June 2008

Calling a Spade a Spade: Measuring the Rhetorical Merit of 2 and 3 John Against Demetrius's On Style

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When trying to gain insight into the occasion and background of the fourth Gospel, scholars often compare the Evangelist’s language, ideas, and literary character against that of the first Johannine epistle. The differences found convince some critics that the two works are from different authors. One such critic made the harsh statement that the author of 1 John had “a mind inferior to that of the evangelist in spiritual quality, in intellectual power and in literary artistry.” On the other hand, those convinced that the gospel and epistle share common authorship point to the Hebraisms more pervasive in Johannine literature than in any other New Testament writing. Wescott says of the epistles, “Generally it will be felt that the writing is thoroughly Hebraistic in tone.” Neither argument, whether for common or different authorship, reflects well on the status of the author as a capable Greek author. In fact, generally, the capabilities of the author are thought to be mediocre at best. Raymond Brown characterizes a common opinion by stating, “Despite the almost elementary character of his Greek, the author’s sentences are often infuriatingly obscure,” and elsewhere refers to “the pervading obscurity of the grammar in these epistles.” And yet, because the author of 1 John is generally considered the author of 2 and 3 John, it might be assumed that the author of 2 and 3 John was just such a humble Jew with meager literary training. However, examination of both contemporary Hellenistic educational practices not only allows for, but even suggests, a solid rhetorical education in the Hellenistic fashion.

A Hellenistic rhetorical background must be allowed for because rabbinic learning had been influenced as early as the second century c.e. by Hellenistic rhetorical practice. Saul Lieberman quotes a second-century rabbi commenting on the type of instruction at his father’s school: “There were a thousand young men in my father’s house, five hundred of whom studied the Law while the other five hundred studied Greek wisdom.” Lieberman makes his own conjectures: “It is hard to believe that this attitude toward Greek culture was limited only to the house of the patriarch. We know how eagerly the middle class imitates the upper class and how readily the lower strata follow the example of the middle groups.”

We may be presented with a picture of a rabbinic school model from Palestine which taught both Jewish and Greek culture. Elsewhere Lieberman comes just short of proposing that certain rabbinic methods of exegesis, particularly gezerah shavah, were close or equivalent to rhetorical techniques prescribed in Hellenistic rhetorical theory, especially since evidence for them both appears to be synchronic. Much research has been done comparing chreia, or “pronouncement stories” used as grammatical exercises in Greek schools, to Midrashic Aggadah. This similarity is manifested in Rabbinic commentaries on scripture that used Greek rhetorical tropes and methods of argumentation. It is not unreasonable, then, to conclude that progymnasmata, or at least techniques from their pages, may have been used in Jewish education of the first and second centuries.

Rhetorical education seems even more within John’s reach because it trickled down through all stages of Hellenistic education—from advanced grammar students to elementary pupils learning how to read and write Greek. Raffaella Cribiore has shown that the view of Greek education in three stages—first letters, then grammar, and finally rhetoric for the most advanced students—was less rigidly distinguished than originally thought. She describes ancient models of schools, particularly for which Libanius’ Hermeneumata provides witness, that range from elementary schools teaching a little grammar, schools with both elementary and grammar instruction, grammar schools teaching a few students to write, and grammar schools giving its pupils initial rhetorical exercises and reading assignments from the orators. Cribiore points to Augustine as a product of this type of rhetorical exercise. Furthermore, she cites the expediency for private tutors to teach whatever their employers wanted as sufficient motivation for even a

common grammarian to also be a rhetorician. For Hellenistic educators to increase job security, she says, “the division into three distinguished levels [primary teacher, grammarian, and rhetor] was not so rigid.”

Overall, after having presented the ancient witnesses, she concludes, “The extant evidence challenges not only the rigid and uniform organization of ancient schooling that past historians of education have pronounced the norm, but also the recently proposed, more realistic model of a two-track system.”

