

Virtue Ethics and John's Gospel: A Brief Assessment of Current Study

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ABSTRACT

For a long time investigations into the ethics in John's Gospel were considered futile and unnecessary. Recent studies has witnessed formidable challenges against this long-held view. Employing virtue ethics and narrative reading, scholars have convincingly argued that while John's Gospel aimed not at constructing any system of ethics, visions of ethics with moral purposes are nonetheless clear in the narrative. Because of this recent development theology and ethics in John's Gospel are considered no longer mutually exclusive. This assessment suggests that the analysis of Jesus as the man of cardinal virtues and utmost magnificence would strengthen this recent challenge and, at the same time, may support the view that the Gospel was written for larger audiences instead of a certain community.

Key words: Virtue Ethics, Narrative Reading, John's Gospel, Christology

INTRODUCTION

The consensus among New Testament scholars who contend that it is futile to look for ethical teachings in John's Gospel is best summarized by Wayne A. Meeks's verdict that the approach to life in John's Gospel is "not merely irrational but antirational."¹

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1 Wayne A. Meeks, "The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist," R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black, eds. *Exploring the Gospel of John. In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 318-319. Thus, Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament: Change and*

Meeks's view on Johannine ethics can be traced to its theological root *via* the lens of the sociology of knowledge in his earlier work "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism".² In this pioneering article Meeks argued that the Christological image of an alien revealer [Johannine Jesus] gave rise to the social isolation of the Johannine sect which constructed ethics as an in-group solidarity against the hostile world. After more than two decades, Meeks maintains the same view that in John's Gospel Jesus "is too alien to human weakness to provide a convincing model, too much 'the god striding over the face of the earth... [the narrative] does not show us how to live or how to die.'³ That John's Gospel ethics is displaced by Christology, as J. L. Houlden puts it,⁴ leaves no room for Johannine ethics. The Johannine thorough-going high Christology and the absence of concern for ethics implicates a dilemma that makes Johannine theology and ethics mutually exclusive, in Meeks's word an "oxymoron".⁵ Thus the lack of ethical concern seems to be the necessary result of a high Christology.⁶

Development (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), 91-100; W. Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (translated by David E. Green; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 297; Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 92. In the Continent, for example, Michael Theobald, *Herrenworte im Johannesevangelium* (HBS 34: Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 564; Georg Strecker, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1996), 359; earlier, see Heinz Dietrich Wendland, *Ethik des Neuen Testaments: Eine Einführung* (3rd ed.; NTD. E 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 109. For a survey and criticism of such a consensus, see Ruben Zimmermann, "Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John? Challenging an Outdated Consensus," *Rethinking the Ethics of John. "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings, Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik/Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics*, volume III, eds. Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 44-80; also Michael Labahn, "'It's Only Love.—Is That All?' Limits and Potentials of Johannine 'Ethics' – A Critical Evaluation of Research," *Rethinking the Ethics of John*, 3-43.

2 Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91(1, 1972): 44-72.

3 Meeks, "The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist," 318.

4 J. L. Houlden, *Ethics and the New Testament* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975), 36-37.

5 Meeks, "The Ethics of Fourth Evangelist," 317-326.

6 The exception to this is the commandment to love one another in John's Gospel and I and II John. Still, that the command seems to be restricted to the community members violates the concern for the general in ethics. One can only speak of ethics in John as sectarian ethics. Even

RECENT DEVELOPMENT

Recent studies have posted challenges against this consensus, however. In a landmark study *Rethinking the Ethics of John* edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann⁷ a collection of essays has been gathered to argue that, while the Johannine writings offer no systematic or theoretical account concerning the norms of ethics (along this line in fact no one New Testament book can be rightly recognized as laying out ethical teachings), it is nonetheless appropriate to uphold an “implicit ethics,” the value system and ethical reflection of which can be identified in the narrative world constructed in the text.⁸ Ruben Zimmermann in particular has launched forcible challenges against Meeks’s arguments by positing four objections: phenomenological, methodological, form-critical, and the tradition-historical.⁹ In the end, Zimmermann contends that with a narrative plot John’s Gospel enables its readers to find a happy life, εὐδαιμονία, or in John’s terminology, eternal life. Thus, “[t]he underlying structure of this implicit ethics seems to be simple: the acts of man are connected to Jesus’ deeds and finally to God’s work. The actions of people are thus given a responsive character.”¹⁰ Similarly in an article seeking to show that John’s Gospel is not ethically defective, Robin Plant has taken pain to examine Meeks’s arguments.¹¹ While the recent emergence of studies on the ethics of John as an indication that “the

