



## **The God who is love and the life of humans: Johannine perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

The Gospel of John claims that in this work, in its presentation of the story of Jesus' ministry and death, there is the ultimate revelation of God's nature. Jesus' death "for the life of the world" is seen as an expression of God's ultimate love. Less clear, however, is how this interpretation affects the human relationships, community ethos, and social action of Jesus' followers in the world. Does the Johannine worldview lead to sectarian separation from the world, or does it encourage active involvement in social action? What are the images and patterns that shape the practical lives of the children of the loving God? And how can the idea of God's love inspire human love for others and reconciling activity in the church and in the wider context of the world? The article addresses these questions from an exegetical perspective and finally places them within the horizon of global theology.

### **Keywords**

*Gospel of John; dualism; ethics; love commandment; love*

How does "eternal life" affect real life? How does the assurance of salvation, of reconciliation with God, and even of God's love affect and transform people's personal and social lives? How does it affect their relationship with others, not only within a Christian community but also beyond it, to society, or in a globally interconnected world, to justice and reconciliation? Can the New Testament provide inspiration and guidance for such a

practical impact of the gospel message, or does it remain theoretical, in the soul or mind of the believer, or at best have an intra-congregational effect?

While other NT texts, such as the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30–37), the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7), or even some Pauline passages (e.g., Rom 12:1–2 and 1 Cor 7:29–31) are often cited as core texts for conceptualizing Christian ethics and for calling Christians to mission in the wider society, the Gospel of John has always been considered less fruitful in this regard. Authors have even questioned whether John can contribute anything to New Testament ethics,<sup>1</sup> let alone to the social dimension of Christian ethics. This has been challenged only in the last two decades by some Johannine scholars, in particular Ruben Zimmermann and Jan van der Watt.<sup>2</sup>

This scepticism is justified by several observations. First, Johannine thought is less ethically explicit and detailed than other New Testament traditions. Apart from the command to love one another (Jn 13:34–5), there are almost no specific admonitions. Readers are told to listen to or obey Jesus' words or commandments, but there is no further explanation of what they are about and what actions they are intended to inspire, other than mutual love. Second, there is the impression that according to Johannine thought, especially in the farewell discourses, the world is characterized by a fundamental dualism between light and darkness, or between the community of disciples and "the world."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when the disciples are called to love one another (Jn 13:34–5), such love is apparently limited to relationships within the community, without any further implications for "the world," the wider society or even global humanity. For this reason, John has often been considered a sectarian gospel<sup>4</sup> or a gospel that inspires

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1 For such a sceptical reading, see Wolfgang Schrage, *Ethik des Neuen Testaments* (2nd ed., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1989), 325. See the survey on scholarship in Jan G. van der Watt, *A Grammar of the Ethics of John*, vol. 1: *Reading John from an Ethical Perspective*. WUNT 431 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 2–6.

2 See *Rethinking the Ethics of John*. eds. Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), and van der Watt, *Grammar*.

3 For an overview, see Jörg Frey, "Dualism and the World in the Gospel and Letters of John," in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, ed. Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 274–291.

4 See Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72, further the provocative monograph by Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (ed. with a foreword by

sectarian behaviour. Sociologically, it has been characterized as an in-group text that strengthens in-group relations but also the demarcation from the outside world. But if this were true, Christian love, and even God's love, would end at the margins of the community, or at best at the margins of Christianity, with no impact on social relations, reconciliation with others, or justice and peace in the world.<sup>5</sup>

In the following reflections I will briefly show that such a sectarian interpretation of John's Gospel is inadequate.<sup>6</sup> In fact, it ignores a number of important aspects of the text which have been elaborated in recent scholarship and which outweigh the above observations.

## 1. Johannine "Dualism": Didactic strategy rather than evidence of sectarian separation

Johannine "dualism" was discovered as early as the eighteenth century, after the first publication of the Iranian texts, but the exegetical debate about its relevance did not begin until the history of religions school at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Rudolf Bultmann, in his influential commentary,<sup>8</sup> saw dualism as the main linguistic feature of John, borrowed from a pre-Christian Gnostic milieu. Following the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, other scholars then located the roots of Johannine thought in the dualistic milieu of the

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Paul N. Anderson; Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2017); cf. also Robert Gundry, *Jesus the Word according to John the Sectarian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