Thus even if the author of the Johannine epistles had no access to the same world-class Hellenistic education as later Christians, such as Tertullian, Augustine, Clement of Alexandria, or Origen, his Jewish background did not preclude a firm command of Greek and rhetorical theory. In light of this evidence presented, we may construct a much more inclusive view of education in Palestine—one that may have included the basics of epideictic and deliberative rhetoric in Hellenistic argumentation. There is no reason to doubt that Jewish teachers, even at an intermediate level, would have taught methods of speech and presentation attested from the Greek prose.

But admitting the possibility of some rhetorical training is not the same as recognizing good rhetoric in the author’s writing. Just because a good education was available to John does not mean he actually had one. Critics may still point to the frequent Hebraisms and especially to the unintelligibility (at least to a modern audience!) of some of the Greek in parts of the first epistle as mistakes that should have been avoided had John been adequately trained. This argument, however, does not allow for the author’s ability to vary his style to fit his audience. Brown has even posited the likelihood that certain expressions and phrases would have been received with more comprehension by the Johannine first-century audience than by modern readers.

It is certainly possible for a skilled writer to alter his or her style to fit the immediate audience. Evidence for this is provided by Marcus Aurelius, who writes his meditations in the standard literary Koine of the day, yet nevertheless apologizes, in a letter to his mother, for using any words that may not be sufficiently Atticized. Even though Atticized Greek may not be an issue in 2 and 3 John, Marcus Aurelius’ statement suggests the author’s freedom to vary style depending on the context of the composition, whether the variation is between Atticized and Koine Greek or merely between elevated and simpler Koine.

Nevertheless, allowance for stylistic variation must be supported by evidence that the author is in command of his Greek. If John has purposefully simplified his Greek, what evidence is there that his style is deliberate and not simply an effort to write in a language in which he has limited skill? What

is the difference, a critic may ask, between an author who “dumbs down” his language and an author who is himself “dumb”? In his influential work on New Testament rhetorical criticism, Kennedy has advocated the use of Graeco-Roman rhetoric as a means by which the text can be understood in a first-century setting:

My goal . . . is the more historical one of reading the Bible as it would be read by an early Christian, by an inhabitant of the Greek-speaking world in which rhetoric was the core subject of formal education and in which even those without formal education necessarily developed cultural preconceptions about appropriate discourse.  

Therefore, if Kennedy is correct and the second and third epistles of John can be understood through rhetorical criticism as understood in antiquity, ancient rhetorical handbooks must be consulted to determine whether John, or any other ancient writer, applies rhetorical principles with skill. As Porter rightly points out, some rhetorical technique may be gleaned simply from the surrounding environment, so if any evidence of the author’s training is to be established within a text, there should be a close correlation between the techniques in a handbook and how they are employed in a text.

Demetrius’s On Style offers such a correlation between John’s style in the second and third epistles and what Demetrius calls the “plain style.” Plain rhetoric, according to Demetrius, is characterized by common diction (the same words), among which there should be no compound or newly coined words. The writing should be “lucid,” which he interprets as a clarity and ease of reading. “Ambiguity should be avoided,” says Demetrius, and among it the figure of epanalepsis, or long lists separated by a repeated conjunction. Repetition also contributes to clarity. Where concision is charming, repetition is often clearer. Dependent clauses are also cautioned against, which makes text a bit longer but certainly clearer. Demetrius advocates ending clauses, dependent or otherwise, with precision so as not to delay the conclusion of a sentence.

