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Preface

Until about a decade ago the general, scholarly consensus held that there was no, or essentially no ethical material in the Gospel and Letters of John. Expressions that there is "eine[r] gewaltige[n] Reduktion ethischer Fragen und Aussagen" in this Gospel,1 or "ein ethisches Interesse an der Gestaltung der Lebensbereiche der Gemeinde wird im Buch nirgends greifbar"2 were not uncommon. For instance, Matera contended: “For anyone interested in the study of New Testament ethics, the Gospel according to John is a major challenge … there are remarkably few references to moral conduct … and its most explicit ethical teaching raises a host of questions.”3 Some offered strongly critical, even harsh assessments, speaking of the “weakness and moral bankruptcy of the Johannine ethics” that would presumably only be interested in whether a person is saved or not, irrespective of and indeed insensitive to any other needs.4

It was opined that these documents offer very little, if anything, regarding everyday ethical issues like marriage, sexual behavior, detailed social expectations, etc. They contain no typical ethical indicators like virtue and vice lists, paraenetic material, law texts or clear discussions about ethical issues. Strecker consequently remarked: “Versteht man unter ‘Ethik’ ein System von ethischen Normen, die verpflichtende Weisungen für konkrete Einzelfälle abgeben, dann wird man im Johannesevangelium vergeblich nach einer Ethik suchen.”5 Johannine literature was in many ways pushed to the periphery of, or even banned from, ethical discussions and debates.

Recently, the climate has changed, as Labahn indicates in his article on the history of research into the ethics of John in this volume. A few key publications (which are mentioned by Labahn and also interacted with

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2 Michael Theobald, Herrenworte im Johannesevangelium (HBS 34; Freiburg et al.: Herder, 2002), 564.
throughout this volume) not only challenged the methodological approach to the ethics of John, but also indicated that there is much more in John than meets the eye, when it comes to ethics. Thus, a new field of inquiry was opened. New questions were asked, new methodologies were applied, and new results led to further questions. The dynamics of Johannine ethics became alive. At the same time, the question of whether it is adequate to name the moral aspects in the Johannine writings ‘ethics’, if ethics is understood as the systematic reflection of norms, remains open. Of course, no ethical theory is explored in John. However, it is our contention that, by means of narration, there is a coherent reflection on values and behavior. In other words, our primary interest lies not in the ethos as lived by the Johannine group, which might be reconstructed from the text, but rather in how the narrated text reveals an underlying value system and ethical reflection *sui generis*, which can retrospectively be classified as ‘ethics’, or better as ‘implicit ethics’. This ethics should be called ‘implicit’ because the author of the Johannine Writings himself offers no systematic or theoretical account concerning the norms of actions. This volume not only challenges the earlier consensus concerning John’s ethics, but also the terms and methods of the study of Ethics in New Testament literature more generally. As such, the volume can be located within the wider range of the scholarly activities of the editors in their exploration of the foundation for and inquiry of New Testament ethics (“Begründungszusammenhänge frühchristlicher Ethik” at both Radboud University/Nijmegen and at Johannes Gutenberg University/Mainz, where the editors are part of the “Research Center of Early Christian Ethics”. This volume is part of the larger project series ‘Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics’, which puts this volume in a more wide perspective.

Early stages of this volume were made possible with support by the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung (Germany) for Ruben Zimmermann, who received funding as a Fyodor Lynen Stipend and worked with Jan van der Watt on a project on ethics. In 2008 a conference was held with the support of the Humboldt Stiftung in Pretoria (South Africa), which set the stage for the book *Moral Language in the New Testament* (WUNT 2.296, 2010). A subsequent conference with continuing support from the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung was organized in order to focus specifically on the ethics of John. This conference was held in Nijmegen in 2010, from which this volume arose. Several leading Johannine scholars were invited to contribute to this theme and contributors were presented with a simple request: write something on the ethics of John. We did not want to pre-determine the results by only asking certain questions, and we intentionally wanted to encourage the contributors to ‘explore’ the issue. In the end, only the papers on research-history and method were requested and two
Old Testament scholars were invited to offer their thoughts on the significance of this material, in considering the ethics of John. The result is this ‘first volume in history’ devoted exclusively to the ethical dynamics of John. Of course, it does not offer a comprehensive perspective on the ethics of John. On the contrary, it explores different approaches in both the Gospel and Letters and some articles are more detailed than others. As a whole, the volume offers an initial presentation of the type of scholarly inquiry that could arise when the texts of the Gospel and Letters of John are approached with new questions supported and driven by new methodological insights. The attendees of the conference expressed that (at least for them) some breakthroughs were made during this meeting. The richness of ethical information in John was thus brought forth with the hope that it would provide ample stimuli for further research, not only in Johannine studies, but also on a much broader level. We are convinced that applying the methodological approaches discussed in these articles to other New Testament material and beyond, could stimulate anew the scholarly discussion concerning ‘ethics’ in John.

