <b>flesh</b> to eat?
John 6:53	Unless you eat the <b>flesh</b> of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.
John 6:54	Whoever feeds on my <b>flesh</b> and drinks my blood has eternal life.
John 6:55	For my <b>flesh</b> is true food, and my blood is true drink.
John 6:56	Whoever feeds on my <b>flesh</b> and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.
John 6:63	It is the Spirit who gives life; the <b>flesh</b> is no help at all.
John 8:15	You judge according to the <b>flesh</b> ; I judge no one.
John 17:2	You have given him authority over all <b>flesh</b> to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.
1 John 2:16	All that is in the world—the desires of the <b>flesh</b> , the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life
1 John 4:2	Every Spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the <b>flesh</b> is from God.
2 John 7	Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the <b>flesh</b> .
Rev 17:16	They will make her desolate and naked and devour her <b>flesh</b> and burn her up with fire.

<sup>19</sup> Peter H. Davids argues that to “go after the flesh” in 2 Peter 2:10 refers to fulfilling desires that have “broken acceptable boundaries.” *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 233. Likewise, the reference to “flesh” in 2:18 refers to “the physical drives” (245). Schreiner notes that both of these examples likely refer to sexual sin and not merely the Pauline concept of “sinful nature.” (345, 358). See also Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 107n17.

<sup>20</sup> Interpreters generally identify this as an allusion to Zechariah 3:4. Gene L. Green argues that the use of the word “tunic” (χιτῶνα) here refers to the “inner garment worn next to the flesh” and “would be the garment most likely to become soiled by the body.” *Jude and 2 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 127–28. Davids refers to this use of “flesh” as indicative of “human drives that lack control and therefore physical and especially sexual sin” (105). Because of the reference to the garment worn closest to the physical body and the earlier references to “flesh” in terms of sexual behavior, this explanation seems more likely than Schreiner’s suggestion that “flesh” here refers to “the Pauline view where it represents the principle of sin” (489) and Moo’s suggestion that it refers to “the sinful impulse” (289).

Reference	Text
Rev 19:18	to eat the <b>flesh</b> of kings, the <b>flesh</b> of captains, the <b>flesh</b> of mighty men, the <b>flesh</b> of horses and their riders, and the <b>flesh</b> of all men.
Rev 19:21	All the birds were gorged with their <b>flesh</b> .

John's usage of *σάρξ* may be separated into three primary categories. First, John sometimes uses *σάρξ* to refer to the material substance of human bodies. This sometimes refers to the "flesh" on dead bodies (Rev 17:16; 19:18, 21). John 6:51–56 includes six uses of *σάρξ* referring to people eating Jesus' flesh, which refers to his living body (either pre-crucifixion or post-resurrection). Jesus is clearly speaking metaphorically, and the metaphor hinges on the idea of eating Jesus' physical body and drinking his physical blood—part of his physical body. Jesus really did give up his physical body for the life of the world (6:51). The sense here is certainly that of Jesus' physical body rather than an inclination to sin or temporal humanness.

Second, John distinctively uses *σάρξ* three times to refer to Jesus' incarnation in which he became *σάρξ* (John 1:14; 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). When the Word became *σάρξ* (John 1:14), he became a whole human being, a classification which includes "bones, blood, and soul—the whole human being."<sup>21</sup> In doing so, the Son is able to live "a fully human life in his human nature."<sup>22</sup> To say that the Word "became flesh" necessarily includes God the Son locating his human nature within a human body (John 1:14; cf. 1 John 1:1).<sup>23</sup> His assumption of a human body is part of what is necessary for him to "become *σάρξ*." These uses also refer clearly to the physical body rather than temporal humanity or the inclination to sin.

Third, John uses *σάρξ* in five other instances in a less concrete sense. In two of these uses, *σάρξ* is contrasting what is human and physical with what is spiritual. For example, in John 1:13, children of God are "born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."<sup>24</sup> Also, Jesus says in John 3:6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." But these uses of *σάρξ* also bring to mind the human body. Klink comments on John 3:6, "In John 'flesh' is merely the body and its limitations."<sup>25</sup> The primary purpose of *σάρξ* in these verses (1:13 and 3:6) is to contrast physical human birth with spiritual birth, but in these verses it is impossible to separate *σάρξ* from the functions of the human body in relation to birth. Three other uses are exceptions and do not refer to the human body (6:63; 8:15; 17:2). John 6:63 says that "it is the Spirit

<sup>21</sup> Edward W. Klink III, *John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 106–7. Stephen J. Wellum points out that "to live a human life the Son needed more than a mere body or flesh; he also needed a human soul in order to will, act, and experience as a man." *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 297.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>23</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger notes that this is what distinguished Christ from the Greek gods who "could hardly have imagined immaterial Reason becoming a physical being." He was not merely an apparition but "literally was made flesh." *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 41.

<sup>24</sup> Klink notes on John 1:13, "For John the flesh is merely the body with all its needs and wants. The natural urges of the body are intended to be in sharp contrast to the source of the children of God, which is supernatural and entirely from the outside of a person" (106).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 199.

who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.” The human efforts of man cannot help the person achieve life; only the working of the Spirit can produce life. In this instance, the human body may not specifically be in view; rather, this seems to refer to the fact that people in their human nature are unable to attain life without the Spirit. John 8:15 is primarily a reference to human limitations. “You judge according to the flesh (σάρξ); I judge no one.” A final use in John 17:2 refers to the authority of Jesus “over all flesh to give eternal life.” This occurrence of σάρξ seems to refer to all humanity. These final three uses do not seem to refer to the human body at all.

To summarize, in John’s twenty-two other uses of σάρξ (excluding 1 John 2:16), nineteen of these uses necessarily have some reference to the human body, whether referring to the flesh of dead bodies, Jesus’ flesh and blood, or Jesus’ becoming flesh in the incarnation. In three other cases, John uses σάρξ with no reference to the human body (6:63; 8:15; 17:2). Two of these uses likely refer to “human nature” (6:63; 8:15), and the other refers to human beings in general (17:2).

### *The Desires of the Flesh in 1 John 2:16*

Scholars present three possible views for the meaning of “desires of the flesh” in 1 John 2:16: (1) the Pauline concept of “flesh” as sinful inclination, (2) the “Jewish” sense of “flesh” as that which is human as opposed to divine, and (3) bodily physical desires. The first two views are the most frequently represented views in commentaries.

