Mosaic and Christic Ethos in the Gospel of John

Edward H. Schroeder

[Printed in Currents in Theology and Mission Vol. 29:3 (June, 2002) Reprinted with permission.]

> *"The Law was given through Moses: grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." – John 1.17*

The Gospel of John contains no ethical teachings as we find it in the synoptics or in Paul – no Sermon on the Mount, or on the plain, no God and Caesar renderings, no paraenesis (exhortation), no Haustafeln, no references to the Decalogue or its first and second commandment summaries. So "ethical teaching" in the sense of moral legislation, no. But "ethical teaching" as ethical evaluation in practice, as conflict about human ethos, definitely yes.

If, as Paul Ricoeur notes, the entire Fourth Gospel is a "cosmic trial," then the gospel narrative itself is an event of ethos, the qualitative evaluation of human behavior taking place "in a larger cycle of ideas in a 'juridical' turn where we find such notions as envoy, to testify, testimony, to judge, judgment, to accuse, to convince, counselor…..It is in the framework of a suit over rights" that the meaning of justification as vindication surfaces, "which derives its coherence from this horizon of the great trial on which all theology of testimony is projected" (Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics of Testimony*, quoting Preiss, *Justification in Johannine Thought*, 140).

The same is true for ethical theology in the Christian vein: evaluative judgments in the earthly trial lay claim to eventual vindication by the judge of the great and final eschatological trial. Christian ethos understands itself as the quality that accrues to human behavior and behavers by virtue of the divine evaluation.

In John's Gospel that verdict is in dispute right from the start, first of all for Jesus and then for his disciples. Beginning in the prologue the seesaw opposition between contesting and attesting unfolds: "He came to his own home, and his own people received him not" (1.11). Testimony is given "to what we have seen and heard; but you do not receive our testimony" (3.11). In this essay we examine the attested/contested ethos of the disciples. It parallels Jesus' own ethos but with one difference: his causes theirs.

Exegetes call our attention to the historical circumstances of John's intended audience. These first hearers are living in the post-70 A.D., post-Jamnia situation of Jewish Christians separated from the synagogues of normative Judaism. The twelfth of the eighteen benedictions (*Birkat-ha-minim*) in the synagogue liturgy has left them *aposynagogos* (out of the synagogue) (9.22, 12.42, 16.2). The daily life conflict between these two Jewish religious communities is retrojected, pantomimed, and paradigmed into Jesus' own trial. The issue is ethos. Which of these two faith communities is right, or which one has the right to claim to be true? True to doing the will and work of God, to keeping the word of God, to keeping the commandments, finally to being true to the scriptures and its law and its Moses? So in their earthly trial, the earthly and eschatological trial of Jesus does a repeat performance.

John's way of stating the Christian claim that Jesus as the Christ changes human ethos is stated in the prologue as follows:

“to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gave the right (*exousia*) to become children of God” (1.12). I translate the Greek term *exousia* as a juridical/ethical term for “rights” instead of the NRSV’s rendering “power” to follow through on the Ricoeur/Preiss proposal of the cosmic trial. *Exousia* as used elsewhere by John corroborates this rendering.

The right to be children of God arises in the sinner’s encounter with Christ

As the Johannine prologue opens, there are no signals that anyone has such right automatically. In fact, the opposite is signaled. As the Sent One, the Envoy, arrives in the world, the world that was made through him, this world “knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.” The Envoy is “true light,” but what he shines into is darkness.

The Envoy has rights to the world and its people. He made every bit of it with no exceptions (1.3). But these rights of the Creator’s ownership are contested by the intended receivers. By contesting his claim they signal that they are not children of God. If they once did have the *exousia*, they now do not want it. But some do receive him. Yet, receiving does not signal that they have already been rightful children of God. No, they too are previously right- less, but now they are given the *exousia* to become what they previously were not: “children.” And John makes the novelty of this right of procreative passage specific. It is parenting “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a male, but of God” (1.13). The right comes by receiving/believing the Sent One. How does that work?

We get an answer by sampling some of the Christ-encounters John offers. John leaves no doubt that people do not arrive on the scene having the *exousia* of children of God (*tekna theou*), call it the *tekna*-cratic ethos. No, all are born of flesh, and flesh

stays flesh (3.6). It profits zero (8.63). Everyone "must be born anew" (3.6f.). It is expected that a "teacher of Israel" would understand this (3.10). The Lamb of God is to take away the sin of the world (1.29), and no one is initially exempt from this contra-*tekna*-logical evaluation. All are sinners without exception.

