

The Letter of 1 John



I Introduction to the Letter of 1 John



The Letters of John have received a lot of attention in the past few decades and many fine works have resulted. However, these works have not provided an examination of how the author carefully employed rhetoric to persuade his audience. While addressing the standard issues expected in a commentary, this one seeks to do so with the author's rhetorical construction as the primary focus. He designs every word, phrase, and sequence to move his audience to maintain its course or to redirect it according to what he deems most advantageous to it. This commentary seeks to show how detailing his rhetorical strategy helps us to interpret and apply these letters for today.

AUTHORSHIP

Most scholars assume that the Gospel of John, the Letters of John, and the Book of Revelation are all products of the bearers of the Johannine tradition centered in Ephesus at the close of the first and beginning of the second centuries AD. The Gospel of John is a collaborative effort of the Apostle John and his disciples, who created the core of this tradition. The prescripts of 2 and 3 John state that the letters are written by the “Elder,” while 1 John does not disclose its author. This commentary assumes that all three Johannine Epistles are composed by the Elder, a primary bearer of the Johannine tradition (1:1–5; cf. 4:6).¹ This commentary also assumes

¹ For detailed discussion of authorship, see R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB 30 (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 14–30; J. Painter, 1, 2, 3 *John*, SP 18 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 44–51. P. Trebilco (*The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 264–67) argues that the Elder wrote the Gospel as well as the Epistles of John.

that the Johannine Epistles were written in the order in which they are presented in the canon and address consecutive, developing events.²

AUDIENCE AND SITUATION ADDRESSED

Constructions of the situation addressed by the Johannine Letters are as diverse as those devised for the Johannine literature in general. This commentary constructs the situation from points of broad consensus and in dialog with rhetorical features of the letters.³ The situation that the Elder addresses is rooted in a schism within the Johannine churches in Ephesus and elsewhere in Asia Minor at the end of the first century to the early second century AD. This schism resulted in two distinct groups: the Elder and his audience and the secessionists, who left the Johannine churches to be independent (2:18–19; 2 John 7).⁴ First John is written to “the ‘mother’ Johannine group that spawned the Johannine churches in the outlying areas.”⁵ Although it has lost members to the secessionists (cf. 4:5), the churches have not changed their allegiance (2:12–14; 4:4).⁶ Differing interpretations of Johannine tradition as represented in the Gospel of John (circa AD 90) caused the schism. As Brown states, “every idea of the secessionists (as reconstructed from the polemic of I and II John) can be plausibly explained as derivative from the Johannine tradition as preserved for us in GJohn [Gospel of John].”⁷ Since the Johannine Letters do not

² Brown, *Epistles of John*, 30–35.

³ For further discussion of the situation of 1 John, see Brown, *Epistles of John*, 47–115; R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 93–144; Painter, 1, 2, 3 *John*, 79–94; S. S. Smalley, 1, 2, 3 *John*, WBC 51 (Waco: Word Books, 1984), xxiii–xxxii; Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*, 268–92; U. C. von Wahlde, “Raymond Brown’s View of the Crisis of 1 John: In the Light of Some Peculiar Features of the Johannine Gospel,” in R. A. Culpepper and P. N. Anderson, eds., *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, ECL 13 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 19–45; J. M. Lieu, “The Audience of the Johannine Epistles,” in *Communities in Dispute*, eds. Culpepper and Anderson, 123–40.

⁴ In agreement with most commentators, I am assuming that there is only one group opposing the Elder. For discussion of attempts to identify the secessionists with known groups in antiquity, see Brown, *Johannine Epistles*, 47–68; J. Painter, “The Opponents in 1 John,” in *The Quest for the Messiah*, 2nd edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 437–64.

⁵ Brown, *Epistles of John*, 89. For further information on the nature of the audience of 1 John, see Brown, *Epistles of John*, 100–03; Smalley, 1, 2, 3, *John*, xxxii.