First and foremost, we would like to express our appreciation to the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung for supporting this venture both financially and in spirit. Thanks are also due to Radboud University of Nijmegen (Netherlands) for their contribution to the conference and financial support for the editing of this volume. The majority of the editorial work was done by Frederik S. (Ferdie) Mulder of Radboud University Nijmegen, with the assistance of Susanne Luther. Last but not least we would like to thank Jörg Frey and Mohr Siebeck for accepting this volume in their WUNT series.

Nijmegen and Mainz
January, 2012

Jan G. van der Watt
Ruben Zimmermann
Introduction: Overview of Research
“It’s Only Love”¹ – Is That All?

Limits and Potentials of Johannine “Ethic” –
A Critical Evaluation of Research²

Michael Labahn

1. Introduction

This article is not intended to present a complete history of research with a detailed presentation of different positions and opinions. This contribution is rather about an analysis of the limits and potentials of talking about a Johannine ethics against the background of the history of research. It aims at describing the current discussion, based on the denial of any kind of Johannine ethic. The current discussions represent a shift in approach, which will become evident in the following discussion. As far as the author forms part of these discussions this article represents a plea for new approaches and methods in approaching the problem of Johannine ethics.

1.1 “Kiddies, Love One Another!”: Taking Lessing as Point of Departure

In Das Testament Johannis (1777), which takes up the apocryphal episode of the old apostle John transmitted by Jerome (Epist. ad Galatas 6), the great Enlightenment thinker Gotthold Ephraim Lessing offers a clue to John’s thinking. Before he died, John summarized his preaching about Jesus in the repetition of the simple but basic statement, “Kinderchen, liebt

¹ Although it might be true that John Lennon hated this Beatles’ song from 1965 (cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It's_Only_Love), the title is a good starting point into an analysis of limits and possibilities of Johannine “Ethic”. As far as the Johannine semantic concept of love plays a major role in discussion, such a presentation will also show that the Johannine concept of ethics is based on the concept of “love” but that more about the Johannine ethical teaching could be said. We will return to that question in reference to Lessing’s interpretation of the Johannine message (section 1.1).

² I am very grateful to Tom Thatcher who did much more than simply revising the English of my article. His critique, questions and hints helped to improve the argument of the current paper.
According to Lessing, this apocryphal note is more authentic than the Gospel of John, which causes conflicts. This simple statement on love represents the core of the Johannine message, which is ultimately more significant than the message of the written Fourth Gospel. In Lessing’s interpretation, love is a basic ethical criterion, which is relevant not only for Christianity but for all humanity.

There can be no doubt that the statement \[\text{ἐὰν ἤγιόν τιν} \] (1 John 4:8) is one of the highpoints of New Testament theological reasoning. The preceding comment in this context further aims to define those who are loved by God in terms of their interrelation to God and to humanity: \[\text{πᾶς ὁ ἁγιασμένος ἕκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται καὶ γενόμενε τὸν θεόν} (1 John 4:7). This declaration in 1 John 4:7–8, could be read as the foundation of a powerful ethical program of love, such as that found by Lessing in the “Testament of John”. But does Johannine thinking elaborate such a program, so that we can speak of a Johannine “ethic” based on love for humanity? And if the Johannine literature does elaborate an ethic of love, how and by what means do Johannine arguments elaborate such a program? Is Lessing correct to view the Johannine conception of love as the grounds for a general ethical program, or do the Johannine statements on “love” refer to a group-bound ethos or “conventicle ethics” that serves only to establish social identity, perhaps in the context of a severe social/religious conflict?