John does not think that this is pessimism. He signals a bit of surprise himself that when the "true light" shines, everything else is by contrast so dark – especially things that were so lucid before, like the "man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." Doesn't this also qualify John's alleged anti-semitism? Isn't John saying: Even the very best Jews, who are the best people of all ("Abraham's children"), are nevertheless dark by contrast with this Envoy? The best human moral and religious luminaries can't hold a candle to him. And if he is "true light," theirs isn't at all.

No one has the divine paternity by bloodlines, by fleshly birth, even as "Abraham's descendants." No one has a priori-*tekna*-legitimacy. In fact, to push the parental metaphor, the folks who do claim it apart from the Christ have an alternate heredity from the one claimed: "born of fornication……of your father the devil." Satan's demonry in John is singularly forensic: he is a courtroom liar "and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (8.41-44).

The fundamental untruth that the father of lies passes on to his children is the untruth about themselves. To remain in that untruth is to wind up dead. Hence Satan's own ethos is that of "murderer." All are sinners, but they hold that to be untrue about themselves. Though sinners-in-fact, they remain by their denial sinners-in-untruth.

The first ministry of truth that the divine Envoy exercises is to move such sinners-in-fact into being sinners-in-truth. In the full-scale argument about paternity in John 8 this ministry of truth on Jesus' part fails: "Because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin?" For that is the "truth" issue here: Who is sinner? "If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?" (8.45f.). Their refusal to hear this word of truth about themselves leads to the tragic contra-*tekna* conclusion: "The reason why you do not hear them [these true words of God] is that you are not *of* God" (8.47). Here Jesus' truth-ministry fails. The intended receivers remain in untruth. They adjudge Jesus to be the liar – at least about them. So they take up stones to throw at him – to close the case and carry out the verdict.

In the immediately following chapter 9 we have a Christ-encounter that leads to a happier conclusion, though the antagonists of chapter 8 continue alongside the central figure to highlight the contrast. It is the pericope of the "man blind from his birth." Five times this point is made: he was "born" blind. We might think that this was merely a clinical statement from his medical chart, were it not for John's making both in the prologue a matter of rights and his using blindness as a metaphor for sin throughout this pericope. This puts us right back at the center of the debate about ethos "from birth." Who is the sinner? The critics put that value judgment on Jesus (9.24) and in their last word to the newly-sighted man tell him that he was "born in utter sin" (9.34).

Note how the man never disputes his genetic malady. In fact he affirms it. I was "a man born blind." He is blind in fact, and, what's more, "in truth." Human beings are "in truth" what they are if they make no pretense to appear otherwise, but will be nothing other than they in fact are.

We might think it would be folly for a man blind from birth to deny something so undeniable, yet that is John's point about the ethos of the sinners here. For people so committed to God's truth, why deny the divine truth about one's self? At least if they did not see it clearly before, now by contrast with Jesus, grace and truth in person, their difference from him is inescapable. But not if they are blind, blind from birth.

The protagonist here is blind/sinner in fact and "in truth," and already with that his ethos is a considerable distance removed from those who are blind/sinner in fact only. His Christ encounter moved him into the realm of truth, albeit sinner-in-truth. But he now moves even further away from the sinner's initial ethos. For Jesus is not only truth for this sinner. He is also and uniquely grace for him, "grace upon grace" (1.16). Jesus "manifests in him the works of God" (9.3), the prologue-designated work of the "true light" to enlighten every darkened one (1.9). "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (9.5), he says as the healing begins. And he graces this "true" sinner with the gift of sight, of light. Does that mean that he is now a non-sinner? At first it sounds incredible, yet that is the relentless conclusion to the John 9 pericope.

The first ethical move in the process is to become a "sinner in truth." When some of the Pharisees come to Jesus after the event and ask whether they are blind, he says, "If you were blind [=sinner in truth] you would have no sin [by virtue of this encounter with me]; but now that you say, 'We see' [i.e., we are nonsinners], your sin remains." The clinically blind man's sin does not "remain," not only because Jesus opened his eyes, the physical enlightening action, but because after his exclusion from the synagogue Jesus finds him and moves him to the confession, "Lord, I *believe*." With that confession he qualifies for a new ethos: "to all who receive him, who believed in his name, *he gave the right* to become children of God." Children of

God are graced nonsinners who have moved from sinner-in-fact, to sinner-in-truth, to graced nonsinner: they hold the *tekna*-cratic right. The deuterocanonical pericope of the adulteress (8.1-11) corroborates the sequence: sinner-in-fact, sinner-in-truth, graced ("neither do I accuse you") nonsinner ("sinner no more").