⁶ For a detailed study of the opponents of 1 John, see D. R. Streett, *They Went Out from Us: The Identify of the Opponents in First John*, BZNV 177 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

⁷ Brown, *Epistles of John*, 72. The secessionists’ claims are derivative of topics of the Gospel of John: being sinless, knowing God, abiding in God, and walking in the light (1:8, 10; 2:4, 6, 9; John 3:21; 8:12; 14:7; 17:22, 23, 26). Brown, *Epistles of John*, 69–86; Smalley, 1, 2, 3 *John*, xxvi–xxx.

quote the Gospel of John, it may not have been used by the Elder. However, the Johannine tradition that the Gospel explicates is the basis of both the Elder's and the secessionists' interpretation.⁸

The Elder considers the secessionist interpretation of Johannine tradition to have diverged from the true understanding (2 John 9) to become deceitful lies (2:22; 3:7; 5:10; 2 John 7). The secessionists refuse to give authority to him and other tradition-bearers (4:6) and instead promote their own interpretation of Johannine tradition (2:26–27; 4:5; cf. 2 John 9–11). They successfully gather members from the neighboring region and elsewhere in the Johannine churches (1 John 4:5; 2 John 10) and pose the further threat of potentially adding even more converts to their number (2:26–27; 3:7; 2 John 9–11).

The differing interpretations of Johannine tradition derive from the closely related topics of Christology and ethics (3:23; cf. 2 John 5–11). The secessionists draw out the implications of the high Christology of the Johannine tradition, particularly of incarnation based on the preexistence of the Son of God. One such implication is to minimize the salvific significance of the earthly life and death of Jesus. The secessionists deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, come in the flesh, and come by water and blood (2:22–23; 4:2–3, 15; 5:1, 5–6, 9–13, 20; cf. 2 John 7). Rather, the baptism of John initiated the revelation of God's glory in Jesus, and the crucifixion was merely the continuation of this initial revelation (cf. John 1:14; 7:18, 8:50; 11:40; 14:9; 17:5, 24).⁹ In response, the Elder stresses the salvific nature of Jesus's earthly life (1:7–9; 2:2, 12; 3:5, 8, 16; 4:9–10, 17) and death (5:6).

The struggle in 1 John is still for a proper faith in Jesus as 'the Christ' and 'the Son of God' (5:1, 5); but now the stress is on the human career of God's Son: a 'Jesus Christ come in the flesh' (4:2; II John 7), a Jesus Christ who 'came . . . in water and in blood' (1 John 5:6). The struggle is against those who 'negate the importance of Jesus' the man (4:3), against those who are too 'progressive' (II John 9).¹⁰

⁸ For an in-depth study of the use of the Johannine tradition in the Letters of John, see R. Kakola, "The Reception and Development of the Johannine Tradition in 1, 2, 3 John," in T. Rasimus, ed., *The Legacy of John: Second-Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel*, NovTSup 132 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 17–47.

⁹ Brown, *Epistles of John*, 75.

¹⁰ Brown, *Epistles of John*, 29. For further discussion of Christological problems, see Brown, *Epistles of John*, 50–54, 73–79.

From the high Christology of the Johannine tradition the secessionists also draw out implications for ethics. Minimizing the salvific importance of the life and ministry of the earthly Jesus led to moral indifference. Contributing to this moral indifference is the lack of emphasis upon ethics or moral teachings in Johannine tradition. Moral indifference does not mean that the secessionists are antinomian or libertines, for they consider themselves begotten by God, in fellowship and communion with God, and to abide in and love God (1:6; 2:4, 6; 4:20). The Elder does not accuse the secessionists of any vice, and his silence is unusual if vices were present. In ancient rhetorical practice, vices of opponents were emphasized to ruin their ethos or authority, and in early Christianity this emphasis took the form of vice lists (e.g., 2 Pet 2:12–22). The closest that the Elder comes to incriminating the secessionists' ethics is insinuating that they love the world (2:15–17) and do not help the needy (4:20).¹¹

The secessionists also claim that they are free from the guilt of sin and have not sinned (1:8, 10). Apparently, they denied the possibility of sin after redemption on analogy of the sinlessness of Jesus. The claim of sinlessness in imitation of the sinlessness of Jesus is probably derived from Johannine tradition (John 3:18; 5:24; 8:46; 13:10; 20:22–23). The Elder does not refute these claims outright, later making similar claims himself (3:6, 9; 5:18). Rather, he conditions them, making it clear that sin is still a possibility in the Christian life and the secessionists should take it very seriously (1:6–2:2, 4, 6, 9).¹²

The secessionists are guilty of not loving fellow Johannine Christians (2:9–11; 3:10–18, 23; 4:7, 8, 20). The presence of passages in the Johannine Letters that deal with the commandment to love (2:7–11; 4:7–21; 5:1–5; 2 John 4–6) suggest that the Elder speaks specifically of the love commandment when he claims that the secessionists do not keep the commandments (2:3–5; cf. 3:22). In the Gospel of John, every time Jesus mentions the commandment(s), love is at the forefront (13:34–35; 14:15; 15:10, 12, 17). In Johannine tradition, the brothers and sisters to be loved are members of the churches whose beliefs and practices conform to those of the group. Therefore, the secessionists do not love the Elder's group because of their secession over these very matters.¹³

¹¹ For further discussion of ethical issues, see Brown, *Epistles of John*, 54–55, 79–86.

