



The socio-rhetorical force of 'truth talk' and lies: The case of 1 John

Author:

Dietmar Neufeld^{1,2}

Affiliations:

¹Department of Classical, Near Eastern and Religious Studies, University of British Columbia, Canada

²Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Note:

Prof. Dr Dietmar Neufeld, Chair of the Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation Section of the Society of Biblical Literature since 2005, participates in the research project of Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck, Department of New Testament Studies of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to:

Dietmar Neufeld

email:

dneufeld@interchange.ubc.ca

Postal address:

Department of Classical, Near Eastern and Religious Studies, University of British Columbia, 1866 Main Mall, Buchanan C 207, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1, Canada

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This article canvassed Greek and Roman sources for discussions concerning *truth talk* and lies. It has investigated what social historians and/or anthropologists are saying about *truth talking* and lying and has developed a model that will examine the issue of truth and lying in socio-religious terms as defined by the Graeco-Roman sources. The article tracked down the socio-rhetorical force of *truth talk* and lies, in terms of how they are strategically deployed to negotiate authority, to exert epistemic control, to define a personal and communal identity and to defend innovation in the midst of competing truth claims. It focused on the New Testament writing (1 John) and demonstrated that the author, in his desire to establish and defend his vision of truth, resorts to a style of *truth talk* endemic to the literary habits of Graeco-Roman antiquity. In so doing, the author established himself as a credible witness, set himself apart from those propounding falsehoods and, to some extent, distanced himself from the vision of truth propounded in the Gospel of John.

Current linguistic climate

The book of 1 John is preoccupied with truth and its many expressions and disguises¹:

- false prophets roam about spreading lies (4:1)
- persons possessed by the antichrist lie in their denials of the truth (4:3)
- 'spirits' cannot be trusted and must be tested to separate the 'spirit of truth' from 'the spirit of error' (4:6)
- truth is in short supply thus the enjoinders to embody it (1:8; 2:4, 21; 3:18, 19; 4:6; 5:6)
- liars claim 'truth' incongruent with their behaviour (2:4; 4:20; 5:10).

What is one to make of the *truth talk* and lies in 1 John? The habit of fudging facts is nowhere more evident than in the current crop of reality shows. In a recent article, James Poniewozik (2006) avers:

But even savvy viewers who realize that their favorite reality shows are cast, contrived and edited to be dramatic have no idea how brazen the fudging can be. Quotes are manufactured, crushes and feuds constructed out of whole cloth, episodes planned in multifaceted storyboards before taping, scenes stitched together out of footage shot days apart.

(Poniewozik 2006:40–42)

He goes on to observe that often the practice of *frankenbiting* is used in reality shows to:

clarify an incoherent interview, sometimes to flat-out put words in subject's mouths, this technique stitches together clips from different scenes to make participants say what the makers of the show wish they had said ... or producers may withhold information – such as downplaying a budding romance – to create suspense.

(Poniewozik 2006: 40–42)

The point is that humans have immense linguistic capacity. The power of words in speech and writing to capture, contain, trim, hide, define, defend and imagine, whether sublime or mundane, is truly astounding. In the words of Jeremy Campbell (2001):

Where simpler species disguise themselves with borrowed plumage, we obfuscate with words, plant doubts in minds we are able to read; the subtlety of our minds and the complexity of human society make it all inevitable that we should do so.

(Campbell 2001:42)

'At every level', said the scholar of language George Steiner:

from brute camouflage to poetic vision, the linguistic capacity to conceal, misinform, leave ambiguous, hypothesize, invent, is indispensable to the equilibrium of human consciousness and to the development of man in society.

(Campbell 2001:42)

¹Truth is referred to in 1:8; 2:4, 21; 3:18, 19; 4:6; 5:6; liar in 1:10; 2:4, 22; 4:20; 5:10; lie in 1:6; 2:21, 27; 4:1; false prophets in 4:1; spirit of the antichrist in 4:1–3; spirit of truth and spirit of error in 4:3.

Ralph Keyes alleges that dishonesty has inspired more euphemisms than copulation and defecation (2004:15). Euphemasia (Elliott 2006:163–67) calls up the remarkable linguistic creativity of humans for finding less distasteful words or phrases as substitutes for something harsher or more offensive. Instead of the harsher or more offensive words that would more precisely designate what was intended, humans use words or expressions with less unpleasant associations. It has spawned categories of ambiguous verbal expressions that are not exactly the truth, but fall short of a lie (Keyes 2004:15). Hence, we can speak of poetic truth, nuanced truth, imaginative truth, virtual truth, essential truth, messaged truth, softened truth, strayed truth, spun truth; we can speak of alternate reality, strategic misrepresentation, creative enhancement, augmented reality and so on (Keyes 2004:15). Keyes (2004) goes on to note that:

the tattered condition of contemporary candor is suggested by how often we use phrases such as ‘quite frankly,’ ‘let me be frank,’ ‘let me be candid,’ ‘truth be told,’ ‘to tell the truth,’ ‘to be truthful,’ ‘the truth is,’ ‘truthfully,’ ‘in all candor,’ ‘in all honesty,’ ‘in my honest opinion,’ and ‘to be perfectly honest.’ Such verbal tics are a rough gauge of how routinely we deceive each other. If we didn’t, why all the disclaimers?