> Werner Elert has observed:
> The kind of truth which makes its entry in the person of the sinless Christ
> is totally different from the truth sinners dread. Jesus becomes their
> associate and friend, he is one of them. In becoming their equal, he makes
> them his equal. In the Johannine signs [including this one], he eliminates
> the difference between sinners and himself, even becoming "sinner" like
> them. Are they then too no longer sinners? It sounds incredible. It could
> at most be so if the one eliminating the difference were really believable.
> John claims to believe it, describing the process in the words: "We beheld
> his glory….full of grace and truth." Christ is not only truth in person, but
> also grace in person, for by making sinners his equals, they become graced
> sinners. But the question still remains whether this verdict that Christ renders
> on sinners by becoming their freind, is also God's verdict. Not until we have
> clarity here will we have a conclusive answer to the question of consequences
> that this action of Christ toward sinners has for their total

ethos.
(Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, 187f.)

In Johannine terms John's Jesus claims to *give* that right to believing sinners. But claims are cheap. Since the claimed right is the "right of children of God," the question arises: Does God concur in this judgment? Does Jesus have the right to extend family rights to anyone, let alone to sinners – and then extend them to such a motley collection of them, the *ochlos*, the riffraff, "the accursed, who do not know the law," whom the law designates *aposynagogos*?

Jesus' own "rights" and thus Jesus' right to extend Tekna-cratic rights

In Jesus' own trial his right to be called "Son of God" is at the center of the suit. John is unrelenting in signaling the cross ("the hour") as the denouement that verifies Jesus' right to the title. In every instance where John links the term *exousia* to Jesus directly, the right is associated with life and death. And this linkage is not surprising, since John's Gospel treats life and death as juridical (that is, ethical) events and not primarily as medical, biological phenomena. Let us examine these explicit "rights" references to Jesus.

In Jesus' defense for healing the sick man at the sheep gate pool he says, "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him *exousia* [the right] *krisin poiein* [to execute judgment] because he is the Son of man" (5.26f.).

The right claimed by Jesus here is the right of the Son of Man, the right of the final judge at the eschatological judgment day. He claims this right, but by what rights? What authorizes God to turn over the grand finale judgment to the Son – and especially

to this one? We might be inclined to think that since he is the Father's son, such transfer of duties is merely a matter of majestic magisterial discretion. Not so. Jesus "earns" this right by what he does in "the hour." Even though as the divine Logos, only Son…in the beginning," he does have "life in himself," that does not yet authorize him to bestow that life (=the right to be children of God) to others who rightfully do not have it. That right needs to be earned by effort, by "doing the work" of the Envoy, if that work truly is the work of God.

Jesus becomes the Son of Man "by rights" by virtue of his own trial. This divine judge is not above the fray; in fact, he is not even above being himself indicted, found guilty, and executed. To be sure, he is then vindicated, but not without the continuing marks of an incriminated death (20.27). John draws these two together: the hour of cross/resurrection is the conclusion of Jesus' trial and simultaneously Jesus' elevation to the bench of final judgment as the Son of Man, in both cases he is "lifted up."

There is a double "double-take" here. First of all, the earthly accused one is simultaneously the vindicated eschatological judge. Second, those who entrust their case to this strangely incriminated and vindicated judge get a jump on the final judgment, "heading it off at the pass," "scooping" it before it happens, and thus hilariously getting the final judgment already behind them.

The future judgment already behind them? "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; s/he does not come into judgment, but has (already) passed from death to life" (5.25). This proleptic bestowal of "right to life" is finally identical with the right of children of God, a right that means biographically "born of God," "begotten, not made," tantalizingly similar (or is it even

identical?) to the right of life of the only-begotten Son.

Jesus becomes the Son of Man “by rights” by virtue of his own trial.

