

Having the Father and the Son – the Structure, Main Theological Idea and Hermeneutical Principle of the Second Epistle of John

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ABSTRACT: The Second Epistle of John is one of the least commented on New Testament writings, with the vast majority of existing commentaries being linear. The authors of this article attempted to take a structural view of this short book. After discussing the structures of the letter proposed by scholars (part one), they proposed their own structure of the book, thanks to which the main theological idea of the letter (2 John 9) (part two) could be determined, along with a hermeneutical principle allowing for new interpretative insights into the book as a whole (part three). This principle can be put into the words: “having the Father and the Son.”

KEYWORDS: Second Epistle of John, exegesis, structure, classical rhetoric, structural analysis, epistolography

The Second and Third Epistles of John are not only the shortest writings in the New Testament (245 and 219 words, respectively) but also the least commented on. As Robert W. Yarbrough notes, it is easy for the NT readers to overlook these and go straight from the letters of Peter and the First Epistle of John to the Epistle of Jude and Revelation.¹ Yarbrough’s remark can also be extended to the interest of biblical scholars in these short texts: The Second and Third Epistles of John are treated as insignificant additions to the Johannine tradition, which is represented primarily by the Fourth Gospel and the First Epistle of John. As a result, the Second and Third Epistles of John are rarely analysed as autonomous writings with their own theological thought.²

¹ R.W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2008) 330–331.

² Commentaries devoted to John’s letters usually cover all three writings. Just to give a few examples: J. Beutler, *Die Johannesbriefe* (RNT 8/3; Regensburg: Pustet 2000); H.-J. Klauck, *Die Johannesbriefe* (EdF 276; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1991); G. Strecker, *Die Johannesbriefe* (KEK 14; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1989); G. Zevini, *Le tre lettere di Giovanni* (Commentari biblici; Brescia: Queriniana 2019);

This article aims to show that the Second Epistle of John can be treated as an autonomous writing, with a structure that helps to capture the main theological thought of the letter. It is not easy to grasp this thought with a traditional linear reading. Especially since the letter seems to be divided into two parts that differ in theme and dynamics. Lines 2/3–6 are usually indicated as part one, lines 7–11 as part two. They form a body of writing framed by typical epistolographic formulas. These formulas, reminiscent of those used in Greco-Roman epistolography of the first to third centuries, are usually taken as evidence of the genre affinity of the Second Epistle of John to Hellenistic private letters. Emphasising this affinity, as well as the supposed absence of Old Testament allusions, not to mention quotations, lead to the application of classical rhetorical principles when analysing the Second Epistle of John, which determines and at the same time makes it difficult to grasp the main idea of the letter, as will be evident in the proposals presented below by biblical scholars studying the text of the Second Epistle of John (Part One). The authors of the article, noting in the Second Epistle of John many elements taken from the Jewish tradition, propose a structural approach based on the principles of structural analysis, which makes it possible to see dependencies and a certain symmetry between the different parts of the text (Part Two). In this way, it is also possible to highlight the speaker's clearly formulated guiding thought of the letter (2 John 9), distinguished even by a specific gnomic and antithetical form. Analysing the guiding thought and turning it into a hermeneutical principle when interpreting the Second Epistle of John is undoubtedly a step towards restoring the theological autonomy of this letter (Part Three).

1. The Second Epistle of John and the Hellenistic Letter

It is accepted that the Second Epistle of John represents the epistolographic form typical of Hellenism in antiquity, with its characteristic prescript (v. 1) as well as initial (vv. 2–3) and final (v. 13) salutatory formulas. The presence of an address and, above all, the initial and final salutations also makes the Second Epistle of John conform to the modern general definition of a letter as “a written message from one person (or group of persons) to another person (or group of persons) [...]” Formally, it is a letter addressed by the sender(s) to the recipient(s) using, at the beginning and end, one of the conventional formulas and/or polite expressions (alternatively an allusion to them) that identify both parties.³

Typically, Hellenistic letters began with the formula “A (sender) to B (addressee) salutation”; this was sometimes expanded, depending on the degree of familiarity, intimacy or kinship.⁴ In the Second Epistle of John, this conventional address formula is matched by

K. Jaroš, *Die Johannesbriefe. Einleitung und Kommentar* (Patrimonium theologicum; Aachen: Patrimonium 2019).

3 M. Trapp (ed.), *Greek and Latin Letters. An Anthology with Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) 1.

4 J. Muir, *Life and Letters in the Ancient Greek World* (London – New York: Taylor & Francis 2008) [ePUB].

ὁ πρεσβύτερος ἐκλεκτῆ κυρία καὶ τέκνοις αὐτῆς, “The elder to the lady chosen by God and to her children.” The equivalent of the salutation would be the phrase ἔσται μεθ’ ἡμῶν χάρις ἔλεος εἰρήνη παρὰ θεοῦ πατρὸς καὶ παρὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ πατρὸς, “Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, will be with us in truth and love.” This sentence is usually translated into “May grace, mercy, peace be with you...” or “Let grace, mercy, peace be with you...” but formally it is an indicative sentence. The salutation also includes vv. 1d–2, where the sender confesses that not only does he love his recipients but includes “also all who know the truth” (πάντες οἱ ἐγνωκότες τὴν ἀλήθειαν). This love is based on truth nurtured in a community of recipients (v. 2).

In Hellenistic epistolography, the transition to the body of the letter usually took place through the expression of hope that the addressee was in good health, as was the sender. Sometimes thanks are expressed for a letter received or messages from the addressee forwarded by other means.⁵ This variant is also used by the author of the Second Epistle of John, who rejoices to find among the children of the chosen lady those who “walk in the truth”: ἐχάρην λίαν ὅτι εὑρηκα ἐκ τῶν τέκνων σου περιπατοῦντας ἐν ἀληθείᾳ (2 John 4a–b).

The ending of a letter was much simpler and less elaborate than the beginning. It usually contained one word, “Farewell” or “Greetings,” the latter being preferred for business or official letters.⁶ Sometimes the personal relationship with the recipient allowed the sender to use a longer formula, often handwritten. Greetings from and to third parties (sometimes even to favourite pets) were also added. At other times, especially when relations were not very cordial, the letter was sent without final salutations.⁷ In the Second Epistle of John, the conventional ending is limited to conveying greetings from the sister community: ἀσπάζεται σε τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἀδελφῆς σου τῆς ἐκλεκτῆς, “The children of your sister, who is chosen by God, send their greetings,” although some manuscripts add ἡ χάρις μετὰ σου (442) symmetrising the initial and final salutation formula to some extent.⁸

Due to its small size, it is presumed that the Second Epistle of John fit on a single sheet of papyrus with a standard size of 25x20 cm.⁹ Surviving papyrus correspondence – private (but also official) correspondence – from the first to third centuries confirms that the length of a letter did indeed depend on the size of the papyrus sheet.¹⁰ In Roman times, it happened that writers, having written down the entire page and still having something to add, continued writing in the margins. The left margin – usually wider – was filled in first,

⁵ Muir, *Life and Letters* [ePUB].

⁶ In the NT, such a typical epistolary ending is Acts 15:29, where the official letter of the apostles ends with ἔρωσθε “Farewell.”

⁷ Muir, *Life and Letters* [ePUB].

⁸ Perhaps, as claimed by Judith Lieu (*The Second and the Third Epistles of John* [London et al.: Bloomsbury 2015] 51), the mention of grace also appeared under the influence of Corpus Paulinum.

⁹ S.S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (WBC 51; Waco, TX: Word Books 1984) 314; I.H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1978) 54.

¹⁰ Lieu, *Second and Third*, 37–38; For the formats of papyrus sheets, see “Format and Layout,” A. Sarri, *Material Aspects of Letter Writing in the Graeco-Roman World. 500 BC–AD 300* (Berlin – Boston, MA: De Gruyter 2018) [ePUB].

followed by the right margin.¹¹ It is not known what the size of the original Second Epistle of John was and whether the margins of the letter remained free. Line 12 could possibly suggest that it was written in the margin, but equally well the Elder, seeing that he was running out of space on the sheet, could have inserted the sentence “I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete” at the end of the main text.

Although it is believed that the Second Epistle of John most resembles Hellenistic private epistolography, it is difficult to place it in this category since the addressee is the community called the “lady chosen by God.” The difficulty with classifying the Second Epistle of John also lies in the fact that letters of a literary nature, which were essentially scholarly treatises in letter form, were usually longer, exceeding the standard volume of a single sheet of papyrus. Private letters, shorter but also more cordial, were not addressed to communities. A classic work by which letters were classified was Pseudo-Demetrius’ *De elocutione*, in which the rhetor states that letters that are too long and too serious in tone are in fact not letters; they are treatises to which greetings have been added (228). A private letter, on the other hand, should be a short letter replacing a conversation (223).¹² As can be seen, this distinction already makes it difficult to classify the Second Epistle of John as a private letter (with its brevity and cordiality, in particular, speaking in its favour) or as a scholarly treatise (with the collective addressee and the parenetic and theological nature of the writing speaking in its favour).