¹² Brown, *Epistles of John*, 81–83.

¹³ Brown, *Epistles of John*, 83–86; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxvi–xxvii.

The Elder perceives the situation to be acutely negative. The secessionists do nothing but lie and deceive (1:6, 10; 2:4, 22; 3:7; 5:10; 2 John 7). Their doctrine is a lie and characteristic of the antichrist (2:22; 4:1–3), and their sinning makes them children of the devil (3:8). Christ will shame their followers at his coming (2:28). The Elder expects the situation to continue. It is a fulfillment of the expectation of the antichrist (2:8, 18, 22; 4:1–3) and, as such, a precursor of the second coming of Christ in the end-times already underway (2:8). It will remain until the end (2:18, 28; 4:17). However, the effects of the situation can be minimized by the faithful if they remain loyal to the Johannine tradition (4:4). To that end the Elder continually affirms the knowledge of the faithful and warns against being deceived (2:3, 24, 26–28; 3:7, 19–22; 4:13).

RHETORICAL CONSTRAINTS BEARING ON THE SITUATION

Rhetors seek to persuade using rhetorical constraints to direct the decisions and actions of their audiences to modify the situations addressed as the rhetors desire. Such constraints are of two main types: those inherent in a situation and those created by the rhetor. The former include traditions, beliefs, interests, and images familiar to their audiences, and the latter include the rhetors' proofs from ethos (authority), pathos (emotion), and logos (argumentation).¹⁴

The Elder uses several inherent and created rhetorical constraints as he tries to persuade his audience to navigate the situation with the secessionists as he deems most advantageous to it. While he does not appear to rely directly upon the Gospel of John to construct his letter,¹⁵ he depends on Johannine tradition as originally understood by the Johannine tradition-bearers, of which the Gospel of John is a primary expression (1:1–3; 2:7, 24; 3:11; cf. 2 John 5–6).¹⁶ One element of tradition with particular constraining force is the expectation that the antichrist will appear and signal the

¹⁴ L. F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 8.

¹⁵ R. Bultmann (*The Johannine Epistles* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973], 1) argues that the author uses the Gospel, though "not slavishly." Brown (*Epistles of John*, 86–100) argues that "the genre, polemic, argumentation, and even structure of 1 John depends essentially on GJohn" (p. 86). See his chart on pp. 757–59, which shows the similarities between the Gospel of John and 1 John. Smalley (*1, 2, 3 John*, xxvii–xxx) argues that the author is consciously expounding the theology and tradition of the Gospel of John for the benefit of the opposition and occasionally relies directly on the text.

¹⁶ Brown, *Epistles of John*, 97–100.

imminence of the return of Jesus Christ, something the Elder assumes has already occurred (2:18–19, 28; 4:1–6, 17). Any exhortation based on this fulfilled expectation takes on an added urgency because the right response of the faithful is tied directly to their fear of judgment and hope of eternal life.

The interests of the audience are also constraints. These interests include fellowship with the Johannine tradition-bearers and the Johannine churches as a whole (1:3, 7), cleansing from unrighteousness (1:9), abiding in the light (2:10), eternal life (2:17, 25; 3:14), mutual abiding in the Son and Father (2:24; 3:9, 24; 4:15), confidence in judgment at the return of Christ (2:28), being born of God (5:1), overcoming the world (5:4–5), and obtaining answers to prayer (5:14–15). The Elder upholds these interests as realities restricted to those who adhere to the traditional Christology and moral behavior of the Johannine churches.