### The Pauline Concept of “Flesh”<sup>26</sup>

A common view is that John is using σάρξ in a Pauline sense, referring to the desires of the flesh as the desires of innately sinful human nature.<sup>27</sup> The “desires of the flesh” in 1 John 2:16, therefore, represent the sinful desires that come from fallen human nature. In this case, Kruse notes that “this is a general category, and the second and third elements of those things which comprise the world are subcategories.”<sup>28</sup> The strength of this argument is that it fits with other Pauline uses of “flesh” in close

<sup>26</sup> Identifying this as the “Pauline” sense does not imply that Paul never uses other senses of σάρξ; see above for examples of Paul’s varied use of σάρξ. Paul was Jewish, and he does use the more Jewish sense of σάρξ at times, and he also refers to σάρξ in terms of bodily desires in other instances.

<sup>27</sup> For support for this view, see R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 426; C. Haas, Marinus De Jonge, and J. L. Swellengrebel, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Letters of John*, Helps for Translators (New York: UBS, 1972), 57; Rudolf K. Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 33–34; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 144–45; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1984), 83–84; John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 103; D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 1991), 102; Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2001), 110. Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 95; David Rensberger, *The Epistles of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 33; Rick Williamson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, NBBC (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2010), 96; Bruce G. Schuchard, *1–3 John*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012), 211; Gary Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, EEC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012), 203–4.

<sup>28</sup> Kruse, 95. Similarly, though he acknowledges that the grammatical καί . . . καί construction seems to lead the reader away from this idea, Smalley argues that the second and third phrases “are to be regarded as further definitions of” the first phrase (83).

connection with “desires” and in a sense that seems to refer to fallen man’s inclination toward sin (e.g., Gal 5:17; Eph 2:3).

Two considerations, however, challenge this interpretation of *σάρξ* in 1 John 2:16 and render the Pauline sense an inadequate explanation. First, this usage is entirely out of line with John’s typical use of *σάρξ*. As noted above, John never uses *σάρξ* in this specified Pauline sense outside of 1 John 2:16, so it seems unlikely that he is using this sense in 2:16. Though Derickson acknowledges that this usage is “not characteristic of John,”<sup>29</sup> he still holds that John is using the Pauline sense: “In this instance John appears to be using ‘flesh’ in much the same sense as Paul when he is referring to the sin nature within the believer.”<sup>30</sup> Raymond E. Brown, however, correctly warns, “One should not too quickly read the Johannine writings through Pauline spectacles, even when both writings use the same phrase. For John ‘flesh’ is not an evil or sinful principle.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Karen H. Jobes says, “The term ‘flesh’ (*σάρξ*) is used in almost exclusively negative ways in the apostle Paul’s writings, but that understanding should not automatically be brought into John’s thought. . . . In John the concept of ‘flesh’ does not denote innate sinfulness as it does, for instance, in Paul.”<sup>32</sup> This does not imply that John is unaware of Paul’s concept of “flesh.” It is quite possible that John’s thought is informed by Paul’s teaching on the flesh (e.g., Gal 5:16, Eph 2:3) and that he understands that the only reason any of the body’s cravings are sinful is that they are driven by the fallen sinful nature (the Pauline sense of flesh).<sup>33</sup> No proponents of the Pauline view, however, have explained why John would here be breaking his own pattern of usage to match up with the Pauline usage that is entirely foreign to John’s usage.

Second, 1 John 2:16 provides no compelling grammatical/syntactical reason to believe that “desires of the flesh” should be understood as the general category of which the two subsequent phrases are manifestations. The *καί* . . . *καί* correlative construction between each phrase gives the impression that this is a simple series of distinct characteristics rather than a sequence identifying a main category with

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<sup>29</sup> Derickson, 203.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 203–4.

<sup>31</sup> *The Epistles of John*, YAB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 309–10.

<sup>32</sup> Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 112; see also Andrew David Naselli, “Do Not Love the World: Breaking the Evil Enchantment of Worldliness (A Sermon on 1 John 2:15–17),” *SBJT* 22.1 (2018): 25n12. Though John Calvin was aware that the phrase is commonly explained in the Pauline sense of “the whole corrupt nature of man,” he “approve[s] of another meaning,” and he picks up on John’s difference from Paul on this point. Calvin argues that Paul’s use of “flesh” in Romans 13:14 is the best explanation of John’s use of *σάρξ* in 1 John 2:16. *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 187.

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps Ephesians 2:3 presents a helpful example to connect the Pauline and Johannine concepts. Both Ephesians 2:3 and 1 John 2:16 are in contexts discussing the dangers of the “world” (Eph 2:2 speaks of *τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου*). Paul refers to unbelievers “among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh [*ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῆς σαρκὸς ἡμῶν*], carrying out the desires of the body [*τὰ θελήματα τῆς σαρκὸς*] and the mind.” It seems most likely that Paul’s first reference to flesh in 2:3 speaks of flesh as man’s fallen nature inclined toward sin (though this use can easily be understood to refer to the physical body); the second reference to flesh in 2:3 likely speaks of the desires of the physical body, since these desires are in distinction to the desires of the mind. Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida comment on the second use of *σάρξ* in 2:3, “Here the two nouns ‘flesh and thoughts’ (also 4:18) clearly indicate ‘bodies and minds,’ ‘physical and intellectual’ (desires).” *A Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians*, Helps for Translators (New York: UBS, 1993), 42–43. If the second use of *σάρξ* refers to the human inclination to sin, it would seem odd to distinguish the desires “of the mind” from the “desires of the flesh.” Instead, the desires of the mind would be one aspect of the desires of the fallen human nature.

subcategories. Also, other vice lists in the NT do not seem to have that kind of categorization structure. Jobes argues that 2:16 “follows the convention of using the number three for referring to evil in the ancient world. Philo, for instance, attributes all wars to ‘the desire for money, or glory, or pleasure.’ This argues against seeing subordination of the second two to the first.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, “desires of the eyes” and “pride of life” would seem to be an odd choice of the only two subcategories under “desires of the flesh.” These categories would be inadequate compared to Paul’s description of “works of the flesh” (Gal 5:19–21). The Pauline view, therefore, seems inadequate for the use in 1 John 2:16.

