

ETHICS AND *IMITATIO CHRISTI* IN 1 JOHN

A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

Mavis M. Leung

(mavisleung@evangelseminary.edu.hk)

Summary

This paper focuses on one of the ethical features of 1 John, namely 'the imitation of Christ'. It argues that this ethical feature is related to the believers' identity and vocation as the people of God. Just as in the OT Israel is obliged to reflect God's nature in everyday life, the believers must take on Jesus' character as their character and follow in his footsteps to surrender one's own life for the benefits of others. The result of this paper indicates that the weight of the Jewish ethical thoughts in the formation of Johannine ethics is more important than often acknowledged.

1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen a surge of scholarly interest in topics surrounding Johannine ethics or ethos. Recent publications are in general more affirmative of the place and importance of the (implicit) ethics in John's Gospel and Epistles,¹ in contrast to some previous

¹ E.g. Cornelis Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature: A Study in Johannine Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017); Jan G. van der Watt, 'Reciprocity, Mimesis and Ethics in 1 John' in *Erzählung und Briefe im johanneischen Kreis*, ed. Uta Poplutz and Jörg Frey (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016): 257-76; Jörg Frey, 'Ethical Traditions, Family Ethos, and Love in the Johannine Literature' in *Early Christian Ethics in Interaction with Jewish and Graeco-Roman Contexts*, ed. Jan Willem van Henten and Joseph Verheyden (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013): 167-203; Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, ed., *Rethinking the Ethics of John: 'Implicit Ethics' in the Johannine Writings* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007): 285-346; Jan G. van der Watt, 'Radical Social Redefinition and Radical Love: Ethics and Ethos in the Gospel according to John' in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt (Berlin:

works that tend to be relatively negative on this matter.² In particular, several recent works have approached the ethics in 1 John from the sociological perspective concerning family relationships and group identity. For example, Jan G. van der Watt has shown that in 1 John the social conventions of the ancient Mediterranean family are evoked to foster the believers' group identity and thereby encourage certain behaviours.³ For Jörg Frey, 'the family ethos' lays the 'strongest basis' of Johannine ethical thinking.⁴ Dirk G. van der Merwe notes that the 'ethos of the ethics in the Johannine epistles' is fundamentally 'a matter of "fellowship" within a family'.⁵

One of the ethical emphases in 1 John is the 'imitation of Christ'. According to van der Watt, this Johannine feature serves to motivate the believers to imitate Jesus' behaviour by means of two social phenomena within the Graeco-Roman milieu, namely 'reciprocity' and 'mimesis'.⁶ Cornelius Bennema has recently published a monograph on the subject of 'mimesis' in the Johannine literature. One of the sections of his book is devoted to examine 'the Believer–Jesus/God Mimesis' in John's Gospel and Epistles.⁷ In both of these works (of van der Watt and Bennema), the possibility of a Jewish background is dismissed on account of the belief that 'little evidence' of *imitatio Dei* is found in the OT.⁸ However, a number of recent OT studies have indicated that the imitation of God should be considered one of the viable concepts to describe the ethics of certain biblical texts. Moreover, it is not impossible that John had gleaned insights from more than one resource

Walter de Gruyter, 2006): 107-33; Johannes Nissen, 'Community and Ethics in the Gospel of John' in *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999): 194-212.

² E.g. Wayne A. Meeks, 'The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist' in *Exploring the Fourth Gospel: In Honour of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1996): 317-26; J. L. Houlden, *Ethics and the New Testament* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975): 35-41.

³ See Jan G. van der Watt, 'On Ethics in 1 John' in *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (Atlanta: SBL, 2014): 197-222.

⁴ Frey, 'Ethical Traditions', 184.

⁵ Dirk G. van der Merwe, 'A Matter of Having Fellowship: Ethics in the Johannine Epistles' in van der Watt, *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos*, 535-63, esp. 535.

⁶ Van der Watt, 'Reciprocity', 267-76.

⁷ Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature*, 83-142.

⁸ Van der Watt, 'Reciprocity', 265; Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature*, 24, 199-200.

in order to effectively advance his ethical agenda. The fact that ancient Graeco-Roman conventions probably lie behind the Johannine exhortation to imitate Jesus does not necessarily mean that this exhortation cannot at the same time evoke the Jewish thought regarding the imitation of God, provided that this thought is present in the OT. It should be noted that the concept of imitation itself insinuates the idea of ‘hierarchy’, which is created by ‘the tension between the drive to sameness and the inability to achieve it’.⁹ Thus it is mistaken to take the exhortation to act like God or Christ, whether in the OT or 1 John, as necessarily implying the notion of arrogantly aspiring to be equal with God or Christ.

The present paper will attempt to answer the following question. Is the idea of *imitatio Dei* in the OT a source of ethical insights for the development of *imitatio Christi* in 1 John? Two observations lend support to the proposed attempt. The first is the explicit identification of Jesus as ‘God’ in John’s Gospel (John 1:1; 20:28) and the probably implicit affirmation of his divinity in 1 John 5:20.¹⁰ In fact, it is of the Johannine conviction that the Son has perfectly revealed the Father in the world and they are in complete unity. The second is the frequent use of the filial language to describe the relationship between God and his people in the OT and extra-canonical Jewish literature.¹¹ Therefore, it is probable that the family metaphors in 1 John serve to affirm the believers’ identity as God’s people, who stand in contrast with the secessionists who left the community. Perhaps an objection to the present undertaking is the absence of explicit OT citations in 1 John. In response, it should be noted that numerous themes and terms in this epistle (e.g. Messiah, purification, knowledge, righteousness, and Last Judgement, etc.) evidently take root in the OT or resonate with the

⁹ Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 75.

¹⁰ If the view that the demonstrative pronoun οὗτος in 1 John 5:20 stands for ‘Jesus’ is accepted, there is an implicit statement of the Son’s deity in 1 John. See Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014): 214; Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008): 320; Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 2001): 214–15.

¹¹ See the examples in John A. Dennis, *Jesus’ Death and the Gathering of True Israel: The Johannine Appropriation of Restoration Theology in Light of John 11.47–52* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006): 281–84; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, trans. J. Holland-Smith and W. J. O’Hara (London: Burns & Oates, 1965): 162–63.

