

JAN G. VAN DER WATT

A Grammar of the Ethics of John

Volume I

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431



Jan G. van der Watt

A Grammar of the Ethics of John

Reading John from an Ethical Perspective

Volume I

Mohr Siebeck

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Vir

Shireen, Nireen, Loutjie, Jana en Markus
Die mense wat my lewe vol en ryk maak

Preface

Several years ago, I had to decide on a project for my sabbatical. I realized that little had been done on the ethics of John, which motivated me to pursue this topic, more with the idea of writing a short overview of the material to be found largely in commentaries, theologies and books on New Testament ethics. As was expected, views on Johannine ethics were mostly quite cursory and even negative, as I indicate in the first chapter. Little attention was given and no monograph could be found on this topic. However, upon reading the text of John closely, I realized that there is much more to John than meets the eye. Moving beyond the classical ethical analytical criteria like paraenesis, virtue and vice lists, ethical imperatives and the like, to a more comprehensive approach (which is described in the first chapters), a dynamic perspective on ethics started to open up. At that stage my path crossed with that of Ruben Zimmermann (professor at Mainz), who spent a year with me in South Africa on a stipend from the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung. He also pursued a more comprehensive approach, which he called ‘implicit ethics’, a phrase that in the meantime had become well known in the debate. Our cooperation led to a conference on Johannine ethics, organized at Radboud University (Nijmegen, The Netherlands) in 2010. The book *Rethinking the ethics of John* was the result. This book also served as an inspiration for others to join the search for something previously described as ‘basically non-existent’. During the past decade and a half one of the most active branches of research in Johannine studies resulted. Several conferences followed,¹ with articles and even books published, and at several universities worldwide, doctorates were pursued on this topic.²

This book is the result of several years of research into the question of Johannine ethics. My approach was to publish my research as I progressed (cf. the bibliography for articles published along the way), although my ultimate aim was to present a more structured and comprehensive picture by publishing a (this) book. This has to do with my view that developing scientific research on a major topic benefits from making it available even as the research develops to fellow researchers to consider and evaluate. Discussion and mutual scrutiny are

¹ These include subgroup meetings at SBL, papers at Colloquium Iohanneum, Radboud Prestige lectures, as well as at the Institute of ethics at the University of Mainz and the University of Pretoria, to name just a few.

² For instance, from England (Cambridge), USA (Baylor), Netherlands (Radboud University Nijmegen), Australia (Murdoch University), South Africa (Pretoria).

crucial elements in the process that enhance our scientific knowledge. By saying this I acknowledge everybody who made inputs that influenced the ideas in this book. Judging from comments in the research by others who followed in the pursuance of this issue, making my findings available as I went along was a positive decision, since the influence of this research published along the way is evident in the debate. The consequence is of course that parts of the book might seem familiar to those who know the debate that has taken place over the past few years, since it reflects some of the articles already published. However, this is not a publication of a collection of my essays (which is often done by scholars), but rather a book that has been systematically written *as book*, based on some of my research that has been published over the past few years. This research was integrated into the structure and argument of the book, expanding, changing and restructuring it to form part of the larger argument leading to the description of the ‘grammar of Johannine ethics’. In the text itself I do not refer to the articles where they are used, except where it seems to be necessary. The reader should assume and even expect that parts of the articles mentioned in the Bibliography were used, sometimes briefly or heavily redacted, sometimes in more detail, depending on the role they play in the general development of the argument in the book itself.³

Obviously, reading John also leads one to the Johannine letters. Ironically, the letters seem to focus more on ethics than the Gospel itself, and in order to expand the database I proceeded to analyse the Johannine letters. The original intention was to publish the material in one volume, but for several reasons, not the least the development of the debate on the letters that tends to read the letters more independently, it seemed more feasible to publish the ethics of the letters in a second volume, making the book on the Gospel volume one. It is envisaged that the second volume will also contain a discussion on the similarities and differences between the ethics of the Gospel and that of the letters, hopefully expanding our views on the Johannine group in general.

A few brief remarks about the setup and presentation of the material in the current volume are necessary. A fair amount of space is spent on considering theoretical issues, especially since a more comprehensive approach is suggested. This is dealt with in the first part of the book. The setup of the book follows a certain structured approach, and is not done by moving through the Gospel chapter by chapter (as is sometimes done with descriptive or narrative approaches). Due to John’s spiral or cyclical style, structuring of the material was necessary: through reading and analysing the Johannine text itself, particular issues presented themselves as part of the basic framework of Johannine thought

³ Several monographs (also published doctorates) appeared after this book was completed (though not yet published), inter alia written by Cor Bennema, Lindsey Trozzo (PhD) and Sookgoo Shin (PhD). Unfortunately, this material could not be considered fully for this publication, but will be in a forthcoming publication of the Radboud Prestige Lectures in New Testament, published by Brill, dealing with this topic.

on ethics. Exactly because John has a spiral-like structure, implying that he consistently returns to topics, made it necessary to consider similar remarks together that are spread throughout the Gospel. This resulted in the need for structuring the material to present a cohesive argument. The aim was indeed to present an overall and logical picture of how the different aspects related to ethics are linked and developed in the Gospel. In order to determine the nature and semantic scope of certain key concepts, more extensive discussions on these concepts were necessary. Longer addenda and several excursuses on important topics are also added to serve as broader framework for the argument, explaining certain choices made.