### The “Jewish” Sense of “Flesh”<sup>35</sup>

If John’s use of *σάρξ* in 1 John 2:16 is to follow the same general pattern as John’s typical use of *σάρξ*, this leaves us with two possible senses. The first possibility is that John is referring to the desires of the flesh as “that which is merely human as opposed to divine”<sup>36</sup> (or “merely human desires”). Many scholars identify this as the OT or Jewish sense of “flesh,” based on the LXX use of *σάρξ* to translate the Hebrew *בָּשָׂר*.<sup>37</sup> They argue that in such examples in the OT, the LXX translates *בָּשָׂר* with *σάρξ* when speaking of man’s weakness or transitory nature in contrast to God. Common examples include the following:

“My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years” (Gen 6:3).

“He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again” (Ps 78:39).

“All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field” (Isa 40:6).

The strength of this view is that it accurately reflects some instances of John’s usage of *σάρξ* (John 6:63 and 8:15).

Several considerations, however, challenge this view. First, these examples use *σάρξ* to speak of man as “flesh,” and they subsequently *describe* “flesh” (man) as weak and transitory. They do not, however, *define* flesh as weak and transitory. For example, Isaiah 40:6 is not using “flesh” in a sense

<sup>34</sup> Jobes, 113.

<sup>35</sup> Identifying this as the “Jewish” sense is based on the proposal that the OT prominently uses “flesh” in this way. It is readily acknowledged that Paul was Jewish, but Paul employs distinctive senses of “flesh” that the OT does not use.

<sup>36</sup> Jobes, 112. For similar explanations of this view, see Edward Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant: A Study of εἶναι ἐν and μένειν ἐν in the First Letter of Saint John*, *Analecta Biblica* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 184; Brown, 309–10; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary*, trans. Reginald and Ilse Fuller (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 121; Gary M. Burge, *Letters of John*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 115; George L. Parsenios, *First, Second, and Third John*, PCNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 82; and Robert W. Yarborough, *1–3 John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). Some scholars fail to distinguish sufficiently between the Pauline sense and the sense of “flesh” as what is merely human as opposed to what is divine. For example, Smalley correctly observes that *σάρξ* is “sometimes used neutrally in John, to denote humanity in physical terms.” Therefore, “there is in John’s view nothing inherently wrong with ‘the flesh.’” Smalley then explains that the phrase “desire of the flesh” refers “to fallen human nature in general; to a disposition of hostility toward God” (84). Smalley hereby acknowledges that “flesh” in John’s writings is neutral but that the “desires of the flesh” refer to the Pauline sense of desires of “fallen human nature in general.” These two explanations, though, are mutually exclusive.

<sup>37</sup> The Hebrew term *בָּשָׂר* “flesh” is used 270 times in the Hebrew OT. The LXX uses *σάρξ* a total of 158 times.



meaning “weak” or “transitory.” The meaning of “flesh” in Isaiah 40:6 is that of “all created beings.” The idea of the transitoriness of “all flesh” comes only with the subsequent description of all flesh being “as grass.” The term *σάρξ* in itself, though, does not convey the idea of transitoriness. For example, if Isaiah had said, “All flesh is sinful” or “All flesh needs salvation,” in these cases “all flesh” would *mean* “all people” and “all flesh” carries no hint of “transitoriness” in itself. Based on OT examples such as these, however, some scholars argue that the “desire of the flesh is simply the desire for those things that pertain merely to this life.”<sup>38</sup>

One point consistently overlooked in the commentaries on this passage is that though the OT may use *בָּשָׂר* (with *σάρξ*) in this sense of “transitoriness,” this is certainly not the most commonly used sense of *בָּשָׂר* (and *σάρξ*) in the OT. In fact, this use of *בָּשָׂר* is quite rare (used for perhaps seven out of 270 uses of *בָּשָׂר*).<sup>39</sup> Therefore, to refer to this as the “OT and Jewish”<sup>40</sup> meaning of *σάρξ* is quite a stretch. When Burge claims that “the LXX never uses *sarx* with reference to sensuality but often uses it to refer to humanity in general, particularly as it stands in contrast to God,” he does not list any references to support this idea.<sup>41</sup> The OT basis for Burge’s statement is extremely limited. Though it is possible to argue that John is basing his use of “flesh” on the later development of “flesh” in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which seems similar to Paul’s usage of “flesh” in some cases,<sup>42</sup> it is inaccurate to say that the sense of “flesh” as “the human as distinct from the divine”<sup>43</sup> is based on a prominent pattern of usage of *σάρξ* in the OT. The OT uses *בָּשָׂר* much more frequently to refer to the physical body.

Another challenge with this view is the general nature of a definition of *σάρξ* in reference to human nature or transitoriness. For example, Brown says that the desire of the flesh “is directed toward all that satisfies the needs and wants of human beings taken as such.”<sup>44</sup> Malatesta states that *σάρξ* contrasts man “in his weakness and mortality with God who is all powerful and eternal.”<sup>45</sup> Burge says that the

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<sup>38</sup> Jobes, 112.

<sup>39</sup> The BDB lexicon entry for *בָּשָׂר* lists numerous references for the basic meaning of “flesh” in a physical sense (sense 1–4). Sense #5 refers to “man over against God as frail or erring,” and seven total references are listed for this sense (Gen 6:3; Pss 56:4; 78:39; Job 10:4; 2 Chr 32:8; Jer 17:5; Isa 31:3). Sense #6 refers to examples using *כָּל-בָּשָׂר* to refer to “all living beings/animals/mankind.” Similarly, the list of senses of *בָּשָׂר* in the Logos Bible Software Word Study analysis includes the following senses for the 270 uses of *בָּשָׂר*: flesh/tissue (107x); meat (61x); body (51x); humankind (24x); living things (15x); a relative (7x); the male sexual organ (4x), a blood relative (1x). The Logos system classifies Pss 56:4, 78:39, Job 10:4, and Jer. 17:5 under “humankind,” and it classifies Gen 6:3, 2 Chr 32:8, and Isa 31:3 under “flesh (tissue).” This supports the idea that “flesh” does not inherently carry the sense of “transitoriness.”