- 5 Such views had a decisive impact on the movements of Pietism and Evangelicalism, and parts of worldwide Evangelicalism today are shaped by such a perspective in distance from the majority society. Conversely, Robert Gundry, a prominent figure of American Evangelicalism, proudly and provokingly interprets John as a Sectarian (Gundry, *Jesus the Word*).
- 6 See Ruben Zimmermann, "Is there ethics in the Gospel of John? Challenging an outdated consensus", in *Rethinking the Ethics of John*, 44–80; see also the considerations in Jörg Frey, "'Ethical' Traditions, Family Ethos, and Love in the Johannine Literature," in *Die Herrlichkeit des Gekreuzigten: Studien zu den johanneischen Schriften 1*, ed. J. Schlegel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 767–802.
- 7 See Jörg Frey, "Johannine Dualism: Reflections on Its Background and Function," in Jörg Frey, *The Glory of the Crucified One: Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018), 101–167, here: 105–8.
- 8 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel according to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

scrolls.<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Becker, in his critical commentary, saw the development of dualism as a litmus test for reconstructing the development of the Johannine community,<sup>10</sup> which, at least in its crucial periods, was seen as a secluded sect, isolated from the surrounding world, and using an enigmatic sociolect. The Johannine language was seen as evidence of the sociological structure of the community in the background, and because of its dualistic language, the Johannine writings were seen as in-group texts, written only for mutual self-affirmation within this marginal sect.

However, the language of the text does not necessarily reflect the social structure of the community. So, the inference from language to social structure is invalid. Furthermore, we need to ask not only about the religious background of a language, but also about its pragmatic function.<sup>11</sup> The Johannine use of the oppositions of light and darkness, life and death, truth and lie, or community and world has often been explained in terms of a particular religious background, first from Persian thought, then from Gnosticism, and later from Qumran. However, there are significant differences between the dualisms found in these contexts and the Johannine use of dualistic language elements. Therefore, the Johannine language does not simply represent a particular religious worldview. The names of the eschatological adversaries, Satan (Jn 13:27), diabolos (Jn 8:44; 13:2), or “ruler of this world” (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), refer to various motifs from early Jewish tradition, but it is also clear that, according to John, the power of these evil figures is decisively broken by Jesus’ death and exaltation (Jn 12:31; cf. also Rev 12:9). Furthermore, unlike the Qumran sectarian texts or later Gnosticism, dualistic pairs of opposites are not used

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9 Thus, most boldly, James H. Charlesworth, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel according to John,” in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*. eds R. A. Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 65–97. See the criticism in Jörg Frey, “Recent Perspectives on Johannine Dualism and its Background,” in *Qumran, Early Judaism, and New Testament Interpretation. Kleine Schriften* 3. ed. Jacob Cerone. WUNT 423 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 763–790.

10 Jürgen Becker, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 2 vols. (3rd ed., Gütersloh: Mohn, 1991).

11 In critical discussion with Meeks, (“The Man from Heaven”), the most important contribution was Takashi Onuki, “Zur literatursoziologischen Analyse des Johannesevangeliums,” *AJBI* 8 (1982), 162–216; see also idem, *Gemeinde und Welt im Johannesevangelium: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der theologischen und pragmatischen Funktion des johanneischen ‘Dualismus’*, WMANT 56 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1984).

to describe clearly defined classes of people but have a pragmatic function that contributes to the dynamism of the Johannine text. The terms and motifs are used to lead the reader from darkness to light, or from death to life. Thus, dualistic linguistic elements are used for the kerygmatic purpose of the gospel, to promote faith and life in Jesus.

Contrary to earlier scholarly views, recent research, inspired by narratological insights,<sup>12</sup> has uncovered the numerous didactic elements in the Johannine language.<sup>13</sup> The Gospel does not hide its insights from outsiders, but uses a variety of didactic devices to communicate its view to its readers. From the very beginning, in the prologue, the text provides clues to the intended understanding of the story and, in particular, of the death of Jesus. Through the interaction of narrative characters, their implicit and explicit characterisation and explicit narrative asides and commentaries, the narrative “guides” the reading process, stimulating the readers’ interaction with the text and their insight into the meaning of the narrated story. Easily accessible motifs such as “water”, “bread” or “light” attract the reader and invite interaction. Various leitmotifs, such as “the hour”, “the world” or “life”, are developed through repetition, variation, and amplification, evoking ever deeper understanding. And when the Gospel presents puzzles, they are not there to keep outsiders out, but to stimulate the reader to deeper understanding. John’s Gospel wants the reader to understand. Furthermore, in my view, it is not simply written for in-group use, but for wider reception in a world of books. John is indeed a “bookish” text, with a beginning that surpasses the beginning of the Greek Bible (Jn 1:1; cf. Gen 1:1 LXX) and a conclusion that speculates about a world full of books (Jn 21:25).

