J. P. Louw: On Johannine style.

ABSTRACT

Johannine style has been discussed by some scholars mainly in terms of Semitisms and related grammatical peculiarities. Should these features be classified as stylistic, however? Other scholars have restricted their remarks to the relative absence of rhetorical figures of speech, such as advocated by the earlier Greek orators. But figures of speech are merely one aspect of style. Style involves a much wider range of items, for style pertains to an author’s choice from among the various possibilities of expression offered by the language. Style also extends beyond sentence boundaries; it involves the structure of the total discourse.

Moulton’s Grammar of New Testament Greek, first published in 1906, became not only one of the most respected grammars but also perhaps the only one with a full volume devoted to the style of the Greek New Testament. The fourth volume (by Nigel Turner) appeared in 1976. Turner also wrote the third volume on the syntax of New Testament Greek. In his introduction to volume four he draws attention to the fact that he did “not seek to drive a rigid distinction between syntax... and style”. He also states, “...this fourth volume rather concerns itself with grammatical and other linguistic features which distinguish the work of one author from that of another”. This is the reason why the bulk of the material found in volume four concerns itself with Semitisms (especially Hebraisms and Aramaisms). However, these features of the language of the Greek New Testament pertain more to the grammar of the different authors than to style in the sense of an author’s choice from among the various possibilities of expression offered by the language. Style in this latter sense is confined to the selective mode or form of construction, the way or manner in which something is said. Therefore features such as peculiar uses of pronouns, conjunctions, negatives, prepositions, particles, prolepsis of the subject of a subordinate clause, and so on, seem to be far more related to the grammar of an author than to style as defined above. In fact, most grammars of New Testament Greek treat Semitisms under the sections dealing with morphology and syntax, or in a special section on the type of Greek found in the New Testament.

These grammars, on the other hand, would regularly restrict style to rhetorical figures of speech. The Funk-Rehkopf edition (1976) of the well-known Blass-Debrunner’s Grammar of New Testament Greek confidently states (par. 492) that “the absence of rhetorical art in the Johannine discourses is quite clear”. This contention has often been understood in a wider sense as though the Johannine discourses were on the whole without style. The notion “rhetorical art” has been generally understood by many commentators as being synonymous to “style”. Yet “rhetorical art”, especially as applied by Blass-Debrunner, pertains mainly to the so-called Gorgian figures of speech (the Гогих Деbrunner that are far more restricted in range than one may readily include under the term “style”, that is, the manner in which something is said. One may not personally favour the style of a particular author, yet the way in which such an author presents information, thoughts, arguments and the like, is still very much part of the author’s style. The Gorgian figures of speech were embellishing devices employed by Greek rhetoricians towards the later part of
the Classical Greek period and followed by orators in the earlier stages of the Hellenistic period. Atticistic authors in the following centuries regularly subscribe to the tenets of the Gorgian figures of speech, yet in no way did any of the later writers rigidly adhere to the prescriptions of the ancient rhetoricians. Norden's famous book Die antike Kunstprosa, first published in 1898, contributed much to the custom of judging style in terms of the Gorgian figures of speech as illustrated, for example, by Blass-Debrunner's statement quoted above. One may also refer to Robertson's monumental Grammar of New Testament Greek in which he states (1914:1194) that "there is no NT rhetoric". Robertson's discussion of the style of the New Testament is mainly concerned with grammatical peculiarities, especially Semitisms. Deissmann in his Light from the Ancient East (first edition in German, 1908) voiced the same attitude by saying that Paul's Greek never becomes literary; it is never disciplined by the canon of Greek orators or tuned to the subtleties of ancient rhetorical rhythms; it remains non-literary. This is a contention that has been followed by the majority of grammarians who wrote on New Testament Greek – and for the Johannine discourses it was assumed even more rigidly. This also explains why almost nothing has since been written on Johannine (or for that matter on New Testament) style.