Jewish traditions.¹² Therefore, it is warranted to explore the possible OT background of the Johannine ethical exhortation to imitate Jesus.

The next section will discuss the concept of the imitation of God in the OT and early Judaism. The discussion will begin by delineating the current landscape of scholarship on this subject. What follows is a survey of the relevant OT and extra-canonical Jewish texts. The ensuing section will analyse the passages of 1 John in which the notion of the imitation of Christ is found. As will be seen, it is likely that John drew insights from the Jewish idea about imitating God in his approach to the ethical thought concerning the imitation of Christ in 1 John.

2. The Imitation of God in the OT and Early Judaism

2.1 *The Old Testament*

According to John Barton, the Jewish scholar Martin Buber was probably the first person in modern times to propose describing the ethics in the Hebrew Bible in terms of the imitation of God.¹³ Buber said that '[t]he imitation of God, and of the real God, not of the wishful creation; the imitation, not of a mediator in human form, but of God himself – this is the central paradox of Judaism'.¹⁴ For Buber, the Jewish concept of the imitation of God 'is founded on the fact that we are destined to be like Him'.¹⁵ Near the end of the twentieth century, Eckart Otto elevated the imitation of God to be the main principle of the Israelites' moral conduct according to the OT.¹⁶ In his words, 'God's dealings with humans can be a model for the way humans

¹² See Daniel R. Streett, *They Went Out From Us: The Identity of the Opponents in First John* (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2011): 107-11; Judith M. Lieu, *I, II, & III John: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2008): 23-25; D. A. Carson, "'You Have No Need That Anyone Should Teach You'" (1 John 2:27): An Old Testament Allusion That Determines the Interpretation' in *The New Testament in Its First Century Setting: Essays on Context and Background in Honour of B. W. Winter on His 65th Birthday*, ed. P. J. Williams et al. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004): 269-80.

¹³ John Barton, 'Imitation of God in the Old Testament' in *The God of Israel*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2007): 35-46, esp. 35.

¹⁴ Martin Buber, 'Imitatio Dei' in *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis*, trans. Greta Hort (New York: Schocken Books, 1948): 66-77, esp. 71. The original German essay is 'Nachahmung Gottes', *Der Morgen* 1 (1925-1926): 638-47. See also the citation of Buber's words in Barton, 'Imitation of God', 35.

¹⁵ Buber, 'Imitatio Dei', 71.

¹⁶ Barton, 'Imitation of God', 35.

should deal with each other; this testimony is the core of an Old Testament ethics'.¹⁷ In his articles published in 1978 and 1994, Barton discusses three types of ethics that are useful for explicating the ethical thoughts in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁸ These three types of ethics are 'obedience to God's revealed will', 'natural law', and 'the imitation of God'. In another essay published in 2007, Barton responds to Cyril S. Rodd's criticism against considering the imitation of God a viable principle of an OT ethics (more on this below). Barton maintains that 'some people in Israel saw the goal of human ethical conduct as likeness to God, and that *imitatio dei* is a usable concept in the study of OT ethics'.¹⁹

A number of other scholars have also affirmed the presence of the imitation of God in the OT. E. J. Tinsley believes that the biblical metaphor of the 'way' suggests the idea of 'conforming one's conduct to what he [God] had shown himself to be during the journey to the Promised Land'.²⁰ For Sidney Steiman, the biblical teaching about creation in Genesis is indicative of a resemblance between human and God, though human beings should not aspire to impersonate the deity (cf. Gen. 3:5).²¹ Eryl W. Davies argues that the notion of the imitation of God is perceptible in the legal and prophetic materials, the Psalms, and the narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures.²² He stresses that while none of the characters in the biblical narratives is explicitly described as imitating God, the Israelites could obtain certain knowledge about the divine attributes and actions and consequently develop 'a sense of duty and moral responsibility'.²³ In Davies' assessment, the frequent

¹⁷ Cited from Barton, 'Imitation of God', 37.

¹⁸ John Barton, 'Understanding Old Testament Ethics' in *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville, Kentucky; London: Westminster John Knox, 2003): 15-31, esp. 15. This article was originally published in *JSOT* 9 (1978): 44-64. See also John Barton, 'The Basis of Ethics in the Hebrew Bible' in *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 45-54. This latter article was originally published in *Semeia* 66 (1994): 11-22. The page numbers of these two articles in the following footnotes refer to the reprinted essays in the book.

¹⁹ Barton, 'Imitation of God', 45.

²⁰ E. J. Tinsley, *The Imitation of God in Christ: An Essay on the Biblical Basis of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM, 1960): 35.

²¹ Sidney Steiman, 'Imitation of God', in vol. 8 of *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972): 1292-1293, esp. 1292.

²² Eryl W. Davies, 'Walking in God's Ways: The Concept of *Imitatio Dei* in the Old Testament' in *In Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements*, ed. Edward Ball (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999): 99-115.

²³ Davies, 'Walking in God's Ways', 109.

use of anthropomorphism to describe God in the OT, as well as the doctrine of creation about *imago Dei*, are two crucial factors of the development of the Jewish concept of *imitatio Dei*.²⁴ Gordon Wenham claims that simply the notion of obedience to the divine ordinances is insufficient to define OT ethics.²⁵ In addition, ‘the idea of the imitation of God held together the network of virtues and ethical ideals that the biblical writers were implicitly promoting’.²⁶ Christopher J. H. Wright notes that in the OT the Israelites are obliged to reflect God’s nature in their everyday deeds and attitudes.²⁷ Yet he prefers using the phrase ‘reflection of God’s character’ instead of ‘imitation of God’ to avoid giving the impression of ‘mere mimicry’ or ‘copying God’s actions’.²⁸ Walter Houston examines the texts in the Pentateuch that explicitly or implicitly suggest the idea of imitating God.²⁹ On the one hand, he observes that Yahweh is often depicted according to two social roles, namely king/world ruler and patron. Thus these two roles related to Yahweh may provide a model of human behaviour. On the other hand, there are some seemingly violent and partisan acts of Yahweh in Exodus that are unsuitable to be considered a paradigm of human morality. Therefore, Houston agrees with Barton in that ‘*imitatio dei* is not a key to unlock all doors in the ethics of the Old Testament’.³⁰ Lastly, Esias E. Meyer analyses the portrayal of Yahweh as a land possessor and slave owner in Leviticus 25.³¹ He points out that some of Yahweh’s actions in this text are not supposed to be emulated by human beings. Thus he believes that the idea of the imitation of God is present in some parts of the OT but is not the whole story of OT ethics.³²

²⁴ Davies, ‘Walking in God’s Ways’, 110.

