

JAN G. VAN DER WATT

A Grammar of the Ethics of John

Volume II

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
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502



Jan G. van der Watt

A Grammar of the Ethics of John

Volume II:
Reading the Letters of John
from an Ethical Perspective

Mohr Siebeck

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Vir

Shireen, Nireen, Loutjie, Jana en Markus

Preface

This volume on the Letters of John is the second part of a research project on the grammar of ethics of John, of which the first volume, *A Grammar of the Ethics of John: Reading John from an Ethical Perspective, Volume 1*, dealing with the Gospel, was published in 2019. The original intention was to publish the material on both the Gospel and Letters in one volume, but for several reasons it was not feasible. For practical reasons, for instance, the length of such a volume, and theoretical reasons like the recent tendency to read the Letters as independent documents, it made more sense to publish the material on the Letters in a separate volume.

The same general exegetical methodology that was applied in reading the Gospel is used in analysing the documents, that is a close reading of the text within its literary, social, historical and religious situation. Obviously, the difference in genre and situations is duly taken into account, which required suggesting detailed scenarios for understanding the different Letters. As was the case with the first volume and for the same reasons, some of the research presented in Volume 2 has previously been published during the period of research.¹ However, this material is integrated into the general arguments presented in this volume. The translations from Greek (NA 28) are my own. In some cases the translations of ESV or NRSV are given where I concur with the translation.

A challenge was to combine or connect the material in Volumes 1 and 2, since the aim is that a prospective reader should be able to read either of the two volumes independently of the other as stand-alone documents (i.e. not needing consistent back-referencing to Volume 1 for understanding the arguments in Volume 2), since it is presumed that some would only be interested in the Gospel while others might be interested in the Letters alone.

Due to the overlaps and similarities between these documents, like the concepts of love, truth, eternal life, the use of the cross, the Spirit, and so on, overlaps in the material discussed in the two volumes are inevitable in order to make sense of the discussions. Obviously it should not automatically be assumed that overlapping concepts or words are identical in meaning. The uses in particular instances are checked and considered on their own. Use of cross references (mostly in the footnotes) aims at connecting the discussions

¹ For the motivation, see the Preface of Volume 1.

in the two volumes. The last section (Section 4) also deals with the similarities and differences in order to illustrate both the connections and differences between the ethical material of the Gospel and Letters.

Due to the spiral or cyclical Johannine style it was necessary to structure the material under topics like God, Jesus, family relations, etc. as these issues presented themselves. Because of John's spiral-like working, he consistently returns to topics during his arguments. Since the information about different topics is therefore spread throughout the documents (in spiral-like repetition), both a syntagmatic and a paradigmatic approach were necessary in order to ensure a more comprehensive view of the concept or topic. The paradigmatic overviews are often expressed in tables with accompanying discussions. The aim was to present an overall and logical picture of how the different aspects related to ethics are mutually linked and developed in the Letters.

I am grateful to the people who supported me while busy with this project. I want to thank the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung for financing several research trips, as well as the University of the Free State, where I am a research associate. I am grateful to my Alexander von Humboldt hosts in Berlin (Prof. Cilliers Breytenbach) and Munich (Prof. David du Toit), as well as to Prof. Matthias Konradt who hosted me in Heidelberg. Discussions with Prof. Alan Culpepper on Johannine literature also proved to be very valuable, and for this, he also deserves my gratitude. Not the least, I also want to thank my wife Shireen who has patiently walked the long road with me, assisting me in any way she could. I also want to express my gratitude to Nanette Lötter for correcting my English.

Special thanks go to Prof. Jörg Frey and to Mohr Siebeck for publishing the results of this project in WUNT.