Although figures of speech such as ellipsis, brachylogy, assonance, pleonasm, chiasm, homoioteleuton, irony, zeugma, hyperbole, and so on, do in fact not flourish in New Testament Greek, there are occasional instances that have been noticed in numerous publications on the style of the New Testament writers. However, many of these devices are natural to human expression in general and therefore it is not surprising that one should find some of the figures of speech in various writings, including the Greek New Testament. But the relative absence of these devices are not at all a legitimate yardstick by which one should judge the style of a particular text. What is more, these figures of speech are just one aspect of the total discourse style of a text.

The Johannine discourses are noted for a number of very significant features of style other than the so-called Gorgian figures of speech. Perhaps the most notable is the tendency in the Gospel of John to employ relatively close synonyms with essentially the same meaning. Though general Greek usage may regularly display some difference in meaning between these expressions, John seems to be very fond of varying his diction for the sake of aesthetic embellishment. For example, John 4:48: ἵνα μὴ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα ήθητε, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε: "If you do not see signs and wonders, you will never believe." In John 13:23 the phrase ἄνακτείμενος ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ implying to take the place of honour at a meal, is followed in 13:25 by the expression ἄνακτειμόν ἐπὶ τὸ στήθιον with essentially the same meaning. In 19:37 ἔκκεντρεῖ is used in reference to the piercing of Jesus’ side by one of the soldiers with a spear. In 19:34, however, the same event is described by using the word νέσσω, normally implying in general Greek usage a much less serious wound than expressed by ἔκκεντρεῖ. Yet one should not stress this difference in meaning in the Johannine context. The usage seems to be merely one of variation, not one of meaning. Though ὄραω and βλέπω differ in the sense that ὄραω is the most generic term to express the meaning “to see”, while βλέπω implies seeing as an event of becoming aware of or taking notice of something, 1:51: ὅμως τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνεβαίνει: “you will see the heaven opened”, and 1:29: τῇ ἐκπάρδει βλέπει τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐρχόμενον: “the next day he saw Jesus coming” indicate that John uses these terms as being synonymous. The same applies to John’s use of φιλέω and ἀγαπάω. The usage in especially 21:15-17 seems to reflect simply a rhetorical alternation designed to avoid undue repetition. John uses both φιλέω and ἀγαπάω for the total range.
of loving relations between people, between people and God, and between the Father and Jesus. In discussing John 21:15 Bernard has shown in The international critical commentary that Abbott in his Johannine grammar (1906) was mistaken in saying, “There are no synonyms in John”. Bernard gives a full list of all the relations expressed by φιλέω and ἀγαπάω in the New Testament and in the Septuagint, and concludes, “We must treat ἀγαπάωs and φιλέωs in v. 15-17 as synonymous, as all the patristic expositors do”. He also mentions the fact that the Syriac versions render ἀγαπάωs and φιλέωs in John 21:15-17 by using the same verb although two Syriac words were at the disposal of the translators.

It would be unfair to regard such alternating between synonyms as merely a pointless variation, as has been suggested by Turner (1976:76). Though there seems to be no difference in lexical meaning however hard one looks for a subtle distinction, this tendency to variety in the use of similar words should rather be understood as a Johannine device to give flavour to a discourse which is syntactically very simple in structure. Compare John 1:19-24 for the use of ἀποστέλλω and πέμπτω meaning “to send”: ὅτε ἀπέστειλαν πρὸς αὐτόν οἱ Ἰουδαίοι (v.19) ... τίς εἰ; ἵνα ἀπόχρισαν δῶμεν τοῖς πέμψαις οἱμάς (v.22) ... καὶ ἀπέσταλμοι ἦσαν ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων (v.24); or John 5:36-8: ὅτι ὁ πατήρ με ἀπέσταλκεν, καὶ ὁ πέμψας με πατήρ (vv. 36-7) ... ὅτι ὁ ἀπέστειλεν ἐκεῖνος (v. 38) and John 20:21: καθὼς ἀπέσταλκέν με ὁ πατήρ, κἀγώ πέμπτω υἱός.

