Moral transformation in the Johannine writings

Johannine ethics is a problematic area for scholarship but recently there has been a breakthrough. In this new era of Johannine ethics, the present article examines the concept of moral transformation. The argument is that the Johannine writings present a moral narrative world where a moral God saves immoral people by bringing them into his moral world. When people live in God’s moral world their character and conduct are shaped in accordance with the moral beliefs, values and norms of the divine reality. In order to model and promote the envisaged morality amongst his readers, John presents various characters, whose characteristics and behaviour might be either emulated or avoided.

This article is dedicated to Jan van der Watt for his exemplary scholarship and friendship. The topic of this article is the concept of moral transformation in the Johannine writings. Though the subject of Johannine ethics has only existed at the periphery of scholarship since the 1970s, Jan van der Watt has doggedly pursued the topic since 1999 (the List of References only contains a selection). The crucial breakthrough came in 2012 with the publication of a collection of essays (Van der Watt & Zimmermann 2012). This landmark study provided a doorway for scholars to explore afresh the ethical horizons of the Johannine writings. Building on Van der Watt’s pioneering work, I will argue that the Johannine writings present a moral narrative world (section 1), and envisage people’s moral transformation (section 2). The first section is a preparation for the more substantial second section, the main focus of the study.

As a working definition, I use the term moral transformation to refer to 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. As a child of God, the believer has been transferred from the immoral world ‘below’ to the moral world ‘above’ and must now think and live in line with this new environment. This socio-religious relocation initiates a process of moral transformation. However, it is only conceivable to speak of moral transformation in the Johannine writings if John presents a moral God and if his writings have a moral dimension, lest we import a foreign category. I will therefore first show that the Johannine writings have a moral purpose and contain a moral narrative.

A moral narrative world

When viewed against Graeco-Roman virtue ethics, I contend that the Johannine corpus has a strong moral dimension. John’s purpose for writing his Gospel and first letter is that people may have ζωή [life] through believing in Jesus (20:31; 1 Jn 5:13). I suggest that this purpose is not only soteriological but also ethical in nature, firstly because ‘the good life’ is a moral goal and secondly, John presents ‘belief in Jesus’ as the singular moral ‘work’ for obtaining this moral goal. Discourse on virtue ethics originated in ancient Greek philosophy with Plato and Aristotle. For them ζωή [well-being, happiness] is the supreme good that people should pursue for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else; it describes that state achieved by the person who lives the proper human life (e.g. Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics I.2–4). In the Johannine literature, ζωή is the closest equivalent to this highest good. John indicates two kinds of life, namely ψυχή as the transient, finite human life that can be laid down (12:25; 13:17; 15:13); and ζωή that denotes the divine, everlasting life that the Father and Son share and that defines them (1:4; 5:21, 26; 6:57; 14:6). In the Johannine scheme of things, people do not (naturally) know God – not in the sense that it saves them – and hence the ultimate good or ‘ζωήμοσις’ [salvation] is to know God and partake in the divine life that the Father and Son share (17:3). Put differently, the Johannine equivalent of ζωήμοσις, the highest

1. The similarity in language, style and thought of the Gospel and the epistles warrants an examination of both writings, even as common authorship is debated. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to the author(s) as ‘John’.
2. Rather than claiming that John intentionally drew on Graeco-Roman morality, I merely suggest that virtue ethics is a useful heuristic framework for understanding Johannine ethics.
3. Bible texts with only reference to the chapter and verse come from the Gospel of John.

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good for people, is to be in a relationship with the Father and Son and share in their ζωή (Bennema 2013:168–172). In fact, ζωή is the Johannine shorthand for salvation. The Prologue introduces Jesus as ‘in him was ζωή’ (1:4) and the rest of the Gospel spells out how there is ζωή in Jesus and how he makes it available to people. If ζωή is the highest moral good people can achieve when they enter into a relationship with the Father and Son (since it is only there that ζωή is available), then the entire Johannine narrative is a moral one.