Johannine scholarship offers a broad range of answers to the above questions, and there is no current consensus on these issues. An earlier generation of critical scholarship assumed that there was no distinctive Johannine “ethic” at all (cf. Ruben Zimmermann’s article below, pp. 44ff.). However, a new trend appears to be emerging. At least since the 1980s,

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research has adopted a “new look” on the Johannine writings using new interpretive methods. At about the same time, Johannine research began to free itself from the boundaries of Bultmann’s existential hermeneutics.

Both developments have led Johannine scholarship to more balanced answers to questions related to Johannine ethics. This paper will survey several major trends in this more recent research and their methodological presuppositions, with a view to determining the extent to which John promotes a distinct ethical system. Is it “all love”, as Lessing argued, or is the Johannine ethical vision more complex?

1.2 “Ethics” or “Ethos” – What Are We Looking For?

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify the value of the term “ethics” in general usage and with regard to the New Testament data in particular.

Clearly, the books of the New Testament do not resemble the philosophical essays or moral epistles produced by ancient philosophers like Aristotle or Seneca. At the same time, however, many later Early Christian letters (or so-called “letters”) reflect on ethics in terms of the relationships between Christian believers and those inside, and outside, Christian communities.

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Closer to the interests of the present essay, Udo Schnelle’s recent commentary (see discussion below) argues that 1 John articulates an “ethical theology”.

Thus, while the New Testament does not elaborate a systematic approach to ethics, passages like 1 John 4:7–8 reflect a critical examination of the foundations of ethics. Scholars have seen that much of the New Testament addresses the ethical implications that emerged from the new faith in Jesus Christ.

Before discussing the ethical aspects of the Early Christian writings, however, one must define the scope and value of the term “ethics”. According to Trutz Rendtorff, “ethics” is “a theory of the human behavior” (“Theorie der menschlichen Lebensführung”), one that assumes that the individual human being is a responsible subject who is able to make reflective judgments about his or her deeds. The term “responsible” here encompasses the individual’s relationships to other human beings in her/his social context and environment, while the term “theory” encompasses critical reflection based on a theoretical and methodological framework. Indeed, critical reflection has been an essential premise in discussions of ethics since Aristotle: ethics is a critical analysis of moral rules and their conditions and motifs. Any system of ethics develops a methodological and intellectual line of argument that should evidence a systemic quality and on which any ethical decision or advice is based.

As noted above, the New Testament authors do not undertake such a systematic approach to ethics and generally fail to provide critical reasoning in support of their moral teachings. Further, New Testament research requires a definition of ethics that is broad enough to cover narrative texts such as the Gospels. In view of these concerns, one may define an “ethical text” as a text that

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a) provides a reflective orientation toward the reader’s actual “way of life”
b) by defining how to behave and act\textsuperscript{14}
c) according to a value system that is developed or supported\textsuperscript{15} by the text,
   its characters, and/or its setting,
d) in relation to a specific social group and/or in relation to the surrounding society at large.

As a corollary to the above definition, ethical texts will attempt to persuade the reader to embrace the norms that they promote as normative.\textsuperscript{16} The precise means by which this climate of acceptance is developed will, of course, depend on the genre and form of the text in question.

Of course, scholars who deny that such a “reflective orientation” is sufficient to define a text as “ethical” – insisting instead that “ethical” texts must evidence overt theoretical reflection on the frameworks of the value systems they promote – will conclude that the Johannine writings should not be understood as ethical discourses. Responding to this argument, Jan Van der Watt (2006) has attempted to broaden the methodological approach and to gain insight into the moral world of the Gospel of John by using the analytical category “ethos”\textsuperscript{17}, which he differentiates from ethics. Ethos refers to “the habitual – often unreflected – behaviour of a group”\textsuperscript{18}. Van der Watt draws here on Michael Wolter\textsuperscript{19}, who in turn refers to the

\textsuperscript{14} This “definition” may be achieved in a number of different ways, including direct commandments, the examples of characters in the text, imagery, and other textual features that can communicate values.

\textsuperscript{15} A text could signal acceptance of a value/ethical system(s) adopted from the broader cultural context, and might guide its readers to act in conjunction with these established norms. Such an acceptance does not exclude certain changes of or corrections to the adopted system.


