

During Eastertide, the First Epistle of John features over six weeks in the Lectionary for 2018, from the 8th April to the 13th May, and according to Dr Palmer not one of these readings begins and ends where the writer would have wanted it to. In fact, he states that this delightfully disciplined book of the New Testament has been read only haphazardly over the past seventeen hundred years! Here, this Eastertide, he shares with Methodist Recorder readers the reading that he believes would put a smile on the face of the writer were he here today.

From the Rev Dr David G Palmer:

This First Epistle of John is a fine example of a work of ancient rhetoric. The all-in-one chartⁱ which I present captures the document in all its parts and wholes. It also indicates the ways in which these parts and wholes relate. In literal English, I follow the order of the Greek words so that those who do not read Greek can get a real feel for the kind of composition that this is. The letter's purpose is revealed along with its structure, and because this text can now be read as the writer intended, we can all access for ourselves what the writer is saying (because we can see how he is saying it). In the past, we have had only the help of commentators who neither have recognised the work as a piece of ancient rhetoric, nor have been able to read the text for themselves in the way that the writer intended.ⁱⁱ It continues to surprise and trouble me that 1 John's characteristics of simplicity and purity have never been seen before.

My chart presents a reading of the Greek manuscript(s) through 'parsing' and rhetorical analysis. Writers had rules laid down for them. This writer clearly wrote to them. Firstly, he had to establish what his purpose in writing was. He had to marshal his main intentions and thoughts. Secondly, he had to choose the structure that he would employ. It would be one that would give clarity to his work. Through it, the reader would access the writer's main thoughts and ideas. (As Augustine knew, there was no understanding of a text without an appreciation of its structure.ⁱⁱⁱ) Thirdly, the rhetor had to choose the writing style which he would use from the beginning of his work to its end. He would have to be thinking how he would introduce it in its simplest form at the opening of his letter. This would be his best help to his reader's reading work of 'parsing' (parting) the text. To the Hellenist writer/rhetor, writing style gave punctuation to the whole text. Along with the structure it would also provide a natural referencing system - of 'section and part'. Artificial 'chapter and verse' were never needed for this document.^{iv} The writers also had a tool-box full of devices for giving clarity to the presentation of the text: they included dualities, introductory word repetitions, other forms of significant word repetition, inclusios, and so on. Lastly, the writers had to give thought to memorability and presentation: documents were prepared for recital from memory, or prepared for reading aloud in an oral/aural learning culture.^v

My presentation reveals the structure of the treatise as ABB'A'. It is the most ancient and most common *chiasm* in Hellenist literary work. Two outer parts (A and A prime) parallel each other around two inner parts (B and B') which also parallel each other. I find its use as a book structure in total eight times among the twenty-seven New Testament documents.^{vi}

To scholars, the big stumbling block to reading 1 John has been that the units of the text themselves could not easily be defined. But this evaporates, as soon as one sees this rhetor's writing style at work simultaneously at five different literary levels. My presentation shows that the writing style is to be described as ABB', where A is the introductory piece, B is the first development and B' is the second and paralleling/corresponding development which completes the three-part whole. Look anywhere in the text and accustom yourself to it and how it works. It's very clever and quite

fascinating. These three-part wholes are the basic units of the text, the basic building blocks of the document. It is this writing style that enabled any reader in the first century AD to read the ancient Greek manuscripts. They could accurately 'parse' a text of columns of letters then, without gaps between words and all without punctuation, as found in Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. Such a writing style clearly needs to be served today by a translation which will disclose it and not conceal it, so that our reading style can match the writer's/rhetor's intention. For eleven hundred years, the Roman Catholic Church read only its own Latin translations. It missed, therefore, all the details that were preserved only in the original Greek copies and that were overlooked by translators in the first three centuries.^{vii} The Reformation may have seen a new focusing of interest in the Greek texts, but as yet it has not re-discovered these important details. For years, commentators have been saying that letters such as this are not works of ancient rhetoric.^{viii}

We examine the letter's four-part chiasm, ABB'A'. Dualities of 'looked upon' and 'testify' which are to be found in the Greek, but which are never picked out in commentaries, introduce and identify Section A (in part A) and Section A' (in its part A). The writer of the letter uses this duality deliberately to guide the reader in his/her reading. Further, the B parts of both these opening pieces introduce the subjects of these sections which parallel: 'God is light' in the first, with 'God is love' in the second. In this way, this document begins to reveal the discipline that went into its writing. These outer series, A and A', enfold two middle sections. Section B gets straight into the new theme, 'Love not the world' and Section B' responds immediately at its opening, introducing its new theme, 'Love one another'. The Letter's themes thus emerge along with the structure of the work. This is our first fact: 1 John comprises four sections in the chiasm: ABB'A'. What next stands out, the second fact about this piece of literature, is that each section comprises three parts, A, B and B', which each comprise three parts, A, B and B', and which in turn, and so on, comprise three parts, A, B and B', to five literary levels of text. What is revealed is a repeated use of opening terms throughout the work.