Johannesburg, Summer 2022

Jan G. van der Watt

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Abbreviations

ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , Freedman, DN (ed.), 6 Volumes, New York 1992
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> . Temporini, H, and Haase, W (eds.), Teil II: <i>Principat</i> , Berlin/New York 1974ff.
ASV	American Standard Version
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
AV	Authorized Version – 1873
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BDAG	Bauer, W, Danker, FW, Arndt, WF, and Gingrich, FW, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3 rd edn., Chicago 1999
BFC	La Bible en Français courant
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BiLi	<i>Bibel und Liturgie</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CV	<i>Communio Viatorum</i>
CEV	Contemporary English Version
CIJ	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum</i> , Frey, J-B (ed.), 2 Volumes, Rome 1936–1952
EBR	<i>Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception</i> , Berlin/Boston 2009ff.
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , Balz, HR, and Schneider, G, eds., 3 Volumes. Grand Rapids 1990–1993
ESV	English Standard Version
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
GN	Gute Nachricht
GNB	The Good News Bible
GW	God's Word Translation
IG	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>
ISV	International Standard Version
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
KJV	King James Version
LCL	The Loeb Classical Library
LEB	The Lexham English Bible
Lut	Lutherbibel

NA 28	Nestle-Aland, <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 28th edn., Stuttgart 2012
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NAV	Nuwe Afrikaanse Vertaling (New Afrikaans Translation)
NBG1951	Bijbel – 1951 (Dutch translation)
NBS	La nouvelle Bible Segond
NCV	New Century Version
NGTT	<i>Nederduitse gereformeerde teologiese tydskrif</i>
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
RGG ³	<i>Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> , 3 rd edn., 6 Volumes, Tübingen 1957–1965
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
SVV	Statenvertaling (Dutch translation)
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , Kittel, G, and Friedrich, G (eds.). Translated by Bromiley, GW, 10 Volumes, Grand Rapids 1993
TNIV	Today's New International Version
TOB	Traduction Oecuménique del la Bible
TRE	<i>Theologische Realenzyklopädie</i> , Krause, G, and Müller, G (eds.), 36 Volumes, Berlin/New York 1977–2004
TRu	<i>Theologische Rundschau</i>
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
TTZ	<i>Trierer theologische Zeitschrift</i>
TWNT	<i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament</i> , Kittel, G, and Friedrich, G (eds.), 10 Volumes, Stuttgart 1932–1979
TZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
YLT	Young's Literal Translation
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

Introduction

1. Ethics of the Johannine Letters in research

The Letters of John are known for their emphasis on *love*.¹ In addition, 2 and 3 John deal with ethical crises specifically related to receiving ‘problematic’ visitors. There is little further evidence of ethical issues related to specific practical issues like, for instance, marriage, sexual or juridical behaviour, fiscal issues, and so on.

1.1 Negative attitudes

Even though references to ethics occur in virtually all commentaries on the Letters² and the ethical nature of the Letters is acknowledged,³ systematic and detailed reflection on ethical issues remains a rarity.⁴ A survey of the relevant literature⁵ shows that although some attention is given to ethical issues like

¹ Cf., for e.g., Augustine at the beginning of his *Ten Tractates on the Epistle of John*. To mention but a few examples of the presence of the concept of love: God is love; He loved believers first and as he loved believers, they should love one another (1J 4:10–11); Jesus illustrated the nature of love through his death and this should be imitated by believers (1J 3:16); The Presbyter loves his fellow Christians in truth (2J 1); love is the commandment they heard from the beginning (1J 2:7–10; 2J 6); believers testify to the love of Gaius (3J 6).

² Cf., e.g., relevant sections in Brown (1986), Schnackenburg (1984), Smalley (2002), Klauck (1991), Painter (2002), Lieu (2008), and Menken (2010).

³ As Schnelle (2010:188) remarks, ‘Es geht dem 1 Joh um die ethische Gestalt, den ethischen Charakter des Christentums!’ Kysar (1992:910), for instance, emphasizes the centrality of the moral perspectives in the Letters. Cf. Perkins (1979), Schnackenburg (1967:316), Brown (1982), Smalley (1984), Von Wahlde (1990:108), Van der Watt (1999; 2011; 2014) and Van der Merwe (2006:536). The primary theological foci in 1 and 2 John is usually identified as Christology and ethics. There are differences of opinion about the relation between these two concepts. Some see his ethics as directly dependent upon his Christology (Beutler 2000:26) while others do not want to link them so directly (Lieu 1991; 2008).