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 150.

theory of ethos developed by Wolfgang Kluxen\textsuperscript{20} and Thomas Schmeller.\textsuperscript{21} However, Van der Watt’s application focuses on “functional descriptions” in contrast to technical terms.\textsuperscript{22} Specifically, narrative-critical approaches may analyze characters and their behaviour to detect an underlying concept of ethos/ethics in a text such as the Fourth Gospel. Such a methodological approach gives attention to elements of the Johannine narrative such as shared values, the love commandment, and the “family” ethos (including meals and footwashing).

While Van der Watt’s approach has proven fruitful, within the broader Johannine system of meaning, values, and general demands distinct decisions on how to act morally are still necessary. It might therefore be asked whether and by what means a differentiation between ethics and ethos is helpful and appropriate.\textsuperscript{23}

1.3 Johannine Ethic – Different Ethics?

Any discussion of Early Christian ethics, and especially of a Johannine ethic, must explore the historical, sociological, and political context\textsuperscript{24} in which such a concept or program developed. Two points of consideration are particularly important for the present discussion.

First, there is a need to define the range of sources that would form a database for reconstructing the Johannine ethic. Five New Testament writings are traditionally ascribed to an author called “John”. The Gospel

\textsuperscript{20} Wolfgang Kluxen, \textit{Die Ethik des Ethos} (Fermenta philosophica; Munich: K. Alber, 1974).


\textsuperscript{22} Van der Watt, “Ethics and Ethos” (n. 17), 151.

\textsuperscript{23} See Van der Watt, “Ethics and Ethos” (n. 17), 165, regarding the love commandment: “Based on the reciprocal and exemplary nature of loving identity, ethics (in the sense of rules or commandments) and ethos (in the sense of behaviour in a fixed way) are interrelated and indeed merged.”

and the three letters of John form a distinct corpus because they share a large number of common linguistic and theological details. These writings are best viewed as the product of a “Johannine school”, with three different authors producing the various texts: one individual produced the Fourth Gospel, another 1 John, and a third, who calls himself “the Elder”, produced 2 and 3 John. Further, these texts, and the Johannine school that produced them, stood in a particular relationship to certain Johannine communities. Therefore, each of the three authors and their respective writings should be treated on his/its own terms, with each dealing with a distinct situation and developing its own concept of meaning and, correspondingly, its own concept of ethical demands within that situation – all, of course, engaging and drawing upon the larger Johannine agenda in various ways.

Within the quest for a Johannine ethic, such an approach means, for example, that one should view 1 John and the Gospel of John as distinctive contributions. The tendency to interpret 1 John as commentary on, or supplement to, the Gospel is not only misleading, but also delimits the contribution of the letter to the understanding of Johannine ethics in a problematic fashion.

The Revelation of John is connected to the Johannine writings not only by its name, but also by significant linguistic overlaps and common motifs. Therefore, the book of Revelation may be associated with the

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26 Cf. with regard to the idea of love: Schnelle, Die Johannesbriefe (n. 6), 163, pointing to (1) the relationship between “love” and “light”, (2) the love relationship between God and believers, and (3) the discussion of the “Handlungsebene des Gesamtgeschehens” in 1 John compared to the Fourth Gospel. The significance of such an outline is challenged by Willi Marxsen, “Christliche” und christliche Ethik im Neuen Testament (Gütersloh: Gutersloher Verlagshaus, 1989), 246: “Zwar könnte man vermuten, daß sie [the Johannine writings; M. L.] in ihrer Ethik im wesentlichen übereinstimmen, doch genau das Gegenteil ist der Fall. Es läßt sich nämlich zeigen, daß sich die Ethik des ‘Johannes’ grundlegend von der Ethik seiner Schule unterscheidet.” Even more doubtful is Schulz’s suggestion that one may distinguish the ethical conceptions of a hypothetical Johannine source document, possibly of Gnostic origin, from the presentation of the final form of the Gospel, which may, in turn, be distinguished from the moral teachings of the opponents described in 1 John (Siegfried Schulz, Neutestamentliche Ethik [Zürcher Grundrisse zur Bibel; Zurich: TVZ, 1987]).

27 The approach advocated here is rejected by Schrage, Ethik des Neuen Testaments (n. 7), 301.

history of the Johannine writings, a position adopted, for example, by Siegfried Schulz. The present discussion, along with the remainder of the essays in the current volume, subscribes to the theory that the ethical program of Revelation should be read on its own terms. Revelation develops meaning through a radicalization of reality that promotes a certain group ethos as well as a Christologically-grounded ethic—an ethic that specifically opposes the norms and lifeways of the extra-textual world governed by the Roman Empire. Since this mode of sense building is not evident in the other Johannine texts, Revelation may be excluded from the present discussion.