Due to his cyclical style, John develops different topics and concepts in relation to one another (pictorial thinking – see later), which means that in discussing one topic, references are made to others that might already have been discussed, which inevitably leads to some repetition in the book’s argument. This necessitated references in the footnotes to discussions in the other parts of the book in order to retain cohesion in the argument. It should be noted that the translations from Greek are my own, although in some cases I used the ESV and NRSV.

With gratitude I want to acknowledge several colleagues who accompanied and influenced me along the way. Ruben Zimmermann and I spent numerous fruitful hours in discussing ethical issues. His influence is apparent throughout, as is the case with Michael Wolter, with whom I spent rewarding times as Humboldt researcher, as well as Mercator professor. I also want to thank the Humboldt-Stiftung for their generous support, as well as David du Toit (Munich) and Cilliers Breytenbach (Berlin) who served as Humboldt-Stiftung hosts. Thanks also go to Ben Witherington, with whom I spent some time as Beason visiting scholar at the commencement of the project. Radboud University Nijmegen also deserves special mention for the way in which this institution created opportunities and gave support to my pursuits. Of course, a great deal of gratitude goes to my wife, Shireen, who has been my companion ‘along the road’, always willing to accompany and support me. Colleagues are also thanked, who may not have been so directly involved, but who served as valuable discussion partners, such as Alan Culpepper, Paul Anderson, Stephan Joubert, Jos Verheyden, Abe Malherbe, Cor Bennema and Bill Loader, amongst many others. Thank you also to Nanette Lötter, who corrected my English.

Jan van der Watt

Johannesburg, Summer 2019

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| <i>ABD</i> | <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , Freedman, DN (ed.), 6 Volumes, New York 1992 |
| <i>AJP</i> | <i>American Journal of Philology</i> |
| <i>ANRW</i> | <i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> . Temporini, H, and Haase, W (eds.) |
| <i>ASV</i> | American Standard Version |
| <i>AThR</i> | <i>Anglican Theological Review</i> |
| <i>BBR</i> | <i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i> |
| <i>BDAG</i> | Bauer, W, Danker, FW, Arndt, WF, and Gingrich, FW, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3 rd edn., Chicago 1999 |
| <i>Bib</i> | <i>Biblica</i> |
| <i>BibInt</i> | <i>Biblical Interpretation</i> |
| <i>BR</i> | <i>Biblical Research</i> |
| <i>BSac</i> | <i>Bibliotheca sacra</i> |
| <i>BTB</i> | <i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i> |
| <i>BTZ</i> | <i>Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift</i> |
| <i>BZ</i> | <i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i> |
| <i>CEV</i> | Contemporary English Version |
| <i>CTJ</i> | <i>Calvin Theological Journal</i> |
| <i>CV</i> | <i>Communio viatorum</i> |
| <i>ERV</i> | English Revised Version |
| <i>ESV</i> | English Standard Version |
| <i>ETL</i> | <i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i> |
| <i>EuroJTh</i> | <i>European Journal of Theology</i> |
| <i>EvQ</i> | <i>Evangelical Quarterly</i> |
| <i>EvT</i> | <i>Evangelische Theologie</i> |
| <i>Int</i> | <i>Interpretation</i> |
| <i>IRM</i> | <i>International Review of Mission</i> |
| <i>ISV</i> | International Standard Version |
| <i>JAAR</i> | <i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i> |
| <i>JB</i> | The Jerusalem Bible |
| <i>JBL</i> | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i> |
| <i>JBTh</i> | <i>Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie</i> |
| <i>JDT</i> | <i>Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie</i> |
| <i>JETS</i> | <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i> |
| <i>JR</i> | <i>Journal of Religion</i> |
| <i>JSNT</i> | <i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i> |
| <i>JTSA</i> | <i>Journal of Theology for Southern Africa</i> |
| <i>KD</i> | <i>Kerygma und Dogma</i> |
| <i>KJV</i> | King James Version |