⁴ Ethics in 1 John is more often treated in combination with, and as a sub-section of, the ethics of John’s Gospel, as Konradt (2022:ad loc.), for instance, does it.

⁵ Some publications on the ethics in the Letters are: Rese (1985:44–58), Klauck (1989:151–71), Perkins (1992:287–95), Söding (1996:306–57), Van der Watt (1999:491–511; 2014; 2016; 2018), Van der Merwe (2005:527–42; 2006:535–63), Nicklas (2006:245–

love, references to light or sin, these are relatively limited, as is the excitement among scholars about exploring ethics in depth in these Letters.⁶ Negative remarks about the treatment of ethics in the Letters are not uncommon. Rensberger,⁷ for instance, notes, ‘The epistles are not concerned with ethics ... The only ethical category of interest to the author is love for one another’. Lieu⁸ broadens this idea when she remarks, ‘It is true that the “ethical” dimension is very unspecific and that behaviour seems primarily directed towards other members of the community; there is no consideration of how they are to behave “in the world”’.

1.2 Interest in the ethics of the Letters

In spite of these sentiments, interest in the ethics of the Letters of John is evident in articles that have recently been published.⁹ Schnelle emphasizes what he calls a theological ethic,¹⁰ while Van der Watt and Van der Merwe¹¹ focus on the communal basis of ethics in the Letters. Wischmeyer, again, differentiates between the situations addressed by the Gospel and the Letters respectively, arguing that ethics is much more prominent in the Letters because of the difference in the situation between the Gospel and the Letters – what Jesus said to his disciples in John 13ff. is applied to a wider audience in the Letters.¹² However, the interest remains relatively low key.¹³ On hospitality, Malherbe¹⁴ and Malina¹⁵ reflect on the ethical dynamics in 3 John, although Malina in his article focuses more on methodological issues.

1.3 Possible reasons for the limited interest in the ethics of the Letters by scholars

The limited interest in the ethics of the Letters by scholars might partly be due to the apparent clear and straightforward ‘ethical language’,¹⁶ basically calling for ‘brotherly’ love, without treating the contents or implications of

48), Snodderley (2008), Wischmeyer (2009:207–20), Schnelle (2010) and Armitage (2021). See also Malherbe (1977:222–32) and Malina (1986:171–94) on 3 John.

⁶ Cf. Painter (2002:1–26) for an overview of the history of interpretation of the Letters.

⁷ Rensberger (1997:35).

⁸ Lieu (1991:106).

⁹ Cf. also Snodderley (2008).

¹⁰ Schnelle (2012).

¹¹ Van der Watt (1988; 1999; 2007; 2014) and Van der Merwe (2005; 2006).

¹² Wischmeyer (2009).

¹³ The above mentioned are only in the form of journal articles, often approaching the ethical dynamics from a specific perspective. I am not aware of any comprehensive treatment (i.e. as monograph or substantial part of a monograph) of the subject.

¹⁴ Malherbe (1977).

¹⁵ Malina (1986).

¹⁶ Cf. Schnackenburg (1967:316).

this love in much concrete detail (cf., however, 1J 3:16–17). What can be said is: ‘love one another’ and that is it!?

A further reason for the lack of interest might be the absence of broader social awareness in the Letters, since on the surface level there seems to be no interest in issues outside the circle of the Johannine group, such as more general ethical themes like social responsibilities, economic or political behaviour, and individual issues related to interpersonal relations, marriage, or sexual behaviour, for instance. Lists of virtues and vices are lacking, while terms referring more to principles than practical behaviour are used, like truth, righteousness, purity or sinlessness. These principles are not filled with practical content, however, that is no morals are spelled out.¹⁷ Neither are these documents ethical treatises.

Another issue seems to hamper ethical reflection, namely, ethical issues that might seem strange or even be questioned by modern readers.

