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The Significance of John 1:14–18 for Understanding John's Approach to Law and Ethics

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Abstract

The paper examines the role and status of Torah in Johannine ethics by examining where Torah first becomes the focus of attention, John 1:14–18. While what precedes in the prologue provides important background and what follows in the rest of the Gospel sheds significant light on the passage, this paper argues that already within 1:14–18, and not just in 1:16b, key parameters are set that inform our understanding of John's approach to the Law and ethics as a whole.

Keywords

Law – Torah – John – Ethics

One of the major contributions of recent scholarship, and in particular of Bruce Chilton, to whom this essay is dedicated, has been a more careful and differentiating treatment of the manner in which Jesus and the early Christian movement related to its Jewish matrix. One of the Gospels where the issue of that relationship comes to the fore is in dealing with the challenge of discussing ethics in the fourth Gospel. This is not least because of its lack of specific ethical teaching on the lips of Jesus, aside from the new commandment to love one another.¹ At a deeper level, behaviors of positive characters provide models

1 See the important collection of contributions on the topic in Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, eds., *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings* (Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik / Contexts and Norms of New Testament

that inform ethics at least indirectly, as can imagery.² There are also judgments made that reflect adherence to such basic ethical norms as the rejection of murder, adultery, theft, and bearing false witness. The resources for Johannine ethics, however, are greatly expanded if we can assume that the author and his community remained Torah observant.³ Then we would be justified in supplementing our data with the corpus of ethical teaching embodied in Mosaic law.

Sometimes religio-political, ideological concerns add weight to this view, since it is deemed ecumenical to portray the Gospel as not critical of Jewish law and Judaism and to blame its anti-Semitic use on failed exegesis. There are of course serious dangers in allowing such legitimate hermeneutical concerns to shape our historical exegetical conclusions. But good relations, including good ecumenical relations, are always served best by a commitment as far as possible to what appears to be true, rather than to what one might want to

Ethics III; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) and the two introductory papers that highlight the problem: Michael Labahn, "It's Only Love'—Is That All? Limits and Potentials of Johannine 'Ethic'—A Critical Reevaluation of Research," pp. 3–43, and Ruben Zimmermann, "Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John? Challenging an Outdated Consensus," pp. 44–80.

- 2 On this see especially J.G. van der Watt, "Ethics and Ethos in the Gospel according to John," *ZNW* 97 (2006), pp. 147–176; J.G. van der Watt, "Ethics Alive in Imagery," in Jörg Frey, Jan G. van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmermann, eds., *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language* (WUNT 200; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), pp. 421–448; P. Dschlunigg, *Jesus begegnen: Personen und ihre Bedeutung im Johannevangelium* (Theologie 30; Münster: LIT, 2000); Tobias Niklas, *Ablösung und Verstrickung: „Juden“ und Jüngergestalten als Charaktere der erzählten Welt des Johannesvangeliums und ihre Wirkung auf den implizierten Leser* (Regensburger Studied zur Theologie 60; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001); Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009); Udo Schnelle, "Das Johannevangelium als neue Sinnbildung," in Gilbert van Belle, Jan G. Van der Watt, and Petrus Maritz, eds., *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (BETL 184; Leuven: Peeters, 2005), pp. 291–313. See also the discussion in William Loader, *Jesus in John's Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming), pp. 410–420.
- 3 Martin Vahrenhorst, "Johannes und die Tora: Überlegungen zur Bedeutung der Tora in Johannevangelium," in *KD* 54 (2008), pp. 14–36, 33f; Stephen Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity according to John* (NovTSup 42; Leiden, 1975); J.L. Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York, 1978); see also Jan G. van der Watt, "Ethics of/and the Opponents of Jesus in John's Gospel," in van der Watt and Zimmermann, *Rethinking*, pp. 175–191, who writes: "The Law forms a central pillar in the ethical discussions in the Gospel. Neither party holds a negative view of the Law as such. The real problem lies with the interpretation of the Law" (p. 189). If so, then "interpretation" needs to include such radical interpretation as sees the Law predicting its cessation and the Temple's replacement by Christ, as shown below. This would go far beyond the usual meaning of the term.

believe, which may at the negative end be prejudicial and at the positive be patronizing, both a distortion. Pro- and anti-Semitic stances, whether deliberate or unintentional, have contaminated Johannine research, so that we need to move beyond them to ground both history and our ecumenical concerns in more careful historical reconstruction.