1.1. Structure of the Second Epistle of John Based on Classical Epistolography

The formal resemblance of the Second Epistle of John to private Hellenistic correspondence was noted already in the 19th/20th centuries. In 1901, Adolf Deissmann outlined the long-standing distinction between two types of ancient letters, the *litterae* and the *epistula*.¹³ To some extent, this distinction overlaps with Pseudo-Demetrius’ comments but ignores issues of volume, exposing the content of the writings. *Litterae* and *epistula* were supposed to be identical in form but quite different in premise, content, and purpose. As defined by Deissmann, *litterae* was a record of a private conversation and considered a “real letter,” revealing a lot of information about the sender. As it was often a very spontaneous and occasional correspondence, the *litterae* – at least initially – was not characterised by much attention to stylistic or literary issues.¹⁴ Initially, private letters were not kept either.¹⁵ It was different with letters known as *epistula*, which were literary from the start, the purpose of writing them was much more general than in the case of private letters, and

11 Sarri, *Material Aspects* [ePUB].

12 W.R. Roberts (ed.), *Demetrius On Style. The Greek Text of Demetrius “De Elocutione” Edited After the Paris Manuscript with Introduction, Translation, Facsimiles, etc.* (Cambridge: University Press 1902) 172, 174.

13 A. Deissmann, *Bible Studies Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions to the History of the Language, the Literature, and the Religion of Hellenistic Judaism and Primitive Christianity* (Edinburgh: Clark 1909) 3–59.

14 H.G. Meecham, *Light from Ancient Letters* (Eugene: Allen 1923) 37.

15 J. Schnayder, [Introduction], *List antyczny. Antologia* (ed. J. Schnayder) (Wrocław: Ossolineum 2006) xiv.

they were intended for a wider audience.¹⁶ In spite of the discrepancies between the Second Epistle of John and the *litterae*,¹⁷ which are noticeable at first glance and have already been mentioned above, the letter was long considered an example of private correspondence and a “real” letter. This claim is echoed with great certainty by, among others, Werner G. Kümmel: “No other NT letter, not even the Epistle to Philemon, has as distinct form of a Hellenistic private letter as the Second and Third Epistles of John.”¹⁸ George L. Parsenius, for example, is less certain about 2 John but defends the privacy of the letter, arguing that parenetic letters – and 2 John is one – “were often used as an opportunity to give advice to distant friends, relatives and associates.”¹⁹

This widespread adjudication on the close affinity between the Second Epistle of John and the Hellenistic private letter probably prejudiced the consideration of the structure based on the rules of classical epistolography and classical rhetoric. Therefore, most biblical scholars distinguish between an introductory section containing the typical epistolary indications of sender, recipients and greetings (vv. 1–3 or 4); the body of the letter with a varied, more or less detailed thematic division (vv. 4–11); and a conclusion also containing typical epistolary formulas (vv. 12–13).²⁰ As a result, the division proposals are very similar. Some are very general, such as the one suggested by Ian H. Marshall:

1. address and greetings (1–3);
2. living in truth and love (4–6);
3. beware of false teaching (7–11);
4. closing words and greetings (12–13);²¹

Werner de Boor:

1. introductory greetings (1–3);
2. truth and love as the hallmarks of a Christian (4–6);
3. warning against strange teachings (7–11);
4. conclusion (12–13);²²

Georg Strecker:

1. beginning of the letter (1–3);
2. a reminder to love one another (4–6);
3. warning against deceivers (7–11);
4. conclusion of the letter (12–13);²³

¹⁶ Meecham, *Light*, 37.

¹⁷ Marshall, *Epistles*, 145.

¹⁸ W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. A.J. Mattil) (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1966) 313.

¹⁹ G.L. Parsenius, *First, Second and Third John* (Paideia. Commentaries on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2014) 27.

²⁰ R.W. Funk, “The Form and Structure of II and III John,” *JBL* 86/4 (1967) 428; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 316; R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 30; Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1982) 788.

²¹ Marshall, *Epistles*, 97, 103, 109, 117.

²² W. de Boor, *Listy Jana* (trans. Z. Ligęza) (Warszawa: Zjednoczony Kościół Ewangeliczny 1984) 179, 185, 188, 193.

²³ Strecker, *Die Johannesbriefe*, 313, 327, 332, 354.

Robert H. Gundry:

1. address and greetings (1–3);
2. mutual Christian love as an antidote to heresies (4–7);
3. a warning to resist heresy (8–11);
4. concluding remarks (12–13);²⁴

Constantine R. Campbell:

1. opening: greetings (1–3);
2. walking in truth and love (4–6);
3. prohibition of cooperation with fraudsters (7–11);
4. final greetings (12–13).²⁵

What draws attention in these general structures is the division of the body of the letter into two parts: 4–6 and 7–11. Attempts to clarify the subject matter of these sections, and thus of the letter as a whole, are also evident. The authors generally agree that part one is about truth and love, while part two focuses on warning against and prohibiting contact with false teachings and false teachers. Thus, a noticeable tension emerges between the two parts of the letter. It does not disappear even when commentators try to subdivide and describe especially the subject matter of the body of the letter in more detail. Some even try to emphasise this tension further, seeing it as a genre feature. The latter include, among others, G.L. Parsenius, who describes the Second Epistle of John as a parenetic letter. In doing so, he cites Pseudo-Libanius, who distinguishes two essential elements in a parenetic letter: encouraging people to take some action or adopt some attitude, and dissuading them from certain actions or attitudes. These two features are easily discernible in the Second Epistle of John precisely because of this tension between lines 4–6 and 7–11. The letter encourages mutual love and following of the commandments (5–6) as well as commands the rejection and avoidance of anyone who preaches any doctrine other than the teaching of Christ διδαχή τοῦ Χριστοῦ (7–11).²⁶ Accordingly, the structure of the entire letter according to G. Parsenius is as follows:

1. prescript (1–3);
2. true faith and living in the truth (4–6);
3. false faith and insincere behaviour (7–9);
4. false teachers and hospitality (10–11);
5. farewell (12–13).²⁷

24 R.H. Gundry, *Commentary on First, Second and Third John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2011) [ePUB].

25 C.R. Campbell, *1,2 & 3 John* (The Story of God; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2017) 181.

26 Parsenius, *First, Second and Third*, 131.

27 Parsenius, *First, Second and Third*, 132.

A division into five parts is also proposed by J.A. du Rand:

1. greetings (1–3);
2. thanksgiving (4);
3. request (5–6);
4. appeal (7–11);
5. conclusion (12–13).²⁸

Based on this structure, he also tries to generate the main theme of the letter and defines it as: walking in love according to the commandment and standing by the professed doctrine of Christ.²⁹

A detailed division of the main parts of the epistle also appears frequently among those biblical scholars who stand by the traditional division into three or four main parts. Raymond E. Brown, for example, distinguishes:

1. the opening formula (1–3);
 - a. sender (1a);
 - b. addressees (1b-2);
 - c. greetings (3);
2. the body of the letter (4–12);
 - a. expression of joy and transition to the main content of the letter (4);
 - b. request to keep the commandment of love (5–6);
 - c. warning against antichrists and their teachings (7–11);
 - d. promise of a visit and conclusion of the content of the letter (12);
3. final formula (13).³⁰

Simon J. Kistemaker tries to go deep into the main part (body) of the letter, which gives his proposal a somewhat structural character, although no relationship between the different parts is apparent:

1. introduction (1–3);
 - a. address (1–2);
 - b. greetings (3);
2. instructions (4–11);
 - a. request and command (4–6);
 - A. praise (4);
 - B. call (5–6);
 - b. warning (7–11);
 - A. description of false teaching and warning (7–8);
 - B. caution (9);
 - C. prohibition (10–11);
3. conclusion (12–13).³¹

²⁸ J.A. du Rand, "Structure and Message of 2 John," *Neot* 13 (1979) 101.

²⁹ Rand, "Structure," 109.

³⁰ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 645, 646, 683, 685, 693, 696.

³¹ S.J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of James, Epistles of John* (New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 1987) 372–373.