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| <i>KuI</i> | <i>Kirche und Israel</i> |
| LCL | Loeb Classical Library |
| <i>LTP</i> | <i>Laval théologique et philosophique</i> |
| NAB | New American Bible |
| NASB | New American Standard Bible |
| NASV | New American Standard Version |
| <i>NBD</i> ² | <i>New Bible Dictionary</i> , Douglas, JD (ed.), 2 nd edn., Downers Grove 1982 |
| NCV | New Century Version |
| NEB | New English Bible |
| <i>Neot</i> | <i>Neotestamentica</i> |
| NEV | New European Version |
| <i>NIDNTT</i> | <i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , Brown, C (ed.), 4 Volumes, Grand Rapids 1975–1985 |
| NIV | New International Version |
| NLT | New Living Translation |
| <i>NovT</i> | <i>Novum Testamentum</i> |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| <i>NTS</i> | <i>New Testament Studies</i> |
| <i>OGIS</i> | <i>Orientis graeci inscriptiones selecta</i> , Dittenberger, W (ed.), 2 Volumes, Leipzig 1903–05 |
| <i>P.Oxy</i> | <i>The Oxyrhynchus Papyri</i> . |
| <i>ResQ</i> | <i>Restoration Quarterly</i> |
| <i>RevExp</i> | <i>Review & Expositor</i> |
| <i>RGG</i> | <i>Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version |
| <i>SJOT</i> | <i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i> |
| <i>SNTU</i> | <i>Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt</i> |
| <i>ST</i> | <i>Studia theologica</i> |
| <i>TBei</i> | <i>Theologische Beiträge</i> |
| <i>TDNT</i> | <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Kittel, G, and Friedrich, G (eds.). Translated by Bromiley, GW. 10 Volumes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 |
| <i>TJT</i> | <i>Toronto Journal of Theology</i> |
| <i>TLZ</i> | <i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i> |
| <i>TP</i> | <i>Theologie und Philosophie</i> |
| <i>TRE</i> | <i>Theologische Realenzyklopädie</i> . Edited by G Krause and G Müller |
| <i>TRev</i> | <i>Theologische Revue</i> |
| <i>TRu</i> | <i>Theologische Rundschau</i> |
| <i>TS</i> | <i>Theological Studies</i> |
| <i>TTZ</i> | <i>Trierer theologische Zeitschrift</i> |
| <i>TynBul</i> | <i>Tyndale Bulletin</i> |
| <i>TZ</i> | <i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i> |
| UBS | United Bible Societies |
| <i>VC</i> | <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i> |
| <i>ZEE</i> | <i>Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik</i> |
| <i>ZNT</i> | <i>Zeitschrift für Neues Testament</i> |
| <i>ZNW</i> | <i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> |
| <i>ZWT</i> | <i>Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie</i> |

Chapter 1

What are they saying about ethics in John?

Scholtissek uses the word ‘renaissance’ when referring to developments in Johannine research during the last few years of the twentieth century.¹ He also describes these Johannine research activities as creative ‘in der Rezeption der breiten exegetisch-literaturwissenschaftlichen Methodendiskussionen, die intensiv aufgegriffen werden’. The most fruitful developments were in the area of narratology, especially in characterization. The latter was further developed in the first decade and a half of the 21st century.² Notable is that no mention is made by Scholtissek of any interest in ethics, for the simple reason that a more intensive interest in the ethics of John³ only started at the beginning of the 21st century.

During the last century, ethics was a relatively neglected field of research in the Gospel and Letters of John. Judgements about the presence of ethics in the Gospel of John were often negative with the consequence that this topic seldom got the attention it deserves. Typical, for instance, is the remark of Theobald, ‘Ein *ethisches* Interesse an der Gestaltung der Lebensbereiche der Gemeinde wird im Buch nirgends greifbar’.⁴ It is no wonder that Matera starts his discussion on Johannine ethics by remarking, ‘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’.⁵ Even the renowned Johannine

¹ Scholtissek (2001:268–69).

² Cf. Bennema (2009); Hunt *et al.* (eds.) (2013).

³ For convenience the word ‘John’ will be used to refer to the author of the Gospel or to that Gospel as a whole, depending on the context. It does not imply anything about the origin of the Gospel or the person of the author(s).

⁴ Theobald (2002:565). Publications by van der Watt (2006), Schnelle (2006) and Burrige (2007) have drawn some attention to this neglected field of research. Interest has started to grow, mainly due to some publications and three conferences (one in Mainz and two in Pretoria) with resulting publications (cf., for instance, Zimmermann 2007; van der Watt 2010; van der Watt and Zimmermann 2012) that stimulated the debate which has resulted in increasing interest. Cf. FW Horn and Zimmermann (2009) and Wolter (2009). Meeks (1996) also pointed to the implicit nature of the moral dynamics of Johannine ethics, as will be discussed later on. Apart from recent publications, I am aware of several PhD dissertations on the ethics of John being written at the time of this survey. With the completion of this book I also became aware of books on the ethics of John, one by Bennema (2017) as well as one edited by Skinner and S Brown (2017), but was not able to consult them.