If ζωή is a moral objective, the means for obtaining it is ‘practising’ a particular Johannine virtue – πιστεύειν [to believe]. In Graeco-Roman antiquity, εὐδαιμονία was attained by practising certain virtues during one’s life (Aristotle NE I.7). For John, πιστεύειν is the singular virtue essential for achieving ζωή. We saw that John’s purpose statements in John 20:31 and 1 John 5:13 explicitly state that the means for obtaining εὐδαιμονία or ζωή is πιστεύειν in Jesus. This implies that πιστεύειν has a moral dimension. We see this confirmed in John 6:27–29. When a crowd enquires about τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ following Jesus’ exhortation ‘to work’ for food that leads to ζωή, Jesus explains that the singular ἔργον God requires from them is πιστεύειν in Jesus.4 Believing is a moral act in that it acknowledges the true identity and work of God and Jesus, and their relationship. In other words, πιστεύειν in Jesus is not only a moral act because it is the sole means by which people attain ζωή, the highest moral good, but also because, as the sole ἔργον God requires, it is the proper moral response that people should render to God (cf. Van der Watt 2011:433–435).

While the Johannine writings evidently depict God in soteriological terms, I suggest that they also present him as a moral God when one considers God’s identity and the ‘work’ he is involved in. John’s characterisation of God and Jesus as φῶς [light] (1:4–5; 8:12; 1 Jn 1:5, 2:8) has a moral dimension when viewed against ὀσκοῖ (darkness), which characterises people and the devil. For John light is a moral good or quality because it enlightens people’s dark minds and provides ζωή (1:4–5, 9). People do not have a saving knowledge of God apart from the Logos-Light who enlightens people by revealing God (1:9, 18; 8:12; 12:46; cf. 1 Jn 5:20). The darkness that characterises the world and its people is inter alia a moral darkness because the dark world rejects the life-giving Light (1:4–11). People engage in morally dubious behaviour (πράττειν φαῦλα) and have immoral inclinations – they have a strong aversion to the light (μηποῦν τὸ φῶς) and prefer the darkness (γνώσθην τὸ σκότος) for fear that their evil deeds (πονηρά τὰ ἔργα) may be exposed (3:19–20; cf. 7:7). The ruler of the world, the devil, is also characterised in immoral terms such as ‘the evil one’ (ὁ πονηρός 17:15; 1 Jn 5:18–19), murderer, liar (8:44), and sinner (1 Jn 3:8; sin is morally wrong – δικὰς; 1 Jn 5:17). As such, people in the world are under the rule of ‘the evil one’, enslaved to sin (8:34), children of the devil (8:44; 1 Jn 3:8) and characterised by immoral behaviour (3:19–20; 7:7).

In contrast to the devil and human beings, John characterises God and Jesus by various moral attributes or properties: primarily ζωή, φῶς, ἀγάπη or φίλος [love] and ἀλήθεια [truth] (see further in the section ‘Moral values’ below), but also ἀγαθός ορ καλός [good] (7:12; 10:11, 14, 32; 3 Jn 11); δίκαιος [righteous, just] (5:30; 17:25; 1 Jn 1:9; 2:1, 29; 3:7); ‘sinless’ (1 Jn 3:5; cf. 8:46); πιστός [faithful, trustworthy]; (1 Jn 1:9); ἔγκυος [holy] (6:69; 17:11); and ἀγάπης [pure] (1 Jn 3:3). These moral qualities describe both the character or identity of God and Jesus as well as their behaviour. For example Jesus is regarded as being ‘good’ (10:11, 14) and doing ‘good’ (10:32); Jesus is life (1:4; 14:6) and gives life (5:21); Jesus is light (1:5, 9; 8:12) and gives light (1:5, 9; 1 Jn 2:8); Jesus acts justly and is just (5:30; 1 Jn 2:1, 29); Jesus is truth and testifies to the truth (14:6; 18:37); God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16) and acts in love (3:16; 5:20; 1 Jn 4–9; 11, 19).

In short God and Jesus both embody and demonstrate these moral goods – they give and act out who they are. In addition, the work God is involved in has a moral dimension because God’s ἔργον, carried out by Jesus (4:34; 17:4), is to deliver people from moral darkness (3:19–20; 5:17; 9:3–4) and give them ζωή, the chief moral benefit. God’s moral work of saving people includes liberation, cleansing, sanctification and forgiveness (8:32; 15:3; 17:17, 19; 1 Jn 1:9; 2:1).