To name a few: the exclusive emphasis on ‘brotherly love’, which even seems outright sexist to some. The imperative (2J 10–11) not to allow a visitor into your house or even greet him seems to militate against the idea of Christian love and charity. It seems to propagate a situation where open discussion or, to put it in modern terms, ecumenical relations are discouraged. Some modern readers are also uncomfortable with the ancient reciprocal obligation to return a gift (like love), especially in light of free will. Then there is the harshness of the Presbyter in 3 John, where he insinuates that Diotrephes does not know God since he does not want to welcome strangers (travelling missionaries who are associated with the Presbyter) into his house.

1.4 The aim of this volume

The aim of this volume, as is the case with Volume 1 on the Gospel, is to analyse and construct a grammar of ethics of the Letters through a multi-dimensional, close reading of the texts within their socio-religious frameworks, focusing on the data related to ethics and morals within the broader framework of the message of John in these particular documents. What was stated in the first volume about the methodology and approach also applies here and need not be repeated.¹⁸

A scenario of the possible situation will first be offered for the writing of the Letters, based on a close reading of the texts. The consistency and plausibility of the suggested scenario will be tested repeatedly, especially in regard to whether it allows for a plausible and integrated understanding of the different detailed remarks related to the ethics in the Letters. This is of course

¹⁷ Cf. Klauck (1991:277–80).

¹⁸ The approach will be similar to that used in Vol. 1, 29–107 where the theory is discussed in more detail.

more an approach than a method (different exegetical methods are of course used in the process of a close reading of the text).¹⁹

The ethics of the three Letters will then be dealt with individually (Sections 1–3), resulting in a grammar of the ethics of the Letters. In a last section (Section 4) the similarities and differences between the ethics of the Gospel and Letters will be considered.

Before dealing with the different Letters separately, a few issues should first be considered that influence the interpretation as well as the grammar of ethics of these documents.²⁰ These issues deal largely with the nature of the documents as well as the interrelatedness of the Letters, both to the Gospel and to each other.

2. The genre of the Letters

The nature of genre is central to the interpretation of a document. A joke, for instance, should be interpreted differently from a newspaper article or a scientific essay. *Letters* were an important and central means of general and specific communication among all classes of society in ancient times.²¹ There is large consensus that 2 and 3 John are true ancient letters, but there are doubts about 1 John.

¹⁹ Writing on the ethics of the Letters proved to be complex, especially since researchers are divided between two major views (with nuances abounding between the two), namely, i) that 1 John is polemical implying that the contrasting material in the Letter refers to the views of the opponents, or ii) that the document is pastoral, meaning that the contrasting sections are rhetorically intended to convince the addressees to make the correct decisions. Obviously, a choice for a particular view significantly impacts on the grammar of ethics. To come to the most plausible conclusion, the different options are considered and argued in detail and a particular choice is made. This choice formed the framework within which the ethical data is considered. However, for the sake of balance, the implications of a different choice for John's ethics are also discussed, but not in the same detailed way.

²⁰ Not all introductory questions will be treated, for instance, the numerous discussions about a possible structure of 1 John (cf. Brown 1986, Schnackenburg 1984, Painter 2002, Culpepper 1998:245 and Menken 2010), which to my mind mostly seem artificial. Rather, issues that directly impact on the ethics of the Letters will receive due attention, like the social framework or the identity of the opponents.

²¹ Cf. Harding (2003:113) and Painter (2002:85). A vast deposit of ancient letters survives which provides us with ample information about the nature and function of these ancient letters.

2.1 Ancient conventions in letter writing and the Letters of John

Malherbe,²² referring to Graeco-Roman contexts, notes, ‘As early as the fourth century B.C., Epicurus used letters to instruct and direct affairs of the philosophic communities who held him in esteem as their master. The voluminous correspondences of Cicero and Seneca witness to the popularity of the genre in the centuries immediately before and after Christ’. Harding²³ further remarks that ‘philosophers kept in touch with their pupils by letters, reminding them of the teaching of the master, and exhorting them to maintain their commitment to it’. Ancient letters were indeed a versatile and effective means of communication, also for the early Christian communities. The following qualities are regarded as characteristics of ancient letters.²⁴

2.1.1 Ancient letters served as a substitute for physical presence

Letters served as an effective substitute for physical presence, since there was no other quick way of making contact, like fast transport or telephones. Letters, therefore, fulfilled the function of ‘making a person present although he is absent’.²⁵ It is ‘a *sermo cum absentibus*, a communication with somebody absent as if he or she were present’.²⁶ It represented ‘half a conversation’,²⁷ indeed, ‘one half of a dialogue’.²⁸ The other half of the dialogue should be supplied by the receivers of the letter and this unfortunately remains hidden to the present-day reader.