It would be a mistake, for instance, to say that the lack of diversified diction in John is a sign of poor education or lack of knowledge of Greek. Upon deeper examination, John’s diction reveals a more strict adherence to Demetrius’s guidelines. John uses simple common diction when he wants to be clear, as Demetrius advocates. \( \acute{\alpha} \gamma \acute{\alpha} \pi \eta \) and its derivatives (2 John 1, 3, 5, 6; 3 John 5, 6) are used to the exclusion of any synonym, as is \( \acute{\alpha} \lambda \eta \theta \varepsilon \iota \alpha \) (2 John 1, 2, 3, 4; 3 John 3, 4, 8, 12) and, to lesser degrees, \( \acute{\epsilon} \nu \tau \omicron \lambda \omicron \omicron \lambda \) (2 John 4, 5, 6), \( \mu \alpha \tau \omicron \omicron \omicron \omicron \omicron \) (3 John 3, 6, 12), and \( \chi \omicron \omicron \omicron \omicron \) (2 John 3, 4, 12; 3 John 3, 4). As Demetrius cautions, John uses coined or rare words sparingly, the only example being \( \phi \iota \lambda \omicron \rho \proteu \nu \) in 3

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John. The words are simple enough to be recognized even by a modern audience and even exemplify another of Demetrius’s plain virtues: repetition. “For the sake of clarity,” says Demetrius, “the same thing must often be said twice over.”\(^{17}\) Demetrius explicitly mentions “twice over” as if it is not endless repetition he advocates, but coupled emphases. When tracking the above-mentioned words in John, they are found always to come in couplets, of which no less than 17 can be identified in the latter two letters.\(^{18}\) Two of them are in the first three verses of 2 John:

1) καὶ οὐκ ἐγὼ μόνος ἀλλὰ καὶ πάντες οἱ ἐγνωκότες τὴν ἀλήθειαν.
2) διὰ τὴν ἀλήθειαν τὴν μένουσαν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ μεθ’ ἡμῶν ἔσται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.
3) ἔσται μεθ’ ἡμῶν χάρις ἔλεος εἰρήνη.

The underlined words mark couplets. Their sharing of the same case is an example of what ad Herennium refers to as conduplicatio,\(^{19}\) which, according to Lanham, is the repeating of words in succeeding clauses.\(^{20}\) Another characteristic of coupled repetition in 2 and 3 John is the author’s strict care to keep his repetitions together. In 2 John 4–6, forms of the word ἐντολή appears four times. Nevertheless, the four are divided into two by the repetition of ἀγάπη in two different forms:

4) καθὼς ἐντολὴν ἔλαβομεν παρὰ τοῦ πατρός.
5) καὶ νῦν ἐρωτῶ σε, κυρία, οὐχ ἃς ἐντολὴν γράψαν σοι καὶ παῖς ἀλλὰ ἂν ἐίχαμεν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἁγιασώμεν ἀλλήλους.
6) καὶ αὕτη ἔστιν ἡ ἀγάπη, ἵνα περιπατῶμεν κατὰ τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ: αὕτη ἡ ἐντολὴ ἔστιν.

The three couplets help to connect three teachings. The first teaching establishes truth in the original commandment received from the father. The second teaches that the original commandment was to love one another, and the third defines love as walking according to the commandments. A third couplet exists in 3 John 3–4, in which the couplets are not just words but whole phrases:

3) καθὼς σὺ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ περιπατεῖς.
4) μετόπεραν τοὺς οὐκ ἐχὼ χαράν, ἵνα ἰκούω τὰ ἐμὰ τέκνα ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ περιπατοῦντα.

Couplets with entire phrases also exist in 2 John 9 “μένων ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ,” and

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17. Demetrius, On Style, § 197.
18. 2 John 1, 2–3, 4–5, 5–6, 6, 7a, 7b, 9, 10–11a, 10–11b, 3 John 1–2, 2, 3, 3–4, 7–8, 12a, 12b.
v. 3, “μεθ’ ἰμῶν.” These and the aforementioned couplets of single words help both to insulate ideas within other ideas (ἐντολή/ἀγαπη) and to link other ideas for the sake of unity and clarity.

