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Ethics and the Gospel of John: Toward an Emerging New Consensus?

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Abstract

For decades the scholarly consensus held that the Fourth Gospel was either devoid of ethics or that its ethical material was narrow, exclusive, and sectarian. In recent years, that consensus has begun to show signs of wear. This article examines the more recent turn to 'implied' ethics by looking at four English-language books on the subject published in the past four years. This examination is undertaken with a view to tracing a newly emerging consensus, which holds that (1) the Gospel of John has ethical material, and (2) that material must be taken seriously by those reflecting on ancient ethical systems in general and New Testament ethics in particular. Further, the emerging consensus holds that the implied ethics of the Fourth Gospel, far from being strictly sectarian, are useful for reflecting on and/or constructing models of normative Christian behavior.

Keywords

consensus, ethics, genre, Gospel of John, implied ethics, Johannine, mimesis, moral development, moral progress, rhetoric, sectarian

A Brief Look at the Old Consensus

The last decade witnessed a surge of interest in the question of Johannine ethics. Eschewing the long-held consensus that the Fourth Gospel lacks ethical material, contemporary treatments have approached the subject with greater nuance and a more robust scholarly imagination than in previous decades. Recognizing that the gospel lacks the same type of ethical discourse as the Pauline correspondence or the Synoptic Gospels, previous commentators had dismissed the gospel

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as having little value for discussions of New Testament ethics. This perspective is perhaps clearest in Meeks's pronouncement that 'the Fourth Gospel meets *none of our expectations about the way ethics should be constructed*' (Meeks 1996: 320; emphasis added). Others have similarly downplayed the notion of ethics in John, suggesting that they are either absent from the Fourth Gospel or hopelessly sectarian. In particular, scholars have rejected the notion that the Johannine emphasis on love is normative in any way. Note the following representative excerpts from a handful of publications over the past six decades:

(1) '[T]here is no indication in John that love for one's brother would also include love toward one's neighbor' (Käsemann 1968: 59).
(2) 'Even when [John] speaks of the command to love and of doing what Jesus commands, *John's real concern is not primarily ethical at all*. His concern is with the new condition of life conferred on the believers through Christ' (Houlden 1973: 36; emphasis added).
(3) 'Precisely because such [fundamentalist] groups, however, now exist in sufficient abundance to be visible, perhaps *the weakness and moral bankruptcy of the Johannine ethics* can be seen more clearly. Here is not a Christianity that considers that loving is the same as fulfilling the law (Paul) or that the good Samaritan parable represents a demand (Luke) to stop and render even first aid to the man who has been robbed, beaten, and left there for dead. Johannine Christianity is interested only in whether he believes. "Are you saved, brother?" the Johannine Christian asks the man bleeding to death on the side of the road. "Are you concerned about your soul?" "Do you believe that Jesus is the one who came down from God?" "If you believe, you will have eternal life," promises the Johannine Christian, while the dying man's blood stains the ground' (Sanders 1975: 99-100; emphasis added).
(4) '[W]e may ask whether a chapter on the Johannine writings even belongs in a book on the ethics of the New Testament' (Schrage 1988: 297).
(5) 'The only rule [of the Johannine Jesus] is "love one another," and that rule is both vague in its application and narrowly circumscribed, being limited solely to those who are firmly within the Johannine circle' (Meeks 1996: 318).
(6) 'Apart from the love that imitates Jesus' love for his own, *John's Gospel is practically amoral*. We look in vain for the equivalents of Jesus' teaching on divorce, oaths and vows, almsgiving, prayer, fasting, or the multitude of other specific moral directives strewn across the pages of Matthew's Gospel. Everything comes down to imitating Jesus' love for his disciples; what concrete and specific actions should flow from this love are largely left unspoken' (Meier 2001: 47-48; emphasis added).

(7) 'Ein ethisches Interesse an der Gestaltung der Tebensbereiehe der Gemeinde wird im Buch nirgends greifbar' (ET: 'Nowhere in the book [viz., the Gospel of John] is there an ethical interest in the design of the life of the community') (Theobald 2002: 565).

Similar observations from other scholars could be added to the above list though these should suffice to illustrate the point that the idea of a constructive, normative Johannine ethics has been roundly rejected by a significant cross section of scholarship (for more detailed analysis of the old consensus, see van der Watt 2006a; Zimmermann 2012; Bennema 2017a; Skinner 2017a). However, there have been numerous attempts to revisit the question of Johannine ethics over the past decade, with a much greater emphasis on 'implied' ethics. By 'implied ethics', scholars mean to explore those areas that are woven into the fabric of the narrative and may not be as obvious as imperative commands or prohibitions. Previous commentators have noted that the Fourth Gospel lacks the same type of explicit ethical instructions as the letters of Paul or the teachings of the Matthean (e.g., 5.1–7.29) or Lukan (e.g., 6.17-49) Jesus, but this does not constitute a lack of ethics as much as it points to a different type of ethical discourse in the Fourth Gospel. A closer look reveals that studies on New Testament ethics have largely focused on an indicative-imperative approach derived from analyses of Paul's epistles. In 2009, Horn and Zimmermann brought forth an edited volume entitled, *Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ*, which is dedicated to exploring this very question in Paul, James, the Gospels, and the wider social environment of the New Testament. Writing on this subject in another publication, Zimmermann notes:

> The fact that research into New Testament ethics has concentrated on paraenetic text segments, which are not found in the Gospel of John and very infrequently in the Letters of John, has led scholars to disregard the fact that ancient ethical discourse was much less interested in the clarification of individual questions than has been perceived within the scope of New Testament research. *The separation of theology and ethics does not correspond to ancient thinking, but instead reflects a structure of perception that was introduced by Rudolf Bultmann in order to describe Pauline ethics as an indicative-imperative schema*. (Zimmermann 2012: 61-62; emphasis added)

After exploring the patristic preference for locating ethical material in the Johannine literature, Wannenwetsch similarly asserts that there are 'powerful and *specifically modern biases* that trigger the suspicion that with John we cannot do the sort of ethics we think we should be doing today' (2012: 93-94; emphasis added). In other words, the scholarly trend that has led to denying the existence of Johannine ethics is rooted in modern, primarily Western assumptions,

not necessarily those assumptions that may have been operative in the ancient Greco-Roman world.

Writing a decade earlier than both Zimmerman and Wannenwetsch, Bolyki appears to nod in the direction of their suggestion about the ethical value of John:

> Compared to the other three Gospels and their rich ethical teaching, the ethics of John seems to be restricted to ch. 13, 'the new commandment' of love, hence the accusation that it is limited, scanty and far from being part of an overall ethical system. This is true *only if we understand the ethics of any Gospel as a collection of moral laws and their interpretations*. In that case the Gospel of John (GJ) is indeed poor in terms of its ethical content. (2003: 198; emphasis added)

Also writing in 2003, Boersma perceptively notes that we

> must beware of the pitfall of simply combing his gospel in search for statements indicating a concern for broader moral or social issues. Such a search can only end up in disappointment. One looks in vain for explicit statements on the environment, on the treatment of the economically marginalized, or on Christian involvement in politics. (2003: 104-105)

Despite these hints toward the presence of ethics in John from nearly two decades ago, only recently has the near consensus regarding John's contribution to New Testament ethics (or lack thereof) been seriously challenged. One positive thing the turn to implied ethics has demonstrated is that scholarly notions of ethics in the New Testament have suffered from both a restricted definition and a limited imagination. Additionally, analyses of implied ethics have suggested that it is helpful to think more broadly and across ancient historical, social, and theological contexts, and in light of modern methodological advances in order to assess the potential value of the Fourth Gospel for doing ethics.

Breaking through the Old Consensus

Outside North America, there has been a much wider (and earlier) recognition among scholars that the Johannine literature should play a greater role in discussions of New Testament ethics, as the above excerpts from both Boersma and Bolyki attest (exceptions have been Hays 1996: 138-57 and Matera 1996: 92-118). In particular, the German series, Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik (published by Mohr Siebeck in concert with the WUNT series), has seen the publication of 11 volumes over the past decade, several of which focus specifically on exploring Johannine ethics and others of which contain chapters on the subject (e.g., Hirsch-Luipold 2009; Kok 2010; van der Watt 2010; van der Watt and Zimmermann 2012; Weyer-Menkhoff 2014; Wagener 2015; Bennema 2016; Drews 2017; Rahmsdorf 2019; see also the 2018 German language

compendium by Hoegen-Rohls and Poplutz). A handful of names appear repeatedly as conversation partners in these publications, including Horn, Volp, and Zimmermann. It would not be an overstatement to affirm that van der Watt has played a central role in advancing discussions of Johannine ethics over the past two decades. His prodigious output on the subject of ethics alone includes one authored monograph (van der Watt 2019), and three co-edited volumes (van der Watt and Malan 2006; Zimmermann, van der Watt, and Luther 2010; van der Watt and Zimmerman 2012), along with numerous articles and chapters on ethical questions in the Johannine literature (van der Watt 1999, 2006a, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2017; Attridge, Carter, and van der Watt 2016), and New Testament ethics in general (van der Watt 2006b).

A major shift in the study of Johannine ethics occurred after the publication of van der Watt's co-edited volume, *Rethinking the Ethics of John: 'Implicit Ethics' in the Johannine Writings* (van der Watt and Zimmermann 2012; the potential for this sort of shift is noted in various reviews of the volume: cf. Koester 2013; Heath 2013; Harrington 2014; Jensen 2014; Stimpfle 2016). Regarding the aims and scope of the book, the editors note:

> Ethics is a neglected field of research in the Gospel and Letters of John. Judgments about even the presence of ethics in the Gospel are often negative, and even though ethics is regarded as one of the two major problem areas focused on in 1 John, the development of a Johannine ethics from the Letters receives relatively little attention. This book aims at making a positive contribution and even to stimulating the debate on the presence of ethical material in the Johannine literature through a series of essays by some leading Johannine scholars… By utilizing different analytical categories and methods (such as narratology) new areas of research are opened up and new questions are considered. Therefore, aspects of moral thinking and normative values can be discovered and put together to the mosaic of an 'implicit ethics' in the Johannine Writings. (van der Watt and Zimmermann 2012)

While the first use of the term 'implied ethics' as it relates to the Fourth Gospel appears to be from an article on John and the Decalogue (Kanagaraj 2001), this language has come to signal a new way of thinking about ethical discourse in John. Use of this terminology has largely been influenced by the various chapters and areas of emphasis in the van der Watt and Zimmermann volume, and we continue to see monographs appear with a similar emphasis (cf. the helpful survey of recent scholarship on implied ethics in Shin 2019: 13-25).