2 and 3 John were most probably written to deal with important matters that could not wait until the planned face-to-face meetings, as are foreseen in the endings of both letters.²⁹ Consequently ‘half a conversation’ should suffice. In the case of 1 John the case is less clear. However, ‘half a conversation’ is

²² Malherbe (1986:79; 1988).

²³ Harding (2003:117).

²⁴ Cf. the excellent works of Malherbe (1988) and Klauck (2006) for information on ancient epistolary theorists and the nature and function of ancient letters. Based on descriptions by numerous ancient authors, Malherbe (1988:12), for instance, gives the following ‘definitions’ of a letter: a) ‘A letter is one half of a dialogue (Dem. 223) or a surrogate for an actual dialogue (Cic. *Ad Fam.* 12,30,1)’; b) ‘In it one speaks to an absent friend as though he were present’; c) ‘The letter is, in fact, speech in the written medium’; d) ‘A letter reflects the personality of its writer’. Cf. also Edwards (2001:1).

²⁵ Harding (2003:113) says that the ‘letter writer addresses the recipient as though physically present’.

²⁶ Allen, Neil and Mayer (2009:45). Malherbe (1986:68) notes that the preferred way of instructing in antiquity was through speech, but ‘writers like Seneca regarded letters as the next best’. A letter was a speech written down.

²⁷ According to Harding (2003:113), this was Aristotle’s view. Cf. also Demetrius, *Eloc.* 223–225.

²⁸ Allen, Neil and Mayer (2009:45).

²⁹ 2J 12; 3J 13–14.

suggested by the way the author addresses his intended audience. He knows their ethos and their situation. He refers to what they know and argues from there,³⁰ he anticipates what might be said,³¹ invites them back to fellowship,³² and warns them against deceivers.³³

2.1.2 *Expected friendly tone and style of ancient letters*

According to Seneca³⁴ the tone and style should be as if two friends are communicating in one another's presence, since letters were (normally) the 'expression of a friendly relationship', or at least a relationship where openness allowed communication.³⁵ *Psychagogy*, that is, pastoral care and guidance, was therefore an important function of letters.³⁶

The Letters of John fit the pattern of letters that reflect amicable communication to the benefit of the recipients. In 1 John the readership is consistently addressed in benevolent and intimate personal terms, such as 'beloved'³⁷ or 'my (little) children'.³⁸ The recipients are also, for instance, encouraged,³⁹ warned,⁴⁰ enlightened⁴¹ and praised,⁴² confirming the pastoral nature of the Letter. In 2 and 3 John the author also addresses the readership as people he loves,⁴³ whom he intends to visit,⁴⁴ and in 3 John he calls the recipients 'beloved'.⁴⁵ In 2 John he is concerned about the possibility of damage to the group and positively advises the lady and her children. He also regards it as a joy to visit the group of the lady. In 3 John the author encourages Gaius to do the work of truth and in God's service.

³⁰ Cf. 1J 2:18, 20, 24, 29; 3:11, etc.

³¹ Cf. 1J 1:6, 8; 2:9, etc.

³² 1J 1:3–4.

³³ 1J 2:26.

³⁴ Seneca, *Ep.* 40:1; 75:1–2.

³⁵ Harding (2003:113). See Galatians or 2 Corinthians where an undertone of openness in spite of conflict is evident.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 114.

³⁷ 1J 2:7; 4:1, 7; 3J 2, 5, 11.

³⁸ 1J 2:1, 12, 18, 28; 3J 4.

³⁹ 1J 1:9; 2:1–2, 27; 3:1, 14; 4:4, 19; 5:4, 13.

⁴⁰ 1J 2:15–17, 26; 5:21.