<sup>40</sup> For example, Silva writes, “One can hardly doubt, however, that the OT writers give expression to the fleeting character of human life in a distinctive way,” citing a few of the six references listed in BDB for this sense, including Isa 40:6–7, 2 Chr 32:8, Jer 17:5, and Ps 78:39 (4:253–54). Similarly, Smalley notes, “The writer of 1 John was probably indebted to a Jewish and biblical context for his understanding and use of the term *σάρξ*, ‘flesh,’ meaning (in some texts) the nature of man as a whole, in his distance from God” (83–84). Additionally, Marshall says, “John is here using ‘flesh’ in its Jewish and biblical sense of the nature of man as a whole as a worldly being separated from and opposed to God” (145).

<sup>41</sup> Burge, 115.

<sup>42</sup> See discussion in Brown, 308–310.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Malatesta, 184.

phrase refers to “humanity in general, particularly as it stands in contrast to God. In other words, John has in mind any desire, any sinful interest, that draws us away from God or at least makes continuing fellowship with him impossible.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, by using “desires of the flesh,” John is referring to any sinful desire that draws us away from God. One concern with this explanation is similar to the concern with interpreting John’s use of “flesh” in a Pauline sense. This view essentially makes “desires of the flesh” a general term that roughly serves as an overarching general category overlapping significantly with the desires of the eyes and the pride of life.

Consequently, the lack of specificity in the explanation makes it difficult to identify exactly what kinds of desires are in view. If John is referring simply to any sinful desire, what is the point of adding the desires of the eyes and the pride of life? None of the commentaries that present this view are able to bring clarity to this point. Because of the challenge presented by this general definition, some scholars define “flesh” in this general sense, but they apply it in a much more specific way. Jobes, for example, argues that for John, “flesh” refers to “that which is merely human as opposed to divine”<sup>47</sup> and concludes that “the desire of the flesh is simply the desire for those things that pertain merely to this life.”<sup>48</sup> It is difficult, however, to understand precisely what are those desires “that pertain merely to this life.” When Jobes seeks to identify those desires that are “merely human as opposed to divine,” she specifies “the impulse of human behavior that arises for the natural, even God-given, physical needs,” and she lists sins like “gluttony, alcoholism, and sexual immorality.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Yarborough defines the phrase as “things originating in innate human nature regarded as unredeemed by God.”<sup>50</sup> Yarborough, however, translates the phrase in a much more specific way: “what the body hankers for.”<sup>51</sup> It seems that both Jobes and Yarborough explain “flesh” with one particular sense (the “Jewish” sense), but their application of the “desires of the flesh” represents a different sense: that of physical, bodily desires—not simply what is human as opposed to divine. These explanations give weight to the idea that the third view of *σάρξ* is what John has in mind.

#### “Flesh” as Bodily/Physical Desires

The final possible Johannine sense of “flesh” understands John as referring to *σάρξ* as the human body (“desires of the body” or “bodily/physical desires”). Support for this view in scholarly literature is virtually absent.<sup>52</sup> Some pastoral works and expositional commentaries support this sense, although

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<sup>46</sup> Burge, 115.

<sup>47</sup> Jobes, 112.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Yarborough, 132.

<sup>51</sup> “My translation ‘what the body hankers for’ . . . is simply one more idiomatic rendering of the danger to which John seeks to call attention: things originating in innate human nature regarded as unredeemed by God. This interpretation relates ‘body’ more to the OT and Jewish frame of reference in which “flesh” is the human as distinct from the divine” (ibid.).

<sup>52</sup> Only one modern scholarly commentary presents this view but in an inconsistent way. Georg Strecker refers to *σάρξ* here as “the human body with its desires.” *The Johannine Letters*, Hermeneia, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 59. In the corresponding footnote, however, Strecker states, “Here ‘being flesh’ means the human being

none of them present a substantive defense of the view.<sup>53</sup> Three primary categories support this view: lexical support, support from the immediate context, and possible support from the larger context of Scripture.

### *Lexical Support*

This explanation fits best with much of the Johannine usage of *σάρξ*, which most often refers to—or at least implicitly relates to—a human body. The references to Christ taking on flesh necessarily include him taking on a physical human body (John 1:14; 1 John 4:2; 2 John 1:7). Six references to *σάρξ* in John 6:51–56 refer to the need to eat Jesus’ flesh, which must also refer to his physical body (though in a figurative sense). Even in the references that support the idea that *σάρξ* is contrasting what is human and physical with what is spiritual, the use of *σάρξ* also brings to mind the role of the physical human body with human procreation (e.g., John 1:13; 3:6). Against this argument, Hiebert suggests that John could have said “lusts of the body,” using *σῶμα* instead of *σάρξ*.<sup>54</sup> Presumably, John could have said *ἡ ἐπιθυμία τοῦ σώματος*. John, however, consistently uses *σῶμα* to refer to a dead body, a corpse (John 2:21; 19:31, 38, 40; 20:12).<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, if John wanted to refer to a person’s physical bodily desires, either *σάρξ* or *σῶμα* would be viable options.<sup>56</sup> Using *σάρξ* to refer to bodily desires, however, fits more naturally with the established Johannine pattern of usage of both *σάρξ* and *σῶμα*.

The understanding of *σάρξ* as the physical body might be called the classical Greek sense, which “describes the most physical aspect of human corporality, i.e., what is involved in eating, drinking,

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in its createdness and mortality and describes the realm of human existence” (59n23). Strecker, therefore, seems to be referring to the Jewish sense of “flesh” here in 2:16. Also, George E. Ladd appears to hold to this view, describing “lust of the flesh” as “the pursuit of the satisfaction of gross sensual pleasures.” Ladd, however, provides no support for this interpretation. *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 660.

<sup>53</sup> See Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ: Studies in 1 John* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 217; Leedy, 55; Naselli, 117, 125n12; and Joe Rigney, *Strangely Bright: Can You Love God and Enjoy This World?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 77. Additionally, Augustine holds to this sense of “flesh,” identifying desires “such as food, and carnal cohabitation, and all other such like.” “Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John,” in *NPNF*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. H. Browne and Joseph H. Myers (New York: Christian Literature, 1888), 7:474.

<sup>54</sup> Hiebert, 102.

<sup>55</sup> John also uses *σῶμα* in Revelation 18:13, but it is not in the sense of a dead body. In this verse, *σῶμα* is used to refer to “bodies, even the souls of humans” in a list of products sold by the merchants of Babylon. The sense here is that of “persons.”