A clear strength of the van der Watt–Zimmermann volume is that its contributions steer us away from older conversations dominated by outdated, imprecise, or even anachronistic categories prevalent in previous research. Additionally, contributors utilize newer methodological approaches to these older questions; various chapters in the volume focus on comparing the Johannine literature to other ancient ways of thinking, including virtue ethics (Brickle 2012), sapiential

themes (Glicksman 2012), Stoic and Philonic ethics (Rabens 2012), and attitudes operative at Qumran (Eynikel 2012). Also, there is a much greater emphasis across the volume than in previous works, on narratology and approaching the narrative as a whole.

When discussing the recent shift in thinking about Johannine ethics, we must also pay attention to Weyer-Menkhoff's *Die Ethik des Johannesevangeliums im sprachlichen Feld des Handelns* (2014). His book pursues the question, 'What kind of moral thinking does the Gospel of John promote?' He finds that Johannine ethics are not necessarily the product of principles, rules, or the values expressed through human actions. Instead, John's ethics are rooted in the words and deeds of God. As one approaches the narrative of the Fourth Gospel, it becomes clear that the text provides a comprehensive foundation for morality. Against that backdrop, John's love commandment (especially John 13) is not a limited ethical command, but the culmination of John's cumulative narrative rhetoric relating to human behavior.

During the last decade, it is evident that the influence of this scholarship has trickled down to the North American scene, with the result that scholars in that part of the world are beginning to take Johannine ethics seriously. For the first time, it would seem, scholars in the UK, continental Europe, Africa, Australia, and North America are entering into constructive conversations about the potential for locating ethics in the Fourth Gospel. In the section that follows, it should become clear how this turn to implied ethics—with emphasis on other ancient ethical systems and newer methodological approaches—has opened the door for recent scholars to continue thinking constructively about a normative Johannine ethics. We turn now to an examination of four recent English-language books on the subject.

Toward a New Consensus? Four New Works on Johannine Ethics

In the past three years alone, four new books focused on the exploration of Johannine ethics were published—three of them appearing just weeks apart in 2017. The author and editors of the first three volumes were in contact with one another during the writing process, which helped generate a number of shared talking points across the publications, even when their various conclusions diverge from one another. Apart from one contribution in the third volume discussed below (cf. Reinhartz 2017), the contributors to all four of these works proceed under the assumptions that (1) there are ethics in John, (2) these ethics are useful for reflecting on or constructing normative Christian behavior, (3) these 'implied' ethics must be discussed in ways that depart from the outdated indicative-imperative approach, and (4) some variety of narrative-exegetical approaches can be useful for providing insights into the question of Johannine ethics.

Cornelis Bennema, Mimesis in the Johannine Literature: A Study in Johannine Ethics *(2017)*

In September 2017, Bennema's book, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature* appeared. The monograph is the fruit of several years of his research and writing on the subject (cf. Bennema 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017b, 2017c, 2018). Set forth in his introductory chapter, Bennema's method for treating Johannine ethics incorporates an eclectic mix of (1) ethos, (2) implicit ethics, (3) virtue ethics, and (4) genre considerations. These four elements of his method are combined with an emphasis on mimesis and what he labels 'moral transformation', which he defines as 'the shaping of, or change in a person's character and conduct when they understand, embrace and live out the beliefs, values and norms of God's world' (Bennema 2017a: 144). The major thrust of his argument is that this moral transformation results from the believer's imitation of (1) the Father-Son relationship and (2) the God-believer relationship, both of which are depicted in the Fourth Gospel. He further defines a believer as 'anyone who has pledged allegiance to Jesus as his disciple or follower; synonymous terms are "disciple," "Jesus follower" or "devotee of Jesus"' (Bennema 2017a: 27).

The monograph begins with a helpful discussion of the state of the question, including references to the other two, at-the-time-forthcoming 2017 volumes (viz., Trozzo and Brown–Skinner, discussed below). For Bennema, all of the previous research directed toward establishing the viability of Johannine ethics—as useful as it has been—has nevertheless failed to identify the *center of Johannine ethics*. This, for him, is the idea of mimesis (or imitation). Mimesis has attracted the attention of ethicists from many different fields but has been virtually ignored by those working in Johannine studies. Bennema notes that this is unsurprising since (1) Johannine ethics is a relatively recent area of research, and (2) mimesis is not immediately evident in the Fourth Gospel, since the expected terminology associated with mimesis is absent. Against that backdrop, a particularly illuminating element of Bennema's treatment is his second chapter, which is devoted to establishing the 'Johannine mimetic language' (Bennema 2017a: 33-63).

John's mimetic language, he argues, consists of eight different constructions that create roughly 44 occurrences of mimesis across the Gospel and Letters of John—33 of which are found in the gospel. These constructions are:

1. μὴ μιμοῦ
2. καθὼς
3. καθὼς…καὶ
4. καθὼς…οὕτως
5. οὕτως…καὶ
6. the singular adverbial use of καὶ
7. ὥσπερ
8. ὁμοίως

For Bennema, this language implies a response of imitation on the part of the believer. This broad semantic domain generates a type of Johannine idiolect in the absence of traditional language related to mimesis that we see in other Greco-Roman literature. After his analysis of these constructions, Bennema notes that only John 1–4 and 2 John are without mimetic material in the Johannine corpus.