In conclusion, the Johannine literature presents a moral narrative world where two mutually exclusive moral realms and rulers are pitted against each other.1 Immoral categories such as lies, hate, sin, darkness and murder are related to the devil and his realm (including its people). Moral attributes or qualities such as life, light, love, truth, good, righteous, forgiveness, cleansing and sanctification are ascribed to God and Jesus and those who belong to him. The ultimate moral attainment for people is to participate in the ζωή of God and Jesus through the moral act of πιστεύειν in Jesus.

Moral transformation

Having shown that the Johannine writings present a moral narrative world, we can move to the idea of moral transformation, which occurs when people live in proximity to a moral God. A person’s moral transformation starts with a new birth by the Spirit, a relocation from the dark, immoral world to the moral world of God (1:12–13; 3:3–5; 17:14, 16). This relocation occurs when people ‘practise’ the virtue of πιστεύειν in Jesus as the singular moral ‘work’ God requires. This new birth involves a new identity (one becomes a child of God in his family; 1:12–13) and this new identity should lead to new behaviour. But how does such moral transformation come about? I suggest that one’s moral transformation corresponds to the extent one is able to think and behave in line with the divine reality. A renewed mindset is characterised by the ability to understand and embrace the worldview from above, driven by the moral beliefs, values and norms of God and his world. Renewed behaviour is characterised by conduct that is in line with what Jesus taught and exemplified.

4Recently Grindheim (2016) has argued that τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ in 6:29 is a subjective genitive, referring to the work that God does, rather than an objective genitive, referring to the work that God expects from people. It is possible, however, that both aspects are in view (cf. Lincoln 2005:227).

S.C. Bolyki (2003) who employs the theory of ethical conflicts in ancient dramas to show that the conflict in the Gospel of John is also ethical in nature and part of John’s moral story.
**Moral values**

If John presents God as a moral being, one must ask what values of God’s character and world will shape the identity and behaviour of believers. Though by no means exhaustive, I focus on four moral values that characterise God in the Johannine writings: life, light, love and truth. When people enter into God’s family, and consequently participate in the relationship that the Father and Son share, these moral values or attributes begin to shape their identity and behaviour.

**Life**

This value is expressed by the noun ζωή ([divine life] and its cognate verbs μετέχειν [to live] and ζωοποιεῖν [to give (divine) life]. Ζωή is the everlasting, indestructible life that the Father and Son have in themselves and it even defines them (1:4; 5:26; 11:25–26; 14:6; cf. 1 Jn 5:20). While people only possess φως, which is transient and destructible, entry into the divine family allows them to share in the divine ζωή (e.g. 3:15–16; 4:14; 5:24). Ζωή is a moral category because it represents the continual existence of a moral God, a reality in which people can share. In fact, ζωή as the ultimate moral good that people can achieve (20:31; 1 Jn 5:13), is the Johannine equivalent of εὐδαιμονία, the highest moral good for humans according to Graeco-Roman philosophy (see the section, ‘A moral narrative world’ above). In addition, as people partake in the shared life of the Father and Son, they become a derivative source of life for others (7:38; 17:20).

**Light**

This value is conveyed by the noun φῶς [light] and its cognate verbs φαίνειν [to shine] and φωτίζειν [to give light]. Jesus is described as the life-giving light of the world (1:4–5; 9:8; 12:46) and God is also described as light (1 Jn 1:5). Light is a moral quality of the Father and Son because it is associated with φίλος and contrasted with the immoral darkness that characterises the world (see the section ‘A moral narrative world’). The divine life-giving light shines on people to dispel their immoral darkness (1:9; 12:46; 1 Jn 2:8). Believers are called ‘children of the light’ when they accept the Light (12:35–36) and their subsequent behaviour should reflect the moral realm of light (3:19–21; 11:9–10; 1 Jn 1:7; 2:10).