Among the biblical scholars dividing the Second Epistle of John into four main parts is Udo Schnelle, who makes a more detailed division of only the third part:

1. prescript (1–3);
2. thanksgiving (4);
3. body of the letter (5–11):
 - a. commandment of love (5–6);
 - b. false teachers (7–9);
 - c. prohibition on hospitality to false teachers (10–11);
4. conclusion of the letter (12–13).³²

Similar divisions are common among Polish biblical scholars undertaking analyses of the Second Epistle of John. Often, they do not even devote much space to the structure and it has to be reconstructed on the basis of the subheadings introduced in the content under analysis. Of course, divisions based on epistolography and the separation of the elements of address and salutation at the beginning and end of the text prevail. Thus, for example, Feliks Gryglewicz divides the letter into: 1. introduction (vv. 1–3); 2. Christian love (vv. 4–6); 3. warning against heretics (7–11) and 4. conclusion (12–13).³³ Mirosław S. Wróbel distinguishes: 1. introduction (1–4); 2. recommendation of brotherly love (5–6); 3. warning against teachers (7–11); 4. conclusion of the letter and greetings (12–13).³⁴ More detailed divisions are proposed by Stanisław Gądecki and Stanisław Mędała. The first one, apart from the introduction (1–3) and conclusion (12–13), divides the body of the letter into 5 parts: a. joy with children (4); b. mutual love (5–6); c. deceivers (7); d. take care of yourselves (8–9); e. do not accept deceivers (10–11).³⁵ However, based on this structure, it is difficult to conclude what the main theological and/or ethical thought of the letter is. Stanisław Mędała, who titles his introductory study of the Second Epistle of John *Abiding in the Truth*, seems to be closer to grasping it. He divides the entire letter into five parts: 1. introduction (1–3), 2. acting truthfully (4–6); 3. warning against deceivers (7–9); 4. practical guidance (10–11) and 5. conclusion (12–13).³⁶ Referring to the structure of the ancient letter, Janusz Czernski recognises the following in 2 John: 1. introduction (1–3) – address and salutation; 2. main part (4–12), containing a. commandment of mutual love (4–6) and b. warning against heretics (7–11); 3. conclusion (12–13) – announcement of a visit and final greeting.³⁷ This structure does not entirely coincide with the rhetorical

32 U. Schnelle, *Die Johannesbriefe* (THKNT 17; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2010) 20–32.

33 F. Gryglewicz, *Listy katolickie. Wstęp. Przekład. Komentarz* (Poznań: Pallottinum 1959) 443, 446, 447, 451.

34 M.S. Wróbel, “Drugi List św. Jana Apostoła,” M. Rosik – M.S. Wróbel – H. Langkammer, *Komentarz do Listu św. Jakuba Apostoła, 1–2 Listu św. Piotra Apostoła, 1–3 Listu św. Jana Apostoła. Listu św. Judy i Apokalipsy* (KTPBT 5; Poznań: Pallottinum 2015) 119, 120, 121, 122.

35 S. Gądecki, *Wstęp do pism Janowych* (Gniezno: Gaudentinum 1996) 115.

36 S. Mędała, “Trwanie w prawdzie,” R. Bartnicki *et al.*, *Ewangelia św. Jana, Listy Powszechnie, Apokalipsa* (WMWKB 10; Warszawa: ATK 1992) 90–94.

37 J. Czernski, *Ewangelia i Listy św. Jana. Wprowadzenie literackie, historyczne i teologiczne* (Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego 2016) 204.

structure that J. Czernski took from Duane F. Watson:³⁸ a. *exordium* (1–3); b. *narratio* (5); c. *probatio* (6–11); d. *peroratio* (12–13).³⁹

1.2. Detailed Analysis Based on Classical Rhetoric

In the 1990s, a certain direction in the elaboration of the structure of the Second Epistle of John was set by D.F. Watson,⁴⁰ who superimposed the principles of classical epistolography on those of classical rhetoric. Taking into account the studies of Pseudo-Demetrius and Pseudo-Libanios, he classified 2 John into parenetic epistolography because of its content⁴¹ and into deliberative (and epideictic) epistolography due to the rhetoric used in parenthesis.⁴² He distinguished and classified the elements of 2 John as follows:

- 1) A prescript (1–4) that transitions seamlessly into an *exordium*,⁴³ in which the sender seeks to gain the favour of the addressees by assuring them of love and praising them for acting in truth and according to the commandment received from the Father. Thus, in v. 4, he introduces the topos associated with the commandment and links it to the topos of truth and love, which had already appeared in the prescript (vv. 1–3).
- 2) A *narratio* (5) presenting the main idea of the letter and the sender's concern: adherence to the commandment to love one another.
- 3) A *probatio* (6–11) developing the topos from the prescript combined with the *exordium* and providing advice on how this main idea/object of the sender's concern can be implemented.
- 4) A *peroratio* (12), which usually repeats the main elements of the *narratio* and *probatio*, and here is summarised in the desire for a face-to-face encounter that will make the joy of the sender and the recipients complete; thus, the *peroratio* forms an inclusio with the *exordium*, where the topos of joy also appears (v. 4 – ἐχάρην λίαν, “It has given me great joy”). The *peroratio* is unconventional. This may be due to running out of space on the papyrus sheet or more likely, according to Watson, due to the deliberative convention, which rarely uses recapitulation.⁴⁴ Instead of recapitulation, there is *adfectus* – an appeal to emotion – the joy of the planned meeting – in order to arouse sympathy for the sender and assure a sympathetic reception of his persuasion.
- 5) An epistolary ending (13), which, with the phrase τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἀδελφῆς σου τῆς ἐκλεκτῆς, “The children of your sister, who is chosen by God,” refers to the prescript and ἐκλεκτῆ κυρία καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις αὐτῆς, “to the lady chosen by God and to her children,” thus forming an apt inclusio.⁴⁵

³⁸ See Czernski, *Ewangelia i Listy*, 204.

³⁹ See below.

⁴⁰ D.F. Watson, “A Rhetorical Analysis of 2 John according to Greco-Roman Convention,” *NTS* 35 (1989) 104–130.

⁴¹ Watson, “Rhetorical Analysis,” 107.

⁴² Watson, “Rhetorical Analysis,” 109.

⁴³ Watson argues that there is no need for the standard *exordium* in deliberative rhetoric. However, exordial elements can be clearly seen in v. 4, where the sender expresses joy and concern.

⁴⁴ Watson, “Rhetorical Analysis,” 128.

⁴⁵ Watson, “Rhetorical Analysis,” 129.

Watson's proposal may constitute a premise for creating a structural model, although Watson himself does not do so. He merely indicates inclusive elements. Surprisingly, in summarising and evaluating the rhetoric of the Second Epistle of John, he indirectly states that the letter actually has two leading thoughts. The first is to get the audience to remain faithful to the commandment of love (in the *narratio*). The second is to convince the audience that the recommended course of action (walking in love/commandment) is beneficial to the audience, with the benefit referring to the end of time (receiving payment and possession of God, standing by the teaching of Christ).⁴⁶ As the Elder makes little effort to give any extensive examples of how following the commandment of love is beneficial, it can be assumed that he recognises that the recipients agree with him.

1.3. Moving Sway from the Epistolographic Framework

Despite the prevalence of the epistolographic-rhetorical approach to the analysis of the Second Epistle of John and its message, some biblical scholars primarily opt for a thematic or thematic-motivational approach in the hope of defining more precisely the guiding thought or main theological idea of the letter. These include, among others, William Barclay, who does not treat the prescript and the conclusion in purely conventional terms, but tries to indicate some sort of guiding thought also in these parts. In verses 1–3, it is an indication of the chosen lady and of love and truth; in vv. 4–6, it is an indication of difficulties and how to overcome them; in vv. 7–9, it is an indication of dangerous threats; and vv. 10–13 are titled “No compromise.”⁴⁷

David Jackman does not seem to subordinate his commentary to the epistolary form of John's text either. Although he notes it, he does not over-emphasise it. He titles his commentary “The Primacy of Truth and Love.” However, he realises that this title does not cover the entire subject matter of the letter, so after discussing issues related to the epistolary introduction, he divides the essential content of the letter into two issues: 1. “How to live according to the right priorities” (4–6) and 2. “How to deal with problems (7–11). Within the second issue, he distinguishes two separate issues: a. “How to resist false teachings” (7–8) and b. “The right attitude towards false teachers” (9–11). He does not title the subject matter contained in v. 12, but neither does he directly include it in the final salutations. He assumes that the basis for the conjecture as to what the elder intends to communicate orally is to be found in the remaining passages of the letter. It may be about giving reprimands or admonitions, but it may also be about encouraging, strengthening and uplifting the faith of the faithful.⁴⁸

The epistolary structure is also not evident in Daniel L. Atkin's proposal. Atkin not only relates each of the four parts of the letter to the truth, which he considers to be the main theme of the letter, but he also gives it a title expressing necessity and obligation:

46 Watson, “Rhetorical Analysis,” 130.

47 W. Barclay, *Listy św. Jana i Judy* (trans. K. Wiazowski) (Warszawa: Słowo Prawdy 1982) 179, 182, 183, 185, 188.

48 D. Jackman, *Listy Jana Apostoła* (Katowice: Credo 2006) 205, 210, 213, 219, 222.

1. we must love the truth (1–3);
 - a. acceptance of the truth (1–2);
 - b. joy of the truth (3);
2. we must live the truth (4–6);
 - a. we should focus on what we believe in – faith (4);
 - b. we should focus on how we behave – behaviour (5–6);
3. we must seek the truth (7–11);
 - a. recognition of the deceiver (7);
 - b. resistance to wasting what one has worked for (8);
 - c. admonition (9);
 - d. warding off the danger (10–11);
4. we must long for the truth (12–13);
 - a. experience of the fullness of joy (12);
 - b. experience of family community (13).⁴⁹

From this structure, he derives the guiding thought of the letter: followers of Jesus must follow his commandments because they love and abide in the truth of his teaching.