Despite its focus on certain communities, probably in Asia Minor, represented in the community of the disciples of the farewell discourses and

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12 See the groundbreaking work by R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

13 See Walter Rebell, *Gemeinde als Gegenwart: Zur soziologischen und didaktischen Funktion des Johannesevangeliums* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1987). For a more recent overview, see D. Estes and R. Sheridan (eds.), *How John Works: Storytelling in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: SBL, 2016).

thus instructed by the word of Jesus and the post-Easter Spirit,<sup>14</sup> the Gospel actually contains a final perspective for “the world”. At the end of the high priestly prayer, Jesus foresees a time when “the world will understand” his mission (Jn 17:23) and even “believe” (Jn 17:21). Understanding is not limited to the community of disciples. Others will notice, and the vehicle of this communication is the mutual love of the disciples (Jn 13:34). It is through their mutual love that others will see that they are disciples of Jesus, that is, they will see the mark of discipleship and “eternal life”. In other words, the love of the disciples should not be confined to their inner circle, but should shine out to others, to the world. The motif of love always overshadows the dualistic motifs of John’s language.

## 2. The death of Jesus as an act of reconciliation and of God’s love

The motif of love is closely linked to the narrative of Jesus’ death, not only in John 15:17, where Jesus’ laying down of his life is presented as the supreme act of love, but already in 3:16, where the giving (away) of the Son is interpreted as an act of God’s love for the world.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is the understanding of Jesus’ passion and death that is at the centre of the fourth Gospel. All the narratives lead to the final climax, to the fulfilment at the hour of Jesus’ death (Jn 19:28–30). The farewell discourses in particular are designed to give the reader clues to the true understanding of this crucial event. And the narrative design of the Passion story aims to lead the reader to perceive, beneath the surface of the account of a cruel execution, the profound theological truth that the true King is enthroned on the cross and begins to reign over those who listen to his word.<sup>16</sup> The Johannine aim is to lead the reader to a deeper and truer understanding of this event, which in the deepest human dishonour is the highest glorification, in the extreme

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14 On the levels of communication in John, see Jörg Frey, “The Gospel of John as a Narrative Memory of Jesus,” in *Vom Ende zum Anfang. Studien zum Johannesevangelium. Kleine Schriften* 4, ed. Ruben A. Bühner. WUNT 492 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 56–76.

15 On the network of love-relations in John, see Jörg Frey, “Love Relations in the Fourth Gospel: Establishing a Semantic Network,” in *Die Herrlichkeit des Gekreuzigten*, 739–765.

16 See Jörg Frey, “‘Seht, euer König!’ Die Johannes-Passion als Sehschule des Glaubens, in *Vom Ende zum Anfang*, 489–510.

humiliation the exaltation to his throne, not an end but a new beginning, not a defeat but the victory over the world (16:33).

This is consistent with the developed Christology of the Gospel. If Jesus is indeed the incarnate *logos* (Jn 1:14), the Son sent by the Father (Joh 3:17 etc.) and even “one” with the Father (Jn 10:30), he could not wish to escape death as in the synoptic story of Gethsemane (Mk 14:32–34). Instead, Jesus goes to his death voluntarily and in full sovereignty, and this active role in his passion is interpreted as an act of love, a death for those he loves (Jn 13:1–3) or, in the horizon of the ancient ethics of friendship, for his friends (Jn 15:17), but also “for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51). Here a universal space opens up: Jesus’ mission springs from God’s love for the world (Jn 3:16), and the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29), indeed, as 1 Jn 2:2 emphasizes, “of the whole world”. God’s loving affection in Jesus is therefore not only for his own, not only for those who respond in faith, but more generally for the whole of humanity. Although John does not use the term “reconciliation” (καταλλαγή) nor the related verb “reconciliate” (καταλλάσσειν), which is rooted in a political or “diplomatic” context (cf. 2 Cor 5:18–20),<sup>17</sup> the Christ event, the sending, death and resurrection of Jesus must be understood as a divine act of reconciliation with the world or, in Johannine terms, as a divine effort to save “the world” (3:18).

God’s love for the world aims at reconciliation and fellowship with all humanity, and the means of reconciliation is that God in his Son takes the place of man and dies the death of man. There are several subtle scenes in John where there is a change of place: Jesus is arrested, the disciples are released (Jn 18:8). Jesus remains imprisoned, the “robber” Barabbas is released (Jn 18:40). Jesus changes places with the paradigmatic disciple, who now becomes the son of his mother, while Jesus himself takes the place of sinful men and their deadly destiny (Jn 19:25–27).