²⁵ Gordon Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000): 104.

²⁶ Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 109.

²⁷ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2004): 37-38.

²⁸ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 37-38.

²⁹ Walter Houston, ‘The Character of YHWH and the Ethics of the Old Testament: Is *Imitatio Dei* Appropriate?’ *JTS* 58.1 (2007): 1-25.

³⁰ Houston, ‘The Character of YHWH’, 25.

³¹ Esias E. Meyer, ‘The Dark Side of the *Imitatio Dei*. Why Imitating the God of the Holiness Code is not Always a Good Thing’, *Old Testament Essays* 22.2 (2009): 373-83.

³² Meyer, ‘The Dark Side of the *Imitatio Dei*’, 382.

On the negative side of the debate, Willis P. de Boer criticises Tinsley of assuming that the notion of ‘walking in God’s ways’ in the OT is intimately connected with that of the imitation of God.³³ Instead, de Boer thinks that the former notion is concerned with the ideas of ‘keeping God’s commandments’ and ‘covenantal union and fellowship’.³⁴ In his understanding, the OT writings have presented the view of a ‘highly transcendent’ God in which the idea of imitation of God plays no vital role.³⁵ Barnabas Lindars says that the concept of the imitation of God in the OT is mainly concerned with the necessity of the Israelites to ‘belonging together with God in a group’ and ‘preserving identity’.³⁶ Furthermore, he claims that this concept did not receive much attention in Jewish ethical discussions until NT times but even then it has remained ‘peripheral’.³⁷ Elizabeth A. Castelli objects to the understanding that considers the notions of *imitatio Dei*, *imitatio Christi*, and following Jesus as being continuous with each other. She thinks that this understanding is ‘rooted in a theological desire to view history itself as a singular, unilateral voyage toward Christian salvation’.³⁸ Cyril S. Rodd alleges that while ‘a few writers within Old Testament viewed human virtues as mirroring those of Yahweh’, the OT writers normally did not think of ‘either morality or purity as imitating God’s actions or his character’.³⁹ He believes that the emphasis of the ethical demands in the OT falls on the exhortation to obey God’s commands. In Rodd’s view, the idea of the human beings emulating the divine actions or character presupposes ‘a God who has been brought down to the human level’.⁴⁰

As said above, Barton has responded to Rodd’s criticism in an essay in 2007. Over against Rodd’s allegation that *imitatio Dei* is a foreign concept to the biblical writers, Barton emphasises that ‘describing ethics as a matter of acting in the way God acts or would act’ is indeed

³³ Willis P. de Boer, *The Imitation of Paul: An Exegetical Study* (Kampen: Kok, 1962): 32-38.

³⁴ De Boer, *The Imitation of Paul*, 34-35.

³⁵ De Boer, *The Imitation of Paul*, 41.

³⁶ Barnabas Lindars, ‘Imitation of God and Imitation of Christ’ in *Duty and Discernment*, ed. G. R. Dustan (London: SCM, 1975): 100-10, esp. 107.

³⁷ Lindars, ‘Imitation of God and Imitation of Christ’, 108.

³⁸ Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 26.

³⁹ Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001): 65-76, esp. 75.

⁴⁰ Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 76.

'true' to their intentions.⁴¹ Houston and Barton are on the same wavelength. Houston comments that 'the character and actions of YHWH may function more widely as models than Rodd's excessively sceptical analysis may suggest'.⁴² Thus Houston concurs with Barton in upholding the usefulness of the imitation of God for describing the ethical conduct according to the OT, and yet taking note of the limitation of this notion.⁴³ In a nutshell, it seems reasonable to conclude that there is an increasing awareness that the imitation of God is a viable and usable concept to describe the ethical thought in some parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, though this concept is implicitly expressed. While God is often portrayed in human terms (e.g. ruler, king, slave owner, land possessor) in the OT, not all of his actions (e.g. punishing the entire nation on account of the sins of the leaders) are deemed morally proper for humans to emulate.⁴⁴ Thus the imitation of God does not tell the whole story of biblical ethics. Despite this, the usefulness of this ethical concept should be acknowledged. With this in mind, the following paragraphs will present some of the evidence of the imitation of God in the OT.

According to the fourth commandment of the Decalogue in Exodus 20:10-11, the Israelites should labour and do their work for six days but have to rest on the seventh day.⁴⁵ No Israelite, slave, foreigner, or animal in the land could do any work on this day because it is set apart as a holy Sabbath day for Yahweh. Notably, God's action is regarded the basis of the Sabbath command (cf. Gen. 2:2-3). Thus while the Israelites are not exhorted to act like God, his resting on the seventh day of creation establishes a pattern of life (resting on the seventh day) for his people to follow.

In Leviticus 19:2, Yahweh solemnly declares, 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.' As indicated in this declaration, the charge to the Israelites to be holy rests on God's identity and character. Many of the exhortations in Leviticus 19 are practical instructions regarding how to treat other people with kindness and impartiality.

⁴¹ Barton, 'Imitation of God', 41.

⁴² Houston, 'The Character of YHWH', 25.

⁴³ Houston, 'The Character of YHWH', 25.

⁴⁴ See Barton's discussion about the study of Andrew Davies, *Double Standards in Isaiah: Reevaluating Prophetic Ethics and Divine Justice* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Barton, 'Imitation of God', 42-45.

⁴⁵ Steiman, 'Imitation of God', 1292.