Judith Lieu also treats the epistolary structure as a secondary element. In the work *I, II, III John. A Commentary*, the biblical scholar divides the letter into two parts. The salutations (1–3) are followed by an encouragement to persevere (4–8) and then to abide in the teaching (9–13).⁵⁰ As can be seen, this structure does not include final epistolary formulas. It is based on the verb μένω, “to abide,” “to continue.” This allows the scholar to at least partially remove the tension between vv. 4–6, talking about mutual love, and vv. 7–11, talking about dangers and warning against accepting or even greeting false teachers. A more detailed, though also more conventional and epistolographically framed, division is made in *The Second and Third Epistles of John. History and Background*:

1. greetings (1–3); 2. the commandment of love and the tradition of community (4–6); 3. false teachings – rejection of tradition (7); 4. loyalty to tradition (8–9); 5. defending tradition (10–11); 6. final greetings (12–13). From this division, he draws the conclusion that the main problem of the letter concerns the attitude towards the tradition based on the observance of the commandment of love in the community. This does not refer to a lack of love in the community of recipients of the Second Epistle of John, but rather to the preservation and continuation of this tradition, which is described in more detail in both the Fourth Gospel and the First Epistle of John. In other words, the observance of the commandment of love is constitutive and fundamental to the Johannine community, and therefore abiding in this tradition guarantees not only unity but even the very existence of this community.⁵¹

⁴⁹ D.L. Atkin, *Exalting Jesus in 1,2,3 John* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary; Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group 2014) [ePUB].

⁵⁰ J. Lieu, *I, II, III John. A Commentary* (NLT; Louisville, KY – London: Westminster John Knox 2008) 240, 248, 257.

⁵¹ Lieu, *Second and Third*, 64, 71, 77–78, 87, 95, 98.

Similar is the proposal of R.W. Yarbrough, who also attempts to bypass the tension between vv. 4–6 and 7–11 and manage the themes found in the prescript, but places his division more clearly within an epistolary framework: 1. Greeting – John’s love in truth (1–3); 2. John’s joy and concern (4–8); 3. John’s warnings (9–11); 4. John’s farewell (12–13).⁵² Yarbrough acknowledges that what makes 2 John different from a typical Hellenistic private letter is the content of each section, which is alien to this type of Greco-Roman correspondence. He mentions the following as key topics covered in Part 2 John: 1. the truth in Christ; 2. the commandment of love, summarised in v. 5; 3. the threat of accepting anti-Christian teaching that attempts to pass off as evangelical faith, summarised in v. 8 with the warning not to lose the reward and in v. 10 with the prohibition of taking in and maintaining contact with heretics; 4. preparation for a visit.⁵³ Further on, R.W. Yarbrough indicates the assumptions of the letter, which are, in fact, the theological issues addressed by the Elder, but presented, as it were, *staccato*, without making a clear connection between them: a. the identification of the living and true God with Jesus Christ, His Son (3); b. the importance and redemptive power of precepts from God (4–6); c. the importance of true faith concerning the Son of God (7); d. promise of reward for those who persevere in faith (8); e. the responsibility of Christians in proclaiming the kingdom of Christ, manifested in the discernment and support of the true messengers of the Gospel (10–11); f. the joy of knowing God in Christ (12); g. relationships between the faithful in local churches (13).⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that in this last compilation, R.W. Yarbrough omits v. 9 expressing the necessity of abiding in the doctrine of Christ, which ensures having “both the Father and the Son”; “Anyone who [...] does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God,” although it is what seems central to the letter as a whole, especially when viewed structurally based on recurring themes and motifs.⁵⁵

2. Structure of the Second Epistle of John on the Basis of Structural Analysis

2.1. Elements of Jewish Tradition in the Second Epistle of John

The similarity of the Second Epistle of John to the Hellenistic epistles and the lack of explicit references to the Old Testament, such as citations or cryptic quotations,⁵⁶ caused that

⁵² Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 333, 339, 349, 357.

⁵³ P.H. Davids – D.J. Moo – R.W. Yarbrough, *1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, Jude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2002) [ePUB 2016].

⁵⁴ Davids – Moo – Yarbrough, *1 and 2 Peter* [ePUB 2016].

⁵⁵ See below.

⁵⁶ Charles H. Dodd (*The Johannine Epistles* [London: Hodder & Stoughton 1947] lii) concluded that there is no other writing in the entire New Testament in which Jewish tones are as insignificant as in the Epistles of John, D.A. Carson (“John and the Johannine Epistles,” *It is Written. Scripture Citing Scripture* [eds. D.A. Carson – H.G.M. Williamson] [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988] 256) did not even find allusions to the Old Testament in John’s epistolography; and as recently as 2009, John Painter (“The Johannine

the analysis of Jewish tradition present in the epistle was rarely addressed. This also translated into a lack of research on the structure of the letter using structural analysis. Meanwhile, the entire letter is written in Semitising Greek,⁵⁷ as evidenced, among other things, by the great number of participia replacing predicates expressed by verbs in the personal form. In the Jewish environment of the first century, one encounters exclusive communities confronted with the world having a strong sense of belonging to God and living in the end of times (2 John 7–8). John's sharp distinction between those who have God (2 John 9e) and those who do not (2 John 9c) is reminiscent of the division between the sons of light and the sons of darkness also known from Qumran and intertestamental apocalyptic literature. The injunction to "Love all the sons of light, each according to his lot in the counsel of God. Hate all the sons of darkness, each according to his guilt, in the vengeance of God" (1QS 1:9–11)⁵⁸ is similar to John's call for mutual love in the community (2 John 5) and the warning not to accept or encourage the activity of those who preach false doctrine under any circumstances (2 John 10). In the injunction "Not to transgress in any one of all the words of God in their periods [...]. Not to turn aside from his true statutes, going to the right or to the left And all who come into the order of the community shall pass over into the covenant before God, to do according to all that he has commanded [...]" (1QS 1:13–17),⁵⁹ the same motives as in 2 John 4c, 5c, 6b, d can be discerned, namely the necessity to follow the commandments which "we have from the Father" and which have been known from the beginning.⁶⁰ It is noteworthy that 2 John 3, regarded as a Hellenistic salutation formula, contains a typically Jewish peace wish ἔσται μεθ' ἡμῶν [...] εἰρήνη. Together with the other elements, grace and mercy, it can be seen as a reference to both the temporal future and eschatological times. The announcements in the Community Rule are of a similar nature: "[...] all who walk by it, for healing and abundance of peace in length of days, and bringing forth seed, with all eternal blessings and everlasting joy in the life of eternity, and a crown of glory with raiment of majesty in everlasting light" (1QS 4:6–8).⁶¹

Judith Lieu also draws attention to the similarity of the motifs present in the First Epistle of John with those found in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.⁶² Her insights can also be applied to the Second Epistle of John. In terms of genre, of course, the Second Epistle of John is not a typical testament, but the figure of the Elder enjoying universal authority, both if the term πρεσβύτερος is taken literally and titularly, giving guidance to

Epistles as Catholic Epistles," *The Catholic Epistles and Apostolic Tradition. A New Perspective on James to Jude* [eds. K.W. Niebuhr – R.W. Wall] [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2009] 258) argued that 2 and 3 John could not be addressed to Jewish readers precisely due to their lack of OT references. In addition, typical Greco-Roman names (Gaius, Diotrefes, Demetrius) occur in 3 John, indicating a rather Hellenistic audience.