Such concerns come into play when discussing a major solution to ethics in John, namely, that John espouses Torah observance and so provides us with much more ethical data than surfaces in the text. Accordingly, John's Jesus can be identified as the Word who also came as divine Wisdom in Torah, so that John's Jesus stands tall, as it were, on the foundation of the Law, which remains in force.⁴ A Matthean reading of John gives us an image of Jesus as Torah/Logos incarnate, upholding Torah and bringing out its true meaning (Matt. 5:17–19; 11:28–30). Such interpretation reads *χάρις ἀντὶ χάριτος* (1:16) as grace on top of grace⁵ and the prologue as an account of salvation history with the Logos active in creation, visiting Israel through the prophets and the Law and coming finally in the flesh in Jesus, and the few instances of Jesus' disputes involving reference to laws (5:17–20; 7:19–24; 9:4; 10:22–39; 8:17) are read as Jesus' serious engagement in halakhic debate.⁶

This image of Jesus incarnating Torah begins to wobble as soon as we realize that a major aspect of Torah is cult, including Temple, and that, far from undertaking simply a makeover of the Temple, his "Father's house" (2:16), John's Jesus replaces it, not just as the eschatological Temple, but because true worship, he asserts, cannot be confined to time and place (2:19–22; 4:19–24). In the same context of the opening chapters we similarly have the water for purification changed to wine (2:1–10), another symbol of replacement.⁷ There is no sound, exegetical ground for denying that in John Jesus replaces the Temple and so, at least in this respect, a large component of Torah, not least because

4 Martin Hengel, "The Prologue of the Gospel of John as the Gateway to Christological Truth," in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser, eds., *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 265–294, 272–282; Daniel Boyarin, "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John," in *HTR* 94 (2001), pp. 243–284, 275–279.

5 Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005), 1.421; Vahrenhorst, "Johannes und die Tora," pp. 28–29.

6 Vahrenhorst, "Johannes und die Tora," pp. 22–26; Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), p. 502. Cf. A.T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John* (BNTC 4; London: A&C. Black, 2005); Jürgen Becker, *Johanneisches Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), p. 185.

7 Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SacPag 4; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998), p. 68; Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2001), p. 69.

so much related to purity, festivals and the like is bound up with the Temple cult. One cannot and should not separate Temple and Torah. It is ecumenically more offensive and patronizing to be found denying such replacement than acknowledging it as reality. This then calls into question our solution of expanding our database for Johannine ethics by a reconstruction that has a Matthean sounding Johannine Jesus espousing Torah observance.

Elsewhere I have pursued the issue in detail, demonstrating that this is a misreading of John and that John rather portrays Jesus as offering what John's fellow Jews claimed only Torah offered, and I will not repeat the argument in detail here.⁸ John's fellow Jews seek life in Torah, but John declares that only in Jesus is life to be found (5:39–40). Not Moses but Jesus is the bread from heaven (6:32). Far from being disparaged, however, the Torah was God's gift, which in its rites, festivals, and institutions foreshadowed what was to come, in its words predicted it, and in its stories, such as in the manna in the wilderness (6:30–58), symbolically prefigured it.⁹ What God gave at the level of the flesh as something positive and valuable, God has now replaced at the level of the Spirit (3:1–8; 6:62), according to John. Indeed, Torah had allegedly predicted that the coming of the Logos would bring this about and now served primarily as witness to that effect (5:45–47; 1:45). Transferring images traditionally linked to Wisdom/Torah to Jesus, the author now has Jesus as the true bread (6:32–35, 48–51), true light (1:9; 8:12; 1:5, 7–8; 9:5; 12:35–36, 46), the way, the truth, and the life (14:6; 11:25; 1:4; 5:40), so that the appropriate stance towards Torah is to honor its role in the past and its continuing witness in the present, but no longer to make it life's center, now that the one to whom it looked forward as center and sole authority has come.