**Love**

This value is articulated by the interchangeable nouns φίλος and φίλος [love], and their cognate verbs φιλεῖν [to love]. Love is an identity marker in that it defines God (1 Jn 4:8, 16) and Jesus (in 17:26 God’s love in the believer is equated to Jesus residing in the believer). The mutual love between the Father and the Son (3:35; 5:20; 14:31) is shared with or extended to the believer (14:21, 23; 16:27). Hence love identifies those who belong to God’s family (13:34–35; 14:23; 15:12, 17; 1 Jn 2:9–11; cf. 8:42). God expressed his love for people by giving up his Son at the cross as an atoning sacrifice (ἁλίσκω) for humanity’s sins (3:16; 1 Jn 4:8–10). Love drives Jesus to give his life for the life of the world (1 Jn 3:16). Hence love is a moral category because it compels God to act morally on behalf of immoral people. Similarly, the love that characterises believers should be tangible in their behaviour (13:34–35; 1 Jn 3:18).

**Truth**

This value is expressed by the noun ἀλήθεια [truth] and its cognate adjectives ἀληθής and ἀληθινός [true]. ‘Truth’ is Johannine shorthand for the divine reality, i.e. the reality about God and the world above (cf. 1:9, 17; 3:33; 8:26; 17:17). Like the other values, truth defines the Father (3:33; 17:3) and Son (14:6; 1 Jn 5:20). Jesus embodies and defines truth (1:14; 14:6) but also mediates this truth to people (1:7–18; 3:31–33; 8:31–32, 40, 45; cf. 6:32, 55). Truth is the defining moral component of Jesus’ teaching because it liberates a person from sin and provides moral cleansing (8:31–32; 17:17). Those who accept the truth are then ‘from the truth’ (ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας; 18:37; 1 Jn 3:19), and this truth must shape believers’ moral behaviour. Indeed John uses various expressions to stress that truth should be a demonstrable moral quality: ‘to do the truth’ (3:21), ‘to testify to the truth’ (15:27; 19:35; 21:24), ‘to love in truth’ (1 Jn 3:18; 5:20), ‘to worship in truth’ (4:23–24), ‘to be guided into the truth’ (16:13), and ‘to walk in the truth’ (2 Jn 4; 3 Jn 3–4).

In conclusion, the moral values that characterise the Father and Son and direct their actions, also determine the believer’s character and conduct. In the following sections, it will be argued that believers can only live out these moral values to the extent that these have shaped their character and thinking. While John may not be as explicit as Paul in Romans 12:2, moral transformation relates to both a renewal of the mind and a corresponding change in behaviour. In turn, consistent moral behaviour strengthens and affirms moral thinking and character.

**Moral reasoning**

Believers or members of God’s family are expected to align their thinking to their new environment, the world above, and this new thinking should inform their behaviour. To think ‘from above’ is to think in line with God’s character and purposes; to reason according to the beliefs, values and norms of the world above. While John does not mention this concept explicitly, there are numerous implicit references.

Typically, characters in the Johannine narrative show thinking ‘from below’. This is unsurprising considering people are ‘from below’ (cf. 8:23, 43–47). On various occasions Jesus starts a conversation at an earthly level but quickly moves to a spiritual level, and people are often unable to follow. Nicodemus, for example, misunderstands the spiritual birth...
get a glimpse of that coming reality. Hence, while Jesus presents God’s life-giving revelation, he does so in a ‘veiled’ way and the Spirit has the task of revealing its meaning and significance. John records a few instances where the disciples are able to grasp Jesus’ teaching after the resurrection (2:17, 22; 12:26; 16:4) and this thinking ‘from above’ is most likely the result of the Spirit’s anamnesis. Indeed, in his first letter John describes the post-Easter reality where believers are able to think ‘from above’ because of the Spirit (1 Jn 2:27). The extent to which John and his fellow believers are now able to think ‘from above’, that is in terms of the beliefs, values and norms of God and his world, is indicated by the frequent phrase ‘(by this) we/you know that’ (1 Jn 2:5, 18, 21; 3:5, 14–16, 19, 24; 4:2, 6, 13; 5:2, 15, 18–20). Indeed, in the post-Easter era the cognitive darkness that tarnishes the world and its people (1:5, 9–11) is dissipating (1 Jn 2:8).