According to Jacob Milgrom, the fact that there are both ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ commands in Leviticus 19 indicates that the concept of Israel’s holiness does not only mean ‘separation from’ but also ‘separation to’.⁴⁶ These twin ideas are seen more evidently in the pertinent command in Leviticus 20:26. The Israelites have the dual obligation to live their everyday life in a manner that is dissimilar to the nations and ‘mimics’ God’s ‘transcendent’ nature.⁴⁷ Rodd argues that the exhortation in Leviticus 19:2 is simply telling of the reason or basis (כִּי; ‘because’) rather than the model according to which Israel should pursue her holiness.⁴⁸ However, Barton asserts that this exhortation presupposes that ‘some quality of God is there meant to be shared by human beings’.⁴⁹ As Milgrom remarks, the Levitical command implies that Israel should ‘strive to imitate God’ and yet ‘be fully aware of the unbridgeable gap between them’.⁵⁰

In the book of Deuteronomy, the imagery of the ‘way[s] of the Lord’ occurs frequently and is often connected with the twin exhortations of love and obedience (e.g. Deut. 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 26:17; 28:9).⁵¹ Admittedly, the expression of ‘walking in the way of the Lord’ or ‘walking after God’ does not necessarily mean the imitation of God. Yet it is natural that these expressions would suggest such a notion.⁵² As Davies says, similar expressions like these imply that ‘Israel was destined to travel on a journey in which God was to lead the way as a guide and example for the people to follow.’⁵³ For the present purpose, it will suffice to look at the use of such expressions in Deuteronomy 10:12-19. This passage falls within the context of Moses’ second speech to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 10:12–11:1. This speech begins with the rhetorical question ‘And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you?’ (Deut. 10:12a). It is followed by a threefold answer in Deuteronomy 10:12b-15, 10:16-19, and 10:20-22,

⁴⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22* (New York: Doubleday, 2000): 1604.

⁴⁷ Houston, ‘The Character of YHWH’, 9; cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1605.

⁴⁸ Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 69.

⁴⁹ Barton, ‘Imitation of God’, 36.

⁵⁰ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1605.

⁵¹ See Davies, ‘Walking in God’s Ways’, 103; Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 39-42.

⁵² Bennema observes that the expression of ‘following Jesus’ does not denote imitation but would ‘imply’ and ‘lead to’ imitation. His observation can be applied to the similar notion of ‘walking in God’s way’, though he thinks that the imitation of God is not a prevalent concept in the OT. See Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature*, 86.

⁵³ Davies, ‘Walking in God’s Ways’, 103.

and culminates in the ensuing exhortation to love God and obey his commands in Deuteronomy 11:1.⁵⁴ In Deuteronomy 10:12b-13, the command to walk in the ways of the Lord is associated with the ideas of the fear of the Lord, the love for him, a wholehearted service, and an obedience to the divine ordinances. The social implications of walking in God's ways are spelt out in Deuteronomy 10:17-19, in which the Israelites are encouraged to emulate Yahweh's charitable acts to treat the vulnerable in the society with kindness and generosity. Just as Yahweh protects and provides the needs of the foreigners, his people should show kindness to the aliens who reside in their midst.

Outside the Pentateuch, the idea of 'reflective ethics' is implied in the combination of Psalms 111 and 112.⁵⁵ These two psalms have in common the acrostic form (i.e. the first letters of the colons of the poem make up the Hebrew alphabet) and a number of cognate terms and themes. Notably, some of the descriptions about God or his works in Psalm 111 are applied to portray the people who fear him in Psalm 112. For example, the notion of 'perpetual righteousness' refers to Yahweh in Psalm 111:3 as well as his people in Psalms 112:3 and 112:9.⁵⁶ Both Yahweh and the righteous person are described as 'gracious and compassionate' (Ps. 111:4; 112:4).⁵⁷ Other parallel themes or terms include 'justice' (Ps. 111:7; 112:5), 'remembrance' (Ps. 111:4; 112:6), 'firmness' (Ps. 111:8; 112:8), and 'to give' generously (Ps. 111:5; 112:9).⁵⁸ As Davies says, '[t]he attributes of God set forth in Psalm 111 are regarded in Psalm 112 as being reflected in the life of the true believer'.⁵⁹ Simply put, although there is no explicit command to imitate God in these two psalms, reading them in combination points to an underlying correspondence between God and his people.⁶⁰

2.2 Early Judaism

The idea of the imitation of God evidently occupies a place in the thought-world of Second Temple Judaism. Our discussion will begin

⁵⁴ Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012): 269.

⁵⁵ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 41.

⁵⁶ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (rev. edn; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2002): 128.

⁵⁷ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 128.

⁵⁸ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 128.

⁵⁹ Davies, 'Walking in God's Ways', 107.

⁶⁰ Barton, 'Imitation of God', 38.

with the pseudonymous document Letter of Aristeas (second century BC), which purports to provide an account of how the Jewish Law was translated into Greek in Alexandria, Egypt, under the order of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–247 BC).⁶¹ As unfolded in this document, the king sent a deputation to Eleazer the high priest in Jerusalem to request a team of Jewish scribes to go to Alexandria to translate the law. Upon their arrival in the city, the king lavished a series of banquets for them over a course of seven days. He enquired the Jewish scribes one by one concerning perfect kingship and wise rule. In three places of the Letter of Aristeas, the term μιμέομαι (‘imitate’) occurs to describe an emulation of God’s kindness or righteousness. In the Letter of Aristeas 1:187-188, Ptolemy II sought the advice of the oldest scribe at the seat of honour, ‘How can one keep his kingdom without offence to the end?’ The Jewish sage replied that the king should administer the kingdom by ‘imitating [μιμούμενος] the eternal goodness of God’. In 1:210, the king asked another scribe about the true mark of piety. In response, the scribe said that no wicked or unjust deed could escape God’s notice. Since God gives benefits to the whole world, it is right for the king to do good by ‘imitating [μιμούμενος] him’. In 1:281, Ptolemy II enquired a scribe the requirement of appointing an officer. The king received the answer ‘... As God showers blessings upon all, you too in imitation [μιμούμενος] of him are a benefactor to your subjects.’⁶²

The imitation of God is a recurrent theme in the ethical discourses in the works of Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC–50 AD).⁶³ While speaking of the charitable act of sharing one’s possessions with the needy, Philo comments that it is a praiseworthy act to emulate the everlasting God in showing kindness (*Spec. Laws* 4:72-73). He stresses that the law forbids those who have power to act wickedly and deceitfully towards other people (*Spec. Laws* 4:183). Instead, all who have power both for good and for worse ‘ought to will the better, and the better is to benefit instead of injuring as many as they possibly can. For this is to follow

⁶¹ The English translation of the Letter of Aristeas is from R. J. H. Shutt, ‘Letter of Aristeas’ in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (2 vols; New York: Doubleday, 1985): vol. 2, 7-34.