But how does the earthly accused become thereby the eschatological judge? The next two *exousia* passages provide an answer. In the Good Shepard pericope of chapter 10 Jesus says: “no one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have *exousia* to lay it down, and I have *exousia* to take it up again; this assignment [*entole*] I have received from my Father.” The divine commission of the Envoy is to do just that, to lay down and take up again his life. That is what makes his dying “right” irrespective of the hanky-panky that may have ensued in the dramatic story line. And that is what makes his resurrection “right” – it is what God sent him to do. But how does that all work to be of benefit for the intended beneficiaries, in this pericope, the mortally endangered sheep?

John, of course, affirms the beneficial results of Jesus’ death. In commenting on the Son of Man’s “hour” we hear: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth, and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (12.25). And a few lines later: “For this purpose I have come to this hour” (12.27). “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this signaling what sort of death he was going to die” (12.31-33). The “Book of Signs” in John concludes with this summary signal.

His death is not a tragic accident. It is central to his assignment. Simultaneously as he is lifted up to be the eschatological judge ahead of time, he is also the dying grain of wheat bearing much fruit, the rights-transfer agent for

making others children of God. At times Jesus sounds as if the judge's role is not part of his original assignment. "I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. Whoever rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day" (12.47-48). By virtue of being savior he attains the right to be the eschatological judge. Nevertheless, verdicts *ad malam partem* (for the bad part) are not his *opus proprium* (appropriate work) but his opus alienum (alien work).

How does his death bestow rights to unchildren to become children? In 17.1-3 he prays: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him *exousia* over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Who would want rights to "all flesh"? Bothered as we are with the negative "rights" that each one's own flesh bestows ("remains flesh," "profits zero"), who would want rights to any more, let alone to "all flesh?" Already in the prologue that arrangement of rights was telegraphed ahead to us. The *logos* became flesh – our kind of humanity – in order to get rights over all flesh. Right to do what? Judge them? No, that's not the assignment. Right to give them eternal life. Right to give these unchildren the life and right of God's own self.

How does the cross actually do that? The final *exousia* passage in John takes us into the courtroom exchange between Jesus and Pilate. "Do you not know that I have *exousia* to release you, and *exousia* to crucify you?" says Pilate. "you would have no *exousia* over me," answers Jesus, "unless it has been given you from above." Rights come from the bench. But there is a Bench above Pilate's bench, and that's where the "right" to Jesus' life or death is grounded. And as we heard in chapter 10, that right is

one which Jesus himself now exercises, not Pilate at all, even though it is Pilate's decision that implements the Envoy's divine assignment.

But what is "right" about the execution death of Jesus? By what right does he die? At the trial John does not dispute the claim of the plaintiffs: "We have a law and by that Law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God." This claim for the lawfulness of Jesus' execution needs the interpretive linkage that John provides earlier when Caiaphas, the high priest, addresses the Jewish council: "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." John comments: "He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the *children of God* who are scattered abroad" (11.50-53). The death of Jesus is legal, and at the same time saves people from the law's case against them that they should "perish," that they should die their own rightful deaths.

How does John make all that legal doubleness compute? The law (of Moses) gives Pilate the right to pass the death sentence on Jesus. Pilate, of course, does not know this. That is a "right" given him from above. But is Moses for Jesus or against him? That is the debate in the entire Fourth Gospel. The opponents view the either/or as follows: either Moses testifies that Jesus is the Son of God, or Moses testifies that he is a blasphemer deserving of death. John's own answer to that either/or is Yes to both, but with an important nuance: He is indeed the Son of God, the *Logos* of the deity, and in his enfleshed way of solidarity with sinners he does perpetrate blasphemy, but a blessed blasphemy, a contravening of God's own (Mosaic) law about sinners. Jesus' blasphemy is his claim to move sinners into the divine family, right into the Father's lap where

according to Moses only the Abrahamic Torah-faithful had any right to be, and even, according to John, previously only the only-begotten One had any genetic rights to be (1.18).

Although Moses in John always testifies for Jesus, Moses is conversely always the accuser of sinners. This fate is made even more lethal when sinners-in-fact set their hope upon Moses (5.45ff.). Sinners-in-truth are therefore not likely to be such "disciples of Moses" (9.28). Yet merely "not hoping in Moses" does not get them out from under Moses' condemnation. Flesh and its bread, even Mosaic bread, leaves you dead in the wilderness (chap. 6). Jesus' partnering with sinners, though a genuine Son of God (a nonsinner) himself, enmeshes him in Moses' deadly criticism upon those whose side he takes. Thus it is paradoxically true that "we have a law [Moses' own fundamental death verdict for sinners], and by that law he ought to die." The blasphemy of Jesus' action is not simply the claim: I am the Son of God, but the things he does as he claims that title and its rights. His hobnobbing with sinners, and his taking their side in their own controversy with Mosaic criticism and the Mosaic administrators is what is so contrary to the Yahweh of the Mosaic Decalogue who claims not to be friendly toward sinners (Ex 20.5f.). No wonder almost every sign he performs embroils Jesus in juridical argument.