<sup>56</sup> Both terms may speak of bodily desires elsewhere in the NT. In Romans 6:12, Paul refers to the desires of the *σῶμα*: “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body [*σῶμα*], to make you obey its passions [*ἐπιθυμία*].” Paul may not be limiting “the passions of the body” to physical desires, however. In this context, he is speaking of “the body of sin” (Rom 6:6), and he is certainly not limiting the scope of the human sin problem in “your members” to physical sins of the body (Rom 6:13–14). Moo notes that in the context of Romans 6, Paul “uses the word *sōma* to refer to the whole person, with an emphasis on that person’s interaction with the world. . . . It is that ‘aspect’ of the person which ‘acts’ in the world and which can be directed by something else: either by that person’s new, ‘higher nature’ or by ‘sin.’” *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 375–76. Other passages use *σάρξ* for what seem to be physical desires. Ephesians 2:3 seems to function this way because of the contrast between the desires of the mind and the desires of the flesh. Other possible examples of this include Romans 13:14 and 1 Peter 2:11.

and sex.”<sup>57</sup> The Greek term originally referred to “the muscular part of the human or animal body” and then broadened into a reference to the body as a whole.<sup>58</sup> Greek thought understands man to consist of an incorruptible part, the *ψυχή*, “in antithesis to the corruptible *σάρξ*.”<sup>59</sup> In this sense, the Greeks would use either *σάρξ* or *σῶμα* to refer to the perishable component of man.<sup>60</sup> Epicurus, in particular, identifies the *σάρξ* as “the seat of desire,” and Epicureans “fed their souls with the pleasures of the body like pigs.”<sup>61</sup> Subsequently, “*σάρξ* is increasingly regarded as the source of *ἡδονή* and esp. of uncontrolled sexuality and immoderate gluttony.”<sup>62</sup> Silva discusses the Greek development of *σάρξ* with Epicurus:

Epicurus, however, gave a new turn to this idea. Within the framework of his atomism (derived from Democritus), he viewed pleasure or desire (*ἡδονή*) as residing in the *σάρξ* (e.g., *Sent.* 4 [τὸ ἡδόμενον κατὰ σάρκα], 18 [ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ ἡ ἡδονή]). It is important to listen to the voice of the flesh or body when it says not to hunger or thirst. . . . Now the flesh regards pleasure as limitless, but the mind (*διάνοια* G1379) grasps the limits of the body and leads to a perfect life (*Sent.* 18, 20). These ideas were popularized and inevitably debased, being depicted, esp. by their opponents of the Platonic school, as favoring evil desire. According to them, the cravings and lusts of the body defile the soul, which has a share in the divine. Epicurus was obliged to defend himself against the charge that he approved intemperance. The anti-Epicurean polemic was widely spread in Hellenism and it penetrated deeply into Jewish thought.<sup>63</sup>

From these comments, it is important to note the focus on “flesh” in relation to bodily pleasures. As Silva notes, though, this Greek mentality does penetrate into Jewish thought before the time of the NT authors.<sup>64</sup> The LXX itself uses *σάρξ* frequently to refer to the physical flesh of human bodies (e.g., Gen 2:21; Job 2:5; Mic 3:2), though the OT typically does not use *σάρξ* to refer to bodily *desires*. The fact that the Greek (and subsequently Jewish) development of *σάρξ* focuses on the physical aspect of the human body and that in the Greek world *σάρξ* does appear with a strong relationship to bodily pleasures supports the idea that John is using this term to refer to physical bodily pleasures. Of course, the Pauline and “Jewish” sense can include “bodily pleasures.” John’s consistent usage of *σάρξ*, however, is demonstrably different from and more narrow than the Pauline and the “Jewish” sense.

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<sup>57</sup> See discussion in Brown, 308.

<sup>58</sup> Schweizer, “*σάρξ*,” 7:99–101.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 7:102.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 7:103.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. Schweizer points out that Epicurus himself “preferred the lusts of the lower part of the body to the delights of the eyes and the ears” (7:105).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 7:105.

<sup>63</sup> Silva, 4:252.

<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Schweizer notes that Hellenistic Judaism “drank all this in eagerly” (7:105).

*Support from the Immediate Context*

Another strength of this sense is in the resulting relationship of “desires of the flesh” to the other two phrases describing “all that is in the world.” The parallelism in John’s threefold description of the world makes better sense if “lusts of the flesh” does not refer to the general human inclination toward evil or what is human as opposed to divine. John is using three genitive constructions; in each, the pre-genitive represents the sinful action (desire and pride) and the genitive in each represents a neutral aspect of humanity (flesh, eyes, and life). Table 2 displays the consistent connection of sinful behavior with neutral aspects of humanity in 1 John 2:16.

**Table 2. Sinful Distortions of Neutral Aspects of Humanity**

Sinful Behavior	Neutral Aspect of Humanity
Desires/lusts (ἐπιθυμία)	Flesh (σάρξ)
Desires/lusts (ἐπιθυμία)	Eyes
Pride	Life

John seems to be saying that the world consists of the perversion and use of neutral aspects of humanity (flesh, eyes, life) to tempt people to engage in sinful behavior (lust and pride). “Eyes” and “life” are not inherently sinful. People love the world when they use their eyes to fulfill sinful desires (e.g., coveting), or when they take pride in their possessions or status. In the same way, “flesh” (the physical body) is not inherently sinful. However, it is easily corruptible in this fallen world, and when people use their flesh to fulfill sinful desires, they are loving the world. This parallelism is lost if “flesh” is defined as the general human inclination toward sin.

Furthermore, John states that one of the problems with these three aspects of the world is that they are passing away (1 John 2:17). It is easy to understand how the desires of the eyes and the pride of life provide temporary and short-lived satisfaction. The desires of the body work the same way. These desires provide temporary pleasure and satisfaction, but they are merely temporary. Understanding these desires as physical bodily desires aligns all three descriptions more closely as elements that provide temporary satisfaction. If “flesh” is to be interpreted as “man’s general inner inclination toward sin,” the conceptual parallelism is much less clear.<sup>65</sup> Man’s sinful nature stays with him until death. It is not something that passes away in the same sense that the other two elements do. It is best, therefore, to understand “desires of the flesh” in 1 John 2:16 as a reference to human bodily desires rather than “that which is merely human as opposed to divine.”