⁶² In some other places of the Letter of Aristeas, the concept of the imitation of God is implied without using any explicit terminology (e.g. Let. Aris. 1:190, 191-92).

⁶³ See Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007): 132; David B. Capes, ‘Imitatio Christi and the Gospel Genre’, *BBR* 13.1 (2003): 1-19, esp. 8-9.

God since He too can do both but wills the good only' (*Spec. Laws* 4:186-187).⁶⁴ Therefore, 'it is right for good rulers of a nation to imitate him [God]' in the respect of dealing with the people (*Spec. Laws* 4:188). In *On the Special Laws* 2:225, Philo points out the similarity between parents and God in bringing what did not exist into existence. Such a likeness between parents and God lends support to the fifth commandment of the Decalogue that one should honour his or her father and mother.⁶⁵ Moreover, just as the children imitate the nature of their fathers, one should cultivate virtues and do all that is right with diligence (*Sacrifices* 1:68). Philo affirms that all human beings should make the best of their effort to imitate God, particularly giving benefits to others, for all humanity have received strength from him (*Virtues* 1:168). Concerning Moses' exhortation to the Israelites in Deut. 16:12, Philo believes that it is pious to imitate God's works. Yet he at the same time repudiates the arrogant mind of conceiving of itself being equal with the deity (*Alleg. Interp.* 1:48-49).

Lastly, we will point out the explicit references to the notion of the imitation of God in the *Testament of Asher* and several rabbinic writings. It is stated in *Testament of Asher* 4:3 (cf. 4:5) 'one man hates the man who, though merciful, is also unjust, or who is an adulterer, even though he fasts, and thus is two-faced. But his work is good as a whole, because he imitates the Lord [μιμῆται κύριον], not accepting the seeming good as though it were the truly good.'⁶⁶ Within the literary structure of the *Testament of Asher*, chapter 4 is the counterpart of chapter 2. Both of these chapters portray the person who seems to be both righteous and wicked. However, the person in chapter 2 is in general evil but the one in chapter 4 is overall good.⁶⁷ For our purposes, it will suffice to note that the language of the imitation of God is used to portray the good person.⁶⁸ Given the late date of the rabbinic writings, caution must be exercised in using them to shed light on the Jewish thoughts of the first century AD. However, it is important to stress that the basis of the rabbinic understanding of

⁶⁴ The English translation of Philo's works is from Loeb Classical Library.

⁶⁵ Cf. Philo, *Decalogue* 1.51, 120.

⁶⁶ The English translation of the *Testament of Asher* is from Howard C. Kee, 'Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs', in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, 816-18.

⁶⁷ Harm W. Hollander and Marinus de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1985): 338.

⁶⁸ Hollander and de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, 351.

imitatio Dei lies in the Hebrew Scriptures. In *Sifra* on Leviticus 19:2, Rabbi Saul expounds on the command of this biblical text within the setting of the royal court. The imitation of God is compared with the act of the royal retinue to imitate the king.⁶⁹ It is underlined in *Sifré* on Deuteronomy 11:22-25 (Pisqa 49:1) that one should walk in God's ways by imitating his attributes and cultivating the qualities of mercifulness, graciousness, and righteousness.⁷⁰ In *Sotah* 14a of the *Babylonian Talmud*, Rabbi Hama posits the question, 'Is it possible for a person to walk after the Presence of God (Deut. 13:5)?' given that the Lord is 'a consuming fire' (Deut. 4:24). Then the Jewish sage explains that 'the meaning is that one must walk after the traits of the Holy One' by performing charitable deeds (e.g. providing clothing for the naked, visiting the sick, and comforting the mourners) according to God's compassionate acts towards his people.⁷¹ In *Yevamot* 6:6 of the *Babylonian Talmud*, the house of Shammai and the house of Hillel debate about the minimum number of children that a man must have before going celibate. Whereas the Shammaites believe that 'two boys' are enough, the Hillelites say 'a boy and a girl since it is said, "Male and female he created them"' (Gen. 5:2). It is then explicated in *b. Yevamot* 6:6 that the former position derives 'the governing analogy from the case of Moses' but the latter position derives 'the governing analogy from the case of the creation of the world'.⁷² Thus the underlying assumption of the Hillelites' argument is that man should imitate God in this matter regarding procreation.⁷³ Since the house of Shammai was primarily dominant before AD 70, it is likely that this dispute between the Shammaites and the Hillelites originates from the religious world of the first century AD.⁷⁴

In summary, the implicit concept of the imitation of God in the OT has become expressly perceptible in the Jewish ethical thought of the

⁶⁹ See Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1604.

⁷⁰ Jacob Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation* (2 vols; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987): vol. 1, 164.

⁷¹ Jacob Neusner, ed., *Sotah of The Talmud of Babylonia: An Academic Commentary* (vol. 17; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994): 67.

⁷² The English translation of *b. Yevamot* is from Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (vol. 8; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2011): 318.

⁷³ I am grateful to a reviewer for pointing out this rabbinic example.

⁷⁴ There is an indirect reference to the Jewish imitation of God's benevolence in the apologetic work (*Apol.* 14) of Aristides of Athens. For the concept of the imitation of God or Christ in the teachings of the church fathers, see Capes, 'Imitatio Christi and the Gospel Genre', 16-17; Buber, 'Imitatio Dei', 69 (concerning Polycarp).

Second Temple period. The presence of this concept is especially perceptible in Hellenistic Judaism. While the interests of the author of the Letter of Aristeas and Philo in the matter of the imitation of God might partly due to their concerns to make the OT intelligible within the Graeco-Roman milieu,⁷⁵ it is doubtless that both of the authors considered the OT the basis of their discussion regarding this matter. The concept of the imitation of God also finds explicit expression in the rabbinic writings. Despite the late date of these writings, it is likely that this rabbinic concept takes root in the OT. In all of the literature under survey, there is an emphasis on following after God's benevolent acts towards humans and particularly caring for the vulnerable in the society.