Other examples illustrating John’s preference for variation are John 1:48: ὑπὸ (under) τὴν σωτήριον εἰδὼν ἦσαν καὶ John 1:50: εἰδὼν σε ὑποκάτω (under) της σωτηρίας; John 1:44: ἀπό (from) Βεθλεὲμ, ἐκ (from) τῆς πόλεως Ἀνδρέου καὶ John 11:1: ἀπό (from) Βηθανίας, ἐκ (from) τῆς κόμης Μαρίας. Note also John 5:9: ἐγένετο ύγιής (became well) ὁ ἄνθρωπος and John 5:10: ἠλευθεροῦν οὖν οἱ Ἰουδαίοι τῷ τεθηραπευμένῳ (became well); or John 16:23: ἐμὲ οὖν ἐρωτήσετε (ask) οὐδὲν ... ἐὰν τι αἰτήσητε (ask) τὸν πατέρα.

It is quite remarkable that though Greek offers a variety of terms to express a particular area of meaning, John’s vocabulary is generally limited. For “asking” ἐρωτάως and αἰτέω are used, but not δέομαι or παρακαλέω: for “sending” πέμπτω and ἀποστέλλω occur, but not ἀπολύω or ἐκβάλλω. Regularly his synonyms are confined to only two words for each meaning. Though he uses ἐξετάζω four times, λέγω and λαλέω are his general words for “speaking”. Note, for example, John 8:44: ὅταν λαλῇ τῷ φησίδω: “whenever he speaks a lie” and 8:45: ὅτι τὴν ἀλήθειαν λέγω: “because I speak the truth”.

It is important, however, not to assume that John is unaware of certain subtle differences in meaning between synonymous terms. Note his use of λέγω to focus on the content, and λαλέω on the informal activity in 4:26: λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς. Ἐγὼ εἰμί, ὁ λαλῶν σοι: “Jesus said to her, I am the one who speaks to you.”

One more example may suffice. For “to know” John uses οἶδα or γινώσκω, but not ἐπιστάμαι. Compare 8:19: οὕτω ἐμὲ οἶδατε οὕτε τὸν πατέρα μου and 10:15: καθὼς γινώσκει με ὁ πατήρ κἀγὼ γινώσκω τὸν πατέρα. But John also employs οἶδα and γινώσκω for “understanding the meaning of something”. In general Greek usage, and likewise in the New Testament, there is a slight difference in meaning in so far as οἶδα focuses upon the resulting knowledge, while γινώσκω points to understanding as the result of the ability to experience and learn. In 13:7: ὁ ἐγὼ ποιῶ σ’ οὐκ οἶδας ἐρτί, γνώσῃ δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα: “What I do you do not understand now, but you will understand hereafter”, it is possible to apply this subtle difference in meaning, yet one can also explain the switch from οἶδα to γινώσκω as part of John’s preference for variation.

One of the meanings expressed by πιστεῖω in John (as well as in the whole New Testa-
ment) is to believe in the good news about Jesus Christ and to become a follower, that is, to have Christian faith. John frequently employs a prepositional phrase (πιστεύω εἰς) to express this meaning, as in 3:16: ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν. Yet in 3:15 we have ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ. A number of manuscripts read εἰς αὐτὸν in 3:15, which is more in line with the regular πιστεύω εἰς. There seems to be no difference in meaning and as such the “smoothing out” of the phrase in many manuscripts is understandable. However, what is more important is that instead of πιστεύω εἰς John often uses πιστεύω with the dative: ἵνα πιστεύητε εἰς ὅν ἀπέστειλεν ἐκεῖνος (6:29) and ὁ πιστεύων τῷ πέμψαντι με ἔχει ζωὴν αἰωνίαν (5:24). Some scholars have chosen for a distinction of meaning between πιστεύω εἰς (true, genuine Christian faith) and πιστεύω + dative (incidental belief). However, it seems far more relevant to regard these different modes of expression as stylistic variants. One may further compare 1 John 3:23: ἵνα πιστεύσωμεν τῷ ὑνόματι τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ with 1 John 5:10: ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τόν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ.