Second, there are a number of different theories regarding the historical setting of the Gospel of John and the other Johannine writings. Obviously, the Johannine ethic, as developed in the Fourth Gospel, will be understood differently depending on the socio-historical background within which the text is framed. If, for example, the Gospel of John is assumed to have originated from a severe conflict with Judaism, its narrative presentation and ethical arguments will be evaluated differently compared to a reading that orients the text to conflicts within the Johannine community. The

30 Cf. his extensive reasoning in Schulz, *Neutestamentliche Ethik* (n. 26), 529–530.
textual data suggests that both historical dimensions have become part of the formation of meaning in the Gospel: the first context of conflict is reflected in the *aposynagogos* texts (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2) and related passages, while the second is evident in the schism among the disciples at John 6:66. Readings of the Johannine “ethic” against the backdrop of these conflicts\(^\text{34}\) will be discussed below (3.2.1).

2. No Ethic in John?\(^\text{35}\)
A Critical Evaluation of Main Arguments

As noted earlier, scholars have shown some reluctance to speak of a Johannine ethic at all, much less to describe elements of John’s moral vision in detail.\(^\text{36}\) Five such approaches will be briefly reviewed here.

(a) Rudolf Bultmann’s reading of the Gospel of John portrayed the Incarnation as the revelation of the “Dass” (“that”) of God in Jesus, a revelation that negates any human self-confidence. Exposure to this revelation leads to a crisis that provokes an “Entscheidung”.

In der Entscheidung des Glaubens oder des Unglaubens konstituiert sich definitiv das Sein des Menschen, und jetzt erst erhält sein Woher seine Eindeutigkeit.\(^\text{37}\)

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Bultmann’s existential interpretation, accompanied by his program of demythologizing, was not interested in the quest for a Johannine ethic and in fact did not leave room for the development of a Johannine ethical concept. His focus on the paradox of the Incarnation did not support an understanding of the narrative development of the Word who became flesh – on the contrary, Bultmann claimed that the Johannine depiction of the incarnate Jesus lacks “jede Anschaulichkeit; die Begegnung mit ihm ist nur Frage und nicht Überredung”. According to Bultmann, the Johannine Gospel only illustrates the “Daß der Offenbarung, ohne ihr was”. Despite its genius, a major weakness of this approach was its tendency to reduce the Johannine text to a mirror of Bultmann’s own hermeneutics. Of course, recent research may still benefit from the many philological, exegetical, and even theological insights of Bultmann’s interpretation, but it cannot follow his diminution of the Johannine arguments and its story.

Nevertheless, Johannine scholarship largely followed Bultmann in neglecting to identify, or even to seek to identify, a distinctly Johannine ethic. To take a notable recent example, Michael Theobald, who revises and updates Bultmann’s theory of an “Offenbarungsredenquelle”, joins him also in his doubts about a Johannine concept of ethics. “Ein ethisches Interesse an der Gestaltung der Lebensbereiche der Gemeinde wird im Buch [i.e. the Gospel of John] nirgends greifbar.”

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41 Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (n. 37), 418.

42 A critical evaluation is given by Labahn, “Bultmanns Konzeption der existenzialen Interpretation” (n. 9), 202–206; see also Jörg Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, vol. 1: *Ihre Probleme im Spiegel der Forschung seit Reimarus* (WUNT 96; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 156.

43 Michael Theobald, *Herrenworte im Johannesevangelium* (HBS 34; Freiburg et al.: Herder, 2002), 565. In his commentary Theobald refers to additions by the later redactor that “betrifft das Verhältnis von Glaube und Ethos: Wenn die Redaktion in 5,29 mit universalem Geltungsanspruch vom Tun des Guten und des Bösen als Kriterium über ‘Leben’ oder ‘Verdammnis’ spricht, wirft sie die Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Glaube und Werken auf, nach der Bewährung des Glaubens in einer Lebensgestalt des ‘Guten’”. However such a reference only forms a “theologisches ‘Ausrufezeichen’” (*Das Evange-
Johannine ethic focuses on inner-community dynamics. Therefore, his assumption is a bit surprising, inasmuch the concept of mutual love for brothers/sisters (see below 3.2.1–3) would seem to touch on the community’s inner relations.