3. The Imitation of Christ in 1 John

This section will examine the relevant passages in 1 John to better understand the ethical rationale and implications of the imitation of Christ in this letter.⁷⁶ The examination will be undertaken in light of the Jewish belief that God's people are obliged to reflect his nature in everyday life.

3.1 1 John 2:6

The first clear instance of the imitation of Christ is found in 1 John 2:6. It is asserted that whoever claims to abide in God/Christ ought to walk just as Jesus walked. There is a progression of ideas from an existence in God (ἐν αὐτῷ ἐσμεν, 'we remain in him') in the prior verse 5 to a perpetual remaining in God/Christ (ἐν αὐτῷ μένειν, 'to remain in him') in verse 6.⁷⁷ The verb μένω ('remain') occurs a total of twenty-four times in 1 John.⁷⁸ Its first appearance in 1 John 2:6 is linked with the motif of obedience to God's commandments in the preceding verses. In the Fourth Gospel, the phrase μένειν ἐν ('to remain in') is often used to

⁷⁵ For the imitation of God in Graeco-Roman antiquity, see Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 71-76.

⁷⁶ The term μιμεῖσθαι ('imitate') occurs only once in 3 John 1:11 in John's Gospel and Epistles.

⁷⁷ Edward Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant: A Study of εἶναι ἐν and μένειν ἐν in the First Letter of Saint John* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978): 133.

⁷⁸ 1 John 2:6, 10, 14, 17, 19, 24 (3x), 27 (2x), 28; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24 (2x); 4:12, 13, 15, 16 (3x).

describe the intimate relationship between Jesus and his disciples.⁷⁹ T. Francis Glasson notes that this phrase is reminiscent of the biblical directive given to the Israelites to ‘cleave to’ (קָדַבְּ) Yahweh (cf. Deut. 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; 30:20; Josh. 22:5; 23:8-11).⁸⁰ In his study of the concept of ‘interiority’ in 1 John, Edward Malatesta observes that the interrelated expressions of μένειν ἐν (‘to remain in’) and εἶναι ἐν (‘to be in’) resonate with the future hope of the restored Yahweh–Israel relationship as envisioned in Jeremiah 38 (31 MT/Eng.) and Ezekiel 36 LXX.⁸¹ Specifically, the Israelites’ unfaithfulness to Yahweh in Jeremiah 38:32 LXX is described in terms of failing to ‘remain in’ his covenant.⁸² As a result, the Lord promised of a time when he will make a new covenant with the house of Israel (Jer. 38:33-34 LXX [31:33-34 MT/Eng.]).

As shown in the previous sections, in Jewish thinking the people of God are expected to live in a way that is in accordance with his character and their special relationship with him. Similarly, in 1 John 2:6 a permanent union with God/Christ implies the status of being God’s people and has the ethical bearings on how one should live in this world.⁸³ John uses the verb ὀφείλω (‘ought’) to accentuate the Christian duty to follow in Jesus’ footsteps (cf. 1 John 3:16; 4:11; 3 John 1:8). Furthermore, by correlating the believers’ way of living with Jesus’ way of living (cf. καθὼς ἐκεῖνος [‘just as that one’] and οὕτως [‘in this manner’]),⁸⁴ his earthly life is presented as the ‘noble exemplar’ and ‘the very source which empowers the Christian to imitate the Lord’.⁸⁵ In light of the use of the verb περιπατέω (‘walk’),

⁷⁹ Ten occurrences of the phrase μένειν ἐν are found within the context of John 15:1-17 with reference to the mutual relationship between Jesus and the disciples (John 15:4 [3x], 5, 6, 7 [2x], 9, 10a) or that between Jesus and the Father (John 15:10b). See Mavis M. Leung, ‘The “Purity” of the Disciples in John 13:10-11 and 15:2-3’, *Jian Dao* 36 (2011): 131-55, esp. 143-44.

⁸⁰ T. Francis Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel* (London: SCM, 1963): 76.

⁸¹ Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant*, 42-77, esp. 69.

⁸² Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant*, 59, 63.

⁸³ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996): 143.

⁸⁴ In 1 John, the demonstrative pronoun ἐκεῖνος (‘that one’) often stands for Jesus (cf. 1 John 2:6; 4:17; 3:3, 5, 7, 16). The comparative conjunction καθὼς (‘just as’) introduces a comparison between the believers and Jesus (cf. 1 John 2:6; 3:3, 7; 4:17; see also 3:23). For the use of καθὼς in John 13:34; 15:10, 12, see Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature*, 108-15.

⁸⁵ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 89; cf. van der Watt, ‘Reciprocity’, 267; Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant*, 134.

the scope of Jesus' example that the believers have to follow suit encompasses the whole way of living. This verb occurs twice in 1 John 2:6. The perfective aspect of the aorist indicative verb περιπάτησεν ('he walked') serves to portray Jesus' way of living as a whole. The imperfective aspect of the present infinitive περιπατεῖν ('to walk') underlines the believer's ongoing way of daily living in the present. While the metaphorical use of 'walking' to signify the whole of living is rare in classical Greek, such a usage can be seen in several passages in the LXX (e.g. 2 Kings 20:3; Prov. 8:20; Eccl. 4:15; 11:9; Isa. 59:9; cf. Prov. 2:7, 10).⁸⁶ In fact, the use of this verb in 1 John 2:6 harks back to its earlier appearances in 1 John 1:6-7, in which the contrast between 'walking in darkness' and 'walking in the light' evidently bears moral overtones (cf. 1 John 2:11). It is crucial to recall our earlier discussion that the expression of 'walking' in the 'way(s) of the Lord' in the OT is related to the idea of the imitation of God. Thus it is probable that this expression provides an OT background to the Johannine assertion that the believers must 'walk' just as Jesus 'walked'.