57 Painter, "Johannine Epistles," 270.

58 P. Muchowski, *Rękopisy znad Morza Martwego: Qumran – Wadi-Munabba'at – Masada* (Kraków: Enigma Press 1996) 23.

59 Muchowski, *Rękopisy*, 23.

60 The interpretation of the expression "from the beginning" will be discussed later in the article.

61 Muchowski, *Rękopisy*, 26.

62 Lieu, *I, II, III John*, 24–25.

the community, can be contrasted with the figures of the patriarchs, who also enjoy universal authority and also give guidance to members of the community living in the end of times. What is common here is not only the position of authority, but also the paternal attitude towards the community, whose members are called children (2 John 1b, 13), and the call to follow the commandments (2 John 4c-6): Zebulun, for example, obliges the faithful: “And now, my children, I bid you to keep the commands of the Lord, and to show mercy upon your neighbour.”⁶³ Likewise Dan: “Observe, therefore, my children, the commandments of the Lord, and keep His law”⁶⁴ Judah does the same: “And now I command you, my children, hearken to Judah your father, and keep my sayings to perform all the ordinances of the Lord, and to obey the commands of God [...] Observe, therefore, my children, all the law of the Lord [...]”⁶⁵ In the general injunction to observe the Law, Issachar mentions the commandment to love: “Keep, therefore, my children, the law of God, And get singleness, And walk in guilelessness, Not playing the busybody with the business of your neighbour, But love the Lord and your neighbour, Have compassion on the poor and weak.”⁶⁶ A reference to this commandment that is closest to John is made by Gad, who treats it as a determinant of communal relationships: “And now, my children, I exhort you, love ye each one his brother, and put away hatred from your hearts [...]”⁶⁷ In this attachment to the commandments, emphasis of their origin from God and the necessity of their observance, a certain Jewish ethos is manifested, which is also recognisable in 2 John.

Jewish roots can also be found in the personification of the community to which the letter is addressed. Giving it feminine characteristics probably indirectly alludes to descriptions of the relationship between God and his people rendered through the bridal metaphor (Hos 1; 2:18–3:5; Ezek 16; Jer 3:20; 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11; Isa 49:18; 61:10; 62:5): the Bridegroom is God, the chosen one is the community. Christianity has adapted this image to reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25–29; Matt 9:15; 25:1–13; Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9–10; 22:17). Thus, it is no coincidence that the Elder calls the Church the lady chosen by God (ἐκλεκτῆ κυρία).

The listing of elements referring to Jewish tradition in the Second Epistle of John is not aimed at questioning its Hellenistic form. Rather, it is about showing the overlap between the two traditions in a way that makes it impossible to properly separate them. This means that the analysis of the Second Epistle of John can be carried out in two ways: on the one hand, using the principles of classical rhetoric, and on the other hand, in view of the presence of numerous elements of Jewish tradition. By looking at the text in a non-linear way, it will be easier to grasp its guiding thought and hermeneutic principle.

63 *T.Zeb.* 5:1 (*APOT*, II, 330).

64 *T.Dan* 5:1 (*APOT*, II, 333).

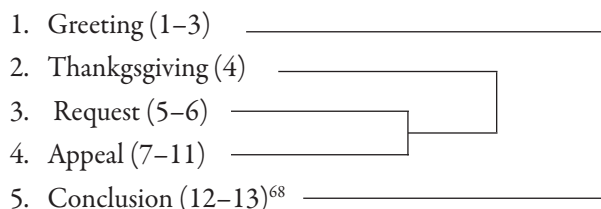
65 *T.Jud.* 13:1; 26:1 (*APOT*, II, 319, 324).

66 *T.Iss.* 5:1–2 (*APOT*, II, 326–327).

67 *T.Gad* 6:1 (*APOT*, II, 341).

2.2. Proposals for the Non-linear Structure of the Second Epistle of John

As shown above, a linear approach to the text based on classical rhetorical principles prevails among biblical scholars. However, it does not yield satisfactory results when attempting to generate the guiding thought of the text, its central theological idea. Few researchers make the effort to explore the non-linear organisation of the text. Some, such as A.J. du Rand, explore it indirectly: when examining successive parts of the text in detail, it becomes apparent that some parts of the text are clearly parallel or chiasmically structured. Therefore, an indirect method is to mark elements in the linear structure that correspond in some way to each other:



Several structural proposals were made in 1990 by E.R. Wendland.⁶⁹ His starting point was a study of the so-called semantic density of the terms used in the Second Epistle of John. The author of the letter would deliberately refer some concepts to more than one designatum. For example, in 2 John 6e, ἵνα ἐν αὐτῇ περιπατῆτε, the referent of the personal pronoun αὐτῇ can be love, but also commandment or truth. Similarly, in 2 John 9b, in the expression διδασχὴ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, the doctrine of Christ can refer to both the doctrine preached by Christ (genetivus subiectivus) and teachings about Christ (genetivus obiectivus). Semantic density is, according to E.R. Wendland, a stylistic means of reinforcing a text's message and organising its structure, so it is not surprising that it applies to terms that are key to the text, which often form a thematic composite whose meaning is deeper and more complex than the individual terms that comprise it.⁷⁰

The main theme of the Second Epistle of John is, according to E.R. Wendland, ἀλήθεια, truth. This is already evident from the announcement of the theme in v. 1c, οὗς ἐγὼ ἀγαπῶ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ. In the verses that follow, this notion takes on a deeper and deeper meaning, absorbing – like a rolling snowball – also what is implicit in the terms ἀγάπη – love, ἐντολή – commandment, and finally διδασχὴ τοῦ Χριστοῦ – Christ's teachings. In exploring this multiform truth, Wendland reconstructs five structural patterns: 1. a semantic structure based on a hierarchical arrangement of semantic relations that shows how a sentence or related

⁶⁸ Rand, "Structure," 111.

⁶⁹ E.R. Wendland, "What is Truth? Semantic Density and the Language of the Johannine Epistles (with Special Reference to 2 John)," *Neot* 24/2 (1990) 301–333.

⁷⁰ Wendland, "What is Truth?," 320.

sentences⁷¹ connect to other single sentences or a group of related sentences;⁷² 2. syntactic structure and related 3. pragmatic structure;⁷³ 4. a lexical and thematic structure that forms a concentric pattern;⁷⁴ 5. typographic structure.⁷⁵ Not all proposals are entirely convincing. Pragmatic structure can hardly even be called structure – it is simply naming the sender’s intention using particular expressions (e.g. 1a “The elder to the lady chosen by God and to her children” is an address; 3a “Grace, mercy and peace [...] will be with us” is a wish or blessing; 4a. “It has given me great joy” is a praise; 5a “And now, dear lady,” – a request; 5b “I am not writing you a new command” – an explanation; 5c “but one we have had from the beginning” – a reminder, 5d “I ask that we love one another” – a commandment, etc.).

Most convincingly presented is the lexical and thematic structure, which turns out to be a concentric structure.⁷⁶ E.R. Wendland argues that this kind of structure is not isolated in the writings of John, who does not shy away from chiasmus either. Thus, it is not surprising that these measures were also used in the Second Epistle of John in order, on the one hand, to differentiate between the various elements of the discourse, but, on the other hand, to organise the text and give it coherence in terms of both form and content:⁷⁷

A. **Greeting** (1–3) – the chosen lady and her children

B (4) **thanksgiving** – a reason to “rejoice”

C (5–6) **commandment** – walk together in love and truth

D (7) **characterisation** – “deceivers” and “antichrists”

E (8) **admonition** – you are not obeying the “injunction” (i.e. loving one another/confessing the truth) so you may lose the “full reward”

D’ (9) **characterisation** – those who “do not continue” in Christ’s teaching/teachings about Christ”

C’ (10–11) **commandment** – show no love to (have no fellowship with) those who deny the truth/teaching

B’ (12) [**thanksgiving**] – the desire to create opportunities to “rejoice”

A’ (13) **greeting** - “children of your sister, who is chosen by God.”

After rearranging this peculiar concentric macrostructure, E.R. Wendland proceeds to a structural analysis of almost every element (the description of the central element E and the elements B’ and A’ is missing). This, however, comes off less convincingly. Element A, for example, was described as chiasmic, although the proposed chiasmus was

71 Wendland uses the term cluster.

72 Wendland, “What is Truth?” 324.

73 Wendland, “What is Truth?” 327.

74 Wendland, “What is Truth?” 329.

75 Wendland, “What is Truth?” 331.

76 Wendland, “What is Truth?” 329.

77 Wendland, “What is Truth?” 320.

very irregular. Some components of element A were repeated, others did not live to be assigned to chiasmic segments at all and remained in limbo:

- a. whom I love (1b)
- b. in the truth (1b)
- c. and not I only, but also all (1c)
- d. who know the truth (1d)
- d'. because of the truth, (2a)
- which lives in us and (2b–c)
- e. will be (2c)
- f. with us (2c)
- FOREVER (2c)
- f'. Grace, (3a)
- e'. mercy and (3a)
- peace from (3a)
- g. God the Father (3b)
- h. and from Jesus Christ, (3b)
- h' the Father's (3b)
- g'. Son, (3b)
- b'. will be with us (3c)
- a'. in truth and love (3c).