(Keyes 2004:6)

Robin Marantz Henig (2005) comments that:

the English language has 112 words for deception, according to one count, each with a different shade of meaning: collusion, fakery, malingering, self-deception, confabulation, prevarication, exaggeration, denial. Lies can be verbal or nonverbal, kindhearted or self-serving, devious or baldfaced; they can be lies of omission or lies of commission; they can be lies that undermine national security or lies that make a child feel better.

(Henig 2005:48–53, 76, 80–83)

As Laura Penny (2005) notes:

We live in an era of unprecedented bullshit production. The more polite among you might call it poppycock or balderdash or claptrap, but the concept remains the same, and the same coursing stream of crapulence washes over us all, filling our eyes and ears and thoughts with clichés, euphemisms, evasions, and fabrications. Never in history have so many people uttered statements that they know to be untrue. Presidents, priests, politicians, lawyers, reporters, corporate executives, professors and countless others have taken to saying not what they actually believe, but what they want others to believe – not what is, but what works.

(Penny 2005:1)

Ancient linguistic climate

Graeco-Roman historians, narrators, philosophers and poets were also cognizant of the human capacity for linguistic chicanery and so spent considerable intellectual energy discussing it especially when the lines of veracity were being pushed in written materials of different genres. For instance, debated were the boundaries between fact and fiction – indeed wondering whether the boundary was determinate – the interplay between literary and historical objectives in ancient historiography and the rhetorical value of oral blandishments in written material and whether writers of history should be impervious to blandishments. For some

ancient writers and speakers *falsehood* in a good cause had values that reality often lacked. Embellishment or linguistic ornamentation seemed to be the acceptable practice. Indeed, to refuse to embellish ruled out possibilities – these verbal decorations were the source of new meaning. Even when writing a so-called *history*, ancient authors did not hesitate to add verbal decoration to rearrange facts in order to liberate ideas more illuminating than those that life’s events often only grudgingly and boringly released (Campbell 2001:12–13). Sometimes facts needed improving to drive home a point, clarify, warn and mitigate the force of naked truth too harsh, dangerous and destructive to be faced directly by human kind.

This is not to suggest that wholesale lying was promoted, encouraged, or something in which authors generally indulged. Yet, as Seneca notes, some historians pushed the boundaries of truth when they sought approval for their writings or when they wished to achieve popularity. He states that:

Some historians win approval by telling incredible tales; an everyday narrative would make the reader go and do something else, so they excite him with marvels. Some of them are credulous and lies take them unawares; others are careless and lies are what they like; the former do not avoid them, the latter seek them out. What the whole tribe has in common is this: they think their work can only achieve approval and popularity if they sprinkle it with lies.

(*Quaestiones Naturales* 7.16If.)

Lying historians

What then were ancients saying about truth and lies? These discussions considered the function of truth telling and lying in a variety of literary genres; analytic and non-analytic discourse, prosaic, poetic, literal and figurative discourse and so on. Our purpose will be to canvass and collect from various strands of Graeco-Roman literature attitudes towards, definitions of and discussions of truth talk and falsehoods. Of interest to this article, are the seven types of mendacity mentioned in connection with historians and the writing of history.

Whilst allowances for truth stretching were made for poetry, drama, epic and lyric, such allowances generally were not permitted for historians. Lucian’s essay *How to Write History* (*Hist. conscr.*) states idealistically that:

the historian’s one task is to tell it as it happened ... the one particular characteristic of history is this, that if you are going to write it you must sacrifice to truth alone.

(*Hist. conscr.*)

But it is clear from the many discussions concerning ancient historiography that invention and manipulation of factual material for reasons of propaganda, flattery, denigration, literary rivalry, trumping predecessors, spinning good yarns, historiographical parody, sheer emotional arousal or entertainment, moralising, mapping the past, constructing authorial ethos and structuring reality were permissible and even encouraged. The tyranny of factual truth was



that because historiography was tied to external reality and because external reality was shifting, ambiguous, multifaceted and messy, so was what purported itself as historical.

Ancient historians, however, complained bitterly about the so-called fabricators who proclaimed to tell the truth but did so in the full awareness that it was not. A famous passage in Polybius (2.56.10–12) clearly indicates that the invention of circumstantial detail is not the business of the historian:

It is not a historian's business to startle his readers with sensational descriptions, nor should he try, as the tragic poets do, to represent speeches which might have been delivered, or to enumerate all the possible consequences of the events under consideration; it is his task first and foremost to record with fidelity what actually happened and was said, however commonplace they may be. For the aim of tragedy is by no means the same as that of history, but rather the opposite. The tragic poet seeks to thrill and charm his audience for the moment by expressing through his characters the most plausible words possible, but the historian's task is to instruct and persuade serious students by means of the truth of the words and actions he presents, and this effect must be permanent, not temporary.