The same can be said of the following from John’s first epistle: τεκνία (“children”) in 1 John 2:12 is repeated as παιδία (“children”) in 2:14; and παιδία in 2:18 is followed by τεκνία in 2:28. Note also ὁ ἀγαθός, ὁ ἐωράκαμεν . . . ὁ θεασάμεθα καὶ αἱ χεῖρες ἡμῶν ὑψήλατσαν (1 Jn. 1:1) – hear, see, touch are semantically related and piled up for emphasis. Though ὁ δάκτυλος and θέαμα differ in general Greek usage in that ὁ δάκτυλος is the generic term for seeing, while θέαμα implies that what is seen is somewhat unusual, this distinction is often ignored, especially in a series enumerated for emphasis. The same applies to οὐκ ἔχωμεν καὶ οὐκ ἀκούσαμεν καὶ δὲ ἐωράκαμεν μαρτυροῦμεν: “we speak what we know and we testify to what we have seen”. Another device to achieve emphasis is to maintain the same semantic equivalents by alternating the positive and the negative, for example: John 1:20: ὑμολογήσατε καὶ οὐκ ἰδοῦσατε καὶ ὑμολόγησατε: “he admitted and did not deny but admitted”, or 1:13: οὐκ ἔχως εἰς αὐτὸν ὀφθαλμὸν ἐκ πέρας αὐτὸς ἐκ πέρας αὐτοῦ ἐκ πέρας ἡμῶν ἐκ πέρας . . . ἐγεννήθησαν: “who were born, not from blood, nor from the will of the flesh, nor from the will of man”, meaning: “born, not in the physical sense, but . . .” However, any stylistic device has the function of highlighting, that is, of emphasizing and drawing attention to This is in line with the features of impact and appeal which in turn are the most basic aims of effective communication, since these alert the receptor to pay closer attention to what is said.

Closely related to John’s using synonyms for stylistic variation, is his tendency to employ, in the same context, different meanings of the same word for effecting significant contrasts. In John 1:5 κατέλαβεν may be read as meaning “understand” or “conquer”. The latter fits in well with the glorious tone of the previous verses dealing with Christ’s godhead, while the meaning “understand” links well with the negative tone of the following section, especially οὐκ ἔγνω in verse 5 and οὐ παρέλαβον in verse 11. In 2:23-4 πιστεύω is used twice, first in a positive statement, and then in a negative one: πολλοὶ ἐπίστευσαν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ . . . Ἰησοῦς οὐκ ἐπίστευεν ἐκατόν αὐτοῖς. Two meanings of πιστεύω are in contrast to one another. In the first instance the meaning “to accept as true and hence worthy of being trusted” is applicable; in the second case the meaning is “to rely on to the extent of having complete confidence in”. The people accepted Jesus as prophet on account of the miracles, yet Jesus knowing their hearts did not rely on their belief in him. By using the same word in two senses, John highlights the contrast. The change from aorist to imperfect tense (ἐπίστευσαν – ἐπίστευε) is part of this subtle stylistic play and should not be
stressed. John 4:48-53 is another instance of more than one meaning of πιστεύω operating in the same context. In 4:48 we read: ἐὰν μὴ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα ὄψητε, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσῃς: “if you do not see signs and miracles, you will never believe” (= “never trust me” or even “never become my followers”). In 4:50 we have ἐπίστευσαν ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῷ λόγῳ ὃν εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς: “the man believed (= “accepted as true”) what Jesus told him”. Finally in 4:53 we find καὶ ἐπίστευσεν αὐτός καὶ ἦ οἰκία αὐτοῦ δική: “and he and his whole household believed” (= “became followers of Jesus”, i.e. “became Christians”, or perhaps merely “trusted in Jesus”). Which meaning of πιστεύω is applicable depends on one’s reading of the total context, yet it still remains a fact that more than one meaning is at stake.