3.2 1 John 3:3

In 1 John 3:3, the imitation of Christ is thematically associated with the Christian identity and hope. As underlined in the preceding verse 2, the fact that the believers are God's children in the present is the firm assurance of their hope that 'when he appears/is revealed' (ἐὰν φανερωθῆ) they will be 'like him' (ὅμοιοι αὐτῷ; cf. Rom. 8:29; Col. 3:4). The adjective ὅμοιος ('like') occurs only once in 1 John and is not found in 2 and 3 John. The referent of the aorist passive subjective verb φανερωθῆ ('he is revealed') and the related pronoun αὐτῷ ('him') is unspecified, but most likely stands for 'Jesus'.⁸⁷ Thus in 1 John 3:2 the eschatological promise regarding the believers' conformity to the Son's likeness is affirmed in view of their present identity as God's children.

There is a close connection between eschatology and ethics in Johannine thinking. In view of the certainty of the Christian hope, the believers should make effort to 'purify' themselves 'just as' Jesus is

⁸⁶ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 105; *TDNT* 5: 941, 942-43.

⁸⁷ Brown think that the verbal subject of φανερωθῆ is 'what we shall be'. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (New York: Doubleday, 1982): 393-94. However, most scholars believe that the promise in 1 John 3:2 is concerned about Jesus' Parousia and Christ-likeness. See e.g. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 178; Martin M. Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2004): 69.

‘pure’ (v. 3). A similar movement of thought (from the hope of Jesus’ Parousia to a practical application in the present) is already seen in 1 John 2:28-29, in which the believers are encouraged to do what is right in order to reflect God’s righteous character.⁸⁸ Later in 1 John 3:7, the statement of ‘just as that one [Jesus] is righteous’ (καθὼς ἐκεῖνος δίκαιός ἐστιν) is akin to and parallel to that of ‘just as that one [Jesus] is pure’ (καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἄγνός ἐστιν) in 1 John 3:3. Both of these statements lay stress on the nature of Jesus as a basis of the believers’ pursuit of moral transformation. In 1 John 3:3, both the cognate verb ἀγνίζω (‘purify’) and adjective ἄγνός (‘pure’) are *hapax legomena* in the whole letter. Yet the related verb καθαρίζω (‘purify’) has occurred twice in 1 John 1:7 and 1:9 to figuratively denote the moral cleansing of the believers as a result of Jesus’ death. In the same vein, the notion of ‘purity’ in 1 John 3:3 does not mean ceremonial cleanness but rather is pertinent to morality. The ethical connotation is evident in light of the ensuing discussion about avoiding sin (vv. 4-9) and Jesus’ sinlessness (v. 5). Since the believers have the sure hope of Christ-likeness, they should pursue diligently to reflect Jesus’ pure and sinless nature by abstaining from evil deeds. In fact, the purity of Jesus does not only provide the ethical model but also the Christian impetus to stand firm against the temptations and sins in a hostile world.⁸⁹ It is noteworthy that the pursuit of holiness is the main thrust of Leviticus 19:2, which we saw in the previous section is a key text of the OT concerning the Jewish concept of the imitation of God. Just as in the OT the Israelites as God’s people have the ethical responsibility to reflect his holiness in their daily conduct, in 1 John the believers as God’s children/people should conform their behaviour and character to the purity of the Son of God, namely Jesus Christ.

3.3 1 John 3:16

In 1 John 3:16, Jesus’ sacrificial act of laying down his life for others is presented as an exemplary pattern that the believers should follow suit. It is also the source of power and motivation for the Christian conduct of mutual love. Just as the imitation of God in the OT is not merely an abstract concept but rather bears on how one should act kindly towards other people in the Israelite society, the Johannine notion of *imitatio*

⁸⁸ Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 177.

⁸⁹ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (rev. edn.; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2007): 142.

Christi likewise pertains to how the believers as God's people should deal lovingly with others.⁹⁰ Within the context of 1 John 3:14-17, the frequent occurrence of the term ἀδελφός ('brother') underlines the believers' interrelationship as brothers and sisters in God's family. In contrast to Cain's negative example of killing his 'brother' (1 John 3:12), the believers should follow the example of Jesus' self-sacrificial love by willingly surrendering their lives for the benefits of other members of God's family.

The emphatic wording 'we ought' (ἡμεῖς ὀφείλομεν) in 1 John 3:16 is reminiscent of the words 'you ought' (ὁμεῖς ὀφείλετε) in Jesus' instruction to his disciples in John 13:14. In addition, the expression 'lay down one's life' in 1 John 3:16 is often used to describe Jesus' sacrificial death in behalf of others in the Fourth Gospel (cf. John 10:11, 15, 17, 18 [2x]; 15:13). Richard A. Burridge has demonstrated that this Gospel exerts moral influence on the readers primarily by encouraging them to emulate Jesus' behaviour and attitudes, especially in the respect of how he treats other people.⁹¹ The idea of imitating Jesus is perceptible in the story of the footwashing by the use of the word 'example' (ὑπόδειγμα).⁹² According to *BDAG*, this Greek word basically expresses the meaning of 'an example of behaviour used for purposes of moral instruction' and is used as a positive model to encourage an emulation of it in a number of Jewish or Christian writings (cf. Sir. 44:16; Jas 5:10; 1 Clem. 5:1; 6:1; 46:1; 55:1; 63:1).⁹³ While Jesus was the teacher of his disciples, he took the initiative to wash their feet. His act establishes an example of humble service out of love for others, even those who are in a lower social location.⁹⁴ In 1 John 3:16, the Christian duty to demonstrate mutual love by 'laying down' one's life for others alludes to Jesus' command to the disciples to love one another, just as he has loved them (John 13:34; 15:12-17). It is made clear in the following verse 17 that one's commitment to this obligation should be seen in his or her willingness to supply resources to the poor within the Christian community. On the practical level,

⁹⁰ The phrase ἐν τούτῳ at the beginning of 1 John 3:16 anticipates the following ὅτι-clause, which defines 'love' in terms of Jesus' self-sacrifice for the believers. The demonstrative pronoun ἐκεῖνος refers to 'Jesus'.

⁹¹ Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 285-46, esp. 330-46.

⁹² Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 343-45; Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature*, 99.

⁹³ *BDAG* 1037.