(Polybius 2.56.10–12)

Yet, the question remained: what was the best way to convey the factual information that one had at one's disposal? For some historians, falsehood in a good cause had a value that reality lacked (Campbell 2001:11). Others frequently deployed oratorical and dramatic techniques to add vivid ornamentation to facts, created designer speeches that were appropriate for the occasion, or invented circumstantial detail to add color to an otherwise uninspiring story (Gill 1993). One thinks of Paul's Areopagus address in Acts 17 (a masterful speech, crafted to appeal to the Athenians philosophers, Epicureans and Stoics, gathered on the hill) 'now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new' (Ac 17:21). The author of Acts depicts Paul standing in front of the Areopagus saying:

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

(Ac 17:22–31)

The author has Paul quote a line from the Hymn of Cleanthes to Zeus: 'as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his off spring"' (Ac 17:28). Whilst the setting may not be contrived, Paul's speech certainly was a designer speech carefully crafted to reflect the character of the audience and what they would find appealing. Based on this practice, when Seneca assumes that all historians engage in perpetuating falsehoods, what types of mendacity may he have been thinking about?

Seven types of mendacity

The following is a distillation of points taken from Gill and Wiseman's (1993) excellent book in which they engage in a

far ranging discussion of how ancient authors distinguished between lies and fiction. It is not my intention to discuss how the ancient world may have conceptualised fiction or whether it corresponds to the modern understanding of the term. Mary Louise Pratt (1993) shows that the distinction between lies and fiction is a modern preoccupation and the fact or fiction divide mattered little in the ancient period.

Of interest for this article is the extent to which historians saw themselves as artificers and shapers of the materials at their disposal, yet nevertheless saw themselves providing a true recounting of these materials. In the agonal context of writing a history, writers of history were compelled to produce competing versions of the truth of events, persons and places. In such a competitive literary context, one historian's truth could easily have become regarded as another historian's lie. As we shall see, when ancient writers were accused of telling lies what mattered was not the fact that the details of their narratives were false, but rather that the narratives conveyed false ethical messages not in keeping with the spirit of the age (Pratt 1993:132). It will become clear that honesty was not considered an all-or-nothing proposition but was nuanced and measured on the basis of a sliding scale, slipping between degrees of either one (Keyes 2004:17). A number of factors, such as personal ethos, reputation, intention, grand purpose, rhetorical strategy and content of the message permitted authors to engage in exercises of imaginative literary construction. Yet, they had to write carefully or risk the danger of being accused of perpetuating falsehoods.

They could, for example, be accused of tendentiousness, the attempt to influence opinion in written and spoken discourse by promoting a particular cause or supporting a particular point of view about a person, place, thing and event. The twin vices of tendentiousness were flattery and malice. Flattery of both living and dead persons and execration of the dead militate against truth. As ancients observed, both practices were not free from hope, fear and partisanship and therefore exhibited partiality and prejudice. Whilst ancient authors avoided using the word *lie* when discussing tendentiousness, they nevertheless referred to it as the falsification of history. When someone, however, was accused of gross political partiality in writing, a distinction was made between the defensible lies from ignorance and the culpable lies from choice (Gill & Wiseman 1993:126).

They could also be accused of promoting credulity, the disposition to believe in something on weak or insufficient grounds. Displaying an over-readiness to believe the incredible led to charges of perpetuating falsehoods unbecoming of human intelligence. Some authors, therefore, objected to myths because they involved descriptions of events and natural phenomena that challenged credulity. Therefore, for example, humans did not visit the underworld alive and trees did not grow golden apples. Yet, whilst incredible details in stories were objected to, they still had value: first, possibilities were invented simply for the pleasure and wonder of it and not out of ignorance of the facts and, two, by rationalising the incredible it was possible



to liberate ideas from the mundane clutches of life that were more illuminating than the ideas that ordinary life reluctantly gave up.

Writers of traveller's tales or ethnographies were often accused of confabulation, writing in a style such as to convey the conviction that they had been in the distant land or city of which they describe. Historiographers were fascinated by the distant and exotic lands and wrote of bizarre rites, exotic and savage beasts, yet never having neither witnessed what they described nor visited first-hand these distant lands. Lucian's preface to his *True History* (1:3) warns the reader of the concocted nature of these travel yarns, yet Lucian decides he too is going to tell lies, but he begins his tale with one true statement, namely, that his 'subject is, then, what I have neither seen, experienced, nor been told, what neither exists nor could conceivably do so. I humbly solicit my readers' incredulity' (Reardon 1965:220). Obviously, such a literary context made permissible the exercise of literary license and in Lucian's mind, offered an agreeable interlude that refreshed the mind after hard mental exertions. Lucian remarks that authors will 'find this interlude agreeable if they choose as company such works as not only afford wit, charm, and distraction pure and simple, but also provoke some degree of cultured reflection' (Lucian, *A True Story*, I:2). Stretching the limits of credulity in traveller's tales for Lucian had its place, despite accusations of falsehood, because it stimulated the contemplation of significant issues related to one's cultural group.