The next two chapters are devoted to spelling out—at great length—the two types of mimesis to which this Johannine idiolect is leading the literary audience. Bennema first discusses 'divine mimesis' (chapter 3), which is an imitation of the relationship between the Father and Son. Readers recognize that the gospel is peppered throughout with statements about the Son doing the will of the Father. This behavior is rooted in the intimate relationship between Father and Son and is a model of the sort of intimacy expected between the believer and God. Chapter 4 is then devoted to exploring examples of what he calls 'believer-Jesus/God' mimesis. These instances make up the majority of mimetic occurrences in the Johannine literature.

Believer-Jesus/God mimesis emphasizes human imitation of Jesus, or the character of God as expressed in the gospel. Readers will not be surprised to see that John 13 is the primary text Bennema uses to illustrate this second type of mimesis. Much has been made of the supposed limitedness of the love command in John 13, but Bennema begins by emphasizing the ὑπόδειγμα ('example', 13.15) of Jesus as the focal point. The example that Jesus wants repeated is not the literal foot-washing, but the broader example of service-in-love—what Bennema refers to as a category of 'mimetic act that is sacrificial and humble in nature' (Bennema 2017a: 171). Thus, for Bennema, the love command in John 13 is at the very center of Johannine mimesis and calls for believers to engage in an ongoing series of mimetic acts with sacrifice, service, and love at their core. Bennema notes:

> Even though the love command is not the sole Johannine ethic, it certainly remains central, and if mimesis is the primary mode of behavior by which believers can actualize Jesus' love command, then mimesis could be central to Johannine ethics at large. It may well be that, for John, mimesis answers both the 'what' and the 'how' of ethics, indicating not merely what believers should do but also how they can demonstrate proper conduct. (Bennema 2017a: 125)

As noted above, one of the strengths of more recent work on implied ethics is its narratological focus and its attention to the text in its final form. This observation certainly holds true in Bennema's treatment of the Fourth Gospel across chapters 3 and 4. His exegetical work and care for grammatical and syntactical details are worth noting.

Chapter 5 is entitled, 'The Place of Mimesis in Johannine Ethics'. Here Bennema builds upon the argument to this point and takes a systematic approach

to making his case that ethics play a *central role* in the Johannine story. Far from being an ancillary concern, he argues, ethics are at the heart of the text, and mimesis is at the heart of John's ethics. This claim obviously comes into sharp relief with the previous generation's consensus explored earlier in this article. Here is where Bennema introduces his emphasis on virtue ethics. Comparing the Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics, Bennema argues for something he calls 'family ethics', which affect both the believer's identity and behavior. Key to the Johannine conception of family ethics are life (ζωή), light (φῶς), love (ἀγάπη, φιλία), truth (ἀλήθεια), and honor (the Johannine language of 'giving glory'; cf., e.g., Jn 17.22). Participation in and identification with these Johannine virtues mark out believers as members of God's family. On this he comments, 'We can go so far as to say that the divine identity is communion and believers share or participate in this divine identity. These essential properties of life, light, love, truth, and honour that characterize the communion in the divine family also shape the believer's identity and provide their intrinsic worth' (Bennema 2017a: 159).

The final chapter explores 'mimetic empowerment'. Those familiar with Bennema's previous work on the spirit in John (Bennema 2002, 2007, 2012) will not be surprised that he emphasizes the role of the Spirit-Paraclete in the empowerment of believers to engage in mimesis. While at the heart of Johannine mimesis there is a participatory requirement on the part of the believer, it is ultimately the work of the Spirit-Paraclete to enable believers to participate in this life. The Spirit is the moral agent that (1) allows believers to enter into this life, (2) reminds them of all the things which Jesus said, and which God has accomplished, and (3) strengthens their resolve to continue following and participating.

There is much to commend in Bennema's constructive proposal. First, he makes an argument that is rooted in an awareness of ancient Greco-Roman ideas and parallels. Second, he pays close attention to the text of the gospel and the epistles. Third, he argues that these implied ethics are not ancillary to John's presentation but central. Finally, he makes a compelling case that these ethics provide a model for normative Christian behavior. Despite concerns over his method, 'jumps in logic', or conclusions (cf. critical reviews by Koestenberger 2018; Whitenton 2018; Brant 2019; Harstine 2019), we recognize that Bennema has done a service in helping us think in an honest and substantive way about the presence of normative ethics in the Johannine literature and in a way that moves beyond the previous consensus and some of its outdated assumptions.