My presentation demonstrates that the rhetor is disciplined in his writing in every way. To the bottom left of my chart, we see how he could be said to be a 'slave' to his own system (observe the similar three-fold repetitions in the last two parts, B and B'). He is writing for his reader in a systematic way. He has to. First century writing demanded it! The rules of ancient rhetoric required it. My chart demonstrates how the rhetor of this letter fulfilled these rules *and* gave every indication to his readers as to how he wanted his treatise to be read.

As a participant of the British New Testament Society since 2003, I had the good fortune to get acquainted with the Rev Professor I Howard Marshall^{ix}; we were both Methodists ministers and had that in common at least. In his commentary, he had reflected on the task of a commentator: he'd written, 'The task of the commentator is to serve the text and to help to make it comprehensible to the reader....' Because I felt that that was the role of the writer/rhetor himself, I began a conversation with him on my work of rhetorical analysis.

Marshall, in his commentary, presents seven possible structures (of other commentators) and then presents an eighth, his own. Of the first seven, he says that none are 'free from difficulty' and that, therefore, it 'seems preferable to regard the Epistle as being composed of a series of connected paragraphs whose relationship to one another is governed by association of ideas rather than by a logical plan' and that it is 'not meant to be divided into large sections on a logical basis'. My own view is that *all* the NT Books have a plan and that this plan is best discerned by recourse to rhetorical analysis coupled with 'parsing'.

I was fortunate indeed to have correspondence with Howard on my analysis of 1 John, a few years before he died in December 2015. **Here are his challenges to me and the responses I gave him:**

'I confess to a suspicion of a scheme which accepts the authenticity of 5:7-8... and then rejects 5:21....'

I understand your reaction, but I am following the literary argument each time. The textual argument is strong indeed. But the literary argument for authenticity (or not) is stronger. Verse 5.7, from the Vulgate, completes the balanced, ABB', whole, 5.6-8 (and Wesley includes it in *his* Notes⁶):

This is the one who came	(a)	a	A
by water	(b)		
and blood,	(b')		
Jesus Christ,	(a)	b	
not in the water only	(b)		
but in the water and in the blood	(b')		
and the Spirit is <u>the one testifying</u> ,	(a)	b'	
because the Spirit is the truth. ⁷	(a')		
<u>Because three there are</u>	(a)	a	B
<u>the ones testifying</u>	(b)		
[<u>in heaven:</u>	(b')		
the Father,	(a)	b	
the Word	(b)		
and the Holy Spirit,	(b')		
<u>and these</u>	(a)	b'	
<u>the three</u>	(b)		
<u>one are.</u>	(b')		
<u>And three there are</u>	(a)	a	B'
<u>the ones testifying</u>	(b)		
<u>in the earth:</u>] ⁸	(b')		
the Spirit	(a)	b	
and the water	(b)		
and the blood,	(b')		
<u>and the three</u>	(a)	b'	
in the <u>one</u>	(b)		
<u>are.</u> ⁹	(b')		

This variant reading is likely original to the letter because it establishes the B and B' parts of this ABB' construction as parallels of each other, as everywhere found throughout the letter. Without this reading, this 'whole' (5.6-8) is incomplete.

What can this possibly mean? That the Vulgate preserved what was previously preserved in earlier Latin manuscripts, as well as in the Greek manuscript which its translator(s) possessed? That is the simplest possible explanation. (Others are not so simple and, therefore, are not so worthy of entertaining here.) Or if this is incorrect, then we have the interesting discovery that another, other than the rhetor, knew, or observed, the composition's ABB' writing style, and seeing something lacking at this point, wanted to improve on it!

Verse 5.21, as I state at the end of my literal English translation^{xi}, replicates an anaphora and an address ('Little children...') that is much in use elsewhere in the letter ('Little children' 6x; 'Children' 2x; 'Beloved' 6x – all as opening addresses and starters of new sub-sections), but, at 5.21, it is not followed by anything, other than five words! As an addition, at the very end of the Letter, it really does look as though it discloses its writer's ignorance of the rhetor's writing style and his ignorance of the rhetor's structure of the letter, which is complete in its Four Sections, in every way without it!

'You may well have unearthed a style of writing by the author in which he says something (A) and then adds two comments (B B') that take it further in some way. That would be the way in which his mind works, and if so it is helpful to spot it... But how are the B and B' sections related to one another and to A? What kind of logic is at work. Consider how many modern sermons have three points: what would lead you to analyse these as ABB' rather than ABC?'