In sum, Jesus taught in ‘veiled’ language and was often misunderstood because people failed to think ‘from above’, a prerequisite for gaining spiritual insight into the things of God. This means that Jesus’ teaching must be ‘unveiled’ in order to be understood. In the post-Easter period the Spirit functions as a decoder, decrypting or unlocking Jesus’ revelation, thereby enabling a thinking ‘from above’ and a corresponding moral behaviour. Moral reasoning or thinking ‘from above’ facilitates moral transformation because it informs and shapes both thought and behaviour according to the beliefs, values and norms of the world above. This moral shaping of character and conduct will be the topic of the next section.

Moral behaviour and character

Becoming part of God’s family does not only result in a new identity but also a new mode of conduct, corresponding to the divine family ethos. As believers exist in the divine realm, they are instructed on how to behave morally in line with its beliefs, values and norms. This developing moral behaviour is usually referred to as ‘discipleship’. Though discipleship in terms of coming to Jesus and remaining with him in order to have life is a soteriological category, it also has an ethical dimension that indicates the kind of conduct and character Jesus expects of his followers. Consequently we find various ethical imperatives in the Johannine writings to direct the believer’s behaviour, such as to love one another, to abide in Jesus and his word, to bear fruit, to keep his commandments, to serve one another, to lay down one’s life for others, to testify to Jesus, to ‘do’ or walk in the truth, to be pure and to be righteous. In the section ‘Moral values’ above, we saw

11. Whereas for John virtuous behaviour is rooted in Jesus’ teaching, in early Judaism (e.g., 4 Macc, The Wisdom of Solomon, Philo) the law was the guide to virtuous behaviour. Thus while Hellenistic Judaism promotes a Torah-based identity and ethos, the Johannine (and other early Christian) literature advocates a Christ-based identity and ethos. Cf. Loader (2012); Tobin (2013:148–159); see also Van der Watt (2006b:152–157), who holds that a law-based Jewish value system is the foundation for Johannine ethics, albeit the law interpreted by Jesus.

12. Cf. Grönim (2015) who argues that fostering moral deliberation is important for behavioural change, otherwise one only operates by instinctive behaviour guided by cultural schemata.

13. Zimmermann (2009) shows that moral instructions in the Johannine writings are not limited to grammatical imperatives, but can also be conveyed by other linguistic forms and ideas.
that the divine moral qualities of life, light, love and truth
do not simply constitute the believers’ identity but also drive
their behaviour. In fact, the Johannine writings stress the
relation between identity and behaviour. Hence moral
transformation is broader than behaviour and also relates to
identity.

John 8:39–47 shows the dynamics of identity and behaviour,
and brings into sharp focus two mutually exclusive families.
When ‘the Jews’, seeking to clarify their identity, claim that
Abraham is their father, Jesus says that if this were the case
they would demonstrate corresponding behaviour (8:39).
The ‘if you were ... you would do’ construction (it is repeated
in 8:42) illustrates that identity demands matching behaviour
and conversely that behaviour reveals identity. As it is, the
conduct of ‘the Jews’ does not resemble Abraham’s but that of
a different father (8:40–41). Their behaviour shows that they
behold to the devil’s family – they share the devil’s
identity and their behaviour is influenced by him (8:44).
Indeed the conduct of ‘the Jews’ is consistent with this
identity – they sin (8:24), lie (8:33, 55), seek to kill Jesus
(8:37, 40, 59), are averse to the truth and do not understand
the words of Jesus or God (8:43, 45, 47), insult Jesus (8:48) and
Thus identity informs and demands corresponding behaviour, and
conversely, behaviour reveals and validates identity.

This correlation between identity and behaviour is highlighted
throughout John’s Gospel. To his followers, Jesus stresses
that keeping his commandments shows their love for him
(14:15, 21, 23) and guarantees his abiding love (15:10).
Similarly their loving one another is a testimony to their
identity as Jesus’ disciples (13:35). Elsewhere Jesus asserts
that abiding in him, that is being in relationship with him
(identity), warrants that they bear fruit (behaviour) (15:4–5),
and in turn their bearing fruit will reveal identity (15:8). To
‘the Jews’ who had believed, Jesus says that if they continue
to adhere to his teaching (behaviour), they would prove
themselves to be his disciples (identity) (8:31) – but sadly
they do not, as the rest of the chapter shows.