Lindsey Trozzo, Exploring Johannine Ethics: A Rhetorical Approach to Moral Efficacy in the Fourth Gospel Narrative *(2017)*

In November 2017, Trozzo's revised Baylor dissertation, *Exploring Johannine Ethics*, was published. As the subtitle suggests, Trozzo is concerned to investigate ancient rhetorical features and their potential connection to ethics in

John. She begins by deliberating on the evocative power of narratives in their presentations of ethics, noting first that, 'narratives can include explicit ethical content of various kinds (rules, maxims, paraenetic sections) within the story itself. This explicit ethical content *sometimes* reveals the ethics of the author' (Trozzo 2017a: 9-10; emphasis added). She mentions Plutarch as an example of this phenomenon. Second, '[n]arratives can also present characters as models of virtue or vice that suggest behaviors for the audience to appropriate or avoid' (Trozzo 2017a: 10). She cites Xenophon, Isocrates, Lucian, and Plutarch in support of this point. Third, 'narratives can include direct commentary that reflects on the value of certain virtues and the danger of certain vices' (Trozzo 2017a: 10). However, the Fourth Gospel rarely includes such explicit ethical content or direct commentary, and despite the suggestions of some scholars (e.g., Collins 1976a, 1976b), characters in the Fourth Gospel are rarely positive models. They are more often guilty of grave misunderstanding (on this, cf. Skinner 2009; 2012) or at the very least shrouded in ambiguity (cf. Hylen, 2009), and are therefore not the best models for imitation. In that light, Trozzo aims to adopt a different approach to drawing out the gospel's implicit ethical dimensions. Like the other volumes considered in this article, Trozzo's recognition that Johannine ethical emphases are implicit rather than explicit is key to her presentation. Early in her introductory chapter she writes:

> An ethical text is a text that offers reflective orientation toward one's way of life, defining how to behave according to a specific value system and in relation to a certain social group or society at large… A search for ethical *content* implies looking for explicit statements in the form of direct imperatives or intentional reflections on the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of specific actions—something the Fourth Gospel has very little of. When explicit ethical content is lacking, *we can approach implicit ethics by asking what influence the story would have had on the values and behaviors of those who were exposed to it, especially those who considered it an authoritative or foundational document for their religious community.* (Trozzo 2017a: 16; emphasis added)

These perceptive and helpful comments are followed by a list of questions she intends to use as a guide in the search for implied ethics in John:

- What does the narrative offer in terms of governing the people's everyday affairs?
- What language does the narrative present to help the audience give account of their identity, goals, and circumstances?
- What practices does the narrative prescribe to shape the audience's self-understanding?
- What rationale does the narrative offer for these practices?
- How is God portrayed? How does God act? What is the relationship between God's agency and that of the audience? (Trozzo 2017a: 17).

With these questions in mind, Trozzo examines four different rhetorical elements of the Fourth Gospel: (1) participation in the *bios* genre (chapter 1), (2) incorporation of encomiastic topics (chapter 2), (3) metaleptic extension of encomiastic topics (chapter 3), and (4) rhetorical structure as a guide to interpretation (chapter 4).

The emphasis on genre in chapter 1 is something that Bennema has also identified as a key component to rethinking Johannine ethics. We will also see this emphasis in our discussion of Shin's monograph below. Thus, we can already identify a common element that appears useful for discussing both the presence and the potential normativity of ethics in the Fourth Gospel. If the gospels participate meaningfully in the *bios* genre—as most NT scholars would allow (on this, cf. Burridge 2004)—then it behooves us to pay closer attention to both genre conventions and audience expectations in our treatment of Johannine ethics. Trozzo helpfully notes that there is some ambiguity within current scholarship over the gospel genre and its relationship to *bioi*, and this has influenced the way scholars have labeled the gospels. In her analysis, she is careful to use the language of the Fourth Gospel's *participation* in the gospel genre—language that goes back to the foundational monograph by Burridge—rather than using more definitive language such as 'the gospels *are* examples of *bioi*'. She argues that there is significant overlap between the Fourth Gospel and the *bios* genre and identifies the writings of Plutarch as a fruitful area of comparative analysis. She comments: 'With these things in mind we should not overlook that the early audience of the Fourth Gospel likely would have expected the narrative to include a moral or ethical purpose' (Trozzo 2017a: 59). As with Bennema's monograph, I regard Trozzo's emphasis on genre to be an important contribution of her book, though it is important to recognize that she treats genre differently and with a bit more nuance than Bennema.

In chapter 2, Trozzo identifies four encomiastic topics that can be found in both Greco-Roman biographies and in the Fourth Gospel: (1) origin, (2) nature and training, (3) pursuits, deeds, and other external goods, and (4) death. The evangelist engages in what Attridge has referred to as 'genre-bending' (Attridge 2002), and this is evident in this *very Jewish* gospel's use of standard *topoi* from Greco-Roman rhetorical literature. These encomiastic topics consistently point to the unity between the Father and Son, and this, argues Trozzo, steers the audience away from simple imitation—central to many *bioi*—as the guiding concept. How can readers faithfully imitate one who is divine? Instead, emphasis in the gospel seems to be on unity. The question of *unity over imitation* leads to the next chapter, which deals with the extension of these encomiastic topics to the followers of Jesus.

The discussion in chapter 3 winds through a great deal of material, including (1) scholarly discussions on the Johannine community and the two-level reading of the gospel, (2) an introduction to specific metaleptic elements in the gospel,

and (3) an argument for the use of metalepsis to extend the encomiastic topics discussed in the previous chapter. In my opinion, this is a particularly helpful and nuanced chapter and deserves close attention from those who are researching Johannine ethics. Metaleptic elements represent areas in the story where a 'narrative boundary is blurred' (Trozzo 2017a: 100). Trozzo identifies the following metaleptic elements in John:

- A self-aware narrator who references himself and the audience in the first-person plural
- Hindsight comments that disrupt narrative time
- Anachronistic language and themes
- Extended discourses performed as if directed to the audience
- The character of the Beloved Disciple with whom audiences would identify.