The rhetor is disciplined in his writing method. Each whole part of the Letter comprises three parts, ABB', where A is the introductory part, B is the first development and B' is the second, often paralleling, completing development. This method works at the level of sectional structure (three parts per Section in all, ABB'), at the sub-sectional level (each with three whole parts, ABB') and at each of the lower structural levels too. It is possible that three part sermons (surely, now 'old fashioned'?) are better described by ABB' than ABC. ABC suggests linear progression. B leaving A behind? C leaving B behind? Yes?

In all the New Testament Books, the rhetors employ this ABB' (abb') writing style. I think of the following, from the opening of John's Gospel, as one of the clearest examples:

In the beginning was the Word	a
and the Word was with God	b
and the Word was God. (or <i>lit.</i> 'and God was the Word')	b'

The third line, b', of these three lines, balances the second line, b, and so completes the construction.

'... what reasons would you give why I should accept your analysis rather than any of the other analyses that are around?'

My analysis takes account of *the writing style* and *the compositional method* of the rhetor. Other analyses do not.

'What I need to ask is how adoption of your structure affects how I read and interpret the letter?'

What matters is that we read this letter in the way that the rhetor intended. If we do not, we will make many things of it. We may begin reading a passage from a starting point that the writer never intended. We may then conclude reading a passage, again, where he did not intend. As a result we will read the letter differently from each other and from what the rhetor meant!

In NT scholarship, the latter is what we have been doing for centuries with the NT Books. The *discipline* for reading - as the rhetors intended - has never been known.

'The syntactical analysis is helpful.... I suppose that the important thing would be for you to write up a summary of each of the 4 main sections, showing that there is a connected and coherent topic being expounded in each, and how the complementary sections match one another.'

In my Greek and literal English presentations, in part 1.1-4, I provide cross reference to 4.14, and in 1.5-7 cross reference to 4.16: consider 'we looked upon' and 'we testify' for juxtaposed repetitions, and for the sectional similarities, in the first 'God is light' and the last 'God is love'. The first Section, A, well ends emphatically with repetitions, 'I am writing to you'/'I wrote to you'. They 'know' the 'father' and 'him who is from the beginning'. That is, as this Section presents: they will live in the 'light' and not in the 'darkness' of 'sin'. The last Section, A', ends as emphatically as the first, with three statements beginning with 'We know'. This Section develops the theme of living in God's love and knowing 'life' and 'life eternal'. ('Love of brother' is common to both sections: see 2.10,11 and 4.20-21.)

The inner two Sections B and B' are a pair: in the one, the opening exhortation is 'Love not...' and in the other, it is 'Love...' Section B begins with 'Love not the world' and as a Section it warns about the things of the world, the desires of the world, the ways of the world (denying Christ), their deceivers and the works of the devil. Section B' begins with 'Love one another'. As a Section, it five times uses this phrase which is nowhere found in the letter outside of this section. As in B so also in B', warnings are given that the 'antichrist' is already present (see 2.18 and 4.3).

'... some explanation of the consequences of the analysis for exegesis, or some indication of how exegesis supports the analysis (there is a dialectic here!).'

I am often challenged that what I am doing (in my analysing of the NT texts) is giving my own interpretation of the texts. I argue that I am equally focused on both hermeneutics and exegesis, as the reading of the texts reveals it, in the ways that the writers intended. My work is to take account of their discipline in composition and writing (to the rules of ancient rhetoric) and to discover what is (already) there. Style and structure are evident in all the NT texts: there are no better assists than these for accurate exegesis.

I am pleased to offer my chart to Methodist Recorder readers and particularly to our preachers over Eastertide. As was noted on the Bulletin Board of page 2 of the **MR**, Friday, 16th March 2018, I have an Exhibition which is open to the public. Visitors will be very welcome, but they are encouraged to book in advance. For contact details and more information, see: www.davidgpalmer.co.uk.

ⁱ This chart is one of many that I have created and have taken around Great Britain over two years and now house in a permanent Exhibition: The New Testament, but not as you know it/An Exhibition in Art – Seeing the New Testament for what it is.