Elaborating the data and enquiry beyond the limits of what was thought to be reasonable could lead to charges of verbal chicanery. It was a common practice in both oratory and writing to decorate the data with circumstantial detail in order to heighten the rhetorical and dramatic effect. The thinking was that facts could be improved upon for purposes of dramatic and rhetorical effect. The process of working out in detail, developing and perfecting a literary work, whilst permissible, was nevertheless tricky business. Knowing the facts but fudging them for a more dramatic effective version led authors to add the annotation that 'I am reporting what I was told, [but] I don't necessarily believe it'. Apparently, it was common practice for authors to hedge their bets. Seneca avers:

[This is] what historians do: when they've told numerous lies of their own choice, they pick out one thing they don't want to guarantee, and add the phrase 'my authorities must take responsibility for this.

(*Quaestiones Naturales* 4.3.1)

Two basic criteria determined what was and what was not to be included: credibility and interest, in other words, what was believable and what was worth telling. The origin and truth status of the events, whether they were discovered through enquiry or invented, mattered to some extent but they could be crafted for the sake of the story.

One thinks of Luke in his preface when he writes that:

many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they

were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account ...

(Lk 1:1-4)

For Luke history meant not just reporting the stories that were told, but through his own enquiry finding out what counted as important enough for inclusion, elaborating it and taking responsibility for the result. The symbiotic dance between story and fact mattered – the questions 'is it true' and 'is it worth telling' were held in balance and implied responsibility not for only what was told but for how it was told.

Entertainment (delectation) was one of the legitimate aims of history writing. Competition and rivalry for a good story between predecessors and contemporaries were frequent motives for yet another rendition of a story. Greek and Roman historians strove for vividness [*enargeia*] that brought a scene, event, person, speech and place to life in the imagination of the hearer and reader. The author of Luke writes:

Many have undertaken to provide an orderly account of the events fulfilled among us ... but I have undertaken to investigate everything from the beginning to write another orderly account.

(Lk 1:1)

In the public performance of the written word, the word had to have some entertainment value if it was to stir interest or amusement. Yet, the action of delighting and creating pleasure in an agonal literary environment, led some writers of history to push public delectation too far. Hence, they were accused of tendentiousness.

Providing superfluity of detail to fill out the gaps in an account led to accusations of perpetuating falsehoods. For example, Polybius contrasts the size of Hannibal's forces invading Italy with his own accurate information with that of contemporary writers who, he says, inflate numbers – they invent details to add to the appearance of being true or real. Orators as well as to some extent writers depended on *invention*. The handbooks defined this as the devising of a matter true or probable that will make the case appear more convincing (Gill & Wiseman 1993:412). This was not to be taken as fiction or fabrication but creative reconstruction, even though Polybius complained that those who engaged in *inventio* were plausible liars [*axiopistos pseudomenoi*]. Yet, Polybius' protestations to the contrary, the accumulation of the circumstantial detail was not regarded simply as excessive literary ornamentation but actually an attempt to reach for the truth.

Even Polybius, the idealist committed to *akribeia* [accurate detail], declares that the:

truth of history for understanding public events requires detailed analysis of events, persons, places and things according to their causes, associated state of affairs, and their consequences: ... that neither writers nor readers of history should confine their attention to the narrative of events, but most also take account of what preceded, accompanied and followed them. For if we remove from history the analysis of why, how and for what

purpose each thing was done and whether the result was what we should reasonably have expected, what is left is a mere display of descriptive virtuosity, but not a lesson, and this, though it may please for the moment, is of no enduring value for the future.

(Polybius 3.32.6)

In part, providing vivid detail [*enargeia*] drove the practice of literary embroidery.

In his *Institutio Oratoria* (6.2.31–2), Quintilian explains the importance of providing vivid detail in order to enhance an account:

I am complaining that a man has been murdered. Shall I not bring before my eyes all the circumstances which it is reasonable to imagine must have occurred in such a connection? Shall I not see the assassin burst suddenly from his hiding place, the victim tremble, cry for help, beg for mercy, or turn to run? Shall I not see the fatal blow delivered and the stricken body fall? Will not the blood, the deathly pallor, the groan of agony, the death rattle, be indelibly impressed on my mind? From such impressions arises that *enargeia* which Cicero calls illustration and evidential, which makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence.

(Quintilian 6.2.31–2)

Therefore, the fabrication of circumstantial detail was a way to reach the truth. However, one had to do it carefully, otherwise one was left open to charges of distorting the facts and thus obscuring the truth of the event, person or place one was describing (Gill 1993:146).

Finally yet importantly, not providing enough detail or the absence of elaboration brought with it accusations of perpetuating falsehoods. Brevity implied carelessness and incompleteness and was tantamount to lying. After all, truthful narrative was made up of finely and richly decorated detail (Gill 1993:146).

Important to ask at this juncture is what strategic value claims to truth and accusations and counteraccusations of distorting it would have had. In an agonal literary context, accusations and counter accusations of mendacity were the site of speculation on important issues of social and political control; for example, whether linguistic embellishment could be:

- a means to ferret out truth
- a means to resolve whether discourses deliberately designed to construct through rhetoric a vision of person, event, place and belief as they should be were trustworthy
- a means to determine who had legitimate claims to knowledge and authority
- a means to establish who had the right to retail material publically without judging its historicity
- a means to discover whether invented sources had any claim to truth.