⁹⁴ Nissen, 'Community and Ethics in the Gospel of John', 201-3.

such an idea about emulating Christ's love is akin to the Jewish belief that the imitation of God finds its expression when his people emulate his benevolence by caring for the vulnerable within the Israelite community (e.g. Lev. 19:9-10, 13-14, Deut. 10:17-19; 15:7-10; Ps. 112:9). Judith Lieu calls attention to the highly hierarchical structure of the Roman society, within which the majority of the early Christians probably belonged to the poorer lower classes. Seen in this light, Christian charity and hospitality are all the more necessary for sustaining the livelihood of the poor believers.⁹⁵

3.4 1 John 4:17

The comparison between Jesus and the believers is again brought to the fore in 1 John 4:17. We already discussed the connection between ethics and eschatology in 1 John 3:3. In 1 John 4:17, the notion of the imitation of Christ is further associated with the perfection of God's love in his people and their confidence in the day of judgement (cf. 1 John 2:28; 3:21).⁹⁶ The belief of 'the day of judgement' is based on the OT traditions concerning 'the day of the Lord' (e.g. Isa. 2:12-22; Joel 2:1-11, 32; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph. 1:14-18) and is present in the eschatology of Second Temple Judaism (e.g. Jub. 5:10; 24:30; Pss. Sol. 15:13; 4 Ezra 7:113).⁹⁷ It is of the Jewish expectation that in this day the sinners and the enemies of Israel will be punished, whereas God's people will be saved. By alluding to this Jewish eschatological expectation, it is thus hinted at in 1 John 4:17 that the Christian community within which God's love is perfected actually constitutes his people. The articular expression 'the day of [the] judgement' in this verse probably evokes other related eschatological events that have already been mentioned in 1 John 2:28 and 3:2. It is likely that some scribes perceived a difficulty between the twin statements of 'we will be like him' (1 John 3:2) and 'we are like him' (1 John 4:17) and so made alterations in the latter wording in order to resolve the difficulty. For example, the present indicative verb ἔσμεν ('we are') in 1 John 4:17 is replaced by the future indicative verb ἐσόμεθα ('we will be') in

⁹⁵ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 151.

⁹⁶ The 'love' in 1 John 4:17 probably refers to the love of God. See John Painter, *I, 2, and 3 John* (Collegeville, Minneapolis: The Liturgical Press, 2002): 278.

⁹⁷ Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 222-23 n. 79; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 528.

Codex Sinaiticus and the minuscules 876, 1832, and 2138.⁹⁸ However, as Marshall says, instead of seeing the two statements as incompatible, it is better to consider that an example of ‘the portrayal of the “eschatological reality” of the Christian life’ is given in 1 John 4:17 to encourage the audience to ‘let the ideal become a reality’.⁹⁹

The train of thought in 1 John 4:16b-17 can be delineated as follows.¹⁰⁰ By means of ‘the believers abid[ing] in love and so they abide in God and he abides in them’ (v. 16b), God’s love is brought to perfection in his people (v. 17a), with the result that they will not fear but rather be bold in the Last Judgement (v. 17b); the basis or reason of such a confidence is that ‘just as he is, so also we are in this world’ (v. 17c). The exact clause καθὼς ἐκεῖνός ἐστιν (‘just as that one is’) in 1 John 4:17 is found twice in 1 John 3:3 and 3:7. In both of the latter two instances, there is a predicate adjective (‘pure’ or ‘righteous’) to make clear the point of comparison between Jesus and the believers. Yet the same clause in 1 John 4:17 is without a predicate. In view of the predominance of the themes of ‘abiding in God’ and ‘love’ within the surrounding context, the unspecified analogy between Jesus and the believers most likely pertains to the continually loving relationship with God.¹⁰¹ As will become evident in 1 John 4:20-21, one’s union with God must involve a commitment to mutual love within his family. The Father has already demonstrated his great love for his people by sending his Son to die as an expiation for their sins. Thus God’s love in Christ is the source that gives the believers power and motivation to love one another (cf. 1 John 4:10-11, 19). By doing so, not only they will become more ‘like’ Christ in the present, but also God’s love can be fully expressed in them in the sinful world so that they will not be afraid in the Last Judgement.

⁹⁸ See *Novum Testamentum Graecum: Editio Critica Maior IV*, part I, instalment 3 (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2003): 340.

⁹⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1978): 224; cf. Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant*, 306.

¹⁰⁰ The prepositional phrase ἐν τούτῳ in 1 John 4:17 probably harks back to the intimately loving union between God and the believers in the prior verse 16. See Jobes, *I, 2 & 3 John*, 204; Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 257. For an alternative view, see Culy, *I, II, III John*, 115-16.

¹⁰¹ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 223. In contrast, Bennema claims that the referent of ἐκεῖνός in 1 John 4:17 is ‘God’ instead of ‘Jesus’. See Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature*, 49, 119.

4. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the ethical exhortation to imitate Jesus in 1 John is related to the believers' identity and vocation as God's people. Just as in the OT Israel is obliged to reflect God's nature in everyday life, the believers must take on Jesus' character as their character and follow in his footsteps to surrender one's own life for the benefits of others. Since the believers are incorporated into God's family through faith in the Son, and because the Son has perfectly revealed the Father in the world and acted according to his will, the Johannine exhortation to imitate Christ is not incompatible with the Jewish belief that the object of imitation is God. In 1 John, one of the effects of the family metaphors is to underline the believers' identity as the people of God. This identity bears on the way the believers should treat one another. In fact, one's union with God or Christ impinges on how he or she should conduct themselves towards other people. Conversely, whether one is committed to practice mutual love within the community can demonstrate the (in)validity of one's union with God or Christ. The life of Jesus, particularly his intimate relationship with the Father and his sacrificial love for others, provides not only the ethical model but also the motivation for the believers to abide in him and consequently live out authentic love in the sinful world. Finally, it should be remarked that this paper has not argued that the OT is the sole or primary source of insights of *imitatio Christi* in 1 John. It is likely that John also utilised the social conventions of the Graeco-Roman world to promote correct behaviours and character formation. Yet the result of this paper indicates that the influence of the ethical thoughts of the OT in the formation of Johannine ethics is more important than often acknowledged.