The constraining power of images is prevalent and particularly strong in the portrayal of the secessionists as antichrists (2:18, 22; 4:3), false prophets (4:1–3), spirits of deceit and error (4:6), and liars and deceivers (1:6, 10; 2:4, 22, 26; 3:7; 4:20; 5:10; cf. 2 John 7). These images associate them with the forces of evil and with the final conflagration of good and evil. The Elder insinuates that to align with the secessionists is to be duped by their deceit and to be loyal to the powers of darkness.

The Elder's proofs function as constraints, particularly the proofs of ethos and logos. Ethos is moral character and conduct, the course of life (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.2.1356a.3–4; 1.8.1366a.6; Cicero, *De or.* 2.43.182–84; Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.2.8–19).¹⁷ It "is related to men's nature and character, their habits and all the intercourse of life" (Cicero, *Or. Brut.* 37.128). Ethos acts as proof when the rhetor's goodness, moral righteousness, and goodwill are demonstrated throughout a discourse and enhance the persuasiveness of the message (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.8.1366a.6). The Elder shares the ethos of the revered Johannine tradition-bearers, the authoritative transmitters and interpreters of the Johannine tradition and witness to Jesus Christ as given by the Beloved Disciple (1:1–5; cf. 4:6).

Proofs from logos involve example and argument – induction and deduction, respectively (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.2.1356b.8; Cicero, *Inv.* 1.31–41). Deductive arguments include the enthymeme, which is an

¹⁷ For a discussion of ethos, see G. A. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 91–93; J. Wisse, *Ethos and Pathos: From Aristotle, to Cicero* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1989).

“imperfect syllogism” (Quintilian, *Inst.* 5.14.2), “a proposition with a reason” (Quintilian, *Inst.* 5.10.2). The Elder’s use of enthymemes to refute his opponents and present his own positions offers the constraint of logic (e.g., 2:8, 19).

There does not seem to be an ecclesiastical structure with authority analogous to the later presbyter–bishop that the Elder can use as a constraint. The source of truth in the Johannine Community is the Paraclete (John 14:15–17; 15:26–27; 16:13). This requires the Elder to appeal to the inner constraint of the knowledge of the truth obtained from the divine anointing of the Holy Spirit that provides guidance and discernment to each audience member (2:20, 27; 4:1).¹⁸

THE RHETORIC OF 1 JOHN

J. M. Lieu comments, “although 1 John does at times appear to use rhetorically effective strategies, the letter as a whole is not easily analyzed in these terms.”¹⁹ This assessment is certainly true regarding the arrangement of 1 John, which does not conform to Greco-Roman rhetorical conventions. However, it is not true of its invention and style, which can be analyzed according to those rhetorical conventions. The Elder did not necessarily study rhetoric or use rhetorical handbooks in the composition of this letter, but his rhetorical approach shares much with the rhetoric of his time as taught and found in those handbooks. Whatever his background, his letters are rhetorically sophisticated. I will use Greco-Roman rhetoric as a primary tool of interpretation in this commentary.

The three species of rhetoric are judicial (forensic), deliberative, and epideictic.²⁰ Simply put, these concern accusation and defense, persuasion and dissuasion, and praise and blame, respectively. First John is best classified as epideictic rhetoric.²¹ The Elder seeks to increase the audience’s commitment to the just and honorable values it already holds (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.9; [*Rhet. Alex.*] 3, 35; Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.7; *Rhet. Her.*, 3.6–8) and the

¹⁸ Brown, *Epistles of John*, 70, 93–94.

¹⁹ J. M. Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 36. For more on the rhetoric of 1 John, see H.-J. Klauck, “Zur rhetorischen Analyse der Johannesbriefe,” *ZNW* 81 (1990): 205–24.

²⁰ G. A. Kennedy, *The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World: 300 B.C.–A.D. 300* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 7–23.

²¹ T. C. Burgess, *Epideictic Literature*. University of Chicago Studies in Classical Philology 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902), 3.89–261 (reprinted London and New York: Garland, 1987).

proper understanding of and response to the Johannine tradition regarding Christology and ethics.²² His choice of epideictic rhetoric indicates that he considers his audience to share the values he is espousing and not to have been led astray by the secessionists.

Using epideictic rhetoric, “[t]he speaker tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience . . .”²³ This is the Elder’s approach, for he begins by stating that fellowship with God and Jesus Christ is dependent upon acceptance of the values of the Johannine tradition-bearers, as well as fellowship with them and the faithful churches (1:3). Throughout the letter, the Elder encourages a community of shared values by using the topics of abiding in God, Christ, light, and love (*menō*; 2:6, 10, 14, 24, 28; 3:6, 24; 4:13, 16) and obeying or keeping God’s word, Christ’s word, and the commandments (*tereō*; 2:3, 4, 5; 3:22, 24; 5:3).