Like Pancaro, I have seen the best approach for such an investigation as to start not with 1:14–18 and especially *χάρις ἀντὶ χάριτος* (1:16) but with the rest of the Gospel and only then to turn to these important verses in the prologue.¹⁰ In this paper I want to reverse that approach and begin with 1:14–18. What do

8 William Loader, "The Law and Ethics in John's Gospel," in van der Watt and Zimmermann, *Rethinking*, pp. 143–158. See also my earlier discussions: William Loader, "'Your Law'—The Johannine Perspective," in P. Müller, C. Gerber, and T. Knöppler, eds., *was ihr auf dem Weg verhandelt habt: Beiträge zur Exegese und Theologie des Neuen Testaments: Festschrift für Ferdinand Hahn zum 75. Geburtstag* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001), pp. 63–74; William Loader, "Jesus and the Law in John," in G. Van Belle, J.G. van der Watt, and P. Maritz, eds., *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by the Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminar* (BETL 184; Leuven: Peeters, 2005), pp. 135–154.

9 See Loader, "Law and Ethics," pp. 144–145.

10 Loader, "Law and Ethics," p. 152. Pancaro, *Law in the Fourth Gospel*, does not address 1:17 until pp. 534–537.

they tell us about ethics and Law in John? They do, indeed, address the issue both directly and through typology. The typological is the allusion to Exodus and Moses' receiving the Law on Sinai (Exod. 33:7–23; 34:6 LXX).¹¹ That context informs the allusions in the text to “grace and truth” and to seeing or not seeing God. The broader context of Sinai also informs the use of “glory” and “tabernacled.” Thus Sinai-imagery richly informs the language of 1:14–18. One might speculate that the author could have depicted Jesus as indeed the one whom Moses encountered there and that Jesus the Logos gave the Law, so that now having come he most fully represents and embodies it.

This is not what happens. Instead the author portrays an embodiment of divine glory through Jesus as the Logos who tabernacled among us. Already here we see a foreshadowing of what is spelled out later through the expulsion at the Temple and the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, namely, that Jesus is the new Temple.¹² The normal meaning of the preposition ἀντί is “instead of” or “in place of,” so that the natural reading of χάριτι ἀντὶ χάριτος (1:16) is: grace in place of grace, namely, one gift of grace replacing another.¹³ That this is not, however, intended to be a negative contrast, such as one might find in Paul, is evident in what follows. “The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17). There is no “but” in between these statements, unless we follow *p*⁶⁶. Two things are being juxtaposed, not the bad and the good, but the good and the better. God gave both. Both are grace and gift. However one surpasses and supplants the other. Even if on doubtful grounds¹⁴

11 See Loader, “Law and Ethics,” pp. 152–153. See Johannes Beutler, “Der Johannes-Prolog—Ouvverture des Johannesevangeliums,” in Günter Kruck, ed., *Der Johannesprolog* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2009), pp. 77–106, 95–96, and Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, p. 104, who notes that the text also reflects Ben Sira on seeing God (Sir. 43:31) and on Sophia's tenting among the people (Sir. 24:8) (p. 107).

12 Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, pp. 323–366, 332–334.

13 R. Edwards, “χάριτι ἀντὶ χάριτος (John 1.16): Grace and the Law in the Johannine Prologue,” in *JSNT* 32 (1988), pp. 3–15. See also the linguistic discussion in Konrad Pfuff, *Die Einheit des Johannesprologs* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 99–105, who translates: “Liebe gegen Liebe”; J.F. McHugh, *John 1–4* (1CC; London: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 64–67; Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, p. 103; Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, p. 28.