Together, these five elements disrupt the story world and the world of the audience—who is aware of what is taking place in the community—and thereby thrusts them into the narrative world. Once there, the previously established encomiastic topics are extended in a way that organically leads to reflection upon the shared unity between Father and Son (and between community and God).

The final chapter is by far the longest in the book and aims to show how the evangelist uses structural guides as a way of leading the audience to engage in moral deliberation. As with Bennema's treatment considered above, it will surprise no one that Trozzo spends significant space discussing the Johannine command to 'love one another'. As many have noted over the years, it is the most identifiable ethical concern in the gospel. Overall, this is another masterful chapter that reveals Trozzo's familiarity with topics as varied as ancient rhetorical structure, primary texts proximate to the Fourth Gospel, and important arguments about the Johannine community among scholars. Trozzo argues convincingly here that the Fourth Gospel does not prescribe specific actions, but subtly beckons its audience to a process of ongoing moral deliberation rooted in both the community's experience and pursuit of unity with God.

Like Bennema, Trozzo's discussion of genre is illuminating, and in particular, her acknowledgement of John's genre-bending tendencies. In light of the more recent emphasis on the Jewish background of the gospel, the turn to Greco-Roman rhetorical parallels is perhaps the most important contribution of this volume. That said, it will be interesting to see if future studies take up Trozzo's challenge and apply the same level of care she has displayed on a wider range of Second Temple Jewish sources (on this point, see Balfour 2019). Also of note is Trozzo's attention to the historical situation(s) faced by the community receiving the gospel—an area often overlooked in deliberations such as these. I have little doubt that future scholars working on Johannine ethics will engage this book with great benefit.

Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner, Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John *(2017)*

Also, in early November 2017, Brown and I brought forth an edited volume that modeled itself on the van der Watt and Zimmerman text, though aimed primarily at an advanced student population. Since the conversations in the latter volume were highly academic and intended primarily for a scholarly audience, our volume intended to advance discussions begun by that volume's contributors, while also serving as an intermediate introduction to the subject. The book was divided into three sections: (1) the Johannine imperatives, (2) implied ethics, and (3) 'moving forward', or what we saw as current scholarly projects with the potential to move beyond the previous two categories. We also intentionally chose to include scholars in this project whose academic reputations had been earned, at least in part, by being close readers of the text; most of the essays have extended exegetical discussions (this is helpfully noted in reviews by both Cerrone 2018 and Williams 2018).

Since it is commonly noted that previous studies of NT ethics have focused largely on imperative statements (especially in Paul), we decided to begin our study with an analysis of three Johannine imperatives: 'believe' (Brown 2017), 'love one another' (Skinner 2017b), and 'follow' (Collins 2017). While wanting to distance ourselves from the older indicative-imperative schema discussed above, we did want to explore John's imperatives, partly with the goal of discerning whether it was possible to arrive at anything normative in them. Since much has been made of the supposed limitedness of John's imperatives, particularly the all-pervasive love command, we hoped to offer more complete reflections that were not isolated—as has often been the case—from their wider narrative contexts. Thus, one of the strengths of this first section is that it focuses on reading large sections of the Fourth Gospel from a narrative perspective and letting readers hear the text while allowing John's autonomous voice to emerge. In response to the hopelessly sectarian vision of love that was proffered by a previous generation of scholars, I concluded my chapter on the love imperative in the Farewell Discourse on a note of dissent:

> My examination of love imagery and love commands in the Farewell Discourse has attempted to show that John's vision of love is *both local and universal*. Throughout this chapter I have tried to make the point, through a close reading of crucial passages within the Farewell Discourse, that there is a trajectory from the more particular to the more universal across John 13–17, beginning with an emphasis on 'one another', moving to an emphasis on 'friends', and culminating in Jesus's prayer for all followers of all future time periods. Jesus says that true love—the love he commands his disciples to display—is most fully expressed in the willingness to lay down one's life for friends. By virtue of sharing oneness with Jesus and the Father, the disciples have become the friends of Jesus. *His crucifixion on behalf of the world is the pathway by*

> *which all can potentially become his friends*. *What could be more universal, more normative than that*? (Skinner 2017b: 42; emphasis added)

While I recognize the sectarian elements at work in the gospel, I argue that a close reading of this imperative in its proximate and wider literary and historical contexts provides a trajectory toward normativity that has often been dismissed (see Moloney 2013 for a particularly helpful approach to this question). Both Brown and Collins approach their readings of the 'believe' and 'follow' imperatives with similar thrusts, but especially with an emphasis on addressing the narrative as a whole.

Drawing transparently upon the work of van der Watt and Zimmermann (2012), we organized the second, and largest, section of our book, under the topic of 'implied ethics'. As some reviewers have noted (e.g. Smith 2019), this portion of the book has a bit of an amorphous feel to it. There is no line of argumentation that runs straight through each contribution in a way that would unite this entire section of the book. Instead, as it stands, this section reveals a field that is in flux with various and, at times, competing ideas, but all seemingly toward the end of allowing constructive proposals for exploring Johannine ethics.