(b) Much research has assumed that the Gospel of John deals mainly with Christology and theology. Such an approach tends to leave little room for considerations of the text’s ethical and moral insights.

An emphasis on the christological or theological facets of the Fourth Gospel need not necessarily exclude ethics. Following Rainer Hirsch-Luipold, one may speak of a ‘prinzipiell-theologische Ethik’ in the Johannine writings, positing a close connection between God as love and the act of love that builds a close relationship between God and human beings (1 John 4:7–8). Udo Schnelle’s recent commentary on the Johannine letters moves in a similar direction.

Die johanneische Schule bedenkt die Offenbarung Gottes in Jesus Christus durchgehend in ihren prinzipiellen Dimensionen und entwickelt eine ethische Theologie. Es geht um umfassende theologische Begründungen menschlicher Existenz und grundlegende Ausrichtungen menschlichen Handelns. Theologie und Ethik gehören in der johanneischen Theologie uneingeschränkt zusammen, weil Gott selbst Liebe ist (vgl. 1Joh 4,8,16).

However, one must ask if such an ethic is specific in detail and if it opens a window to concrete actions by the presentation of God, Jesus, his disciples, his adversaries, and other characters in the narrative. Neither Schnelle nor Hirsch-Luipold would deny that. An ethic needs examples and guidelines, and the further presentation of research below will show how such an orientation is given, in different ways, in the Fourth Gospel and 1 John.

(c) Frequently used forms, themes, and terms of Early Christian paraenesis have often been missed within the Johannine literature, especially within the Fourth Gospel (see the approach of Meeks below). Wiard Popkes, in his exploration of New Testament paraenesis, acknowledges this oversight will also stress the insufficiency of a methodological approach that would consider only forms, contents, and terms.

lium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12 [RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 2009], 73), which claims “Recht und Notwendigkeit der Ethik … Der lebensrettende Glaube an den Sohn Gottes muss sich in guten Werken verleiblichen …” (ibid., 402).

45 Schnelle, Die Johannesbriefe (n. 6), 163.
46 Cf. the evidence presented by Wiard Popkes, Paränese und Neues Testament (SBS 168; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1996), 118.

“Postliminal” here refers to “rites of reincorporation”, which Popkes links with conversion. He identifies different Johannine terms and motifs that provide instructions connected with conversion and that cite Jesus as a moral example: “Das Vorbild Jesu wird zum zentralen Bezugspunkt des Imperatifs.”\(^{48}\) These themes are elaborated in more detail in the Farewell Discourses (John 13–17), where the Paraclete appears as “‘der Träger der Paraklese’ in Person”.\(^{49}\) At first sight, Popkes’ presentation may focus too much on the structure of conversion, but his “postliminal” model also includes the aftermath of conversion. Most of the terms and motifs he mentions are connected with staying inside the group.

On the other hand, the fact that the Johannine literature does not include certain forms, themes, and terms that were common in Early Christian paraenesis cannot be cited as evidence that the texts lack a moral orientation. As Popkes notes,

der konversionale Ortswechsel (auf dem Hintergrund des Dualismus) ruft nach dem Bleiben in Christus (das heißt zugleich in der Wahrheit, im Licht, Leben), nach dem Befolgen seines Wortes, besonders des Liebesgebots, nach dem Fruchtbringen und nach der Einheit.\(^{50}\)

Interestingly enough, a shared moral orientation is a point of common ground between the Johannine Letters and Gospel. Again, it is not necessary to highlight the absence of certain elements of ethical instruction, but rather to explore the ways in which the Johannine writings develop an orientation toward the actual lifestyle of their addressees.

(d) In his contribution to the Festschrift for D. Moody Smith, Wayne Meeks denies that one can identify a distinct Johannine ethic, but suggests that one can identify an “instrument for moral formation” in the Johannine literature.\(^{51}\) Meeks’ contribution is of special interest because his argu-

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\(^{48}\) Popkes, *Paränese und Neues Testament* (n. 46), 119.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 122.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{51}\) Meeks, “The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist” (n. 7), 318–320.
ments are grounded in an interpretation of the Fourth Gospel that differs from that of Bultmann. According to Meeks,

(1) there is no significant “explicit moral instruction” in the text;
(2) the Johannine story does not develop “a plausible and universalizable model for behaviour”;
(3) the story simply aims at an acceptance of a certain worldview developed by the text\(^\text{52}\) without “rational kinds of moral discourse”; and,
(4) the text posits a predestination model to explain various characters’ decisions, so that there is “not a morally free decision” in the Fourth Gospel.