14 The sole instance one can cite to support a meaning other than replace, Philo *Post.* 145, does not in fact support it, but refers to one gift of God replacing another in succession: “Wherefore God ever causes his earliest gifts to cease before their recipients are glutted and wax insolent; and storing them up for the future gives others in their stead (ἐτέρας ἀντ’ ἐχείνων), and a third supply to replace (ἀντὶ) the second, and ever new in place of (ἀντὶ) earlier boons, sometimes different in kind, sometimes the same.” See also Pfuff, *Einheit*, pp. 102–103.

one opts to read “grace upon grace,”¹⁵ the ultimate meaning has to be the same, for the new does what the old could not do. Thus 1:18 clarifies this further with another juxtaposition. “No one has seen God at any time” has to have reference to Moses, who at Sinai, according to John’s reading, did not see God. He saw only God’s coattails, as it were (Exod. 33:23). The positive statement, “the one who can be uniquely called God, who is intimately linked to God, has made him known” (author’s translation), is an echo of “the Word was with God and the word was God” of 1:1. Only he has seen God and so only he can make God known. What 1:14–18 tells us then is that there have been two significant actions that can be compared, one of which is greater than the other. Both are God’s gifts. What God gave first he has now replaced by a greater gift, namely, in the person of Jesus, who himself is the Temple and much more and replaces the old. For he alone has seen God and so offers what the Law could not offer. He also is alone the way, the truth and the life (14:6). The old way is no way, except that it points to the new.

John 1:14–18 must be read also in the light of what precedes. John 1:5, the reference to John the Baptist, which underlines that we are talking about the incarnation of Jesus whose ministry John witnessed, also points back to 1:6–8, which already describes John’s role. Its effect is to ensure that the focus of the prologue in speaking of the Logos is on Jesus and his ministry. Already 1:5, which declares that the light shines despite rejection by the darkness, suggests Jesus’ ministry. It makes best sense then to see the reference to the Logos coming into the world which he made and to his people, Israel (1:9–13), as depicting Jesus’ ministry, not the coming of the Logos in Torah. Coherent with John’s soteriology, authority to become sons and daughters of God (1:12–13) derives not from being Israel but from response to the Logos, to Jesus. John 1:14 then continues the reference to Jesus’ coming as the Logos with a focus on his

15 So again most recently Beutler, “Johannes-Prolog”: “mehr und mehr Gnade” (p. 97); similarly J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 89–90, Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes Kapitel 1–12* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2009), pp. 133–135. Michaels rightly adds: “The explanation of ‘grace upon grace’ is that the ‘grace’ or gift of the law through Moses has now, through Jesus Christ, given way to ‘grace and truth’” (p. 90), and Theobald: “Was die Tora—vor allem in der Sinaitheophanie—präfiguriert, das ist in der Inkarnation des Logos Wirklichkeit geworden” (p. 134). He goes to emphasise that the author uses v. 17 “als *hermeneutischen Leitsatz*” for the interpretation of scripture, read not as Heilgeschichte but “strikt *christozentrisch*” (italics original) (pp. 134–135).

coming in the flesh, emphasizing it as the means by which his glory could be seen as the new temple and revelation of God.¹⁶

Read in this way, the prologue cannot be understood as a salvation historical account of the Logos as first active in creation, who then came in the Law and the Prophets to Israel, and finally came in Christ. This is not to say that the prologue might not at some stage in an earlier form have been a salvation historical account, just as it clearly derives ultimately from wisdom mythology that depicted divine wisdom, God's agent in creation, as seeking a place to dwell and finally finding it in Israel as Torah, as Ben Sira 24 and Baruch 3 assert or as the Parables of Enoch (*1 Enoch* 42) declare: not finding a place at all, a tradition more compatible with the Christian salvation historical version. A Matthean version, had there been one, might well have appropriated the Christianized version and depicted Jesus as Wisdom/Torah incarnate and as having come in the Law and prophets and now fulfilling them not by setting them aside but by offering them their ultimate interpretation. Indeed, there are arguably traces of this in its transformation of Wisdom's saying in Q (Luke 11:49) into a saying of Jesus (Matt. 23:34) and its depiction of Jesus as calling people to bear his yoke (Matt. 11:28–30), reminiscent of Torah/Wisdom's call in Sir. 51:23 (cf. also Matt. 11:19). But John is not Matthew. John abandons the salvation historical approach that identifies Jesus with Wisdom/Torah and instead reserves Logos/Wisdom exclusively for Jesus and so, when he comes to 1:14–18, sensitively juxtaposes Law and Logos, both as God's gifts, but one as not only superior to the other but replacing it.

