Conclusion: Moving the Conversation Forward—Johannine Ethics in Prospect

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Throughout the foregoing chapters our contributors have offered detailed engagements with the three Johannine imperatives (believe, love, and follow), numerous subjects that fall under the category of "implied ethics," and a handful of topics that attempt to move other conversations forward in the area of Johannine ethics. We believe that our coverage of these topics shows that our field is currently open for ongoing dialogue about the presence, nature, and value of ethics within the Johannine literature. Against that backdrop, we want to conclude this volume by briefly enumerating several areas of potential benefit for those interested in further exploring the "moral world" of the Gospel and Epistles of John.

1. JOHANNINE ETHICS AND THE RHETORIC OF CHARACTERIZATION IN GRECO-ROMAN BIOGRAPHY

In recent years, studies of characterization in the Gospels have become increasingly abundant.[1] While this area of inquiry has been

1. See, e.g., Frank Dicken and Julia Snyder, *Characters and Characterization in Luke-Acts*, LNTS 548 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016); Christopher W. Skinner and Matthew Ryan Hauge, eds., *Character Studies and the Gospel of Mark*, LNTS 483 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014); Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of*

blossoming, little has been done to connect rhetorical patterns of characterization to an understanding of ethics in the Gospels. One enduring insight of Richard Burridge's landmark publication, *What Are the Gospels?* is the awareness that the Gospels participate in the wider genre of Greco-Roman biography (*bios*), and an important function of such writings is to show the virtue and imitability of the work's protagonist.[2] While Burridge has already attempted an ethical analysis of Jesus's imitability in his book, *Imitating Jesus*, more work remains to be done in analyzing Jesus as well as other figures in the Fourth Gospel against the backdrop of the Gospel's participation in the *bios* genre and in light of ethical concerns.[3] In particular, how are we to understand the literary function of minor characters, and in what ways do such figures contribute to an understanding of the ethics implied by the text? This area of inquiry holds numerous prospects for future research.

2. JOHANNINE ETHICS AND RECEPTION HISTORY

Recent years have also seen a rise in studies devoted to the reception history of the Bible.[4] Studies in reception history are technically outside the realm of direct exegesis of biblical texts but are rather more concerned with examining ways in which biblical texts were

John, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014); Bennema, *A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014); Alicia D. Myers, *Characterizing Jesus: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Fourth Gospel's Use of Scripture in its Presentation of Jesus*, LNTS 458 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012); Steven A. Hunt, Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmerman, eds., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Christopher W. Skinner, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, LNTS 461 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012); Susan E. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

2. Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004; 1st ed., 1992).

3. Richard Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

4. See, e.g., Emma England and William John Lyons, eds. *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible 6 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015); William John Lyons, *Joseph of Arimathea: A Study in Reception History*, Biblical Refigurations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Eve-Marie Becker and Anders Runesson, eds., *Mark and Matthew II: Comparative Readings, Reception History, Cultural Hermeneutics, and Theology*, WUNT 304 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

interpreted ("received") in various locales by different interpreters throughout time. However, such an approach has the potential to yield insights into the earliest uses of and approaches to the Johannine literature. The opening chapter of this book includes a quotation that seems apropos here. In the context of a discussion of patristic writers and their preference for the Fourth Gospel in thinking about the development of moral character, Bernd Wannenwetsch writes 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."[5] This raises the question: How did the earliest interpreters understand the moral world of the Johannine literature, and what, if anything, can this teach us about Johannine ethics, implied or otherwise? It is our opinion that an appeal to the reception history of the Johannine literature vis-à-vis discussions of ethics, moral formation, virtue, and related topics can prove to be a fruitful exercise in the pursuit of Johannine ethics.

3. JOHANNINE ETHICS, THE HISTORY OF THE JOHANNINE COMMUNITY, AND SOCIAL MEMORY

In an intriguing study from 2006, Tom Thatcher asked why John wrote a Gospel in the first place.[6] His answer focused on the communal memories that were passed on for decades via oral tradition until they were ultimately written down. Thatcher argued that early Christians found themselves in conflict not only over who Jesus was but also over what memories should be retained. Thatcher's insights and the assumptions that generated them have the potential to serve as a helpful launching point for future investigations of the moral world of the Johannine writings. In our examination of John's ethics, we still have a great deal to learn not only from those who have sought to advance our understanding of the oral/aural dynamics of life in the ancient Mediterranean world,[7] but also from those scholars

5. Bernd Wannenwetsch, "Political Love: Why John's Gospel Is Not as Barren for Contemporary Ethics as It Might Appear," in *"You Have the Words of Eternal Life": Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective*, ed. Kenneth Mtata (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012), 93–94 (emphasis added).

6. Tom Thatcher, *Why John Wrote a Gospel: Jesus—Memory—History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

7. The foundational work in this area is Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Bloom-

who have sought to refine our understanding of social memory theory and its relevance for the study of the New Testament.[8] Little has been done in this area, and thus there are literally dozens of avenues to explore.

4. JOHANNINE ETHICS VERSUS OTHER ETHICAL SYSTEMS IN THE THOUGHT WORLD OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Finally, it is worth delving deeper into the thought world of early Christianity in order to explore both similar and contrasting systems of ethics. Earliest expressions of Christianity emerged in a complex and variegated world of religious, social, and political ideologies. An analysis of these competing ideological systems can help us arrive at a broader context in which to locate our understandings of Johannine ethics. In particular, comparisons with various forms of Jewish ethics, Stoic ethics,[9] and the pervasive virtue ethics[10] of the Greco-Roman world can provide fodder for fruitful discussions about the presence and value of ethics in the Johannine literature. We hope our own initial engagement with a broader understanding of ethics, the study thereof, and the moral world of the Johannine literature will serve to spur such conversations.

ington: Indiana University Press, 1997). For a recent engagement with advances in this area, see Tom Thatcher, ed., *Jesus, the Voice, and the Text: Beyond the Oral and the Written Gospel* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008). See also, Rafael Rodriguez, *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2014). For a foray into this area in Johannine studies that has not yet breached the realm of ethics, see Anthony Le Donne and Tom Thatcher, eds., *The Fourth Gospel in First-Century Media Culture*, LNTS 426 (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

8. See Chris Keith, "Social Memory Theory and Gospels Research: The First Decade Part One," *Early Christianity* 6 (2015): 354–376; Keith, "Social Memory Theory and Gospels Research: The First Decade Part Two," *Early Christianity* 6 (2015): 517–42.

9. We are grateful to Prof. Harold Attridge for turning our attention to this concern. In a breakfast conversation at the 79th Annual Meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association at Santa Clara University in August 2016, Prof. Attridge suggested that a comparison with Stoic ethics might be one of the more fruitful avenues of research for future investigations into Johannine ethics. While this suggestion came too late in the editorial process for us to devote a chapter to its consideration, we wanted, nevertheless, to acknowledge our indebtedness to him. For his own initial study of the integration of the Johannine literature and Stoicism, see Harold W. Attridge, "An 'Emotional' Jesus and Stoic Tradition," in *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, ed. Tuomas Rasimus, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, and Ismo Dunderberg (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 77–92.

10. This is the approach advocated by Cornelis Bennema in chapter 13 of this book. See also, Cornelis Bennema, "Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings," *IDS* 51 (2017): 1–7.