Arguments about lying and the quality of truth were rhetorically constructed exercises designed to shore up claims to authority, cast doubt on other claims to legitimate authority, formulate personal and communal identity,

delineate communal boundaries and seize epistemic control. Truth and lies were the by-product of analysing the causation and processes of conflict, persons, events and places. It often involved the invention of significant speeches and the careful selection and presentation of concrete events in the artificial context of written discourse. Whilst these practices had an encomiastic bent, they also permitted negative moral judgements. It was not simply a matter of sterilely passing on the content of analysis but of also rendering judgement.

In an honour or shame driven society where glory was at stake and sometimes short lived, ancient historians sought personal glory from their records not only by upholding the veracity of their claims but also by impugning the reputation of their competition. In so doing, decorating fact for evocative effect, engaging in accusations and counter accusations of falsehood, claiming to hold proper truth, vilifying the other, protecting one's own position and writing for purposes of delectation, were strategic exercises designed to enhance the reputation of authors caught up in the heated environment of literary competition.

However, more than that, they were also designed to supplement deficient material, correct factual distortion and pass judgment on moral failure or its potential as so perceived by the author. Moral failure here should not be understood as pointing to some intrinsic and essential flaw of character (an Augustinian moral depravity), but should be understood as pointing to a lack of responsibility for the way in which the information has been received and delivered. Imitation, homage and literary rivalry led both to supplementation of deficient material and to its correction, to the confutation of another's work in close proximity to one's own and of calling into question the moral integrity of a literary competitor.

So what then of the linguistic habits of 1 John? In answer to this question, we must turn briefly to the linguistic habits of the Gospel of John. 1 John is generally perceived to lie within the linguistic orbit of the Gospel of John (Brown 1982:32–36, 757–59; Strecker 1996:xxxv–xliv).

Linguistic habits of the Gospel of John

Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998) in their social-scientific commentary on the Gospel of John (GJ) argue convincingly that the Johannine community has deliberately withdrawn from society and established itself as an alternate society. Amongst a number of strategies it adopts, the one that stands out, is its linguistic habit. As Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:5) point out, the author has a penchant for creating new phrases, ways of saying things and words, a linguistic habit that focuses on the interpersonal and textual and that both relexicalises and over lexicalises words in a bid for:

- the community to redefine itself
- to hollow out a space for itself in society
- to clarify and accentuate social values peculiar to the community

- to spell out the meaning of Jesus as Messiah
- to develop an 'emotional anchorage "in Jesus" for his collectivity'.

Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:9) label John's linguistic habit as anti-language reflecting an anti-society, a language that emerges when the alternate reality is a counter reality, established in contradiction to some conventional norm. Anti-language functions strategically in two ways: defensively to protect a particular social reality and offensively to resist prevailing norms and to register protest. In the milieu of rivalry and competition for place, where John's group self-consciously sets itself apart from larger society, John's anti-language becomes the nodal point for discussions on maintaining inner solidarity in the face of pressures from wider society to surrender under specified conditions, on what it means to slide back into the margins of the group from which they had just left, what it means to uphold belief in Jesus as Israel's messiah in the face of opposition from those who do not and what it means to live in this resocialised reality of which the group members are now a part (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:7–12).

As Malina & Rohrbaugh observe (1998:11–16), in a resocialised reality, the linguistic habits of the group take on distinctive patterns:

- that emphasise the interpersonal dimensions of language
- that depend upon unusual levels of abstraction for terms and phrases
- that rely preponderantly on metaphor
- that utilise the conversational mode to sustain the resocialising process.

Given that a counter reality requires special knowledge and information to sustain and justify itself, it is reasonable to suggest that the author would have been partial in his views, would have been given to adding considerable circumstantial detail concerning the deeds and signs of Jesus, would have been keen to craft exemplary discourses and put them on the lips of Jesus and would have decorated the data for dramatic and rhetorical effect. Indeed, the factual mound concerning the deeds and words of Jesus appears to have been high – the gospel records that 'there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (Jn 21:25), a dramatic overstatement, yet even with this embarrassment of riches the gospel does not hesitate to add considerable, additional colour to the story of Jesus.

In the case of the GJ, when an anti-society uses anti-language as its primary mode of communication (it is of necessity required to engage in a kind of exaggerated truth talk) and, as I have indicated, such dramatic linguistic embroidery shaped and squeezed the factual data in conformity with the agenda of the group. Indeed, it would not at all have been surprising to find charges and counter charges of perpetuating falsehoods flying back and forth concerning the gospel's rendition of the Jesus story and the group's conception of what constitutes proper truth talk, conduct and reliable information. Certainly, in many instances the issue of

truth talk, captured in the beguiling 'what is truth?' seems to be on the line in the GJ and becomes the site of considerable verbal dueling over differing conceptions of factual truth.²

As an example, take note of this bitter exchange between John's Jesus and his detractors:

You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?

(Jn 8:45–6)

Furthermore, Pilate's question 'what is truth' reveals the tyranny of factual truth (Gill & Wiseman 1993:121).