John lists two other characteristics of “all that is in the world”: “the desires of the eyes” and “pride of life.” The interpretation of these elements is more straightforward. For “the desires of the eyes,” the term ὀφθαλμῶν is a subjective genitive, and the eyes are performing the action of “desiring.” Interpreters generally agree that the basic problem with “the desires of the eyes” is coveting what one

<sup>65</sup> It is not necessary to argue that John’s three descriptions are entirely separate and distinct. It is possible that to some extent “the three phrases are simply broad and overlapping ways to describe ‘all that is in the world.’” Naselli, 117. The three descriptions, however, are separate and parallel to an extent, and none of the three entirely encompass the others.

sees.<sup>66</sup> C. H. Dodd is probably correct in identifying “the desires of the eyes” as “the tendency to be captivated by the outward show of things without enquiring into their real values.”<sup>67</sup> “The desires of the eyes” refers to a person’s desire for things because of the attractive appearance of the object.

The third characteristic, “pride of life” (ἡ ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου), refers to boasting or arrogance based on what a person has, whether material possessions or high status. Some scholars limit “pride of life” to pride in material possessions (cf. Luke 15:12, 30; 1 John 3:17),<sup>68</sup> but “life” (βίος) can refer to more than just material possessions; it can refer to a person’s status as well as nonmaterial assets (Luke 8:14; 1 Tim 2:2; 2 Tim 2:4).<sup>69</sup>

John points out that the problem with these aspects of the world is that they are passing away with the world (1 John 2:17). The satisfaction derived from the desires of the flesh and of the eyes and from pride of life is only temporary. Based on this line of reasoning, “desires of the flesh” is a parallel category to “desires of the eyes” and “pride of life,” and people are loving the world when they are doing what feels good (in their body/flesh), chasing what looks good (to their eyes), and working to achieve what makes them look good (pride in possessions and status). This is not to say that Christians should reject pleasure, beauty, and possessions. And resisting the “desires of the body” is certainly not to be understood in a docetic sense. The key is to align such pleasures, along with the enjoyment of beauty and possessions, with the will of the Father rather than the will of the one who is ruling this present world. God created pleasure, beauty, and material goods for our enjoyment. John is here referring to the sinful misuse of the things of this world.

### *Support from the Larger Context of Scripture*

Some scholars have noted a potential connection between the three elements that make up “all that is in the world” with the three phrases in the serpent’s tempting of Eve: “The tree was good for food . . . a delight to the eyes, and . . . to be desired to make one wise” (Gen 3:6). John’s threefold description of the world aligns quite well with Genesis 3—but only if “flesh” refers to bodily desires. In Johannine theology, it could be argued that the behaviors in 1 John 2:16 are “not of the Father” but are “from the world” because they follow the pattern that the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. 1 John 5:19) has established for it—the pattern that the serpent demonstrates in Genesis 3. This pattern also appears in the devil’s temptation of Jesus (Luke 4:1–13).<sup>70</sup> If this

<sup>66</sup> Brown notes that “in the OT to follow one’s eyes toward where one is inclined is more often equivalent to resisting God’s will (cf. Gen 3:6; 6:2; 3:2; Num 15:39; also Mark 9:47)” (310).

<sup>67</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 41. See also Brown, 311; and Jobes, 113.

<sup>68</sup> Marshall, 145; Kruse, 95–96; Jobes, 113.

<sup>69</sup> For example, Akin refers to this as “boasting of what he [man] has and does” (110–11). Smalley argues that pride of life includes “attitudes and activities (‘styles’ of life) as well as material possessions and attractions” (85). See also, Stott, 104; Haas, de Jonge, and Swellengrebel, 57; Derickson, 204–5.

<sup>70</sup> The temptation account in Luke 4 is used for this discussion because the order of the temptations in Luke 4 matches up better with the sequence in Genesis 3:6 and 1 John 2:16 than Matthew’s account does. In Matthew’s account, the order of the second and third temptations is inverted.

connection is valid, then it also supports the understanding of *σάρξ* as the physical body. Table 3 displays three parallel elements of temptation from the serpent in these accounts.<sup>71</sup>

**Table 3. Parallelism in Genesis 3:6, Luke 4:1–13, and 1 John 2:16**

Genesis 3:6	Luke 4:1–13	1 John 2:16
The tree was good for food.	Command this stone to become bread.	The things the body desires
It was a delight to the eyes.	The devil . . . showed him all the kingdoms of the world.	The things the eyes desire
The tree was to be desired to make one wise.	If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.	The pride in status and possessions

Several scholars, however, reject the idea of any such connection between 1 John 2:16 and the temptation accounts in Genesis 3 and Luke 4.<sup>72</sup> In many cases, though, these scholars are the same ones who hold to either the Pauline or “Jewish” senses of “flesh,” in which case the parallelism does not line up well with Genesis 3 or Luke 4. It seems nearly impossible, however, to avoid seeing a strong relationship between Genesis 3:6 and 1 John 2:16, particularly when “desires of the flesh” are understood as bodily desires.<sup>73</sup> The relationship is so close that it would be strange to see this as anything but an intentional connection made by John.<sup>74</sup> The first two temptations in Luke also seem to be obvious connections to Genesis and 1 John; the connection with the third temptation in Luke 4 is somewhat less obvious but is not far off from Genesis 3:6 or 1 John 2:16. Jesus’ throwing himself

<sup>71</sup> This table is generally based on the table in Naselli, 116–17. Naselli also notes that he is “not certain that the three phrases in 1 John 2:16 line up exactly with Genesis 3 and Luke 4 or that John had these parallels in mind. But the three phrases seem to line up at least roughly with Genesis 3 and Luke 4, so the parallel seems legit” (117). Blomberg also identifies these as “fascinating parallels.” *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville: B&H, 1997), 223; see also Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 87. Grant R. Osborne also notes the parallels between the three accounts as “interesting.” *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 137. Others who acknowledge a possible connection include St. Augustine, “Expositions on the Book of Psalms,” in *NPNF*, 8:31–32; Hiebert, 101; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1967), 1:73; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, OTL, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 90; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 238; Douglas Mangum, Miles Custis, and Wendy Widder, *Genesis 1–11*, LRC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

<sup>72</sup> For example, see Alan England Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, ICC (New York: Scribner, 1912), 48; Marshall, 146; Stott, 104; Kruse, 96; and Derickson, 201–2. Brown is particularly critical of a connection of 2:16 with the temptation of Jesus (307).