Consistent with these observations, Meeks criticizes the stigmatization of the opponents as “children of the devil” (esp. John 8:44).\(^\text{53}\) This issue has become significant to recent criticisms of the Fourth Gospels’ value system. Adele Reinhartz, for example, has drawn attention to the fact “that the gospel of love has also been an instrument of hate, not once, not occasionally but frequently and pervasively in the history of Jewish-Christian relations”.\(^\text{54}\)

The critical approach of Meeks clearly indicates that there is a need to clarify what is meant by the term ethics and the relationship of the Johannine arguments to an ethos. Although important insights have been gained in research, scholars are still in the process of developing adequate methodological and hermeneutical tools in understanding the Johannine concept of ethic. As noted earlier, moral orientation can be provided through various means, not only by direct instruction. As will be seen, the Johannine story does aim at a “universalizable” interpretation – of God, of his love expressed in the sending of his son, of the world and those who


believe or refuse to believe – that includes an orientation for the reader’s actual lifestyle.

(e) As a final example, some past research has acknowledged that the Johannine literature develops an ethical vision, but has tended to concentrate the Johannine moral teaching in a single main point. Most frequently, this approach has asserted that the love command is “the only moral rule given by John”.\(^{55}\) Recalling the first point of Meeks’ critique noted above, this approach essentially understands that John does not provide specific moral instruction, but rather only a general rule.

Against this approach, Johannes Nissen maintains that, in the search for a Johannine ethic, “our focus cannot be confined to the explicit moral teaching of the Gospel”.\(^{56}\) Understanding the Johannine text as a meaningful narrative world helps one to interpret the Gospel as a story that develops a reflected system of values through its interpretation of Jesus (Christology) and through the interactions of its characters, with direct or implicit assessments by the implied author. Such a system of values is a guide to the readers as they develop their own moral conceptions, founded in the text and its value system. The quest for a Johannine ethic cannot be limited to direct moral instructions such as the “new commandment”, but must also consider the whole story and its underlying value system, which together lead the reader toward certain actions that are in accordance with the text’s ideas.

Of course, such a broader approach would not disregard the significance of the love command in the Fourth Gospel and 1 John. To the extent that love could be regarded as the centre of Johannine thought,\(^{57}\) love has a systemic quality and can be viewed as the platform from which the Johannine ethic, as expressed within both the texts and the narrative worlds behind them, developed.

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3. Traces of the Johannine “Ethic” in Recent Research

3.1 Johannine “Ethic” in Handbooks on New Testament Ethics

Although the Johannine writings are typically treated in the major reference works on New Testament ethics, one detects a significant reluctance to discuss John’s contribution to a larger New Testament ethic. Wolfgang Schrage, who acknowledged that “Sein und Sollen beinahe identisch werden”, claims that “Weltdistanz und Sündenfreiheit” are the most significant Johannine ethical appeals. Frank Matera complained that “there are remarkably few references to moral conduct” in the Gospel of John, and Heinz-Dietrich Wendland thought that the Johannine writings give the “Eindruck einer gewaltigen Reduktion ethischer Fragen und Aussagen”.

One significant example may be explored here as an illustration of this larger trend in research. Of special interest is the contribution of Rudolf Schnackenburg in the revised version of his Die sittliche Botschaft des Neuen Testaments (1988). As a well-known Johannine scholar who has contributed major commentaries on both the Gospel and the Letters of John, Schnackenburg developed his interpretation of the Fourth Gospel from a source-critical understanding, partly following Bultmann into a

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59 Van der Watt, “Ethics and Ethos” (n. 17), 147 (nn. 2, 4–5), is giving selected but illuminating examples.

60 Schrage, Ethik des Neuen Testaments (n. 7), 302.

61 Ibid., 312–314.


64 Rudolf Schnackenburg, Die sittliche Botschaft des Neuen Testaments, vol. 2: Die urchristlichen Verkündiger (HTKNTSup 2.2; Freiburg et al.: Herder, 1988).