1 John is also replete with examples of this correlation
between identity and behaviour. I will mention a few:
• anyone claiming to have communion with God (identity)
must show matching behaviour; conversely one who
‘walks’ in the light or darkness (behaviour) is in the light
or darkness (identity) (1 Jn 1:6–7; 2:9–11);
• keeping God’s commandments (obedient behaviour)
affirms one’s communion with God (one knows God and
is ‘in him’) and one’s share in the divine attributes of
truth and love (identity) (1 Jn 2:3–6);
• identity and behaviour are inseparable in either family –
to do right (to do no sin) is to be right, to be of God;
to commit sin is to be of the devil (1 Jn 3:7–10);
• when God’s love abides in the believer (identity), it must
result in corresponding behaviour (1 Jn 3:17), just as to
‘love in truth’ (behaviour) demonstrates that one is of the
truth (identity) (1 Jn 3:18–19);
• to love (behaviour) is to be (born) of God who is love, and
guarantees one’s communion with him (identity)
(1 Jn 4:7–8, 12);
• to testify (behaviour) shows communion with God
(identity) (1 Jn 4:15);
• love (identity) is inextricably linked with, even defined
by, obedience (behaviour) (1 Jn 5:2–3).16

A picture emerges that believers’ inclusion in the divine
identity must precipitate transformational behaviour in that
they are expected to behave according to the divine family
code. Believers (should) behave like children of God because
that is who they are. The believer’s ongoing access to the
divine reality results in a growing awareness of who God is,
what he does and what he expects from people. This moral
knowledge should motivate a believer to do what is right. At
the same time, behaviour is transformationative – right behaviour
affirms and shapes one’s identity. Continuous acts of
discipleship (behaviour), such as believing, loving, following,
abiding, obedience, serving and testifying, authenticate and
shape the family bond between the believer, God and fellow-
believers (identity). Thus there is a reciprocal, transformational
dynamic between identity and behaviour; each has the
potential to shape the other.

Characters as moral agents

Any meaningful communication, verbal or written, has a
particular message that the speaker or author wants to convey
to the audience. In line with its purpose, a story is told or
written from a particular perspective, called ‘point of view’.
John’s point of view is informed by his purpose for writing and
his worldview. The soteriological-moral purpose of John’s
writings is to evoke and strengthen life-giving belief in Jesus
among his readers (20:31; 1 Jn 5:13). Likewise the Johannine
worldview is characterised by a soteriological-moral dualism
(see the section ‘A moral narrative world’). John communicates
his moral perspective or point of view through the characters in
the story, subtly leading the reader to evaluate the characters
and creating affinity with or distance from these characters
Consequently the narrative is not neutral because it has an
inbuilt perspective that is communicated to the readers, and
they must evaluate the characters against the author’s
evaluative point of view (Bennema 2014a:48–49, 90–96).

This means that the characters are potential change agents –
they have the ability to effect transformation in the reader.
An examination of Johannine characters as agents of moral
transformation will inform the discipline of virtue ethics.17

14 Van der Watt (2000:192, 199–200) also notes the contrasting origins – ‘the Jews’
are ἐκ the world or devil (8:23, 44) while Jesus and believers are ἐκ above or God
(8:23, 42, 47). People’s origin determines group affiliation and consequently their
actions within that group. Thus a child acts according to his or her identity, which is
established at birth.
15 I ἴννοσθός denotes ‘to be’ rather than ‘to become’ in 15:8.
16 Frey (2013:174–177) argues that in reflecting an ethos of separation from pagan
cults or the Gentile world, 1 John adopts essentially a Diaspora Jewish ethos.
17 Bennema (2013) uses an Aristotelian lens to explore how the Johannine characters
act as moral agents regarding the cardinal virtues of prudence, courage, justice and
temperance. For a broader discussion of character ethics, see Hauerwas (1972)
and also Wagener (2015).
We mentioned virtue ethics in the section ‘A moral narrative world’ above, but I wish to return to it here. Virtue ethics is a form of normative ethics that describes the character of a moral agent as a driving force for ethical behaviour rather than duty to rules (deontology), consequentialism (deriving rightness or wrongness from the outcome of the act itself), or social context (pragmatic ethics). So, in order to model and promote moral thinking and behaviour among his audience, John presents various characters as models that can influence change in the reader. While some characters exemplify characteristics and behaviour that the reader might emulate, other characters display traits or behaviour that should be avoided.