Linguistic habits of 1 John

However, all of this is simply, though nevertheless, an important aside to the issue of the linguistic habits of the author of 1 John. Given that alternate societies are impermanent arrangements in society, Malina & Rohrbaugh (1998:16) suggest that 1 John evidences a return to ordinary society and that its linguistic habits adjust accordingly to reflect this new reality. It is thus my intention to explore the linguistic habits of the author of 1 John and what they might reveal about the literary relationship between the GJ and 1 John and, ultimately what they might reveal about 1 John's originating moments. The *truth talk* in which the author of 1 John engages strategically reveals aspects of this relationship and of its appearance on the literary landscape.

Long noted have been the striking verbal similarities between the GJ and 1 John with the conclusion that this shared language links them genetically (see R.E. Brown 1982:757–759). What to make of these verbal similarities and what they suggest about how the GJ and 1 John relate is open to considerable speculation. Virtually unanimous is the consensus that the shared verbal characteristics argue either for single authorship or at the least that one or two others were involved in the composition of 1 John. Recent commentators speak of a school, circle or community that preserved the Johannine tradition and composed the Johannine writings over a period of several years. The linguistic habit adopted by the respective authors is determined by responding to both internal and external exigencies requiring urgent action through linguistic adaptation (Brown 1982).

Whilst these suggestions have merit, the verbal similarities in the context of intense literary competition invite reassessment. Verbal echoes confirm that 1 John lies within the ambit of the GJ's linguistic jurisdiction. Yet, why would the author of 1 John pay homage to a predecessor by mimicking him? In a context of literary rivalry, deliberately choosing a

2. What exactly is the illocutionary force of 'what is truth'? It is not a self-evident statement in terms of force. Is its force sardonic and hence disdainful, mocking? is its force sarcastic, intended to deride? is its force ironical? is its force cynical? is its force searching?

predecessor to mimic linguistically was not unusual. The pattern of imitation-plus-rebuttal was a standard practice in ancient writings (Gill & Wiseman 1993:100). For example, Thucydides' *History* (1.1–23; 5.26), written some 25 years after Herodotus' *History*, contains two prefaces that in terms of structure and language imitate the preface of Herodotus (Gill & Wiseman 1993:99). Not only does Thucydides echo external reality but also the text. His mimicry is designed to follow in the footsteps of Herodotus whilst, at the same time, insisting on the supreme greatness of his own work (Gill & Wiseman 1993:101). In this insistence, he confutes the work of Herodotus by adding and removing circumstantial detail, emphasising and de-emphasising themes, re-arranging detail to suit his agenda and highlighting errors in Herodotus' accounting and flow of story. Verbal imitation pays homage to an acknowledged forerunner whilst at the same also disparaging him, depreciating his account and exaggerating the superiority of one's own work (Gill & Wiseman 1993:100). The task of constructing something new involves repatriating the familiar, turning and twisting it to conform to the newly emerging entity and legitimating it via claims of truth.

As already indicated, I agree with Malina & Rohrbaugh's conclusion that the author of 1 John was seeking to resituate his community, moving it from the margins to the mainstream of society. There is no doubt that the language of re-situation falls within the compass of the GJ's verbal and ideological jurisdiction.

Modulating one's group in a competitive literary environment must have raised questions for the author of 1 John about how best to manage it, what language to echo and what linguistic habits to adopt and adapt? The linguistic habits of the GJ appear to have been congenial to him because of their power to strike stark contrasts, to forge a communal and personal identity, to address serious theological and social issues of belonging to the truth, believing in the name of God's son, confessing Jesus Christ and exploring the nature of sin. Moreover, it provided him with the language to lampoon the speech and conduct of the opponents. Perhaps the author was aware of communities who had opted to withdraw from society and establish themselves as anti-societies with their concomitant development and use of anti-language. This anti-language, in spite of its apparent meaninglessness to the outsider, nevertheless may have been recognised by the author of 1 John as direct and forceful once adapted to a new situation. He may have seen it as a 'powerful manifestation[s] of the linguistic doing service in the construction of a new interpretation of reality' (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998:15). He too was setting out to recruit, create and consolidate a new entity on the social landscape of his time, so why not recycle some of the language congenial to such an exercise (Malina 1995:96–113)?

He may also have realised that because anti-societies were impermanent arrangements, they had minimal influence on society whereas a community more strategically embedded in society had far greater potential for swaying behavior and belief – especially if this happened to be an item on

the author's agenda. Perhaps he was also aware that anti-societies eventually dissolve for a variety of reasons and then reappear in other forms. Was the dissolution of John's anti-social group in part because of disaffection? It is quite likely that these estranged persons became the so-called secessionists (1 Jn 2:19). The author of 1 John is strategically and deliberately wooing the disaffected members of an anti-society and hoping to bring them into his fold by verbally echoing familiar linguistic patterns whilst at the same time also refining them. There is little doubt that the refined language has bite to it; the situation is a bitter one reflecting a messy and competitive literary environment. The author of 1 John therefore uses a standard arsenal of literary weapons that included mimicry, exaggeration, overstatement, verbal embroidery of a preface that mimics the GJ's incipit in certain ways and the creation of exaggerated speech acts of dangerous, perhaps even imaginary, opponents whose conduct did not match their speech. the GJ is the point of comparison, origin and departure of 1 John's community, it is clear that the linguistic habits that frame the GJ have been modified considerably. The distinctive linguistic patterns of the GJ have all but disappeared in 1 John and have been replaced with a series of redundant dualisms.