Another characteristic of John’s clarity is his predominant preference for paratactic over hypotactic sentences. Demetrius recommends these over longer, more complex sentences:

Try not to make your periodic sentences too long. Take this sentence: “For the river Achelous, flowing from Mount Pindus, passing inland by the city of stratus, runs into the sea.” Make a natural break here and give your listener a rest: “For the river Achelous flows from Mount Pindus, and runs into the sea.” This version is far clearer. Sentences are like roads. Some roads have many signposts and many resting places; and the signposts are like guides. But a monotonous road without signposts seems infinite, even if it is short.21

Demetrius’s first example from Thucydides exhibits a high degree of subordination within a short sentence with the two subsequent clauses subordinated to the first. Thucydides’s phrasing is quite effective at conveying the sense of rambling appropriate to a winding river before it empties into its destination. Nevertheless, Demetrius’s rephrasing, although it omits detail is more straightforward. It matches his model of a road with signposts giving the reader a good sense of where the sentence is headed. This “signposting” is accomplished through ending clauses quickly rather than having the reader wait for a thought to resolve itself.

In the plain style the members should end with precision and rest on a sure foundation as in the examples just quoted. Prolonged endings belong rather to the elevated style as in the words of Thucydides: “the river Achelous flowing from Mount Pindus, etc.”22

Although it may be unclear what Demetrius means by “precision,” a clue to its meaning may be present in his advocating only the accusative or nominative cases to begin clauses.23 Finally, it is interesting to note that this avoidance of hypotaxis is recommended explicitly as it applies to letter writing:

There should be a certain degree of freedom in the structure of a letter. It is absurd to build up periods, as if you were writing not a letter but a speech for the law-courts. And such labored letter-writing is not merely absurd; it does not even obey the laws of friendship, which demand that we should “call a spade a spade,” as the proverb has it.24

Long members must be particularly avoided in composition of this type. Length always tends to elevation.25

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22. Demetrius, On Style, § 206 (cf. § 45, 202).
23. Demetrius, On Style, § 201.
25. Demetrius, On Style, § 204.
Although Demetrius does not specify why he excludes periodic style from “plain speaking,” calling a spade a spade, it is clear that he associates the two not only with each other, but with letter writing.

John’s letters contain no examples quite so illustrative as Thucydides’s passages, but he nevertheless demonstrates an affinity for parataxis over subordination—especially at the closing of his letters, where it is especially preferable to keep the most important parting paranesis clear. Examples of such closing paraneses come in both letters. From 2 John comes an exhortation to forbid hospitality for false teachers:

9) πᾶς ὁ προάγων καὶ μὴ μένων ἐν τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ τοῦ χριστοῦ θεον οὐκ ἔχει· ὁ μένων ἐν τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ, οὗτος καὶ τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν θεόν ἔχει.

10) εἰς τις ἔρχεται πρὸς ὑμᾶς καὶ ταύτην τὴν διδασκαλίαν οὐ φέρει, μὴ λαμβάνετε αὐτὸν εἰς οἰκίαν καὶ χαίρετε αὐτῷ μὴ λέγετε.

Both verses 9 and 10 contain conditional phrases which exhibit a small degree of subordination. In verse 9, the singular nominative present active participles serve as the protasis (“if someone does not remain in the teaching,”) of the apodosis (“then they do not have God”). The parataxis becomes evident when the ease of inserting an adverb is observed. The sentence might easily read, θεὸν οὐκ ἔχει. καθὼς ὁ μένων ἐν τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ. Verse 10 likewise joins its thoughts together with conjunctions rather than subordinate participles or adverbs, “If someone comes to you and does not have this teaching, do not receive him AND do not greet him.” Using participles, the sentence might be more neatly put, “εἰ τις μὴ ταυτίν τὴν διδασκαλίαν φέρων ἔρχεται πρός ὑμᾶς . . .” or simply replace a conjunction with a relative pronoun, “εἰ τις ἔρχεται πρός ὑμᾶς, ὃ ταύτῃ τὴν διδασκαλίαν οὐ φέρει . . .” Another example of a plain closing comes in 3 John 12, in which the character of a witness is commended: “Δημήτριῳ μεμαρτύρησα ὑπὸ πάντων καὶ ύπὸ αὐτῆς τῆς ἀληθείας· καὶ ἤμεις δὲ μαρτυροῦμεν. καὶ ὦδας ὧτι ἡ μαρτυρία ἤμων ἀληθῆς ἐστίν.”