⁵ Matera (1996:92).

scholar Raymond Brown talks about the strange absence of ethics in John.⁶ What follows is a bird's eye view of the ways that research has dealt with this challenge.⁷ The purpose is not only to give an overview, but also to position the current study⁸ within the broader field of research.⁹

1. Ambivalence ... no ethics or ethics indeed?

Until recently research on the ethics of John could be typified either as displaying a negative attitude towards the presence of ethics in John or treating it rather superficially, or only partly.¹⁰ Schrage wondered 'whether a chapter on the Johannine writings even belongs in a book on the ethics of the New Testament'.¹¹ This sentiment is also echoed in the treatment of Johannine ethics in books dealing with ethics of the New Testament.¹² There are often references to John without serious treatment of the issues. Where there are references to Johannine ethics, these are often simply *descriptive* analyses or *paraphrases* of the relevant material in the Gospel.¹³

Three reasons seem to be more pertinent among the many claims that there is a lack or even an absence of ethical material in the Gospel of John.¹⁴

i) The analytical categories for identifying ethical material are often limited to *paraenesis* and *imperatives* (indicative-imperative scheme), *laws*, virtue and vice *lists* that serve as indications of expected behaviour and behavioural

⁶ RE Brown (1986:80).

⁷ Cf. the good overview of Labahn (2012). Cf. also van der Watt (2006), Zimmermann (2012:44–80), Moloney (2017:197–200), Skinner (2017:xix–xxvii).

⁸ As stated in the preface, this study also contains material from a number of my previously published articles that were published during the beginning of this century as part of the developing discussions on this issue.

⁹ Some publications are, for instance, Meeks (1996), Nissen (1999), Kanagaraj (2001), DM Smith (2002), Bolyki (2003), Labahn (2003), Schnelle (2006), Hirsch-Luipold (2009) and van der Watt (2006; 2006a; 2006b; 2010).

¹⁰ Cf. Senior (2007:271).

¹¹ Schrage (1996:302). K Berger (1997), for instance, does not give attention to the ethics in John in his 'theology' of this Gospel.

¹² Cf., for instance, Holden (1973), Rebell (1988), E Lohse (1987), FW Horn (1995), Zager (2003) and Hays (2006). Hahn (2002:659–736) has 77 pages on ethics in the New Testament, but barely refers to John, except for the love commandment (cf. pp. 671–72). Another example is the theology of Hübner (1995) in which Johannine theology is discussed, but without referring to ethics as theme at all. Cf. Von Wahlde (1990:118).

¹³ Cf., for instance, Manson (1962), Morris (1986), Wendland (1975:109–15), Sanders (1986:91–100), E Lohse (1987), Weiser (1993), Matera (1996), Schrage (1996), Hays (1996), Culpepper (2017:68–71). Siegfried Schulz (1987:486–526) works descriptively, paying attention to central themes like law and love, while Marxsen (1989:246–64) focuses more on Christological issues. Skinner (2017:xxi–xxv) adds the view that some evaluate the ethics of John as being 'sectarian, exclusive, negative, or oppositional'.

¹⁴ Cf. Bolyki (2003:198).

patterns, *examples* of exemplary behaviour (of Jesus or other characters); all of which are categories directly related to prescribing specific deeds on the *surface level* of the text. If such prescription of concrete deeds is lacking, ethical material is often considered to be absent.¹⁵ John also does not resemble the philosophical moral narratives of the time, dealing with particular ethical issues in a logical way.¹⁶ As Witherington remarks, ‘We will look in vain for extended discussions in this Gospel about marriage and divorce, singleness for the sake of the kingdom, or other relevant Christian ethical topics’.¹⁷ Matera likewise opines that, ‘there are remarkably few references to moral conduct in the Fourth Gospel’,¹⁸ with Blount remarking that, ‘John does not do ethics. Or so it seems’.¹⁹ Schrage too, notes that the difference between John and the rest of the New Testament lies in the basic absence of ‘konkreter Weisungen oder ausführlicher paränetischer Abschnitte’.²⁰ Hays,²¹ although giving attention to ethical material in John,²² nevertheless remarks: ‘For readers seeking ethical themes, the Gospel of John is a puzzling text. It contains almost none of the specific moral teaching found in the synoptics ...’.²³ He continues by observing that if we only had John ‘it would be difficult indeed to base any specific Christian

¹⁵ A reason for this attitude might be the dominance of the indicative-imperative scheme which was popularized in 1924 through an article of Bultmann. Although Bultmann acknowledged that the two aspects are closely intertwined (cf. also Bultmann 1960:76–77), the distinction between the terms did create the impression that one should look for ethics as something separate, something ‘imperative’. Cf. also Labahn (2012:11–13; 2010:171–207) who opines, ‘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’ (2012:12). Although the tight Bultmannian grip on Johannine exegesis started to loosen in the nineteen eighties according to Labahn (2012:5), his influence is, for instance, still apparent in the negative evaluation of ethics in John by Theobald (2002:565). Wolter (2001:310–12) restricts ethical material to paraenetic material – he offers a definition with this meaning – and thus maintains this distinction between imperative and indicative. In John these elements are so densely interrelated (cf. the continuum of action formation) that such a distinction is difficult to work with and as Zimmermann (2012:62) opines, ‘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’. Zimmermann (ibid. 60–61) bases his opinion on the way in which ancient texts like that of Aristotle, Plato or Plutarch deal with ethics. He argues that motivation and practice were not distinguished and that much of the reflection focused on the reasons and need to act appropriately. The distinction between indicative and imperative is therefore not in line with how ancient ethicists argued.