Verbal mimicry in the preface of 1 John 1:1–4

The opening sentences in 1 John clearly echo the language of the GJ but also depart substantially from it:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life; this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us; we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

(1 Jn 1:1–4, NRSV)

Immediately obvious is that 1 John is propounding a view that is rival to, yet still representative of some of the themes expressed in the GJ. The thematic echoes with the GJ are unmistakable but so also are the departures. Retailing the familiar language of 'beginning', 'word', 'revealed', 'testify', 'father', 'son' and so on, the author of 1 John pays homage to his predecessor by following in his footsteps. But he also insists on the supreme greatness of his account by unapologetically situating his testimony in himself. Commentators have long been puzzled by the 'we' and have offered up several solutions (Brown 1982:158–161):

- the 'we' is not a plural but equivalent to an 'I' and designates the author
- the 'we' is a plural of majesty and authority, recalling an authoritative figure in the early church
- the 'we' is a plural recalling an authentic eyewitness or eyewitnesses
- the 'we' is a genuine plural that designates the author and his associates but does not call attention to a group
- the 'we' is a genuine plural referring to a group that is distinct from the audience or the readers

- the 'we' is a genuine plural that designates the Johannine school.

None of these solutions is satisfactory. A way forward may be found by applying the notion of mimicry to the identity of the 'we' in this passage.

Mimicry of necessity requires upping the ante. Moreover, mimicry in the milieu of literary rivalry forces the hand of the imitator to become increasingly dramatic in his claims. The stakes are high because if he fails to persuade his listeners and readers, the loss of status is considerable. No longer is it sufficient to focus primarily on the *logos* and situate it at the beginning (in the beginning was the word) and to position secondarily the testimony concerning the *logos* in a man who came from God. In a dramatic overstatement, no doubt for rhetorical effect, the author of 1 John positions himself by suggestive insinuation as one from the beginning, he has heard something, seen something, touched something, something concerning the word of life. He introduces himself gradually and cunningly into a position, especially into a place of confidence and favor in the imagination of the hearers. He confutes the account of the GJ by depending on invention and devises the matter of the beginning to be true and probable by hinting indirectly that he was there; this will make the case appear more convincing to his hearers (Gill & Wiseman 1993:142).

Moreover, it is a beginning that lacks conciseness and permits the readers and hearers to fill it with content – in the same way that modern commentators have long filled it with content by agonising over what the 'beginning' actually refers to (Strecker 1996:8–9; Brown 1982:155). We will never know what beginning the author of 1 John may have had in mind and, in the context of rivalry, a clear definition of what 'beginning' the author imagined does not matter. The point is that he imagined a 'beginning' that was tantalisingly imprecise and yet one that was also precise enough to be heard, seen and touched. Vagueness is a powerful rhetorical strategy because it permits a claim to stand without the requirement of validation. An elusive beginning evokes something not immediately present, especially an event from the past of which the author implies he was a part. It is a deliberate rhetorical strategy, a suggestive insinuation designed to establish the credibility of the writer. Why should anyone find him credible unless he has the credentials that qualify him to make his claims? Imitating a respected predecessor and trumping his account helped to establish that the account of 1 John is genuine, paying homage to a respected predecessor authenticated his claims. It would seem that the 'we' then is a lightly disguised reference to the author of this work. I would identify the 'we' as a 'we' of thinly veiled humility masquerading as an 'I'.

Both Polybius (3.32.6) and Cicero (*De oratore* 2:63) declared that the truth of an event, if it was to have value for understanding public affairs, depended upon detailed analysis of events according to their causes, associated conditions and their outcomes (Gill & Wiseman 1993:143). Polybius comments:

... that neither writers nor readers of history should confine their attention to the narrative of events, but must also take account of what preceded, accompanied and followed them. For if we remove from history the analysis of why, how and for what purpose each thing was done and whether the result was what we should reasonable have expected, what is left is mere display of descriptive virtuosity, but not a lesson, and this, though it may please for the moment, is of no enduring value for the future.

(The Histories 3.31)

Writers were then free to add, remove and manipulate the details of an important historical occurrence to give it life. On the one hand, writers wanted to avoid charges of brevity – these were mere displays of descriptive virtuosity and, on the other, to avoid accusations of inflating the events with a surplus of detail. Each of these extremes led to accusations of fabrication that authors wished to avoid. After all, their reputations were at stake. As indicated, however, driving home a lesson for the good of the community often forced the hand of authors. They resorted to invention, that is, the practice of adding a surplus of circumstantial detail. It was a way for them to navigate the uncertain waters of life in search of truth, of defining it and using it to criticise the moral behaviour of the other. Moreover, they also resorted to manipulating the data for rhetorical and dramatic effect in a quest to map the past and structure a new reality for the hearers and readers.