The lack of subordination is almost awkward here, and its prominence emphasizes Gaius’s, the recipient’s, acknowledgment of the Presbyter’s integrity as a witness. Instead of beginning the clause with a καὶ as if joining together two clauses that were important enough to be taken each as distinct units, the author could very easily have subordinated the last clause to the first, since both are in actuality talking about the same thing: “καὶ ἤμεις δὲ ἀληθῶς μαρτυροῦμεν. ἡν ἀληθείαν ὦδας,” or just “καὶ ἤμεις δὲ ἀληθῶς μαρτυροῦμεν. ὥς ὦδας.” The resulting clauses are shorter, retain of the specificity of the first, and yet are not as clear. In the first rephrasing, ἡν ἀληθείαν might refer to what is expressed ἀληθῶς, but it does not directly link the true witness to ἤμεις, as in the example from the letter. The second example is even more vague, as it could refer to simply the act of witnessing or to the truth of the witness.

For further contrast between the plain and elevated styles, the closings of
the Johannine letters could be compared to how Ignatius, writing in second century c.e. Asia Minor, closes his letters. His style is much more elevated and employs a greater degree of subordination, as can be seen in his parting words to the Ephesians:

προσεύχησθε ὑπὲρ τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Συρία.

οὕτων δεδεμένος εἰς Ἱώμην ἀπάγομαι,

ἐσχάτος ὅν τῶν ἐκεί πιστῶν,

όσπερ ἥξιοθην εἰς τιμὴν θεοῦ εὑρεθήναι.²⁶

Not only does the passage display a greater level of subordination than the two examples from John, but it has violated Demetrius’s injunction not to delay the resolution of a clause too long; the relative clause beginning with οὕτων is the result of the cause given in the last relative clause beginning with ὀσπέρ, but cause and effect are interrupted by the participial phrase beginning with ἐσχάτος. Examine Ignatius’ closing to the Magnesians:

Σπουδάζετε οὖν βεβαιωθήναι ἐν τοῖς δόγμασιν τοῦ κυρίου καὶ τῶν ἀποστόλων,

ἲνα πάντα,

ὅσα ποιεῖτε,

1 κατευναίωθητε σαρκί καὶ πνεύματι,

2 πίστει καὶ ἀγάπῃ,

3 ἐν υἱῷ καὶ πατρὶ καὶ ἐν πνεύματι,

4 ἐν ὀρχῇ καὶ ἐν τέλει,

μετὰ τοῦ ἀξιοπρεπεστάτου ἐπισκόπου ἐμῶν

καὶ ἀξιοπλοκοῦ πνευματικοῦ στεθάνου τοῦ πρεσβυτερίου ὑµῶν

καὶ τῶν κατὰ θεόν διακόνων.²⁷

The ἲνα purpose clause introduces a large subordinate clause, made even more prominent by the asyndeton of datives beginning with σαρκί καὶ πνεύματι in the middle. This clause exhibits further qualities of elevation by interlacing schemes of homoteleuta in every other line (πνεύματι, πνεύματι; ἀγάπῃ, τέλει), and amplifying the homoteleuta by making the alternating lines isocola (lines 1 and 3 each contain eleven syllables, and 2 and 4 contain six and seven syllables, respectively).