Chapters in this section include, among others, studies interacting with creation ethics (Culpepper 2017), disability studies (Clark-Soles 2017), and the ethics of dealing with one's supposed enemies (Gorman 2017; Myers 2017), all in the context of John's larger narrative world. One important exception in this section—and in the entire book—is Adele Reinhartz's contribution, which is focused on Jesus' deception in the gospel (see Reinhartz 2017). For her part, Reinhartz rejects the idea that much of any ethical value can be discerned from the Fourth Gospel; instead, we should pay closest attention to the gospel's christological presentation.

The third section of the book is entitled 'Moving Forward', and it contains three chapters that we saw as having a particularly strong potential for advancing conversations about Johannine ethics. It is important to point out that two of the three chapters were written by Bennema and Trozzo, respectively, both of which represent distilled versions of their monographs discussed above (cf. Bennema 2017b; Trozzo 2017b). The remaining chapter in that section is from Dorothy Lee on the subject of ecological ethics: a topic of emerging importance among ethicists and one that has certainly been overlooked as it relates to the Johannine literature. Lee begins her chapter asking:

> Is it possible to discern a distinctive and plentiful store of ethics within the Gospel of John? If so, how do we recognize and articulate the contours of such a Johannine moral theology in a text that lacks the explicit ethical material we find in the other Gospels... The hermeneutical issue lying behind these questions is whether the Gospel of John can be interpreted in such a way as to raise an ethical voice

> in the ecological crisis of the contemporary world or whether such interpretation is anachronistic: that is, asking a question of an ancient text that it cannot fairly be expected to answer. Biblical interpretation inevitably involves the risk of reading and construing the text with unexamined assumptions about its scope and meaning. One of these assumptions is that salvation in the Fourth Gospel (and elsewhere in the New Testament) is concerned only with human beings and has little or no concern for other living creatures. Such an outlook is characteristic, in many respects, of the Western style of interpreting scripture, which is heir to an Enlightenment tradition with its individualism and concern only with human welfare. (Lee 2017: 241-42)

She goes on to challenge these modern assumptions, while offering a close reading of passages in the text to argue for the possibility of arriving at a 'creation ethics' in John.

Finally, the book closes with a brief discussion of prospects for future research, which include:

> (1) Johannine ethics and the rhetoric of characterization in Greco-Roman biography
> (2) Johannine ethics and reception history
> (3) Johannine ethics, the history of the Johannine community, and social memory
> (4) Johannine ethics in comparison/contrast to other ethical systems in the wider thought world of early Christianity. (Brown and Skinner 2017b: 283-86)

While these were the only specific prospects we identified, this list is far from exclusive. Several contributions in the book represent fruitful areas of nascent research that beg for further exploration (specifically, the emphasis on dealing with one's enemies seen in the chapters by Gorman and Myers). It remains our hope that in the coming years, these topics and others addressed in the book will serve as the focus of more constructive research on the viability and/or normativity of John's 'implied' ethics.

Sookgoo Shin, Ethics in the Gospel of John: Discipleship as Moral Progress *(2019)*

In early 2019, Shin published his revised Cambridge dissertation, *Ethics in the Gospel of John*. Drawing somewhat generously from discussions in the above three books—though without always being clear about it (on this, see Skinner 2019)—Shin assumes the viability of Johannine ethics and works toward establishing a normative understanding. About his work he notes:

> This study seeks to challenge the dominant scholarly view of John's ethics as an ineffective and unhelpful companion for moral formation. The Gospel of John has been an unwelcome outsider when it comes to the discussion of ethics since it has been accused of being morally bankrupt, not ethical enough to be included in New Testament ethics, and a puzzling book—indeed, a major challenge—for ethical enquiry. (Shin 2017: 153)

As the subtitle to the work indicates, Shin aims to approach the subject of Johannine ethics against the conceptual backdrop of 'moral progress', which he defines as

> a total reorientation of worldview and of the understanding of the self which is effected by one's growing knowledge of Jesus's identity and mission, and which further enables one to grow in the likeness of Jesus by embodying the moral traits exemplified by Jesus himself. (Shin 2019: 53)

The book is divided into two major sections. The first is entitled 'Moral Transformation in Worldview', and consists of five chapters. Like the previous three books discussed above, Shin's first chapter explores the state of the question, arriving at the following critical points: (1) the study of Johannine ethics is still in a relatively embryonic stage, which means that (2) there are few consensus positions on the subject, so (3) there must be a more definitive move to demonstrate that John has an undergirding ethical dynamic shaping his moral structure (Shin 2019: 3-25).

Chapter 2 is entitled 'Exploring Moral Landscapes' and begins with a discussion of ancient figures such as Plato, Seneca, and Cicero on what it means to 'imitate God'. He begins by noting:

> What the previous discussion signifies is that the modern conception of ethics is not suitable for analyzing John's ethics because the author of John's Gospel lived in the world where people had a different ethical framework from that of the moderns. Then we have a better chance of finding a fitting ethical model for our study not in modern moral philosophy but in the ethical landscape of the first century Mediterranean world because the author would have likely presented his ethical ideas in a way that made sense to first-century readers. (Shin 2019: 32)

This insight might appear axiomatic or even banal to some today, but in the current climate where we are transitioning from one consensus to another, it bears repeating.