¹⁶ Cf. J Barton (2003:9) on this issue in the First Testament.

¹⁷ Witherington (1995:ad loc.).

¹⁸ Matera (1996:92).

¹⁹ Blount (2001:93).

²⁰ Schrage (1989:302).

²¹ Hays (1996:138).

²² Ibid. 138–57.

²³ Cf. also Attridge (2010:17).

ethic on the teaching of Jesus', since 'he offers minimal moral instruction for the community of his disciples'. Even those who still think there are some signs of ethics in John, like Wendland, opine that 'eine[...] gewaltige[...] Reduktion ethischer Fragen und Aussagen'²⁴ is evident in John. Borchert points to love as the basic focal point in the otherwise weakly developed ethical thinking of John when he remarks, 'Although the Johannine Gospel does not spend much time outlining the characteristics of the Christian life and ethical behaviour, it epitomizes the transformed life in the commandment "to love"'.²⁵ To summarize in the words of Von Wahlde, 'One looks through the Johannine Gospel in vain for ethical direction other than the love commandment'.²⁶

ii) The second reason, related to the first, for claiming that there is little or no ethical material in John seems to be the absence of a developed 'ethical structure' in John (and for that matter in any New Testament writing).²⁷ Strecker, for instance, remarks: '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'.²⁸ Obviously, Johannine ethics are not ignored in books that deal with New Testament ethics as such, although it is sometimes overlooked or toned down considerably. They have a place. In most cases a narratological, theological, or combined approach is taken. In many cases the flow of the narrative is simply followed, pointing out what could be relevant for understanding the ethics of John.

iii) Sanders²⁹ finds the explanation for the lack of ethical material in the focus of the plot of the narrative – he speaks harshly of the 'weakness and moral bankruptcy of the Johannine ethics'. The Gospel would presumably only be interested in whether a person is saved or not, irrespective of and indeed insensitive to any other needs.

It is therefore not surprising that books on theology or ethics of the New Testament often do not give noteworthy attention to the ethics of John and if they do, they do so very superficially. Examples are, for instance, the theologies of Klaus Berger, Hübner and Manson,³⁰ the latter discussing ethics from the

²⁴ Wendland (1975:109).

²⁵ Borchert (2002:ad loc.) and Matera (1996:92). Cf. further, for instance, Gerhardsson (1981), Schnelle (2006:309–27), van der Watt (2006) and Burrige (2007). Dewar (1949:185) remarks: 'What ethical teaching there is in this Gospel ... is implicit rather than explicit'. Frey (2012:167–68).

²⁶ Von Wahlde (1990:118). Cf. also Skinner (2017:xix–xxi).

²⁷ Gerhardsson (1981:1).

²⁸ Strecker (1996:539). So also, Meeks (1996).

²⁹ Sanders (1986:100).

³⁰ K Berger (1994:665–66; 1997), Hübner (1995) and Manson (1962). Marxsen (1989:246–64) focuses more on Christological issues, while Anderson (1996) focuses on Christology but does not treat ethics. K Berger (1994:665–66) and Strecker (1996) have brief descriptions of ethical issues in John. In his book on *New Testament ethics* Anderson Scott (1934) makes only three references to John that are general and without any real discussion. Cf. further Morris (1986), Weiser (1993), Dunn (2009) and Voigt (1991). Two dissertations that were done in

First Testament to early Christianity without even touching on the ethics of John.

In spite of the rather negative judgement on Johannine ethics, more detailed attention was indeed given to specific themes or issues related to ethics.³¹ The dominant theme is, of course, love.³² Blank is of the opinion that ‘apart from this [love] commandment (13:34–35) there are no other ethical sayings in John ...’.³³ Borchert joins the choir: ‘Although the Johannine Gospel does not spend much time outlining the characteristics of the Christian life and ethical behavior, it epitomizes the transformed life in the commandment “to love”’.³⁴ Those sharing this view often only give consideration to the love commandment within the broader framework of the theology of the Gospel (i.e., the Christology) and once that is done, there seems to be little need for further reflection. This approach is not without its problems. Apart from in a certain sense isolating the concept of love in John, the fact that these remarks concerning love are often perceived to be limited to the ‘disciples’³⁵ does not help and creates a sect-like impression that limits its application for today, as Meeks³⁶ and Moody Smith³⁷ aptly point out. Matera pinpoints the problem: ‘the most explicitly ethical teaching of the Fourth Gospel – that Jesus’ disciples should love one another as he has loved them – raises the question: has love become exclusive and sectarian?’.³⁸ Not everybody agrees with this view: BurrIDGE,³⁹ for one, denies that this is the case in John. Be that as it may, from a hermeneutical perspective such views, of course, problematize and to a certain extent relativize the ethics in John.

the middle of the previous century were not published, namely, Wachs (1952) and Wittenberger (1971).