ⁱⁱ For instance, in earlier times, Augustine, Calvin, and Operinus all acknowledged the lack of a discernible sequence of thought and confessed difficulty in understanding the structure and organization of the letter. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, scholars started to grapple with the structural difficulties of 1 John. B. F. Westcott (in 1886) decided it was 'extremely difficult'. He states, 'No single arrangement is able to take account of the complex development of thought which it offers, and of the many connections which exist between its different parts.' At the same time, A. Plummer (1886) thought that 1 John was simply a collection of aphorisms that did not have any logical or organised structure, but were a compound of doctrine and

exhortation. What he did identify in the Gospel and specifically in the Prologue was *spiral movement*. He thought it conspicuous in the Letter also. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Robert Law (1909) agreed with the view of some interpreters that 1 John had no logical structure and stated that there was 'no portion of Scripture regarding the plan of which there has been greater diversity of opinion.' Echoing Plummer's use of the term 'spiral', Law thought that it might best describe the structure of 1 John. Not long after this, and completely to the contrary, A. E. Brooke (1912) thought 'the aphoristic character of the writer's meditations is the real cause of this diversity of arrangement, and perhaps the attempt to analyse the Epistle should be abandoned as useless.' But by the middle of the twentieth century, C. H. Dodd (1946) was using the term 'spiral' to describe the letter's structure. Aware also of the presence of aphorisms, Dodd noted that 'the argument is not closely articulated. There is little direct progression... Any attempt to divide the work into orderly paragraphs and sections must be largely arbitrary...' This 'difficult structure', A. N. Wilder (1957) likened to the river Meander, which flowed through the province of Asia. M. Bogaert (1968) called it 'the Canticle of Canticles of the New Testament' and thought it influenced in style by the repetitive nature of Hebrew poetry.' R. Bultmann (1967) acknowledged the apparent randomness of 1 John in yet another way, arguing that the original composition ended at 2:27. Bultmann's theory remains mere conjecture based on the content of the letter alone. Raymond Brown (1995) informs us that others have argued against it 'for the paradoxical reason that they cannot explain why anyone would have added pieces that say little or nothing which was not already said in 1:5-2:27!' He also writes, 'The author's logic is so obscure that one could move around units almost at will and still 1 John would read just as well as it does now.' F. F. Bruce (1970) ruefully summarises, 'Attempts to trace a consecutive argument throughout 1 John have never succeeded.' All recent commentaries seem to fix on 'the spiral' description.

ⁱⁱⁱ In **On Christian Doctrine**, IV.6-7, Augustine addresses the Bible's use of rhetoric and style and argues that literary form and meaning were inseparable.

^{iv} The same is true, given my analysis, for all the books of the New Testament.

^v For a good background to these writing rules of ancient rhetoric, see Burton L. Mack, **Rhetoric and the New Testament**, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1990. Amazingly, Mack describes these rules from various documents, but then fails to test the texts against them.

^{vi} See also: Mark's Gospel, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Timothy, James, 1 Peter and 3 John, in my **New Testament: New Testimony to the Skills of the Writers and First Readers**, (Fifth – Illustrated Exhibition – Edition), 2016, Ceridwen Press, Church Gresley. The A4 Format Softback Book contains 225pp. of text and illustrations. The accompanying disk contains 1,500pp. of presentations of the parsings and rhetorical analysis of all the Greek New Testament texts and much literal English translation. Philippians has been revised recently and can be viewed on www.davidgpalmer.co.uk and in my Exhibition.

^{vii} Listen to what Augustine had to say about early translators: '... in the early days of the faith, no sooner did anyone gain possession of a Greek manuscript, and imagine himself to have any facility in both languages (however slight that may be), than he made bold to translate it!' Augustine, **On Christian Doctrine**, II, 11.

^{viii} See J.N. Sanders, 'The Literature and Canon of the New Testament', **Peake's (single volume) Commentary on the Bible**, eds. Matthew Black and H.H. Rowley, Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1962, 676-677, 'The New Testament can hardly be considered as literature at all, except in the most general sense of the term....,' he says. 'The aesthetic motive and the desire to produce fine writing as something worthwhile in itself are foreign to its authors whose aims were urgent and practical....' 'Lk 1.1-4 echoes the cadences and repeats *the conventional claims of the Hellenistic historians*, but there the resemblance ends....' 'Their comparative indifference to pagan literature was on the whole an advantage to the writers of the New Testament. They gained thereby in freshness and *freedom from stale conventions and artificial rhetoric*. They were *not conscious literary artists, obeying a convention and imitating the correct models, like Hellenistic authors*, but rather practical men falling into familiar forms...' 'The *Literature of the New Testament is in the main something new*.' Sanders admits that Thucydides put speeches into the mouths of his principal personages... and so '*set an unfortunate precedent*', but that Luke didn't follow the precedent!

^{ix} Howard had his own commentary: I Howard Marshall, NICNT, **The Epistles of John**, Eerdmans, 1978

^x Wesley, after Bengel, writes in support of the controversial verse, 5.8 and includes it in the text he produces. Bengel indeed thinks it affirms the writer's interest in structuring the Letter to the Trinity. This then is what was proposed to Methodist preachers of the nineteenth century. John Wesley writes, 'It must now appear to every reasonable man, how absolutely necessary the eighth verse is.' p.918, **Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament**, First Published 1754, 1976 Edition, Epworth Press, London.

^{xi} Now included in **NT:NT(5) op.cit.**