The term χώσμος: “world” occurs three times in John 1:10; the second (“the world came into being through him”) denotes primarily the physical world, the earth; the third (“the world did not recognize him”) signifies the people who did not respond, the unbelievers; while the first use of χώσμος (“he was in the world”) involves a play on both these senses. However, one may also argue that, though the second instance of χώσμος in 1:10 refers primarily to the physical world, it naturally includes the created beings living in this world. Even more startling are the three uses of εἰμί in 1:11, the first meaning “existence” (“in the beginning was the Word”), the second meaning “to be in a location” (“the Word was with God”), and the third indicating class membership, “have the nature of” (“the Word was God”). The use of καθάρισεως in 15:2: πᾶν τὸ καρπὸν φέρων καθάρισε αὐτό: “every branch that bears fruit, he prunes/cleanses it”, may also be understood as an instance of playing on two meanings of the same word, either as 1. an agricultural activity involving the cutting away of unproductive branches or of cutting back productive branches so they can produce better, that is, the activity of pruning a plant; or as 2. meaning a cleansing process by which something is made pure. In the context of John 15:2 these two meanings are, of course, used figuratively. Yet both meanings are perfectly applicable and perhaps intended as such by the author, since cleansing may be interpreted as an implication of pruning.

In John 3:14 (καθάρως Μωϋσῆς ὄψωσεν τὸν ὄχον... αὐτὸς ὄψωθαι δεῖ τὸν ὄχον τοῦ ἄνθρωπου: “as Moses lifted up the snake, so must the Son of man be lifted up”) the term ψωθεν occurs twice in the meaning of “to lift up high some object” with the contextual implication of making it conspicuous. In the case of the snake the meaning is literally applicable while in the case of the Son of man the meaning is used figuratively: In the same way as Moses lifted up the snake for the people to look at and to be healed, the Son of man must be held on high for people to look at in order to be saved. But another meaning of ψωθεν, namely “to give high status to”, can be applied to ψωθενας: the Son of man must be exalted. This involves that the Son of man must be lifted up on the cross while this event paradoxically implies that the Son of man is lifted up to glory. The cross is the beginning of Jesus’ ascent to the Father, his uplifting as such is his exaltation.

In the pericope dealing with the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus the term ἄνωθεν is used by Jesus in the meaning “from above” (implying “from God”) while Nicodemus understands it as meaning “once again”. Then Jesus alludes to this dichotomy by the phrases γεννηθή ἐξ ὕδατος: “born from water” and γεννηθή ἐκ πνεύματος: “born from the Spirit” (v. 5), phrases immediately followed by the synonymous expressions γεγεννημένον ἐκ τῆς σαρκός: “born from the flesh” and γεγεννημένον ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος: “born from the Spirit” (v. 6). These variations not only explain one another, but are also stylistically very significant, in that the reference becomes more explicit as the notions are repeated: γεννηθή ἐξ ὕδατος is more explicit in reference to physical birth than γεγεννηθή ἄνωθεν: “born
(once) again”, while the reference of γεννήθη εκ τῆς σαρκος is quite obvious. It is also interesting to note that physical birth is referred to by yet three other synonymous expressions in John 1:13: εξ αἰμάτων γεννήθησαν: “born from blood” and εκ θελήματος ἀνθρώπου γεννήθησαν: “born from the will of man” along with εκ θελήματος σαρκος: “born from the will of the flesh”, while εκ θεοῦ γεννήθησαν: “born from God” in 1:13 parallels γεγεννημένον εκ τοῦ πνεύματος: “born from the Spirit” in 3:6. The same passage offers yet another example of John’s preference for playing upon words. The term πνεῦμα in 3:8 primarily means “wind” but also anticipates the meaning “Spirit” which is explicitly marked at the end of verse 8 by the phrase γεγεννημένον εκ τοῦ πνεύματος: “born from the Spirit”. The semantic features displayed by all these terms which are so closely knit into a stretch of only six verses, clearly show how stylistically remarkable John’s presentation is, not in terms of Gorgian figures of speech, but rather in terms of other compositional devices.