with the commandment to love one another in view, D. Moody Smith remarks that the Gospel “lacks specificity” in the practice to love. D. Moody Smith, *Johannine Christianity: Essays on its Setting, Sources and Theology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984), 178. See Zimmermann, “Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John?” 47-49, for a bibliography on the research on love commandment, see p. 47-48, n.14.

7 *Rethinking the Ethics of John. “Implicit Ethics” in the Johannine Writings, Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik/Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics*, volume III, eds. Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

8 See *Rethinking the Ethics of John*, x.

9 Zimmermann, “Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John?” 51-79.

10 Zimmermann, “Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John?” 79-80.

11 Robin Plant, “Is John’s Gospel Ethically Defective?” *Evangelical Journal of Theology* VI (1, 2012), 7-21, see in particular, Pages. 9-13.

climate has changed”¹² has only begun to flourish it is however clear that such a positive move to affirm the ethics of John is a result of advance in and integration of hermeneutical framework and insight from theory in ethics, respectively narrative reading and virtue ethics.

The value of Narrative Criticism and its contribution to biblical studies have been affirmed since its rise in the 70s of the last century; while the root of virtue ethics can be dated back to Aristotle and Plato, modern proponents of the discipline include Alasdair MacIntyre, James W. McClendon, Jr., Stanley Hauerwas, Martha Nussbaum, etc. It is the integration of the two disciplines that has opened up new horizons of discussion.

While the attention to Johannine ethics is a recent trend, Alasdair MacIntyre already noted the value of narrative for the study of ethics in the 80s. Instead of listing the behaviors or constructing a systematic theory, MacIntyre points out that the question “What am I to do?” is preceded by a more foundational question, “Of what story or stories do I find myself to be a part?”¹³ It is in this larger framework of life story that a coherent critical reflection on what people do and why could be understood. This effort of integrating narrative reading with virtue ethics has been demonstrated in scholar like Jan van der Watt and many others inspired by his effort. Cornelius Bennema, for example, in a recent article “Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings,”¹⁴ argues that the theological (soteriology) and ethical concerns are not mutually exclusive

12 *Rethinking the Ethics of John*, x.

13 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theology* (2nd edition, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 201.

14 C. Bennema, “Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings,” *In die Skriflig* 51 (3), a2120. <http://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v51i3.2120>; For his earlier works, “Character Reconstruction in the New Testament, Part I: The Theory,” *Expository Times* 127(2016), 365-374; idem, “Mimetic Ethics in the Gospel of John,” in U. Volp, F. W. Horn & R. Zimmermann (eds), *Metaphor-narratio-mimesis-doxologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 205-217; idem, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (2nd edition, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014); idem, “Virtue Ethics in the Gospel of John: The Johannine Characters as Moral Agents,” in L. D. Chrupcata, ed., *Rediscovering John: Essays on the Fourth Gospel in Honour of Frédéric Manns* (Milan: Terra Santa: 2013), 167-181.

in the Johannine corpus. The moral narrative world constructed in John's Gospel is featured by a contrast of the moral world of God above and the immoral world below. The moral God manifest in Jesus embodies moral goods and is determined to deliver people from moral darkness. The nature and soteriological purpose of the moral God and the movement from below to above together make human character transformation logical and necessary. Bennema suggests that the vision of the moral good in Johannine writings is heuristically illustrated by Graeco-Roman virtue ethics.¹⁵

COMPATIBILITY OF THEOLOGY AND ETHICS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

What have been considered as theological attributes characterizing God and Jesus are moral values to shape the character and life of the believers who share the moral values of the moral God. Thus, life (ζωή), light (φῶς), love (ἀγάπη), and truth (ἀλήθεια) are not abstract theological notions but virtues of a transformed new life the characters of which manifest God's liberation, cleansing, sanctification and forgiveness.¹⁶ Thus, soteriology and ethics are intrinsically related in the Johannine writings.