In reality, of course, even where division and separation has occurred as we detect behind John's gospel and which will have informed his radical Christology, which reframed his Jewish tradition but without rejecting it, some basic ethical values were bound to remain normative, and elsewhere I have argued that the structure of soteriology or spirituality, namely, sustaining a relationship with God by living according to God's Word, remains, the same.¹⁷ Replacing Torah as the source of salvation had more to do with what was being asserted aggressively about Jesus against fierce opposition than about the intricacies of biblical law. Sociologically it does not make sense to imagine a community after such division systematically disavowing all the values it once held. After all, Torah was not to be disparaged—and John never did so—but

16 This may, as Beutler, "Johannes-Prolog," notes, reflect engagement with gnostic views (pp. 95–96), but it could also focus on embodiment as the means of manifesting glory, not least because body can be represented with imagery of tent (cf. 2 Cor. 5:1–5; John 2:18–22).

17 William Loader, "The Significance of the Prologue for Understanding John's Soteriology," forthcoming.

to be put in its place; and while it was no longer the life, light, bread, water, it would have continued to shape basic ethical values such as rejection of murder, theft, deceit, and adultery, not least because these were also values shared across cultures and there was no need to set these aside.¹⁸

With Sabbath and circumcision it was probably different, unless these were not experienced as identity markers between the groups, though one suspects that the probability would be high that at least with the latter this would be so, and comments about the Sabbath in John suggest at least a difference of approach, which was more liberal (5:17–20; 7:19–24; 9:4; cf. also 19:31, 40, 42).¹⁹ Even then, if they were living in predominantly Jewish communities one may suspect that Sabbath keeping in some sense would be the norm. We have, then, to differentiate largely unspoken and undisputed norms that, given its background, would have derived in this community from its Jewish heritage and so from Torah, from reflective thought about the basis for deriving ethical decisions, and here the answer in John seems clearly to be not Torah but the fundamental teaching and modeling of Jesus, as they understood and promoted it, focused on love and care for one another (13:1–17, 34–35; 15:9–17), including a social justice component as people lived close to poverty (cf. 1 John 3:11–18).²⁰ John 1:14–18 suggests such a change.

Now, that to which the Law pointed forward and which it foreshadowed has come. The Law, God's gift, had predicted its own demise with the arrival of the new, which now has come and is now the primary basis for ethical reflection. What 1:14–18 suggests coheres with what the Gospel then presents. John's Jesus did not come to reform the Temple but to replace it. He did not come to expound Torah but to replace it. Within all the indirect influences, including those deriving from Torah, now Jesus alone, his teaching and his modeling, stand at the heart of Johannine ethics. And according to John this is no disparagement of Torah but simply the result of what it intended.

18 van der Watt, "Ethics and Ethos," in *ZNW* 97 (2006), pp. 152–155; J.J. Kanagaraj, "The Implied Ethics of the Fourth Gospel: A Reinterpretation of the Decalogue," in *TynB* 52 (2001), pp. 33–60. John's implicit use of decalogue values differs from Mark, where despite setting much of the Law aside Jesus insists that keeping the ethical commands of the decalogue as Jesus interprets them is the way to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17–22), something John would never say—and nor would Paul.

19 See the discussion in Loader, "Law and Ethics," pp. 146–148.

20 See William Loader, "What Happened to 'Good News for the Poor' in the Johannine Tradition?" in Paul N. Anderson and Felix Just, eds., *John, Jesus, and History; vol. 3, Glimpses of Jesus through the Johannine Lens* (Atlanta/Leiden: SBL Press/E.J. Brill), forthcoming.