This is, of course, a bold interpretation. The cruel form of execution by Roman soldiers is interpreted as an act of God’s loving self-giving, his devotion to his creatures, human beings. And the Gospel of John uses every narrative skill to convey this deeper understanding to its readers,

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17 On this, see C. Breytenbach, *Versöhnung: Eine Studie zur paulinischen Soteriologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1989).

while rejecting other, less far-reaching ways of understanding. They should not think that Jesus' death could be the result of human malice, treachery, or the intrigues of the powerful. Rather, it is rooted in and driven by God's love, and thus makes his love manifest in the world. The evangelist uses all his skills to convey this incredibly profound interpretation to his readers.

### 3. The God who is love as an ethical inspiration

The Fourth Gospel claims to reveal the nature of the one and true God (Jn 17:3), whom no one could see before (1:18). This revelation takes place in the person and, more precisely, the story of Jesus, the Word made flesh. The conclusion that 1 John draws from this story and from Jesus' redemptive death is that the ultimate essence of God himself is "love" (1 Jn 4:9–10). The idea of God's affection for his creatures has a long history in the Hebrew Bible:<sup>18</sup> first in the choice of a small group of unimpressive people, Abraham and then Israel, and later in the view that God "loves all his creatures" (Wisdom 11:23–24). Paul can say that God has poured his love into human hearts through the Spirit (Rom 5:5) and that God has shown his love in Christ's death for us sinners (Rom 5:8). This line is continued and brought to a climax in the Gospel and the letters of John: here the death of Jesus is interpreted not only as an act of God's love, but – even more – as proof that God is love. Here the story of Jesus, seen in the eyes of the evangelist, becomes the source for the formulation of the ultimate nature of the biblical God. Christology becomes theology, and this particular theology, the image of the God who is love, can or even must serve as an example and inspiration for human attitudes and behaviour, as a source of a new kind of ethics.

For John, the ultimate criterion of human behaviour can only be the loving example of Jesus, or indeed the God of love. According to the Johannine narrative and, it is God's love for the world that led him to have his word incarnate and, even more, to "give away" the most precious part of himself, his one and only Son (3:16). In the context of Biblical and Greco-Roman

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18 See Jörg Frey, "God is Love': On the Textual Tradition and Semantics of a Core Expression of the Christian Notion of God," in *Von Jesus zur neutestamentlichen Theologie. Kleine Schriften 2*, ed. Benjamin Schliesser. WUNT 386 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 619–644.



concepts about Gods<sup>19</sup> or also about the God of Israel, this is a revolutionary step: God thus went beyond the “limits” of his divinity and took upon himself humanity, a human life story and even the most inhuman kind of death, then this also has consequences for human action and behaviour.

The theological consequence, at least, is that the love to be practised by the followers of Jesus in imitation of the love of Jesus (Jn 13:34–35) has no limits, neither at the borders of the community nor at the borders of other Christian communities, but as a true *imitatio Dei* or imitation of Christ,<sup>20</sup> It transcends borders and seeks out those who are different and irreconcilable. If the Johannine insight into the true nature of God is taken as a measure or standard for human love, then the loving gaze towards the weak and the lost, the commitment to justice and reconciliation without limits can only be the result. The ethical consequence of the Johannine motif of incarnation could be formulated as follows: “Do as God does, become human”.

### 3.1 Specifications of Johannine ethics

There is, however, a concern that such a high demand remains theoretical. This is mainly due to a modern romantic understanding of love as a purely emotional, inner affection, as it is widely represented in the world of novels and popular music. But the ancient context is different. Although the Fourth Gospel does not give much specification of the love it calls for, such love is not merely theoretical, but practical and concrete.

This can better be seen in 1 John which comes from the same community circle as the Fourth Gospel and is, therefore, the historically closest commentary for understanding the gospel narrative.<sup>21</sup> In 1 John, within the context of a severe community conflict, ethical aspects are given somewhat

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19 See Jörg Frey, *Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel: Tradition and Narration* (Waco, Tx.: Baylor University Press, 2018), 19–27.

20 On the mimesis motif in ancient society and in the Fourth Gospel, see van der Watt, *Grammar*, vol. 1, 589–602.

21 On the mutual relationship of gospel and epistles, see my argument in Jörg Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, vol. 3: *Die eschatologische Verkündigung in den johanneischen Texten*. WUNT 110 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000, 46–60), more briefly in “Ethical Traditions,” 769–773.

more explicit.<sup>22</sup> In addition to a strong family ethos,<sup>23</sup> we find mention of issues of material support for the needy. Obviously, there are some (present or former) members of the church who live in boastful pride of their possessions and lifestyle (βίος: 1 Jn 2:16) and are therefore described as “loving the world” and lacking the love of the Father (1 Jn 2:15). 1 Jn 3:17 provides further clarification. Here the term *bios* is used again, and the case is discussed of someone who “has the goods of the world and sees his brother in need but closes his heart to him”. The refusal or abandonment of solidarity for the needs of daily or community life is seen as a violation of the family ethos, which was probably fundamental in the Johannine school. The refusal of support, described as “closing one’s heart against one’s brother”, is a violation of the commandment of love, but it is also evidence of actual “hatred” of one’s brother. Conversely, the practice of the love commandment becomes more specific here. It is a matter of helping the needy in the material affairs of daily life. Love implies action, otherwise it is not love.