³¹ Stuhlmacher (1999:249–64) discusses central terms like faith, love and life.

³² In 1777 Lessing (15–20) claimed that love is the foundation of Johannine and, for that matter, all ethics. Cf. Houlden (1973:35–36), Wendland (1975:109–15), Morris (1978:27–43), Gerhardsson (1981:98), S Schulz (1987:486ff.), E Lohse (1987), Schnackenburg (1988:148–92), van der Watt (1992:74–96), Schrage (1996:138–57), Hays (1996:297ff.), Culpepper (2001:79), Bolyki (2003:198) and Zimmermann (2012:47–48). For in-depth discussion cf. Augenstein (1993) and more recently Popkes (2005).

³³ Blank (1981:69). In spite of the stream of recent publications arguing the contrary, some scholars even today, like Attridge (2010:17) or Von Wahlde (1990:118), maintain that there is nothing about ethics in John other than love.

³⁴ Borchert (2002:355).

³⁵ John 13:34–35; 14:21; 15:9–10, etc.

³⁶ Meeks (1996).

³⁷ DM Smith (1996).

³⁸ Matera (1996:92). Schrage (1996:322) speaks of ‘partikularistische Konventikelethik’. Meeks (1996:323–34). Although referring to the Letters, Perkins (1992:290) uses the term ‘particularist, conventicle ethic’ to refer to the ethical dynamics of John. Cf. also Meeks (1996:324).

³⁹ BurrIDGE (2007).

Discussions are not always restricted to the theme of love; other topics related to ethics have also received detailed attention, in some cases in considerable depth, for instance, in the case of the law,⁴⁰ truth,⁴¹ or sin.⁴² Such themes are usually treated on their own without aiming at a more comprehensive treatment of the full scope of ethics in John. Other themes that are sometimes also discussed in relation to ethics are life,⁴³ light⁴⁴ or eschatology.⁴⁵

2. New insights started to turn the ship

With the influential work of Meeks, the tide began to turn, although I suspect (without really being able to prove it) that it also dampened the debate somewhat due to the convincing way in which Meeks presented his (negative) opinions about ethics in John. He claimed that in dealing with ethical material in an ancient text one should not look for explicit ethical demands but that an ‘explicit and systematic discussion of the principles on which moral action is based and the logic by which moral decisions may be made’ should rather come into focus. He thus moved away from simply focusing on pure ‘actions’, to include *reasons* behind these actions, thus broadening the scope of what should be analysed. A different picture related to behaviour started to emerge.

Due to the significance of Meeks’s contributions,⁴⁶ a brief overview is necessary. Meeks seems to prefer a position ‘in between’. He is not optimistic about the presence of ethics in John and maintains that one should not and cannot speak of ethics in John; he chooses rather to approach John simply as ‘instrument for moral formation’,⁴⁷ thus not totally denying its significance. The reason for this is his view that morality is a social phenomenon and should be interpreted in relation to the context within which it functions. Meeks⁴⁸ is of the opinion that due to John’s particular socio-historical situation, John cannot effectively

⁴⁰ Cf. Pancaro (1975), Du Rand (1981), Augenstein (1999:161–79) and Loader (2002; 2005; 2009).

⁴¹ De la Potterie (1977). In his theology, Strecker (1996), for instance, treats Johannine ethics in a brief section under the title: ‘Wahrheit und Liebe – Die johanneische Schule’. His treatment is mainly a description of the contents of truth, love, law, eschatology and ethics by focusing on Christology. Cf. also van der Watt (2009:317–33).

⁴² Hasitschka (1989) and Metzner (2000).

⁴³ Van der Watt (2000) and Stare (2012).

⁴⁴ NR Petersen (1993), Schwankl (1995) and Thompson (2016).

⁴⁵ Stuhlmacher (1999:249–64) discusses similar themes like faith, love and life while Morris (1986) also pays attention to issues like love, light and truth, but does not integrate them within a wider perspective of ethics.

⁴⁶ Cf. DM Smith (2002).

⁴⁷ Meeks (1996:317).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 318.

communicate a viable ethical vision that transcends its own immediate circumstances. He maintains the following:

– The Gospel offers no explicit moral instruction. The teachings of Jesus are focused on himself and the maxims (gnomes) for moral instruction that are so characteristic of Jesus in for instance the Synoptics, are missing.