Bennema's theory and methodology is spelled out more clearly in "Virtue Ethics in the Gospel of John: The Johannine Characters as Moral Agents." Assuming that "there was some agreement on common moral values that applied to all people seeking to live virtuous life in antiquity," Bennema proposes to examine how much John's Gospel is related to its social-moral environment. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is no doubt the paradigm to which John's Gospel is made to refer. Bennema has come to conclude that, despite that Aristotle's vision of "happiness" (εὐδαιμονία) is not used in the Gospel, the prominent theme "life" (ζωή) in John's Gospel is in fact a Christian version of εὐδαιμονία which is achieved through believing (πιστευεῖν) in Jesus. Bennema argues that "the Johannine virtue of believing is related to or informed by the

15 "Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings," 1, n.2.

16 "Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings," 3-6.

cardinal virtues of prudence (φρόνησις), courage (ἀνδρεία), justice (δικαιοσύνη) and temperance (σωφροσύνη),”¹⁷ albeit in different terminology or imageries. Finally Bennema selects Peter, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind and Pilate as test cases for showing how Johannine characters act as moral agents and whether/how life in this Gospel narrative is transformed *via* the virtue of believing.¹⁸

A MISSING LINK

While the framework of virtue ethics and narrative reading is helpful in retrieving the moral aspects of John’s Gospel, it is interesting that scholars have devoted energy in examining the characters in the narrative but Jesus, given that the moral goods are embodied in God and Jesus. Since Jesus the Son is the only one who makes God known (1.18), no discourse on God’s moral character is adequate or meaningful except an examination on Jesus’ character traits. Even though Bennema stated that moral transformation in John’s Gospel hinges on believing Jesus which further renders a life of following Jesus: “[a] person’s moral transformation starts with a new birth by the Spirit a relocation from the dark, immoral world to the moral world... [t]his relocation occurs when people ‘practise’ the virtue of πιστεύειν in Jesus...Renewed behaviour is characterized by conduct that is in line with what Jesus *taught and exemplified*.” (italics mine)¹⁹ Yet, no example of Jesus virtue has been examined or presented. Instead, the teaching of Jesus is emphasized.

In sum, Jesus taught in ‘veiled’ language and was often misunderstood because people failed to think ‘from above’, a prerequisite for gaining spiritual insight into the things of God. This means that Jesus’ teaching must be ‘unveiled’ in order to be understood. In the post-Easter period the Spirit functions as a

17 “Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings,”10.

18 “Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings,”16-21

19 “Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings,” 2.

decoder, decrypting or unlocking Jesus' revelation, thereby enabling a thinking 'from above' and a corresponding moral behavior. Moral reasoning or thinking 'from above' facilitates moral transformation because it informs and shapes both thought and behavior according to the beliefs, values and norms of the world above..."²⁰

SUGGESTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

If this brief assessment is correct, the characterization of Jesus as the man of virtue seems to be an important aspect that has been overlooked, despite that characterization of Jesus in John's Gospel has been studied amply since narrative criticism was employed in interpreting the Gospel. This line of study has been proved of value because ethics in the Gospel is justifiably addressed, and the affirmation of both theology and ethics declares the label "oxymoron" no longer valid. Also important is the implication it points to, namely, the Gospel might have been written for a wider readership. Towards the end of the last century Richard J. Bauckham has argued in his book *The Gospels for All Christians* that in the ancient times the written genre meant for wider readership, not for communal.²¹ Bauckham's arguments has been followed up and expanded by Edward Klink.²² This view of Jesus being characterized as a man of magnificent virtues would reinforce Bauckham's thesis since virtue ethics was well known in the Graeco-Roman world. Johannine integration of virtue ethics and theology would make a wider audience sensible and sectarian purpose unlikely.

20 "Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings,"4.

21 Richard J. Bauckham, ed. *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

22 Edward Klink III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (SNTSMS 141, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).