From the lexical and thematic macrostructure presented, it is clear that the climax of the letter, the centre of the concentric pattern, is v. 8. It was characterised as an impassioned plea to hold on to the truth so as not to risk losing one's spiritual reward. Since, as mentioned, E.R. Wendland primarily explores the semantic density of the term truth, he sees here a semantic extension of this concept, which does not formally appear in v. 8, but is implied. This means that the truth in the Second Epistle of John covers not only living in community according to the commandment of love (4–6) but also doctrinal issues (7).⁷⁸

The inclination of the author of the Johannine epistles to use chiasmus is also recognised by John P. Heil. He treats all three letters as a so-called epistolary package, sent at the same time to the same community. It is likely that the letters were written in the canonical order, but they were to be read in reverse order before the community at the liturgical assembly: first, the Third Epistle of John as a letter of recommendation; then, the Second Epistle of John as a letter introducing in a general way the issues described in detail in the First Epistle of John.⁷⁹

Each letter has a chiasmic structure, more or less elaborate, revealing itself at a general level (macro-chiasms) and when analysing individual elements of the structure

⁷⁸ Wendland, "What is Truth?," 319–320.

⁷⁹ J.P. Heil, *1–3 John. Worship by Loving God and One Another to Live Eternally* (Cambridge: Clarke 2015) 1.

(micro-chiasms). Of the three epistolary writings of John, the least elaborate structure is to be found in 2 John:

- A. 1–8
 - B. 9a
 - B'. 9b
- A'. 10–13.⁸⁰

John P. Heil justifies his proposal primarily lexically. He traces the occurrence of specific terms, either the same or synonymous, and reconstructs the structure of the letter on this basis. The parallel lexis of parts A and A' as well as B and B' is best presented in tabular form, although the author sticks to the traditional form:⁸¹

A 2 John 1–8	A' 2 John 10–13
ἐκλεκτῇ 1 τέκνοις 1; τέκνων 4 ἐχάρην 4 ἐλάβομεν 4 γράφων 5 πολλοί 7 ἐρχόμενον 7 ἐργασάμεθα 8 πλήρη 8	ἐκλεκτῆς 13 τέκνα 13 χαίρειν 10; χαρά 12 (μὴ) λαμβάνετε 10 γράφειν 12 πολλά 12 ἔρχεται 10 ἔργους 11 πεπληρωμένη 12
B 2 John 9a (9a–c)	B' 2 John 9b (9d–e)
(μὴ) μένων ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ 9b ἔχει 9c	μένων ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ 9d ἔχει 9e

Part A, entitled “It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth,” is also chiastic, or rather concentric, in structure:

- a. 1–3
 - b. 4–5a
 - c. 5b
- b'. 6
- a'. 7–8

Here, the request for mutual love is at the centre⁸² and the entire micro-chiasm, as before, is based on lexical repetition. The basis for the parallelism in sub-element a and a' is

⁸⁰ Heil, *1–3 John*, 45–46.

⁸¹ Heil, *1–3 John*, 6.

⁸² Heil, *1–3 John*, 46.

the occurrence of the name Jesus Christ in v. 3 (a) and v. 7 (a') as well as the occurrence of the preposition εἰς in the expression εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα in v. 2 (a) and in the expression εἰς τὸν κόσμον in v. 7 (a'). While the basing of the parallelism on the expression Jesus Christ is not questionable, especially as these are the only two places in the letter where the Elder mentions the name together with the title, it is somewhat objectionable to attribute key meaning to the preposition εἰς and to build the relationship between a and a' on it, even though this preposition also occurs only twice in the entire letter.

Similar to A, though simpler – without a central element – is the structure of section A' entitled “So that our joy may be complete”;⁸³ the chiasmus is built around the prohibition of the utterance of the salutation in v. 10b and the justification for this prohibition of the utterance of the salutation in v. 11 (unit b and b') and the repeated expression πρὸς ὑμᾶς, “to you,” in vv. 10a and 12, occurring only in these two verses:

a. 10a

b. 10b

b'. 11

a' 12–13.

Heil also sees micro-chiasms at the subunit level, i.e. a, b, c. Sub-unit a is broken down as follows:

α. The elder, To the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth, and not I only, but also all who know the truth because of the truth, which lives in us (1:1–2a)

β. and will be with us (2v)

γ. forever (2c)

β'. Grace, mercy and peace (3a)

α'. from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us **in truth and love** (3b).

As before, the basis of the parallel is lexis and expressions that occur only in the indicated places, e.g. μεθ' ἡμῶν ἔσται [...] ↔ ἔσται μεθ' ἡμῶν [...] with us ↔ will be with us.⁸⁴

Undoubtedly, the distinction of v. 9 at the macro-chiasm level and its separation from other parts of the text deserves recognition. However, J.P. Heil does not seem to have taken full advantage of the opportunities offered by this exposure. As with the study of chiasmus at all levels, his focus here was primarily on lexical elements; there is no guiding thought of the letter. Moreover, he does not treat the Second Epistle of John as an autonomous text. In discussing its content, he refers to the other epistles of John, especially the third, which – in line with the concept of reading the letters publicly in the order 3 → 2 → 1 during the liturgical assembly – the listeners have already become familiar with.

⁸³ Heil, *1–3 John*, 53.

⁸⁴ Heil, *1–3 John*, 47.

2.3. Thematic and Formal Non-linear Structure – Author’s Proposal

The (macro)structure of 2 John proposed by the authors of the article is based primarily on the rules of structural analysis. As indicated above, the Second Epistle of John contains quite a number of elements derived from or alluding to Jewish tradition, which justifies the application of these rules to a text that came from the pen of an author who showed a Semitic mindset. A non-linear approach to the text also makes it possible to manage those passages, as J.P. Heil did, which were omitted from the analysis when applying the rules of epistolography and classical rhetoric as belonging to conventionalised initial salutatory formulas. In dividing the text, the authors of the article were guided by the motif criterion, which is also reflected in the lexis, and by the formal-grammatical criterion, which made it possible to notice the symmetrically distributed parts in which imperatives were used.

However, applying the rules of rhetoric does not mean ignoring the fact that the Second Epistle of John undoubtedly belongs to epistolary literature, as evidenced by the *superscriptio* and *adscriptio* (2 John 1a–c) and the concluding *salutatio* (2 John 13), elements present in Hellenistic epistolography but not alien to epistolography and Semitic epistolography either.

Prescript – v. 1a–c

A. lecture on abiding in love and truth – v. 1d–6;

B. warning – v. 7–8;

C. antithetical sentence – v. 9;

B'. warning – v. 10–11;

A'. planned lecture – v. 12;

Final salutation – v. 13.

The structure above shows that the antithetical verse 9 (element C) is at the centre of the letter. It contains the main message and the main theological idea of the letter, namely the issue of having and not having God, which the Elder links extremely closely to abiding or not abiding in the doctrine of Christ.⁸⁵

This central idea is framed by two warnings (elements B and B'). The first relates to Christology and eschatology (vv. 7–8); the second to specific behaviour (vv. 10–11), which also concerns the attitude to false teaching. It is only in the warnings that the imperatives are used: βλέπετε take care of (literally watch) yourselves in v. 8 and μη λαμβάνετε do not take them into your house and χαίρειν μη λέγετε do not welcome them (literally say no greeting) in v. 10. Each of the warnings includes a justification. In the first (B), the injunction to take care is preceded by the statement that many deceivers have [already] gone out into the world and preach a false Christology οἱ μη ὁμολογοῦντες Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐρχόμενον ἐν σαρκί, “who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. Anyone who shares this doctrine is himself a deceiver and antichrist” (v. 7). In the second (B'), the warning against complicity

⁸⁵ Verse 9 will be discussed in more detail later in this article.

in evil – ὁ λέγων γὰρ αὐτῷ χαίρειν κοινωνεῖ τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῦ τοῖς πονηροῖς, “anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work” (v. 11), is preceded by the injunction not to take in or greet deceivers who bring false teaching – εἴ τις ἔρχεται πρὸς ὑμᾶς καὶ ταύτην τὴν διδαχὴν οὐ φέρει, μὴ λαμβάνετε αὐτὸν εἰς οἰκίαν καὶ χαίρειν αὐτῷ μὴ λέγετε, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them” (v. 10). Attention is drawn to the dynamics of parts B and B’ marked by verbs of motion and a general mention of deeds. In B, it is the going out into the world – ἐξῆλθον εἰς κόσμον, and working – εἰργασάμεθα; in B’, it is the coming – ἔρχεται, bringing – φέρει, and sharing in their wicked word – κοινωνεῖ τοῖς ἔργοις [...] τοῖς πονηροῖς. This contrasts with the static central element (C), which uses primarily verbs denoting a certain state – to continue (μένων) and to have (ἔχει).