– Meeks opines, ‘The narrative does not provide a plausible and universalizable model for behaviour. It does include actors who exemplify both positive and negative roles, but those roles are so specific to the situation of those small, embattled communities for which this Gospel was written that only by means of careful contextualization and transformation can they help disciples of a different time and place.’⁴⁹ So to speak, Jesus walks with his head in the clouds as the heavenly Agent and while the disciples ‘play in the mud’ because they misunderstand Jesus constantly and do not really know what is going on. ‘Neither the main character, nor his disciples are imitable. The disciples play an almost entirely passive role; their failure to understand Jesus’ words and actions frequently casts them as mere foils to Jesus’ superior knowledge and his inscrutability’.⁵⁰

– ‘If we take the narrative as supplying neither rules for behaviour nor models of character or action but simply as rendering a narrative world to which readers are invited and challenged to respond by imaginatively appropriate performance, this narrative is profoundly troubling to rational kinds of moral discourse. The approach to life embodied in this narrative seems on its face not merely irrational but antirational’.⁵¹ How can a community of Christians isolate themselves from society and form an anti-group, not loving anybody else? This is seen as a subversion of society.

– ‘The decision that characteristically divides Jesus’ audience between those who come to the light and those who remain in darkness, between those who “abide” to eternal life and those who draw back and are condemned, is shrouded in mystery. Only those who are “chosen out of the world” can make the right choice, and therefore this decision on which everything depends in the narrative world of John seems to be predetermined and so not a morally free decision. The way to life is a series of riddles’.⁵² Only Jesus has the answer.⁵³

On these grounds Meeks⁵⁴ argues that if ethics is ‘an explicit and systematic discussion of the principles on which moral action is based and the logic by

⁴⁹ Ibid. 318.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 318–19.

⁵¹ Ibid. 319. It will be argued later that these assessments of Meeks might overstate the case a bit.

⁵² Ibid. 319. Also, this assessment does not take note of the complexity of the Johannine material.

⁵³ Hays (1996:139) also regards the intra-communal focus of John as ground for finding it ‘ethically deficient’ since the believer has no responsibility towards the world. Cf. also Houlden (1973:36).

⁵⁴ Meeks (1986; 1986a; 1993; 1996).

which moral decisions may be made',⁵⁵ we cannot speak of ethics in John. Meeks therefore opts for the idea that John rather functions as 'an instrument of moral formation', since the moral dynamics of the Fourth Gospel 'almost boils down to this: resolute loyalty to the community of disciples' according to Meeks who formed a closed group, which of course limits general applicability.⁵⁶

Much can be learned from Meeks' approach. Aspects of specific interest are his emphasis on the direct influence of social aspects on morals, his reflection on whether John offers some ethics or just a moral vision, and his assessment of the nature of moral material in John, which he regards in many ways as not realistic. We will come back to all of these points, since it cannot be denied that Meeks' work influenced the ensuing reflections.

Hays, a previous colleague of Meeks at Yale, also views the Johannine community as 'deeply alienated from the world, perhaps even ontologically distinct from the world' and talks about the 'strongly sectarian character of the Johannine vision'⁵⁷ but nevertheless does not end up with an entirely negative view of ethics in John. He proposes a 'fuller reading of the story ... in order to grasp its implications for shaping the life of the Christian community'.⁵⁸ One should pay attention to the 'complex way in which this story frames the world within which its readers live and move'. He then approaches this story by analysing the Christology, ecclesiology, the ethical implications of the eschatology and eventually the way John creates 'a moral context for moral discernment'. He shows the influence of Jesus, the one who is sent to bring life and 'who is at once heavenly and earthly', and argues that believers should continue this mission based on their bond with Jesus. This bond should be expressed in love. Jesus' love became evident through his act of self-sacrifice. Hays also argues that the separation from the Jewish religious and cultural context had a determining impact on their behaviour. The Johannine group found their solace in their unity and love for one another. Within this situation the Paraclete teaches and assists the community, allowing eschatological expectations to collapse into the present. The merit of his description is that he tries to embed the framework for moral discernment and action within the contours of John's symbolic world.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Meeks (1996:317).

⁵⁶ Ibid. 323. This view is not without its problems. Meeks (ibid. 318–20) mentions problems with John as instrument of moral formation for today, as if there is no explicit moral instruction: the narrative does not provide a plausible universalizable model of behaviour, the narrative provides an irrational approach to life and behaviour seems too predetermined. Wittenberger (1971:29ff.) also propagates this view, although methodologically departing from a different point.

⁵⁷ Hays (1996:139). In spite of this view, Hays (ibid. 145) also acknowledges the fact that Jesus died for the sake of the world, concluding that 'the disciples who share in Jesus' mission in the world can hardly remain indifferent to those outside the community of faith'.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 140. Cf. also Boersma (2003:103–06) who also argues for a narratological approach where the reader is absorbed into the narrative and should live accordingly.

⁵⁹ Hays (1996:153).

This framework however remains indecisive and largely non-directional when it comes to concrete actions.