⁴¹ 1J 2:18–27.

⁴² 1J 2:12–14.

⁴³ 2J 1; 3J 1.

⁴⁴ 2J 12; 3J 13–14.

⁴⁵ 3J 2, 5, 11.

2.1.3 Ancient letters somehow reflected the authentic character of the author

Seneca remarked that a letter, like a personal speech, should reflect ‘the personality of the letter-writer’,⁴⁶ or in the words of Demetrius,⁴⁷ ‘it may be said that everybody reveals his own soul in letters’.⁴⁸ This includes authenticity and trustworthiness, as well as correspondence to reality shared by the recipients.

The three Letters of John each reflects in its own way the character of the author. In 1 John the author identifies himself as representative of the group of eye-witnesses and describes who he is and what he stands for, often referring to ‘I’ or ‘us’, thus revealing information about himself.⁴⁹ In 2 John the author identifies himself as Presbyter⁵⁰ and associates himself with all those who know the truth. His authenticity is confirmed by the truth that abides in him and will be with him (‘us’) forever (2J 1–2). He is sensitive about his relation to the elect lady and does not force his authority on the elect lady, but rather asks her politely.⁵¹ He is very decisive about loyalty to the teachings of Christ and the truth, however.⁵² In 3 John the author likewise identifies himself as authoritative Presbyter⁵³ who follow the truth. He is also personally concerned about the health of Gaius whom he loves in truth, as well as about the well-being of the work of God (3J 6–8, 11–12).

2.1.4 Letters are a versatile means of communication

Ancient letters (much like today) were very versatile means of communication,⁵⁴ as Allen, Neil and Mayer note: ‘there was a flexibility in the deployment of the letter-writing genres and ... it could be used almost *ad libita* for purposes of communication, for dissemination of ideas, for polemical ends, and for instruction’.⁵⁵ Letters could deal with virtually anything that

⁴⁶ Allen, Neil and Mayer (2009:45).

⁴⁷ Demetrius, *Eloc.* 227–228. Translation by Harding (2003:114).

⁴⁸ In *Ep.* 40:1–2, Seneca remarks to Lucilius, ‘I thank you for writing to me so often; for you are revealing your real self to me in the only way you can. I never receive a letter from you without being in your company forthwith ... a letter, which brings us real traces, real evidences, of an absent friend. For that which is sweetest when we meet face to face is afforded by the impress of a friend’s hand upon his letter, – recognition’. Malherbe (1988:12) emphasizes that ‘Letters should be real communications and not technical treatises’.

⁴⁹ 2J 1.

⁵⁰ 2J 1.

⁵¹ Cf. subsection 8.3.2.1 b), p. 298, on 2J 5 (ἐρωτάω).

⁵² Cf. 2J 8, 9–11.

⁵³ Cf. 3J 1, 4, 5, 9–10.

⁵⁴ Malherbe (1988:12–13) argues that the variety in types of letters is clear, considering the 21 types named by Pseudo-Demetrius or the 41 named by Pseudo-Libanius.

⁵⁵ Allen, Neil and Mayer (2009:45).

conversations could deal with, or as Cicero indicates, ‘There are many kinds of letters ... letter writing was invented just in order that we might inform those at a instance if there were anything which was important for them or for ourselves that they should know’.⁵⁶ Letters therefore varied both in style and content and were used for many purposes, depending on the circumstances.⁵⁷

The versatility of the three Letters of John cannot be overlooked. 3 John deals with a personal conflict between the Presbyter and Diotrephes about authority and receiving visiting missionaries, while 2 John deals with false teachings threatening the elect lady and her children. 1 John again deals with a part of his group whose love and co-operation are cooling down in the light of the schism that has already taken place.

2.1.5 *The preferred style of ancient letters*

Ancient literary theorists recommended that letters ‘must be concise, be clear in what they say ... must be adapted to the circumstances and mood of their addressees ... should be written in the most appropriate style’.⁵⁸ There should also be freedom in structuring the letter. Further, as Demetrius puts it, ‘the length of a letter, no less than in style, must be kept within due bounds. Those that are too long ... are not in sober truth letters but treatises ...’.⁵⁹

Although it is a matter of judgment, it may be said that the Letters of John aim at addressing the mood and problems of the addressees in an appropriate manner.⁶⁰ The style is also not too poetic or complex,⁶¹ as is expected of an ancient letter, but displays a certain freedom in the use of diction, like imagery,⁶² although within the confines of the sociolect of the Johannine group.