Many Johannine characters are unable to think ‘from above’ (e.g. Nicodemus, ‘the Jews’, the invalid at the pool, Philip in 6:5–7, the crowd, Peter in 13:36–38, and 18:10–11; Pilate; cf. the section ‘Moral reasoning’ above). Other characters, however, manage to do so, albeit with Jesus’ help (the Samaritan woman, Peter in 6:68–69, the blind man in 9:17–38, Martha in 11:21–27, Mary Magdalene in 21:14–18, Thomas in 21:25–28), and they function as models of moral reasoning. In terms of behaviour ‘the Jews’, Judas and Pilate, for example, are immoral characters. ‘The Jews’ choose (趸ξην) to emulate their father, the devil; in other words, their behaviour results from their identity and is volitional (8:44). Pilate knows the truth (Jesus is innocent) but does not act on it. Judas is characterised by dishonesty and disloyalty; as a thief and traitor, he betrays the trust of the group. While Peter is mercurial during Jesus’ ministry, we learn that he will be a reliable and virtuous character later (21:15–19; cf. 1 Pet. 5:1–3). The Samaritan woman is a virtuous character and a model of moral transformation in that she gradually sees something true about Jesus’ identity and acts in line with his mission. Characters are virtuous to the extent that their thinking and behaviour corresponds to the beliefs, values and norms of God’s world.

In conclusion, the believers’ moral transformation relates to the extent that they think and behave ‘from above’. John models and promotes such morality by presenting various characters in his narrative that his readers should evaluate according to his point of view. Although we did not elaborate, the personal example of Jesus is of course most influential for moral transformation because Jesus often sets the example for appropriate moral behaviour that he expects his disciples (and later believers) to follow (e.g., 12:26; 13:15, 34; 15:10; 17:21–22; 20:21; 1 Jn 2:6; 3:16; see also Bennema 2016a).

**Conclusion**

In this article I explored the Johannine idea of moral transformation. This study has shown that the Johannine writings present a moral God saving immoral people by bringing them through a new birth into his moral world where they will experience moral transformation. For John the single moral ‘work’ that God requires from humans is to believe in Jesus. Such belief results in people participating or sharing in the divine life, the ultimate moral good people can attain. Thus, within John’s dualistic scheme, the believer is transferred from the world below to the world above – characterised by moral commodities such as life, light, love and truth. Being part of this new reality with access to various moral goods, results in the believer’s moral transformation. Believers will be transformed to the extent that they practise moral reasoning and behave in accordance to the beliefs, values and norms of God’s world. John models and promotes the envisaged morality to his readers by presenting various characters, whose characteristics and behaviour might be emulated or should be avoided.

Soteriology and ethics are intrinsically related in the Johannine writings in that John presents salvation as people’s entry into a life-giving relationship with God where moral transformation takes place. Patterned after the character and behaviour of the Father and Son, believers are shaped in their identity and behaviour. Thus, God’s family is the locus of moral transformation and believers are brought into this relational realm through the Spirit. The believer’s participation in the divine relationship is dynamic and sharing in this divine identity is profoundly transformative, affecting one’s being, thinking and doing. The correlation between a believer’s identity and behaviour is that identity informs and shapes behaviour, and conversely, behaviour reveals and affirms identity.

This article opens up further lines of enquiry. Firstly, the believers’ inclusion or participation in the divine identity and life may relate to the concept of theosis. It could be argued, for example, that the believer’s ongoing moral transformation can be understood as theosis in terms of participation in God’s life and character in order to become like God (homoousias) rather than participation in God’s essence in order to become God (homoousias). Secondly, moral reasoning and behaviour is rooted in Jesus’ teaching and personal example. At the end of the section ‘Characters as moral agents’, we noted that Jesus models appropriate moral behaviour in that he often indicates that the behaviour of his followers should be patterned on his...
own. Mimesis is a pervasive concept in the Johannine writings that has largely gone unnoticed in scholarship (but see Bennema 2016a), and if the goal of mimesis is for the imitator to become like the one who sets the example, mimesis could be instrumental for moral transformation.

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