A different approach is taken by Bolyki who identifies John with Greek drama and tragedy.⁶⁰ He argues that reading John in the light of Greek dramas would highlight some aspects of its ethics, thus making use of ‘some methods of ancient literature’ to testify to ‘the hidden ethical dimensions of GJ, beyond the immediate ethical laws’. Ancient dramas aimed at showing and promoting and recommending various values. According to him the kernel of tragedy lies in ethical conflict and it is exactly at this point that the ethical dynamics lie. Due to the dualism in John, conflict with Jews and Romans has a central role and therefore determines its ethical dynamics, and is ‘found in almost every chapter where John’s public ministry is pictured’.⁶¹ Although values in Greek dramas ‘have a preventive, value-guarding role’,⁶² they may be re-ordered or changed due to situations of conflict. This is what Jesus’ actions, like washing the feet and demanding love, do: the ethical paradigm shifts and Jesus demonstrates that ‘the greater and the more powerful is to serve the weaker and the fallible’. Giving up social status and showing hospitality now has central ethical significance, since a new measure of love is given, namely, Jesus and his love (13:34b). This comparison of Bolyki with Greek drama shows that looking for ethical dynamics in John should not be restricted to typical ethical identifiers, and that the function of genre, ethos and the internal development of the plot should also be taken into account, and not the least, that different socio-cultural influences should be reckoned with.

3. The story counts – descriptive ethics and narrative analysis

Methodologically, narratology played a significant role in the analysis of John, especially from the middle of the previous century, with renewed interest in recent approaches to John.⁶³ Ethical material in John was explored by selectively retelling the ‘story of John’ by highlighting and commenting on whatever seemed relevant to ethics.⁶⁴ Using the narrative structure thus usually boils down to going through the text of John chapter by chapter or episode by episode and pointing out the presence of ethical material wherever it is found, a procedure

⁶⁰ Bolyki (2003) makes some valuable remarks, but to my mind works on a too high level of abstraction and does not motivate or reflect on the links he makes between John and Greek literature in general. He also works with a rather unmotivated and unclear definition of ethics. Cf. also Brant (2004) and Parsenius (2010).

⁶¹ Bolyki (2003:201).

⁶² *Ibid.* 202.

⁶³ Cf. Nissen (1999). It is also the case with Pauline literature, as Horrell (2005:88) opines, namely that ‘[t]he various elements of this [i.e., Jesus-events] story provide the theological basis and motivational framework for Pauline ethics, as many have noted’.

⁶⁴ Cf. the authors listed in note 13 above.

that is not always that successful due to the lack of forming an overall and inter-related view of the ethics of John.

The appeal of the narratological approach for analysing the ethical dynamics is understandable.⁶⁵ Narratives, for instance, deal with characters making ethical choices and decisions, often reflecting on motifs for actions or expressing the reasons for these actions within the development of the plot, providing opportunity for dialogues and monologues that explain and inform the ethical aspects of the narrative. By exploring these features in the narrative, ethical material may be identified, not the least because many moral philosophers regarded narratives as foundational for moral expressions.⁶⁶ In Christian contexts they provide paradigms, metaphors and concepts that influence Christians' vision and shape their character. Apart from these, narratives have the additional quality of involving readers in their story and thus encouraging them to develop their own views analogically, based on the narratives. In this way narratives serve as powerful but indirect ethical instruments. In considering Johannine ethics, this allows for going 'beyond obvious statements on morality to consider images and themes in the relevant texts and the narrative worlds behind them'.⁶⁷ We will return to the significance of narratology for the ethics of John (see Ch. 3).

4. Theology, ethics and theological ethics

Discussions on the theology of John usually focus on the Christology and, as was argued above, in this process ethics becomes a peripheral issue and even worse, is often overlooked.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the close relationship between theology and ethics has convinced some that one should think in terms of what some call 'theological ethics', thus emphasizing the interdependence between theology and ethics, as Gerhardsson, for instance, opines, 'the ethical dimension' does find a place in John, especially as 'theological' ethics.⁶⁹ This should not strike us as strange, since Löhr argues that the distinction between theology and ethics as we have it today does not reflect the ancient situation.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Cf. further, for instance, Joisten (2007), Hofheinz *et al.* (2009) and Öhlschläger (2009).

⁶⁶ Not all were equally excited about the possibilities of narratological analysis for determining the ethics of John; cf., for instance, Meeks (1996:318–19), who argues that the characters in John are not imitable: they cannot produce rules for behaviour or even models for character or action. Although he does not deny the presence of this ethical material, he doubts its applicability.

⁶⁷ Labahn (2012:36).

⁶⁸ Cf. *ibid.* 13.

⁶⁹ Gerhardsson (1981:3).

⁷⁰ Löhr (2005:151) remarks, 'Den Schriften des NT ist die theologisch-wissenschaftssystematisch seit dem 17. Jh. geläufige Unterscheidung von "Theologie" und "Ethik" fremd. Dies gilt sowohl für den terminologischen Befund wie für die Sache. Die Wörter *theologia* und *ēthikē* (erg. *theōria*; Aristot. an. post. 89b 9) begegnen nirgends'. Cf. also Zimmermann

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