2.1.6 *Letters or not?*

In light of the above evidence, it might be said that the Johannine Letters reasonably fulfil the requirements of ancient letters, even in the case of 1 John. There is indeed little doubt that 2 and 3 John have the typical characteristics of ancient letters.

⁵⁶ Cicero, *Fam.* 2.4.1 – in this case C. Scribonius Curio, 53 BCE. Cf. Harding (2003:115) and Malherbe (1988:ad loc.) for translation.

⁵⁷ Cf. Ps.-Demetrius, *Typoi epistolikoi*, Introduction 5–8. Malherbe (1988:ad loc.).

⁵⁸ Malherbe (1988:13). In a work attributed to Demetrius of Phaleron (ca. 330 BCE), namely, *On Style*, the author says that unornamented ‘plain’ style for letters was common, but that on certain occasions there was a need to enhance the style rhetorically, especially with moral exhortation as topic (cf. Harding 2003:114). Nevertheless, a letter should be kept uncomplicated, expressing the ‘heart’s good wishes’ (Demetrius, *Eloc.* 231).

⁵⁹ Demetrius, *Eloc.* 228 (translation by Harding 2003:114).

⁶⁰ Cf. 1J 1:3–4; 2:1, 7, 12–14, 18, 26; 3:11; 4:1–2, etc.; 2J 5–10; 3J 2–5; 13–14.

⁶¹ Compared, e.g., to Hebrews, Ephesians or 1 and 2 Peter.

⁶² Cf. the family imagery, light/darkness (1J 1:5–7; 2:8–11), the paraclete (1J 2:1), anointment (1J 2:20, 27), water and blood (1J 5:8).

There is an ongoing debate about the nature of the genre of 1 John, however, since it lacks some of the typical formal characteristics of a letter, like a proper greeting at the beginning or conclusion, causing views to differ on the nature and function of the document.⁶³ In these debates it was consequently categorized as a tract,⁶⁴ a general manifesto, a homily⁶⁵ or pastoral address,⁶⁶ a paper,⁶⁷ a paraenetic letter,⁶⁸ or a book of instruction for followers in order to be able to apply the teaching of the leader, to name but a few. Lieu opts for epistle,⁶⁹ while there are also those who prefer to call 1 John a letter, or even a circular letter.⁷⁰ It seems plausible to read 1 John with a considerable number of scholars⁷¹ as a letter, sufficiently sharing the characteristics of ancient letters, not the least with its focus on a particular situation of conflict.⁷² 1 John seems to be addressed to a particular group (the ‘you’ in the Letter), and is not a general document or treatise that is addressed to a fictive audience, detached from any concrete situation or recipients.

The Letters, 1 John included, do not pretend to be fiction or just general remarks, but respectively address particular crisis situations⁷³ – they want to proclaim, warn, convince, remind, teach, etc. As such they are performative texts that aim to influence and move people in their convictions about particular issues related to them, also on an ethical level.

Letter vs epistle: Doty⁷⁴ remarks that by the end of the 19th century, a distinction was made between letter and epistle within New Testament scholarship. He⁷⁵ points out that Deissmann distinguished between ‘epistles’ (*Episteln*), as documents written for *aesthetic reasons* by such writers as Epicurus, Pliny and Seneca, and ‘letters’ (*Briefe*) to address particular *situations*. Painter opines that 2 and 3 John, at least, fit the criteria of ‘a popular

⁶³ Cf. Thyen (1976:187), Marshall (1978:14–15), Strecker (1989:49), Klauck (1991:30–32), Kysar (1992:902), Du Rand (1997:146–49), Schnelle (2010:56–57), Menken (2010:10), Van der Watt (2007; 2011) and Parsenius (2014:26–28).