<sup>73</sup> Failing to understand “desires of the flesh” as bodily desires seems to be one reason interpreters reject a connection between 1 John 2:16 and Jesus’ temptation. For example, Walter L. Liefeld refers to the Pauline understanding of 1 John 2:16 in his comments on the temptation of Jesus: “Bread, however, is necessary, not evil, and hardly an object of ‘the cravings of sinful man’ (1 John 2:16).” “Luke,” in *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gabelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:864.

<sup>74</sup> In spite of an “extremely limited” number of allusions to the OT in John’s letters, John shows that Genesis 3 and 4 are clearly on his mind in the letter. The account of Cain is obvious (1 John 3:11–15). Additionally, Köstenberger argues for a strong connection of 1 John 3:8–10 to Genesis 3:15. See “The Cosmic Drama and the Seed of the Serpent,” in *Seed of Promise: The Sufferings and Glory of the Messiah*, ed. Paul R. Williamson and Rita F. Cefalu (Wilmore, KY: Glossa House, 2020), 273–76; and Jonathan M. Cheek, “The Individual and Collective Offspring of the Woman: The Canonical Outworking of Genesis 3:15,” *Themelios* 48, no. 1 (2023): 41–42.

from the temple and experiencing a miraculous rescue would have certainly made a spectacular show and would have given him much attention and acclamation from the people. This is not far off from a tree that is “desired to make one wise” or “the pride in status.”

If these parallels are legitimate, they consistently demonstrate the areas in which Satan, the ruler of this world, works to influence humanity away from God and toward himself. At the very least, it seems clear that the serpent employs consistent patterns in tempting people. Those who follow the patterns in 2:16 make it clear that they are under the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). It is certainly possible John is intending to make a literary connection with the first account of temptation by the ruler of this world in Genesis 3.<sup>75</sup> When describing the behaviors that characterize this world, John may indeed have in mind the time at which Satan began to influence humanity for evil through the serpent. For John, these are the characteristics of those who are of the world and who oppose Jesus and believers; thus, they are “of their father the devil” (John 8:44) or “of the evil one” (1 John 3:12). Indeed, the reference to Cain just a few verses later (1 John 3:12) suggests that John has in mind the serpent’s work in the early chapters of Genesis.<sup>76</sup> Though these parallels with Genesis 3 and the Gospels do not prove that “desires of the flesh” refers to bodily desires, this understanding of “desires of the flesh” makes the connection between the passages much stronger.

### *The Theology of the World in 1 John*

In his Gospel and letters, John establishes a strong polarity, or dualism, between believers and the world.<sup>77</sup> An accurate understanding of “desires of the flesh” supports a proper understanding of the polarity in the relationship between God, believers, Satan, and the world in 1 John. Because of this conflict between believers and the world, it is critical that believers must not love the world (2:15). The prominence of the “world” in 1 John is evident in his use of κόσμος twenty-three times in the letter, more than any other noun except θεός.<sup>78</sup> In general, scholars agree that John speaks of the world (κόσμος) in three different senses: (1) the created material world (John 17:5, 25), (2) humanity in general (John 1:29; 3:16–17), and (3) sinful humanity in opposition to God and his people (John 14:27; 17:9).<sup>79</sup> In 1 John, though, the third sense is the predominant sense in view. In 1 John 2:15,

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<sup>75</sup> It is probably best to see Genesis 3 as the basis for John’s three-fold description and probably for the temptation narratives as well. Luke 4 is not the basis for John’s writing, but it supports the idea that temptation from the serpent follows similar patterns throughout time.

<sup>76</sup> Köstenberger notes that “the threefold reference . . . echoes the scenario at the fall” and cites the reference to Cain in 1 John 3:12 as further support for this. *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, BTNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 454.

<sup>77</sup> Köstenberger defines this type of dualism as “a way of looking at the world in terms of polar opposites.” *Theology*, 277. For helpful studies of Johannine dualism/polarities see also Ladd, 259–72; 657–66; Judith Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 80–87; Köstenberger, 282–92; Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 119–29.

<sup>78</sup> The term κόσμος occurs 105 times combined in John’s writings (compared to eighty-one non-Johannine uses in the NT), demonstrating the importance of κόσμος in John’s theology.

<sup>79</sup> This article focuses less on the meaning of κόσμος than the meaning of σάρξ. The argument around κόσμος represents the implication from the prior argument about σάρξ, and thus not in the same detail.



in particular, “world” appears to be functioning as a metonymy for the patterns and characteristics of the third sense—sinful humanity in opposition to God and under the authority and influence of Satan (cf. James 4:4).<sup>80</sup> The Johannine worldview presents a “cosmic conflict between the world of light and the world of darkness” demonstrated primarily in the “struggle between God and his Messiah on the one hand and Satan on the other.”<sup>81</sup> Ladd provides perhaps the most succinct summary of John’s concept of the world: “Man at enmity with God.”<sup>82</sup>

What is prominent in John’s theology of the world, though, is the idea that even though the devil has been defeated and the darkness is passing away (1 John 2:8), the devil exercises significant influence and control over the world: “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19; cf. John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Because many false prophets are in the world, believers must test the spirits (1 John 4:1). The spirit of antichrist is “in the world already” and does not confess that Jesus is from God (4:3). These people are “from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them” (4:6). The world knows the devil, antichrists, and false spirits, but the world does not know believers because it does not know Jesus (3:1). This rejection of believers by the world is on full display with the prototypical child of the devil, Cain, who is of the evil one and murders his righteous brother (3:11–12). Because of this, believers should not be surprised when the world hates them (3:13).

John consistently places believers in direct opposition to the world. In contrast to the spirit of antichrist which is in the world, believers are not from the world, and they do not listen to the world; rather, believers, the “little children,” have overcome the world because Christ is greater than the world (1 John 4:4). By clinging to the truth about Jesus rather than the falsehood from the world, believers overcome the world (5:4–5). Believers, however, do not overcome the world through their own power; rather, they overcome the world through the Savior of the world (4:14) who came into the world (4:9) in order “to destroy the works of the devil” (3:8), who was ruling the world. This displays a multi-dimensional conflict between believers and the world, with Christ as the head of believers and Satan as the head of the world. The young men in whom the word of God abides have overcome the evil one (2:13–14). Because of this victory over the world and its ruler, the world and its darkness are passing away (2:8, 17), though they have not yet completely passed away. It is the last hour (2:18).