Style is not only concerned with individual words and phrases, but should also be considered in terms of a longer stretch of language such as the paragraph, and for this matter, even the total discourse. The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus starts in John 3:1-2a with a number of short phrases as background to the words spoken by Nicodemus in 3:2b: ἦν δὲ ἀνθρωπος εκ τῶν Φαρισαίων Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτῶν ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων οὗτος ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτὸς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ. And then in 3:2b: Ἡμείς ὀδηγον... ἀπὸ αὐτοῦ, 24 words in all. This is in effect similar to what the Greek orators favoured, namely to lengthen phrases as the discourse continues. What Nicodemus said in 3:2b is also well phrased by moving ἀπὸ θεοῦ to an almost initial position, and then ending with οὗ θεος close to the end (οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλλήλωκα διδάσκαλος οὐδεὶς γὰρ δύναται ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἢ σο ποιεῖς, εάν μὴ ή ο θεος μετα αὐτοῦ). In Greek the initial and final positions regularly carry emphasis. Whether John has done this on purpose or not, the fact remains that the text and the contextual matter allow for stressing the notion of God as initiator. The initial position of ἀπὸ θεοῦ also allows for διδάσκαλος to have some prominence. Stylistically this is quite effective, and is enhanced by introducing the following sentence with the solemn phraseology typical of Semitic style, namely ἀπεκρίθη καὶ εἶπεν: “he answered and said” and ἀμὴν ἀμὴν: “verily, verily”. This gives emphasis to the statement in 3:3 which contains the central theme of the discourse: ἀπεκρίθη Ἡσυχος καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, εάν μὴ τις γεννήθη ἀνωθεν, οὗ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὸν βασιλεῖαν τοῦ θεοῦ. Note also how 3:4-10 is an exposition of 3:3.

The structural arrangement of the discourse material in John 3:1-21 is no doubt part of the style since style involves the manner in which something is said. Note how well the discourse structure is arranged:

John 3:1-2: Introductory background information and setting of the stage
3: Central theme
4-10: Exposition of theme
11-21: Theological reflection on implications of theme.

Since style involves the way in which something is said, one should judge an author’s style on all levels of expression: the word, the phrase, the sentence, the paragraph, and so forth – in short, the style of the discourse as a whole. The short extract from the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus referred to above, already exhibited some of the relevant aspects of John’s remarkable and quite refined discourse style. But more should be said about this.
The prologue is quite unusual, but since it exhibits a hymnal, or at least a poetic infrastructure that would lead one to expect stylistically significant features, it may be wiser to begin looking at what follows. If we take as a sample John 1:29-3:36 it appears that each pericope is introduced by a temporal reference: τῇ ἐπαύριον in 1:29, 35, 43; τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ in 2:1; μετὰ τοῦτο in 2:12; ἔγγυς ἦν τὸ πάσχα in 2:13; ὡς δὲ ... ἐν τῷ πάσχα in 2:23, and μετὰ ταύτα in 3:22. This trend continues in subsequent sections. In the above sample section, only one item differs from the rest: 3:1-21 (the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus). It is introduced by ἦν δὲ ἀνθρώπος. Though these section markers are syntactically important in overtly marking the beginning of a new section, they are semantically almost empty. Jesus remains semantically the focal point in each section and especially at the end of each section this fact is stressed: firstly, that he is the Son of God (1:34: ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ), the Messiah (1:36: ὁ ἄνω τοῦ θεοῦ; 1:41: εὐφημαζεν τὸν Μεσσιάν), the Son of man (1:51: τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου); and secondly, that belief in him is the most important reason for the narrative content of the sections. See 2:11: καὶ ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτὸν, 2:22: καὶ ἐπίστευσαν, 2:23: πολλοὶ ἐπίστευσαν and 3:15-21: some form of πιστεύω in verses 15, 16, 18 and related phrases, implying “be saved” and “coming to the light” in verses 17, 19, 20, 21. Finally, 3:36 ends with ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον: “he who believes in him has eternal life”. The compositional style of these sections clearly indicates that John 3:1-21 is a unit, though the latter part (3:11-21) seems to be a theological reflection on the relationship between God and man. John’s play on words and themes is again manifested in this latter section. In 3:11-12: οὐ λαμβάνετε: “you do not receive” and οὐ πιστεύετε: “you do not believe” are thematically the same, and echo what was said in the prologue by οὐ κατέλαβεν: “not understand” (1:5), οὐκ ἐγνώκα: “not know” (1:10) and οὐ παρελαβον: “not accept” (1:11). The replaying of words and themes is further emphasized by 3:19-21 in which υἱός: “light” and σκότος: “darkness” resume the content of the prologue.