The most elaborate part of the structure is element A. It deals with relationships in the community: abiding in the truth, loving one another, keeping the commandments. Although the verb of motion περιπατέω is used three times here, the whole gives a static impression imposed by verbs denoting a certain state, emotion, possession, relation, sensory impression (μένω to continue, εἶμι to be, χαίρω to rejoice, λαμβάνω to receive, ἔχω to have, ἀκούω to hear). This clearly distinguishes element A from elements B and B’. This difference can also be seen when comparing verbs of motion. B and B’ use the verb ἔρχομαι, while A uses the verb περιπατέω, which is part of the expressions describing the state of obedience and faithfulness to the truth (v. 4b) and the commandments (v. 6b), especially the commandment of love (v. 6e).

It is to be expected that element A’ was intended to be redacted in a similar way. That the Elder intended to write it is clearly evidenced by the words: πολλὰ ἔχων ὑμῖν γράφειν, “I have much to write to you” (v. 12a).⁸⁶ However, he abandoned this intention probably because he had already run out of space on the papyrus sheet or would have run out of space if he had started writing his reflection (v. 12b). Therefore, he postponed this lecture until the personal meeting with the recipients of the letter (v. 12c–d). In all likelihood, the subject matter of the lecture in A’ would be similar to A, as can be inferred from v. 12e ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἡμῶν πεπληρωμένη, “so that our joy may be complete.” Placing these words at the very end of v. 12 makes it possible to relate them not only to the joy of the face-to-face encounter, but also to what will be said and was to be written. In addition, in A, the author expressed his delight at the state of relations in the recipient community. If element A’ were to be parallel to A, then also the “complete joy” in A’ should correspond to the joy expressed in A.

⁸⁶ As mentioned above, this absence is explained differently by D.F. Watson, who argues that the use of the deliberative convention exempts, as it were, the recapitulation of content in the *peroratio*.

3. The Main Theological Idea of the Second Epistle of John

3.1. Rhetorical Analysis of 2 John 9

The structure proposed above shows that the Second Epistle of John is built around the idea of having the Father and the Son, which can also be seen as a specific hermeneutical key to the letter. This thought is exposed not only by the structure, but also by giving it a specific form – a sentence based on an antithesis. A sentence (gnome) can be defined, following G.L. Parsenius, as a maxim that expresses some general truth in a concise, sometimes harsh way; usually, sentences are based on antitheses, paradoxes, sometimes on paronomasia.⁸⁷ Already Aristotle argued that “Now a maxim is a statement, not however concerning particulars, [...], but general; it does not even deal with all general things [...], but with the objects of human actions, and with what should be chosen or avoided with reference to them.”⁸⁸ 2 John 9 seems to meet the criteria of an Aristotelian maxim: it deals with a general truth, the possession of God, which is laid out by means of the antithesis of not abiding/abiding in Christ’s teaching, and summarises the positive and negative behaviours laid out in the letter.⁸⁹

The central sentence itself is not merely a simple antithesis. Following D.F. Watson, it is possible to enumerate at least six different, sometimes overlapping, rhetorical figures in v. 9: in addition to antithesis, *pariosis*, epistrophe (*paromoesis*), reduplication, synonymy, and in 9a also irony are employed.⁹⁰ In *pariosis*, the main antithesis is expressed by an equal number of segments:

A.

1. πᾶς ὁ [...] μὴ μένων ἐν τῇ διδασχῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ;
2. θεὸν οὐκ ἔχει does not have God;

B.

1. (πᾶς) ὁ μένων ἐν τῇ διδασχῇ, whoever continues in the teaching
2. οὗτος καὶ τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει has both the Father and the Son.

⁸⁷ Parsenius, *First, Second and Third*, 17. The author argues that John is fond of using sentences and provides examples from the Gospel of John (e.g. 3:5–6; 12:25) and from the First and Third Epistles (1 John 1:5; 2:9; 2:15, 17; 3 John 11); however, he does not provide examples from 2 John.

⁸⁸ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.21.2 (LCL 193, 277). See also Parsenius, *First, Second and Third*, 18. Now a maxim is a statement, not however concerning particulars, [...], but general; it does not even deal with all general things [...], but with the objects of human actions, and with what should be chosen or avoided with reference to them.

⁸⁹ See below – detailed lecture.

⁹⁰ Watson, “Rhetorical Analysis,” 125–126. The author also mentions *regressio* (*epandos*), a figure consisting in repeating things that have already been said and making a distinction between them: πᾶς ὁ προάγων καὶ μὴ μένων ἐν τῇ διδασχῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ. However, it may be doubted whether the author of 2 John really distinguishes between προάγων and μὴ μένων ἐν τῇ διδασχῇ, or whether he merely clarifies his understanding of προάγων. For him, it is equivalent to μὴ μένων ἐν τῇ διδασχῇ, which means that the conjunct καὶ in this sentence would have to be treated as an *epexegeticum*.

The epistrophe consists in ending parts A and B with the same verb ἔχει (have). Reduplication (*conduplicatio*) is the repetition of words in order to strengthen them; the narrator thus distinguishes between two verbs expressing the states of abiding and having. He also repeats their forms – μένων in 9b and 9d is participium praesentis activi; ἔχει in 9c and 9e is indicativus praesentis activi. Synonymy, whereby a word/phrase is not repeated but replaced by another with the same meaning, is evident in the identification of God in v. 9c with the Father and the Son in 9e. Here, the recipient is caught by surprise. It would seem that a synonym for the noun θεός would be πατήρ. The addition of υἱός is an amplification in which an even higher degree, Father and Son, is superimposed on the superlative expression God.⁹¹ Alternatively, the explanation of the formulation in 9a πᾶς ὁ προάγων by the formulation in 9b μὴ μένων ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ may be regarded as ironic.

The statement πᾶς ὁ προάγων itself literally translates as “anyone who leads the way, goes first, goes ahead,” or “anyone who leads out.” Some scholars argue that προάγω refers to the views of heretics who maintained that they possessed more advanced, greater knowledge or a deeper spirituality, and that this knowledge or spirituality allowed them to get “ahead in faith” compared to other Christians.⁹² Then, indeed, one can see the irony in assessing such getting ahead or standing out in faith, knowledge, spirituality, which in fact – as v. 9b shows – is a failure to abide in Christ’s teaching.⁹³

The verb προάγω itself has a neutral or even positive meaning when referring to progress (cf. Sir 20:26). In the Second Epistle of John, however, it takes on a negative character (it is the only such place in the NT) due to the context and explanation in v. 9b.⁹⁴ This clarification seems necessary because, as the various textual variants argue, copyists and translators had some difficulty in understanding the phrase πᾶς ὁ προάγων. The Elder explains that going ahead, getting ahead, concerns the doctrine of Christ, and anyone who gets ahead of that doctrine does not in fact keep it⁹⁵ and, by walking ahead, leads others out of it, as mentioned in vv. 10–11. It follows that πᾶς ὁ προάγων καὶ μὴ μένων ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ 9a and 9b should be considered a synonymy rather than an irony. Then, the correlation between προάγων and μὴ μένων can be seen. The phrases to go ahead, to lead, to lead out presuppose dynamism and exclude static continuing or abiding in something.

The non-abiding and abiding concern the teachings of Christ. The genetivus in the expression διδαχῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ in 9b can, as mentioned earlier, be interpreted as genetivus subiectivus (the teaching preached by Christ)⁹⁶ or as genetivus obiectivus (the teaching

91 Watson, “Rhetorical Analysis,” 127.

92 Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 331; J.R.W. Stott, *The Letters of John* (TNTC 19; Nottingham: IVP 2015) [ePUB]. It is different in the case of Lieu (*Second and Third*, 90–91) who argues that there is insufficient evidence, especially in Christian, philosophical or Gnostic writings, to claim that the verb προάγω was used in these settings to denote advancement or distinction in cognition or spirituality.

93 Stott, *The Letters*, 211–213.

94 Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 673.

95 Lieu, *Second and Third*, 92; Campbell, *1, 2 & 3 John*, 200–201; Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 140; Davids – Moo – Yarbrough, *1 and 2 Peter* [ePUB].