Evidence of these practices is seen in the preface of the GJ and 1 John's imitation of it. Not only are they both interested in revealing the truth of the 'word', but also strategically mapping the past of the 'word'; it heralds from the past. Indeed, it is a past from the beginning, but with currency in the present. Charting the past of an event included describing the accompanying circumstances and persons who lent their credibility to the event. These persons were the testifiers, the so-called witnesses, the fore runners and also the detractors and the opponents the author mentions. Any other supporting detail that added vividness to the presentation was added in order to compel belief. In the case of the GJ, charting the forerunner's place in the larger scheme of things is important to the author(s). Consequently, he situates the 'word' in the grandeur of an amorphous beginning that makes it compelling and similarly he situates the fore runner in a grand beginning with the respected forefathers of the past that makes him compelling. When emissaries are sent to investigate the credentials of John, they ask to know who he is; is he the messiah, Elijah, or the prophet? In each instance he replies 'no' (Jn 1:19–24). When asked to give account of himself, he responds by linking himself with Isaiah, he is a voice crying in the wilderness (Jn 1:23). In revealing his identity to his detractors he carves out a unique place for himself whilst also retaining an indirect connection with the great ones of the past. The circumstantial detail of name-dropping even when he denies any association with them nevertheless serves to give the appearance of impartiality. The author of the GJ provides a map of the past that shows the relative position of each of the players in this divine drama and, in so doing, adds believability and prestige to his account.

If the GJ received its final editing towards the close of the 1st century CE, its author (or authors) may have encountered skepticism concerning his ability to record accurately [*akribeia*] the deeds and speeches of a figure from the distant past. The accumulation of circumstantial detail concerning the deeds and monologues of Jesus may have left him open to accusations of promoting a particular cause, event or person from a partial point of view. An observation from Ephorus' universal history makes the point that descriptions of contemporary events are regarded as believable whereas descriptions of the distant past are regarded as implausible because of the vagaries of human memory:

On contemporary events, we regard as most believable those who give the most detailed account; on events in the distant past, however, we consider such an account wholly implausible, on the grounds that it is likely that all actions and most speeches would be remembered over so long a period of time.

(*FGrH* 70 F 9, quoted in Harpocraton's lexicon; Gill & Wiseman 1993:142)

A map of the past that is populated by persons trusted to have accurate knowledge mitigates the possibility of being castigated a 'plausible liar', the gospel writer was now in the position to argue with his detractors that his resort to 'circumstantial detail was not a mere literary device, but actually a way of reaching the truth' (Gill & Wiseman 1993:143).

The writer of 1 John is in all likelihood operating under the same burden of suspicion. If he, as I have suggested, is mimicking the gospel's preface, he unburdens himself of this suspicion by following in the footsteps of someone whom he regards as having managed to shed the suspicion of implausibility. It gives him the license to alter his map of the past significantly. No longer does he need to place himself in the company of the great ones of the past. He collapses the past and the present into himself and with this act accredits himself with the status of a witness qualified to give an accounting of the things that he has seen, heard and touched. He insinuates himself into the beginning which, in his estimation, grants him the right to bear the respectable mantle of revelation. By collapsing the distant past into the present, he also obviates the need to defend his account against charges of implausibility.

Conclusions

Writing narratives with the appearance of history involved the detailed analysis of events according to their causes, there accompanying circumstances and their consequences. Whilst it was incumbent upon both speakers and writers to be as truthful as possible, a number of pressures that imposed themselves upon them, such as audience constraints and peculiarities, genre of writing or speech, whether to write for amusement or entertainment or pleasure, rivalry and reputation and mimicry, nevertheless forced the hands of speakers and writers to push the envelope of truth. Because so much was at stake (e.g. where reputations were gained or lost, where old allegiances were cemented and new ones forged, where defections occurred, where opponents

emerged and where the truth of an issue, event, person, place or thing was at risk, fudging the details, imagining and creating the speeches, sayings and monologues of heroes [*frankenbiting*] embellishing for exaggerated effect was not unusual and, depending on context, either tolerated or trashed. Truth was a fluid concept and conceived of moving along a sliding scale from degrees of truth to untruth. Perhaps then, we could speak of the author of 1 John of 'truing' rather than propounding a truth that is already a finished thing. In the heat of literary rivalry, his was a truth in the making. Truing required of the author a craftsmanly care and a facility with diverse things. His constructions of truth will be judged by their habitability—their ability to create and sustain community.

I have argued that 1 John finds its place in the condition of literary competitiveness with someone or something where issues of truth are being debated. Persuading the followers, new comers or group members and castigating the detractors was important to him and encouraged the author to map the beginning for dramatic effect and to accuse his opponents of outrageous speech acts. In this competitive environment, the author of 1 John was perhaps accused of favoring a particular point of view and, hence of perpetuating falsehood just as he was accusing his enemies of spreading falsehoods. In an environment of competitive truth claims, the author of 1 John had to ask himself of how best to deliver his vision of truth to his hearers and readers. The author of 1 John chose to follow in the linguistic and, to some extent, ideological footsteps of the GJ but also chose to depart from them in substantial ways; not least, for example, in jettisoning a number of the linguistic habits peculiar to the GJ. As a master of overstatement, however, he finds some of the language of the GJ congenial to his purposes. He pays literary homage to an honoured predecessor by mimicry of language and text, yet nevertheless heads off on his own to emphasise the superiority of his account, to accentuate the greater dangers now lurking in his society, to draw attention to his Christological formulations and to call for a responsible ethic.

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