And that juridical realism before the divine bench is what John reads out of Caiaphas' statement although Caiaphas surely meant it otherwise. "The whole nation" will indeed perish, not by Roman military violence but by Mosaic prosecution before the divine court, if there is no extraordinary intervention. Therefore it is indeed "expedient for you that one should die for the people, lest the whole nation perish," to which John adds, "he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the *children of God* [!] who are scattered abroad" (11.50f.). One dies for all,

and all are saved, are moved to the new ethos of children of God, a *right* they have *sola fide* (that is, “by believing in him”).

This passage reflects John’s version of the more familiar Pauline one-for-all solidarity notions (Romans 5 with its Adamic and Christic human solidarity). In diagramming the action taking place at the level of the “Supreme” court, while the action proceeds in the Jerusalem council and before Pilate’s court, John in the Gospel does not give us very precise signs. The courtroom scene of Revelation 12 gives a later exposition of this Johannine tradition when it describes how the “accuser” no longer has any rights to accuse Christ-believing sinners.

In accusing the Word-made-flesh (made sinner) at the Jerusalem trial, the cosmic accuser is exercising his necessary rights. In fact, he *has to* do it. He has Mosaic authorization for demanding the death verdict. Yet the one he is accusing is the Son of the divine majesty, “one with the Father,” whom to accuse is to incriminate oneself of the selfsame first commandment blasphemy charge. Thereby the accusing law by which Jesus ought to die is caught signing its own death warrant for rebellion and blasphemy, if the one being accused to death really is the Son of God. If he is not, the law’s verdict will stick. If he is, the law’s verdict will counterindict the law itself and Jesus will be vindicated.

Easter is his vindication. Easter is the Law’s Lord confirming the divine right of the Son- in-the-flesh to bring sinners into the family. Easter exposes the law’s forfeited claim to rights over sinners. No surprise then that the first words of the Risen One after the shalom-greeting (i.e., good news to *these* sinners) is their assignment to forgive sins as his envoys with the grim reminder that for whomever they neglect to do it, for those folks sins are “retained.” The accuser still has his rights to

them.

In carrying out the trial of Jesus all the way to his execution the "ruler of this world" loses his rights. We tend to overdemonize this character in John, I think. Who runs this world? Law runs this world – sometimes lawfully, often not, but when it does work, the law (even the very best law – the law of Moses) is the prince of this world. And in a 1-2-3 sequence of the only times this world's ruler appears in John, the Evangelist signs to us the consequences of Jesus' trial for the rights of the law. (1) In describing "this hour" Jesus says, "Now is the judgment of the world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself" (12.31f.). (2) "I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me [literally, 'He has nothing *on* me']; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (14.30f.). And finally, (3) the Paraclete's threefold assignment to convince/convict the world *re* sin, righteousness, judgment: by virtue of Jesus' going to the Father "the ruler of this world is judged" (16.8-11).

The cross certifies before the heavenly and eschatological court Jesus' rights to exempt sinners from the verdict of the accuser. It gives him rights over these sinners, or, in John's language, "right over all flesh to give eternal life to all." That right he does not clutch to himself but gives gratis "to all who believe in him." They were the intended beneficiaries from the very beginning. Believing effects the rights-transfer. Believing in this vindicated Vindicator vindicates the believers already now before the final Supreme court. They trump the other-wise valid accuser by the blood of the Lamb. They are granted the ethos of nonsinner, children of God, and they have it by rights, both by Mosaic rights in the paradoxically legal right/wrong death of Jesus, and even more by family ownership rights of

Jesus’ own grace and truth.

In John’s Gospel that human ethos actualizes itself in behaviors that are in this Mosaic world but of the new world of grace and truth. Bilateral agape is one, prayer in Jesus’ name another, witnessing and working a third, and bearing persecution another, to name a few of John’s favorites. But that’s another essay.

Edward H. Schroeder

MosaicandChristicEthosGospelJohn (PDF)