96 Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 674–675; Stott, *The Letters*, 214.

about Christ).⁹⁷ Some scholars leave this issue unresolved, considering it to be of little importance⁹⁸ or seeing this ambiguity as intentionally introduced by the author of the letter.⁹⁹ To these two dominant possibilities in the commentaries, a third one should be added, namely *genetivus originis* (teaching coming from Christ, teaching whose source is Christ), which enables a broader Christological interpretation.¹⁰⁰ It does not challenge the other two interpretations, but, as E.R. Wendland puts it, increases the semantic density of the expression διδαχή τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

Throughout the letter, the elder explains what abiding in the doctrine of Christ and having God as well as not abiding in the doctrine and not having God mean, showing – as he points out in the sentence – that the two realities are mutually exclusive and that their boundaries are intransgressible.¹⁰¹

3.2. Verse 9 as a Hermeneutical Principle for the Second Epistle of John

When applying the sentence contained in v. 9 as a hermeneutical principle, the content of the entire letter is subordinated to an explanation of what the possession of the Father and the Son consists in. The explanation takes the casuistic form typical of Semitic legislation. Following the antithetical construction of sentences, the author of the letter mentions or suggests behaviours that indicate the absence of God and those that confirm the possession of the Father and the Son. This is best presented in tabular form:

not having God	having the Father and the Son
	Knowing the truth – 1d
	Abiding in the truth forever – 2
	Having the grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Jesus Christ – 3
	Walking in the commandments and truth – 4, 6
	Keeping the commandment of love – 5
Going out into the world from the community – 7	Remaining in the community – 7
Not recognising Christological doctrine/tradition – 7	Recognising Christological doctrine/tradition – 7
Losing what has been earned and not being paid – 8	Not losing what has been earned and getting paid for it – 8
Not abiding in the teachings of Christ – 9a	Abiding in the teachings of Christ – 9
Not bringing the teachings of Christ – 10b	Bringing the teachings of Christ – 10b
Accepting preachers of false doctrine 10c–d	Not accepting preachers of false doctrine – 10c–d
Becoming an accomplice in evil deeds – 11	Not sharing in their wicked work – 11

97 Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 332; Marshall, *Epistles*, 72; Campbell, *1, 2 & 3 John*, 200; M.M. Culy, *I, II, III John. A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2004) 150.

98 Lieu, *Second and Third*, 93.

99 Wendland, “What is Truth?” 310; Heil, *1–3 John*, 52.

100 See below.

101 Cf. Parnsenios, *First, Second and Third*, 19.

As can be seen, the explanation of the main idea of the letter proceeds in the opposite way to what the sentence suggests. The author starts with the positives (vv. 1d–6, lecture A) and moves on to the negatives (vv. 7–9a, 10–11 – warnings B and B'). The possession of the Father and the Son is expressed in very different ways. Alongside statements on knowing the truth and living in community (vv. 1d, 2a, 4–6), there are statements about the future (vv. 2b–3), warnings (v. 8), prohibitions (v. 10) with justification (v. 11). Less varied means are used to describe the behaviour of those who do not have God. Here, statements prevail (7, 9a, 10a, 11). Common to both arguments is v. 8, which, however, will be read differently depending on the adoption of a positive or negative perspective. For those who have the Father and the Son, it is, as mentioned, merely a warning; for those who do not have God, it is an announcement of judgement. This means that having/not having God is not limited to the temporal, it also has eschatological implications and translation. This can be seen not only in v. 8, but also in vv. 2a–3, which deal with the future: [ἀλήθεια] μεθ' ἡμῶν ἔσται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. ἔσται μεθ' ἡμῶν χάρις ἔλεος εἰρήνη. It is usually read as an element of salutation, but in conjunction with v. 2a, it can be interpreted as the eschatological consequences of nurturing truth in the community and in each member of the community (διὰ τὴν ἀλήθειαν τὴν μένουσαν ἐν ἡμῖν, “truth, which lives in us/among us”). A clear eschatological clue is the addition of εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, “forever.” Therefore, in the end times, truth will be with the faithful and grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Jesus Christ will be with them.

The sentence in v. 9 also helps to elucidate John's understanding of truth in the opening verses of the letter. The process of reconstructing the meaning of the concept resembles to some extent E.R. Wendland's proposal, but proceeds in the opposite direction and takes more account of lexical parallels. There is a clear similarity between vv. 2–3 and 9d:

A. whoever **continues** in the teaching [of Christ]

B. has both **the Father and the Son**

A'. The truth, which **lives** in us and

B'. will be with us forever

Grace, mercy and peace from **God the Father** and from Jesus Christ, the **Father's Son**, will be with us in truth and love.

It follows that synonymous with the truth inculcated in each member of the community and nurtured in the community is the teaching of Christ (coming from Christ, preached by Christ, concerning Christ) also inculcated in each member of the community, nurtured in the community and proclaimed (brought) to others (cf. v. 10b). This is also confirmed by v. 1. While the phrase ἐγὼ ἀγαπῶ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ can be translated as I love truly,¹⁰² those who know the truth, οἱ ἐγνωκότες τὴν ἀλήθειαν, must be identified with those who know the teachings of Christ.

¹⁰² Culy, *I, II, III John*, 142.

If one accepts that διδαχή τοῦ Χριστοῦ, Christ's teaching, in v. 9 is synonymous with truth, then the description of truth in v. 4 enables the elucidation of the understanding of Christ's teaching. The walking in the truth, περιπατοῦντας ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, in v. 4b is explained in 4c by the phrase καθὼς ἐντολήν ἐλάβομεν παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς. This means that the equivalent of truth here is the commandment we received from the Father. This is confirmed by v. 6b, where the phrase ἵνα περιπατῶμεν κατὰ τὰς ἐντολάς αὐτοῦ appears instead of the phrase ἵνα περιπατῶμεν ἐν ἀληθείᾳ. It clearly indicates that "walking in the truth" is "walking in the commandments." Noteworthy is the change from the singular of the noun ἐντολή in v. 4c to the plural in 6b. This is explained by the frame surrounding v. 6b: αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγάπη (6a) and αὕτη ἡ ἐντολή ἐστὶν (6c). This means that the Elder understands love (6a) as keeping the commandments, "walk in obedience to his commands" (6b), and "walk in obedience to his commands" (6b) is, in turn, the commandment (6c) that the recipients of the letter have heard from the beginning ἠκούσατε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς (6d) and that we have had from the beginning εἶχομεν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς (5c), that is, the command to walk in love ἵνα ἐν αὐτῇ περιπατήτε (6e). This can be represented in a concentric form that further reveals all the internal correspondences:

truth (walking in the truth) (4b) = the commandment received from the Father (4c);
 the commandment received from the Father (4c) = the commandment we have had from the beginning (5c);
 the commandment we have had from the beginning (5c) = the commandment of love (5d);
 the commandment of love (5d.6a) = keeping all the commandments (6b);
 commandment (6c) = keeping all the commandments (6b);
 you have heard from the beginning (6d) = commandment (6c);
 walking in it (6e) = what you have heard from the beginning (6d).

Since Christ's teaching is the truth, and the truth first and foremost means a commandment received from the Father, it may be somewhat dubious that the syllogism used here leads to the conclusion that Christ's teaching is "a commandment received from the Father." But these doubts are overcome by the reference to the central v. 9 (9c, e), where the term θεός (God) in the segment θεὸν οὐκ ἔχει, **does not have God** (9c), is matched by the extension the Father and the Son in the second segment τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει, **has both the Father and the Son** (9e). Furthermore, already at the beginning of the letter, the sender indicated that everything that comes from the Father also comes from the Son (grace, mercy, peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son). Thus, there is no doubt that also the teaching coming from Christ (genetivus originis) is a teaching/commandment coming from God the Father. In this way, the author of the Second Epistle of John interprets the theological claims also familiar from the fourth gospel,

“I and the Father are one” (John 15:30) and “my teaching is not mine but his who sent me” (John 7:16).¹⁰³

Conclusions

The article examines two dominant approaches in the study of the structure and main theological thought of the Second Epistle of John: the epistolographic and rhetorical approach based on classical rhetoric and the structural approach. The first approach showed how difficult it is to find the guiding thought of the letter. Typically, biblical scholars taking this approach pointed to two ideas: truth and love, as the dominant themes in vv. 4–6, and warning against deceivers as the dominant idea in vv. 7–11. Neither the increasingly detailed division of the different parts of the letter nor the practical elimination of elements considered typical of epistolographic convention – the opening and closing salutations – from consideration favour the determination of the main theological idea. The difficulties in defining the main theological idea of the Second Epistle of John generally necessitated the use of other writings of John, causing that the text in question lost its autonomy and became a less significant “appendix” to the First Epistle of John, a sketch preceding the writing of the First Epistle of John or a summary of the First Epistle of John.

The Second Epistle of John contains quite a few elements relating to Jewish tradition. Their analysis revealed that the letter is concentric in structure, with v. 9 at its centre, which contains the main theological message formulated in the form of an antithetical sentence: “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.” This means that the Elder constructs his text around the idea of having God. By turning this idea into a hermeneutical principle, the text could be reread, together with the elements categorised as traditional greetings (vv. 1d–3), which contain an eschatological understanding of “having God.” By finding a central, single theological idea for the entire text and using it as a hermeneutical key, it was possible to restore the Second Epistle of John’s autonomy and recognise the text as a complete and independent theological writing.

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¹⁰³ A broader discussion of the issues of truth, love, commandments and the problem of the origin of Christ’s teaching, truth and commandments we have had from the beginning, ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, and the resulting Christological implications, is beyond the scope of this article.

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