John illustrates this dualism as that between light and darkness, but this dualism is not absolute in the experience of believers in this age. The first main declaration in 1 John is that “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). He proceeds to include contrasts between light and darkness (1:5–7; 2:8–10), life and death (3:14–16; 5:11–13; 5:16), true and false spirituality (4:1–3, 6, 13), truth and falsehood (1:6–8; 2:4–5, 8, 21, 27; 3:18–19; 4:6), love and hate (2:9–11; 3:14–15; 4:20), and belief and unbelief (5:10–12). This dualism, however, is not a static dualism for John; rather, “his theology is structured in the dualism of the past and the future—the already and the not yet.”<sup>83</sup> Darkness is passing away (2:8), the world is passing away (2:17), and we have passed out of death into

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<sup>80</sup> Contra Gundry, who argues that “world” here must refer to the unbelieving people of the world since John uses that sense in 1 John 2:2 (60–61).

<sup>81</sup> Köstenberger, *Theology*, 281.

<sup>82</sup> Ladd, 262. Ladd also describes the world as “the world of men seen in their rebellion and hostility to God” (660).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 661.

life (3:14). Darkness, however, still characterizes the world, and the world still lies in the power of the evil one (5:19). Whereas the one who loves God does not practice sin (3:8–9), sin is still a reality in the life of the believer because whoever says he is without sin is a liar (1:8), and the one who sins has an advocate with the Father (2:1–2). Therefore, this dualism is not an absolute dualism in the experience of believers. John “uses dualism to express a conviction of the election of the community of believers and to interpret their actual experience.”<sup>84</sup> Therefore, it is a modified dualism: “There is a future dimension, the darkness is passing away, the Son of God appeared to annul the deeds of the devil, the evil one has been conquered.”<sup>85</sup>

John’s exhortation to believers not to love the world finds itself in the midst of this already/not yet overlap. The dualism is not absolute, and the world is not wholly evil. While there is a clear distinction between light and darkness, the world in which believers live is characterized by darkness. Similarly, while there is a clear distinction between God’s kingdom and this world, the experience of believers includes a struggle with the world. This renders it difficult for believers to determine what aspects of this world are sinful and which ones are good. While the world is viewed as dangerous because it is in the power of the evil one, believers are still prone to love it. There are still good things in the world, though the devil’s pattern is to take what is good in the world and to twist it and corrupt it for his own use. This is evident in the serpent’s temptation of Eve to take God’s good creation and turn it into an object of sin through her desires and pride (Gen 3:6). In his temptation of Jesus, the devil commands Jesus to do two things that are not inherently sinful—turning stones into bread and putting on a display of divine power (Luke 4:3–12). Satan works to pervert the true use of the goodness of creation in order to control people through their lusts and desire to misuse it. A person’s affection for the world is problematic when it follows after the devil’s pattern of perverting what is good. People who engage in a lifestyle of fulfilling such illegitimate lusts represent the darkness—the world that is ruled by the devil.

This demonstrates the significance of “flesh” being understood as desires of the body rather than the “human inclination to sin” in the theology of John’s letter. If “flesh” refers to the human inclination to sin, then “flesh” is inherently evil, and loving the world is merely loving and indulging in one’s inclination to sin. This ignores the modified dualism of John’s letter, which understands that as the darkness is passing away, John’s readers need to understand their responsibility in properly ordering their affections and loves in relation to their existence in the world—their bodies, eyes, and life. In 1 John 2:16, “all that is in the world” refers to some of the key areas which Satan, the ruler of the world, uses to tempt people. The desires of the body are designed by God to be good—to enjoy food, sex, exercise, and other bodily pleasures. However, God designed these pleasures to be enjoyed only according to his designed pattern. The ruler of this world wants believers to sin by using God’s gift of bodily pleasures in ways that are contrary to the divine design. Similarly, God designed the eyes to be able to see and take in the beauty of God’s good creation. But Satan tempts people to fulfill the desires of the eyes outside of God’s designed pattern. And God gives people possessions and status as

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<sup>84</sup> Lieu, 83.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 82.

a gift to be enjoyed and used according to his design. Satan tempts humans to use their possessions, status, and power contrary to God's intention. C. S. Lewis explains,

Pleasure, money, power, and safety are all, as far as they go, good things. The badness consists in pursuing them by the wrong method, or in the wrong way, or too much. I do not mean, of course, that the people who do this are not desperately wicked. I do mean that wickedness, when you examine it, turns out to be the pursuit of some good in the wrong way. . . . The powers which enable evil to carry on are powers given it by goodness.<sup>86</sup>

The problem with worldliness is not merely the indulgence in the human inclination to sin; rather, worldliness is the misuse of God's good gifts of the body, eyes, and life, characterized by lust and pride in succumbing to Satan's temptations. The main point in 1 John 2:15–17 is that if a person loves the world by misusing the goodness of God's creation, he is demonstrating that "the love of the Father is not in him," and he is under the power of the evil one.

### *Conclusion*

This article has argued for an accurate interpretation of 1 John 2:16 in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of the theology of the world in 1 John. First John 2:16 is a key verse on the world, and it identifies the "desires of the flesh" as a key aspect of being "of the world." Many scholarly works, however, present an inadequate understanding of the meaning of *σάρξ* in this verse. After examining the lexical data, particularly in light of John's pattern of usage with *σάρξ* along with several contextual factors, John is most likely referring to the desires of the physical body rather than the general human inclination to sin or the temporal nature of humans. This sense seems to fit best with the other two genitive constructions (desires of the eyes and pride of life in 2:16) as well as the temporary nature of these elements (2:17). The likely parallelism with the temptation accounts in Genesis 3 and Luke 4 also fits well with this idea.

This understanding of "desires of the flesh" also fits best with John's theology of the world. John's dualism presents a strong contrast between believers and the world. This, however, is a modified dualism that acknowledges that the darkness is passing away and that what is sinful about the world is not creation in itself but only that which is corrupted by the ruler of the world—the devil. It is therefore the inappropriate use of the desires of the body and of the eyes as well as the pride of life that supremely characterize the world in 1 John. This understanding of 1 John 2:16 provides a solid foundation for interpreting and applying a biblical theology of the world in 1 John and the rest of the NT.

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<sup>86</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), 44–45.