⁶⁴ Schnackenburg (1984:2–3).

⁶⁵ Culpepper (1998:251).

⁶⁶ Marshall (1978).

⁶⁷ Smalley (1984) – a bit anachronistically.

⁶⁸ Stowers (1986:97).

⁶⁹ Lieu (1986:37–51). She and some others she mentions distinguish between letters and epistles. Cf. also Marxsen (1993:285–86).

⁷⁰ Dodd (1946).

⁷¹ Cf. Van der Watt (2007:ad loc.) and further, e.g., Klauck (1991) and Menken (2010).

⁷² One of the reasons why Griffith (2002:8) regards 1 John as a situational document, is because of the exhortation, i.e. the paraenetic character of the document. It is not simply a speech written down, but the author consistently refers to his own activity as author of the letter (cf. 1J 1:4; 2:1, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 21, 26; 5:13) while focusing on specific situations (1J 2:19, 26).

⁷³ Cf. Von Wahlde (1990:105).

⁷⁴ Doty (1973:24). Cf. also Aune (1987:160) and Painter (2002:37–38).

⁷⁵ Doty (1973:24). Cf. also Aune (1987:160).

letter admirably'.⁷⁶ 1 John does not seem to be a 'popular personal letter', though it is 'directed to a specific situation'. He concludes that 'none of these three writings is formally an epistle'.⁷⁷ However, according to Aune⁷⁸ the distinction between letter and epistle has obscured rather than clarified the spectrum of possibilities that separated the short personal letter from the literary letters of antiquity. Some even use these terms without distinction.⁷⁹ To avoid confusion, 1–3 John will be referred to as 'letters'.⁸⁰

3. The relation between the Gospel and Letters of John

An important issue in interpreting the Letters of John is their relation to the Gospel,⁸¹ since that would determine to what extent the Letters must be understood and indeed interpreted in light of the Gospel. For instance, if one reads the term 'life' in a Letter, should one semantically fill it with the meaning it has in the Gospel? Are the conflicts in the Gospel directly related to the conflicts in the Letters, and are the opponents the same?

Answers to these and similar questions directly determine the interpretation of the Letters. For instance, Brown⁸² and others⁸³ presuppose a close relationship between the Gospel and the Letters, and therefore interpret the situation as well as the theology of the Letters in terms of the Gospel, enriching the understanding of the Letters through information from the Gospel.⁸⁴ In 2009 a student of Zumstein, Horst Hahn⁸⁵ argued that 1 John should be seen as a '*Relecture*' of the Gospel, using themes from the Gospel and interpreting them anew that seemed an appealing suggestion. The Letters are also regarded by some as a commentary or a set of explanatory notes that aims at correcting a wrong understanding of the Gospel.⁸⁶

⁷⁶ Painter (2002:37–38).

⁷⁷ Ibid. 38.

⁷⁸ Aune (1987:160).

⁷⁹ Griffith (2002:6).

⁸⁰ If reference is made to all three Johannine letters or one specific letter, a capital L will be used, i.e. Letter(s).

⁸¹ Cf. Brown (1986), Lieu (1986:205–209; 1991:1–8, 100–101), Marxsen (1993:285), Culpepper (1998:252–53), Beutler (2000:29–30), Frey (2000:53–59), Painter (2002:44–51, 58–74), Heckel (2004:426–33, 442) and Menken (2011:219–20).

⁸² Brown (1986) in his commentary. Sproston North (2001), however, argues against Brown, opining that Brown's argument is circular.

⁸³ Cf., e.g., H Hahn (2009), Menken (2012:3) and Parsenios (2014).

⁸⁴ Painter (2002:93) opines that 'The author's response to this crisis is called forth from his own coherent and powerful understanding of the gospel ... he has drawn deeply on the Johannine gospel tradition'.

⁸⁵ H Hahn (2009).

⁸⁶ Cf. Griffith (2002:4). Roloff (1993:291–92) identifies the author of 1 John with the last redactor of the Gospel. He wrote the Letter as a theological tractate to assist in understanding the Gospel correctly. According to him, 1 John therefore describes the situation of

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