Shin moves forward by investigating how a genre-sensitive approach to the gospels would yield a genre-sensitive understanding of ethics. The emphasis on genre sensitivity is a clear strength of the volume and takes the insights of Bennema and Trozzo into account. As noted above, questions related to genre

conventions and audience expectations demand more attention from those who study Johannine ethics. Since it is axiomatic in NT scholarship that (1) the gospels participate in the *bios* genre, and (2) an important element of *bioi* is their emphasis on imitation, it only makes sense, argues Shin, for us to explore what constitutes ethical discourse in other *bioi*. Against this backdrop, Shin interacts with ethical tropes in the writings of Plutarch to establish a helpful analogue for discussing Johannine ethics. In order to draw successfully from this comparison to *bioi*, Shin argues that there remains one overlooked element in Plutarch's ethical principles: the question of 'moral progress', which 'basically refers to the process of gradually advancing to virtue while removing vice' (Shin 2019: 42). The gospel never speaks directly of 'moral progress', but does use the language of discipleship. According to Shin, John intends to portray discipleship as a journey that continually progresses toward the goal of imitating Jesus. He attempts to validate this by first looking at John 1–12 to show 'how the author tries to persuade readers to have faith in Jesus as the Son of God by encouraging them to adopt Jesus' new teachings and worldview' (Shin 2019: 52). He then focuses on individual texts in the gospel to show how people 'who made a commitment to Jesus are expected to continue in their moral progress by imitating the words and deeds of Jesus' (Shin 2019: 53).

Using the findings of chapter 2, the next three chapters primarily employ a narrative-exegetical approach, with a view to drawing out ethical emphases in the stories of Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 (chapter 3), Jesus and the Samaritan Woman in John 4 (chapter 4), and Jesus and the man born blind in John 9 (chapter 5), respectively. As with the studies discussed above, the narratological emphasis is an important element in Shin's treatment of implied ethics in John. In so many previous discussions of ethics among scholars, decisions about the meanings of various ideas, titles, and pronouncements were untethered from a protracted consideration of the wider text. That Shin engages in extended exegetical discussions of various passages in the gospel offers strong support for his overall argument.

Shin next progresses to the second section of the book, which is entitled 'Moral Transformation in Behaviour', and consists of only two chapters. In chapter 6, Shin addresses the concept of 'imitation', and this is where his interaction with and reliance upon the arguments of Bennema and to a lesser degree, Trozzo, become clear. Shin notes that imitation is a major concern in the writings of Plutarch and other Greco-Roman biographers. He sees the foot-washing of John 13 as an entry point into the concept of imitation in John. Drawing upon Bennema's emphasis on mimetic speech patterns, Shin recognizes the significance of καθώς language throughout the Farewell Discourse. According to his analysis there are four emphases in John in which followers can imitate Jesus: (1) love, (2) unity, (3) mission, and (4) what Shin labels ἐκ-status, or his

derivation as 'not from this world' (2019: 131-91). This last category, he argues, is one that many scholars have dismissed as completely sectarian but is actually a key element of John's ethical presentation. He writes that 'such analyses do not do justice to Jesus' claim [that he and his disciples are not of this world], which provides a rich reservoir for moral insights' (Shin 2019: 190). The book closes with a concluding chapter (pp. 192-97) that pulls together each strand of the author's argument.

Shin's presentation of 'moral progress' aligns well with Bennema's understanding of mimetic material in the Farewell Discourse. One of the most important contributions of Shin's work is his emphasis on genre sensitivity and the insistence that we understand the Fourth Gospel as participating in the *bios* genre. And since the mimetic dimension is of singular importance to the *bios* genre (on this, see Burridge 2004: 53-77), Shin's attention to this element is helpful. While Burridge emphasizes the importance of imitation in his works on the subject (Burridge 2007, 2009), Shin's work advances that discussion and provides some helpful reflections on moral development. This is likely the strongest contribution of his monograph to current discussions of Johannine ethics.

Where Do We Go from Here?

A number of important insights and approaches to John's implied ethics appear in the works surveyed above: mimesis/imitation (Bennema, Shin), the value of ancient rhetoric (Trozzo), sensitivity to genre (Bennema, Shin, Trozzo), ecological questions (Lee), creation ethics (Culpepper, Lee), the ethics of dealing with one's enemies (Gorman, Myers), questions related to Johannine characterization (Shin, Skinner), and the role of the Spirit-Paraclete (Bennema). In addition, we note the ubiquity of more robust narrative-exegetical approaches across all four volumes (cf., e.g., Bennema, Brown, Collins, Culpepper, Moloney, Myers, Shin, Skinner). These studies provide us first with evidence of an emerging new consensus that begs for further exploration. Secondly, they provide solid prospects for future research and demonstrate that the ground is fertile for substantive new proposals emphasizing both the presence and the value of Johannine ethics. In this article I have examined the contributions of four recent English-language works on Johannine ethics, but this is to say nothing of the German works that have also appeared during this same period (cf. Wagener 2015; Volp, Horn, and Zimmermann 2016; Hoegen-Rohls and Poplutz 2018; Rahmsdorf 2019). This high concentration of research in such a short span of time suggests that the subject of Johannine ethics is positioned to be a major topic of scholarly discussion in this new decade.

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