Epideictic rhetoric also calls upon universal values, eternal truths, and a god that vouches for these.²⁴ The Elder continuously appeals to principles and truths deemed by his community to be universal because they derive from God in the tradition received from Jesus through the Beloved Disciple (1:1–3, 5) and the anointing of the Spirit (2:20, 27). He affirms that the audience heard this tradition from its beginning (*akouō*; 2:7, 24; 3:11; cf. 2:18; 4:3) and knows it (*oida*; 2:20–21; 3:2, 5, 14, 15; 5:18–20; cf. 2:29).

Amplification, the main means of proof in epideictic rhetoric (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.9.1368a.38–40), is found in abundance in 1 John, as will be demonstrated throughout the following analysis.²⁵ Also, as is true of the style of epideictic rhetoric, 1 John is characterized by metaphor, frequent repetitions of parallels, similes, contraries, and doublets (Cicero, *Part. or.* 21.72).

Epideictic rhetoric praises and blames others to increase or decrease their ethos or authority (Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.4.6–9, 12–14). The Elder blames the secessionists because their Christology and ethics veer from the received tradition (2:22–23; 4:2–3; 5:10). They are without the Father and the Son (2:22–23; 3:6) and thus without life (5:12). They love the world (2:15–17) and hate their fellow Christians (2:9, 11; 3:10, 13, 15, 17; 4:20).

²² Brown, *Epistles of John*, 47, 90–92; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxviii.

²³ C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. J. Wilkinson and P. Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 51.

²⁴ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *New Rhetoric*, 51.

²⁵ D. F. Watson, “Amplification Techniques in 1 John: The Interaction of Rhetorical Style and Invention,” *JSNT* 51 (1993): 99–123.

They are liars without the truth (1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 22; 4:20; 5:10) and try to deceive the churches as they do themselves (1:8; 2:26; 3:7). They make God a liar by denying their sin and God's testimony to the Son (1:10; 5:10). They are of the darkness (2:9, 11) and the spirit of error (4:6), false prophets (4:1) with human testimony (5:9), children of the devil (3:8), antichrists (2:18–19, 22; 4:3), part of the lawlessness of the last days (3:4), idolators (5:21), and mortal sinners (5:16–17). All this vituperation is itself amplification.

It is typical to find all three species of rhetoric in a single work, with one predominating and the other two supporting (Aristotle, [*Rhet. Alex.*] 5.1427b.31ff; Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.4.16). While 1 John is primarily epideictic rhetoric, it also contains portions of deliberative rhetoric. This combination is expected because epideictic and deliberative rhetoric are related, for what epideictic praises and blames, deliberative advises and dissuades (Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.7.28). First John is not deliberative rhetoric per se because it is not primarily intended to advise and dissuade the audience regarding a particular course of action.²⁶ Although the secessionists have been actively pursuing them (2:26; 3:7) and their faith may be shaken (2:3, 26–28; 3:19–22; 4:13–16a), the audience has not been persuaded to leave the Johannine churches and follow the secessionists (2:12–14; 4:4; 5:13; cf. 5:4–5).

However, there is still a deliberative posture throughout the argumentation. Deliberative rhetoric aims to persuade and dissuade an audience about what is advantageous, expedient, and necessary and their opposites – aims present in 1 John. The Elder deems the audience's adherence to the traditional understanding of Johannine tradition to be advantageous because the secessionist interpretation of the tradition is not salvific, and their appearance is a sign of the last days (2:18–19; 3:4; 4:1–3). Adherence to the tradition is necessary to be found faithful at the return of Christ (2:28; 4:17; cf. 3:2).

As is characteristic of epideictic rhetoric, the stasis or basis of the case laid out by 1 John is one of quality (Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.7.28; 7.4.1–3). With the stasis of quality, a claim is made that what is proposed is the best course of action to take under the circumstances, or there is an inquiry into the nature of something, as to whether it just, right, true, and profitable or their

²⁶ For a discussion of deliberative rhetoric, see D. F. Watson, *Invention, Arrangement, and Style: Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter*, SBLDS 104 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 9–10.