Finally, it must be pointed out that a plain style is not, according to Demetrius, the result of a feeble imagination or lack of stylistic finesse, but rather a careful effort to make ideas clear. He names the “arid” style as a “faulty counterpart” of the plain style, which, although it is not elevated, is nevertheless unclear because of its lack of vividness, a quality Demetrius praises in the plain style: “We shall treat first of vividness, which arises from an exact narration overlooking no detail and cutting out nothing.”²⁸

²⁶. Ignatius, Ephesians 21.2.
²⁸. Demetrius, On Style, § 209.
Contrast this with the arid style “found when a writer describes a great event in terms as trivial.”\textsuperscript{29} Then Demetrius gives examples of epic battles described in trivial terms. Yet this objection is not only against using trivial terms when describing the great, but against obscuring the true character of something using inappropriate or euphemistic words. Later Demetrius uses a euphemism for sexual intercourse to illustrate this arid style. In short, the arid style can be spotted by its failure to “call a spade a spade.”\textsuperscript{30}

John, especially in his invective, takes care not to mask the activities and character of his opponents with vague words. Before even mentioning Diotrephes’ name in 3 John, the author calls him \textit{φιλοπρωτεύων, a hapax legomenon}, and goes on to accuse him of slandering members of the church and uses the word \textit{φλοιώρων} to do so. The verb \textit{φλοιώρω} (“to speak nonsense”), says Brooke, “emphasizes the emptiness of the charges which Diotrephes brings against the Elder in so many words.”\textsuperscript{31} The word is found only here in the New Testament, yet it is fairly common in other writers;\textsuperscript{32} in other words it is rare enough to be vivid yet not rare enough to be excluded from the plain style. Then, to make sure his audience knows he is not leaving out any details, he prefaces his next accusations with \textit{καὶ μὴ ἀπκούσμενος ἐπὶ τούτοις}, to give the feeling that he is heaping fault upon fault. He then accuses Diotrephes of not only rejecting emissaries to the church but also of throwing out sympathizers. The last line is especially vivid:

\begin{quote}
10) . . . οὔτε αὐτοῦ ἐπιδέχεται τοὺς ἁδελφοὺς καὶ τοὺς βουλομένους κωλύει καὶ ἐκ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἐκβάλλει
\end{quote}

The already violent act of throwing out members of the congregation is amplified by the assonance of the \textit{k} repeated in such close proximity to each other. The style here is consistent with the context. Consistently, Demetrius cites this kind of assonance or “cacophony” as characteristic of vividness.\textsuperscript{33} It may be too much to speak of the style here as forced, since it avoids brevity, metaphor, and other features which Demetrius attributes to the forceful style, but the indictment remains vivid and avoids the euphemisms and bland words which might result from an arid style.

In both letters John maintains a close correlation with Demetrius’ prescriptions for a plain style, assumedly done for clarity; he wants his audience to make no mistake about receiving only authorized missionaries, his feelings against his opponents, and his love for his congregations. In both letters he uses common,
consistent diction; in both letters he repeats those words and ideas which he considers important and in need of clarification. In both letters he favors paratactic sentence construction rather than clause subordination, exactly as prescribed by Demetrius. In both letters he maintains vividness and uses appropriate words to avoid the “aridity” Demetrius attributes to the careless or incapable stylist. Demetrius makes the correlation close by prescribing this style to letter-writing. Thus, it becomes likely that the author of the second and third epistles follows, if not the handbook itself, then principles derived from it in some degree of formal rhetorical training.

Demetrius himself cautions critics against disparaging the style of an author on grounds of simplicity; they may mistake careful lucidity and vividness for unremarkable mediocrity. He specifically cites critics of Ctesias as having made this mistake: “The charge of garrulity often brought against Ctesias on the ground of his repetitions can perhaps in many passages be established, but in many instances it is his critics who fail to appreciate the writer’s vividness.”

Although observations may be made concerning obscure grammar in some places, this should not lead to suppositions that John the Elder’s Greek composition is crude or that he had little Hellenistic training. It has already been shown that at least some rhetorical training was available to those in Palestine during the period and that this rhetorical training was not necessarily restricted to what was observed in everyday speech or in observed orations. Furthermore, even though it is possible John learned rhetoric from simple observations, his careful constructions and the closeness with which he adheres to Demetrius’s guidelines cannot be ignored. It is more likely that he made good use of formal rhetorical training in whatever degree he received it.

34. Demetrius, On Style, § 219.