Admittedly, this example is still about in-group solidarity, about the practical consequences of the family ethos in the situation of the Johannine community and its crisis, as it is focused in 1 John. But in the light of the reflections on the character of love without limits, the Johannine thought also provides a clue for extending the focus of such love beyond the in-group, beyond one’s own community, or even beyond the Christian community as a whole, especially because such behaviour can bring about what is described in the phrase following Jesus’ love command: Everyone, and especially others, can see the character of discipleship in your love, and if they don’t see it there, they won’t see it at all.

Many details remain to be worked out. But there are no limits to caring for those in need, to working for justice and reconciliation, and this is the only way it can be in keeping with its inspiring model, the love of God made manifest in the atoning death of Jesus.

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22 On the ethics in 1 John, see now the second volume of van der Watt’s major work: Jan G. van der Watt, *A Grammar of the Ethics of John*, vol. 2: *Reading the Letters of John from an Ethical Perspective*. WUNT 502 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), see also Frey, “‘Ethical’ Traditions,” 776–782.

23 On the family imagery, see van der Watt, *Grammar*, vol. 2, 57–72.

### 3.2 Hermeneutical reflections in a global context

Is this really a “Johannine” perspective, as promised in the title of this presentation? Or is it a German, Swiss, European, male, Protestant, theological perspective? How does our exegetical claim to uncover the ideas implied in our texts relate to our own personal, educational, religious, or ethnic perspective? Which of the two takes precedence in interpretation, the text or the interpreter’s perspective, and how does our own perspective affect our reading of the text?

How can an evangelical colleague speak of “John the Sectarian”<sup>24</sup> while I, as a mainstream Lutheran, actually reject such a view<sup>25</sup> and focus, instead, on God’s universal love<sup>26</sup> that overcomes all dualistic divisions and sectarian tendencies? How can the majority of Johannine exegetes see the focus of Johannine thought on predominantly personal salvation? Or is this too narrow a perspective, too strongly influenced by what Krister Stendahl, in his famous article on Pauline studies, once called “the introspective conscience of the West”?<sup>27</sup> And how can other scholars, not at least from a South African perspective, discover much more ethical specification in John,<sup>28</sup> in its narratives and metaphors,<sup>29</sup> and thus reconstruct at least the “implicit ethics” of the New Testament texts?<sup>30</sup>

It is obviously our own perspectives that lead us to research questions, and our own questions determine to some extent what we are looking for in the biblical texts. Exegetical methods cannot override this hermeneutical circle; they can only help us to formulate our observations and arguments

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24 Thus Gundry, *Jesus the Word*.

25 Thus the interpretation in Frey, “Johannine Dualism.”

26 Cf. the work of my former student Popkes, *Die Theologie der Liebe Gottes*.

27 Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *HThR* 56 (1963): 199–215.

28 Thus the work by Jan van der Watt, *Grammar*, vols. 1 and 2.

29 Cf. Jan G. van der Watt, “Ethics alive in imagery,” in: *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, forms, themes, and theology of Johannine Figurative Language*, ed Jörg Frey, Jan G. van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmermann. WUNT 200 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 421–448.

30 Thus Ruben Zimmermann, “The ‘implicit ethics’ of New Testament writings: A draft on a new methodology of analyzing New Testament ethics.” *Neotestamentica* 43 (2009), 398–422; *Die Logik der Liebe: Die ‘implizite Ethik’ der Paulusbriefe am Beispiel des 1. Korintherbriefs*. BThS 162 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2016).

in a communicative way so that they can be openly discussed, possibly challenged or even rejected as inappropriate.

A global perspective of exegetical and theological discourse also gives rise to new questions and new interests in research. Biblical texts are now being asked whether they can contribute to solving the current problems of humanity, of injustice, conflict, and violence. Interpreting biblical texts as inspiration for appropriate human behaviour can provide contributions to such debates. And, as I have tried to show, the Johannine contribution to the image of God as “love”, and its presentation of the story of Jesus as a model of loving compassion, giving up his status and even his life “for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51), is such an inspiration.

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