The various stylistic devices employed by Greek authors since the earliest times involve three underlying principles: repetition, omission and shift in expectancy. The traditional figures of speech such as alliteration, anaphora, chiasm, anastrophe, and so on, all pertain to the principle of repetition. In discourses, ring composition and related features such as those mentioned above for John 3:19-21, are similar in essence to word repetitions. The same applies to omissions. In the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 no reference is made as to the reasons why Nicodemus came and what his initial questions were. Verse 2 is a statement, yet its significance is cultural, namely a word of praise before stating one’s case. Yet, verse 3 gives an answer to a supposed question. Stylistically this is very effective since it concentrates on essentials. It is not a full report on what each participant had to say, but merely a framework into which the basic issue involving γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν: “to be born again”, was projected. The real message of the pericope lies in the theological reflections from verse 11 onwards. John’s gospel is much more theological in orientation than the synoptic gospels. His discourse style underlines this fact. The cryptic nature of Jesus’ replies in his discourse with Nicodemus is indeed rather strange. One would expect a proper explanation. The style of the passage, therefore, suggests once again that the theological reflection is the focal issue in the pericope.

On the microlevel the arrangement of the crucial items in verses 15-21 is stylistically very refined. Note how πιστεύων in verse 15: ἢν πάς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον is taken up and explained in verse 16: οὕτως γὰρ ἤγαγαν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὡστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενὴ ἔδωκεν, ἢν πάς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν (note ἐν αὐτῷ in v. 15) μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ’ ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον.
while ἐδωκεν in verse 16 is semantically reflected in ἀπέστειλεν in verse 17: οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεός τὸν υἱόν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα κρίνῃ τὸν κόσμον, ἄλλο же σωθή ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ — saying, in effect, the same as verse 16. Similarly κρίνῃ in 17 is resumed in 18a (ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν οὐ κρίνεται: ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἀδική κέρδιται) — semantically identical for the sake of emphasis) and linked to πιστεύων repeated in 18a and further emphasized by μὴ πιστεύων (v. 18a) and μὴ πεπίστευκεν (in v. 18b: ὅτι μὴ πεπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ μουσῷ ὕιον τοῦ θεοῦ — now in the perfect tense to emphasize the state of affairs), which allow for κρίνεται and κέρδιται (v. 18a) to be reintroduced, and to become the dominant item in verse 19: δὲ ἐστιν ὁ κρίσις, ὅτι . . . Verses 19-21 actually reflects on the issue of μὴ πιστεύων. In a sense one can say that the section comprising verses 16-21 is very condensed. A multiplicity of relations is intricately connected, yet the total semantic content is still the same as that of verse 15: ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον. Though the syntax of the passage is quite simple, the semantic relations are indeed multiple and complex.

It has now become clear that style involves both syntactic and semantic features, that is, the arrangement of words and of thought. Though the Johannine style is quite remarkable, one should not assume that the features discussed above are peculiar to the Johannine writings; they are, in fact, devices found in the writings of numerous ancient Greek authors. It is merely that in the Johannine style these features are exploited to the full. As such the choice and arrangement of lexical items, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and so on all contribute to communicate a message much more profound than ordinary human language can convey.

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