The ‘righteousness of the children of God’ according to the First Epistle of John

The author of the First Epistle of John predominantly addresses the ‘theological concept of righteousness’ in two pericopes: pericope 1 (1:5–2:2) concerns the ‘Righteousness of God’, and pericope 2 (2:28–3:12) explores the ‘Righteousness of God’s children’ from various perspectives. The adjective, δίκαιος, occurs twice (1:9 and 2:1) and the noun, δίκαιος, appears once (1:9) in the first pericope. In the second pericope, the adjective, δίκαιος occurs three times, the adjective δίκαιος once and the noun, δικαιοσύνη, also three times. This research starts with a discourse analysis to determine semantic networks to be used for the structuring of the reasoning and rhetoric in this research.

Introduction

The occurrence of the concept of righteousness in the pericope, 1:5–2:2,1 concerns the righteousness of God, even though the adjective, δίκαιος, occurs twice (1:9; 2:1) and the noun, δίκαιος (1:9) only once. Research on this pericope has pointed out that the presence of the strong fellowship motif (κοινωνία, 1:6; 7; also 1:3)2 in 1 John has been used intelligently and successfully by the Presbyter3 to constitute the environment within which the Johannine divine righteousness concept could be interpreted and should be understood (cf. Network A). In this pericope (1:5–2:2), the Presbyter has pointed out five divine and human aspects that describe and constitute the righteousness of God from the perspective of communion: fellowship; three descriptions of the being and nature of God (ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστιν, 1:5; πιστός ἐστιν καὶ δίκαιος, 1:9; Jesus, the manifestation of the righteousness of God; confession of sin, forgiveness of sin and the purification from sin.4 Finally, the righteousness of God climaxes when ‘living in the light’.5

The (faithfulness and) righteousness of God, referred to in 1:9 (also cf. 2:29),4 relates to both the nature and the activities of God. Regarding the nature of God, the Presbyter refers to both

1. See my publication on the righteousness of God: The ‘righteousness of God’ according to the First Epistle of John. The reason for demarcation at 2:2 is because of the last relevant occurrence and reference to the divine righteousness (2:1) in the selected verses relevant and applicable for the investigation in mind. The adjective, δίκαιος, occurs also in 3:12 with specific reference to the deeds of Abel being righteous, as opposed to the deeds of his brother Cain. Then, in 5:17 (cf. 1:9) the noun δικαίου occurs, stating that all wrongdoing is sin.

2. The κοινωνία concept is prescriptive for existence in the familia Dei and is constituted in/through love.

3. Various references and reasonings occur about the author of First John. For convenience sake it has been chosen to refer to this author as the ‘Presbyter’ because of the close relation between the three Johannine epistles.

4. Vitruano (1987:123) casts light on the concept of ‘sin’ (ἁμαρτία) in the first epistle of John. He points out how problematic it is to define sin for him, ‘The basic question is: How is 1 John 2:1 to be harmonised with 1 John 3:6 and 3:9?’. ‘How is this apparent paradox to be reconciled with the divine nature of Jesus?’ Parousia. Network E: Those who do what is right are righteous – they cannot sin anymore.

5. Von Wahlde (2002:319) regards δικαιοσύνη in 2:29 to be enigmatic. To whom does it refer – to Jesus or to God? He claims that the antecedent of δικαιοσύνη in 2:29 is God the Father. His justification is founded on his examination of the structure of the pericope,
the faithfulness and righteousness of God in amalgamation with another divine attribute: ‘God is Light’ (1:5, ‘ο θεός φως ἐστιν’). Later in First John, the Presbyter additionally refers to: ‘God is Love’ (‘ο θεός ἀγάπη ἐστιν’, 4:8, 16). The two attributes (faithfulness and righteousness) of God are attached to the verb εἰμι and should be interpreted complementarily.

The (faithfulness and) righteousness of God, also evident in God’s activities, validates sending his Son as propitiation (ἀνάμειξις) of sin (2:2). This Son of God, Jesus Christ the righteous (2:1), intercedes as ‘intercessor’ (παράκλητος), for believers, with the Father. This righteousness of God is continuously forgiving and purifying only those who themselves continuously confess their sins and walk as Jesus walked (2:6). God’s ongoing action of sustained divine righteousness is emphasised by the Presbyter repeatedly using present tense verbs (Van der Merwe 2023).

The objective of this essay is to investigate the theological meaning of the ‘righteousness of the children of God’ according to 1 John 2:28–3:12. The modus operandi to achieve this will be: Firstly, to start with a discourse analysis of the Greek text in order to point out several relevant semantic networks so as to determine the structure of the reasoning and rhetoric of the Presbyter; secondly, to outline the environment and foundation of righteousness; thirdly, to indicate how Jesus is connected to righteousness; fourthly, to identify how the Parousia of Jesus has been used as another rhetorical strategy to alert God’s children to live righteously; fifthly, to explain how the Parousia of Jesus has been used as another rhetorical strategy to encourage the children of God to live righteously; and finally, to confirm that those who do right are righteous and do not sin anymore.

(Footnote 5 continuous …) He is convinced that 2:29 should be read in relation to 2:28, ‘rather than in relation to the remainder of v. 29 and 3:4, that one would suggest that δίκαιος refers to Jesus rather than to the Father’ (2002:338).


7. A comparison of different English translations with the Greek text (NA27), signifies a uniformity among several English translations with slight variations in the title and demarcation of the pericope (2:28–3:10). The following analysis and comparison depict the reality:


The above-mentioned English Bible translations are nearly unanimous in the demarcation of this pericope (2:28–3:10). Only the Open Bible (NASB, 1985) includes 3:11–12 because of the occurrence of the adjective δικαίος in 3:12, while the NRSV excludes 2:28. The Greek text (NA27) consists of no pericope indications, only paragraph indications. A new paragraph starts at 2:28. Chapter 3:11–12 constitutes a paragraph that relates closely with 2:28–3:10. Therefore, in this article I have opted the demarcation of the New American Standard Bible (and Greek text), 2:28–3:12, for the occurrences of the verb ἐσμέναι and the adverb Σωκάς in 3:11, 12. In the pericope, 1 John 2:28–3:12, the noun (δικαίος, 3 και τὸ δικαίον), and the adjective (δικαίος, Σωκάς, Σωκάς), together, appear seven times. This indicates that the concept of righteousuness features decisively in this pericope. Closer research indicates that the Presbyter focuses here on the children of God who must live according to both the righteousness of Jesus (3:7; cf. 2:1, 6) and the Father (2:29; cf. 1:9).

8. This discourse analysis has four functions: (1) It will help us to identify the different semantic networks (semantically related words or phrases or concepts) that enhance better understanding and dynamic interaction between text and reader. (2) It will help us to determine the argument and rhetoric of the author. (3) It will assist us in constructing the bigger picture by means of semantic networks that created coherent mind maps. (4) It will also help us to relate what has already been read with what is still to be read (Van der Merwe 2015:3).

9. Cf. also Van der Merwe (2023) on how fellowship constitutes God’s righteousness in the life of believers.

Discourse analysis of 1 John 2:28–3:12

This section comprises two activities: compiling a discourse analysis and pointing out the various semantic networks that occur in the discourse.

Discourse analysis

For a discourse analysis of 1 John 2:28–3:12, please see Figure 1.

Semantic networks emerging from the discourse analyses

The following semantic networks are identified in the discourse analysis:

- Network A: The familia Dei the environment and foundation of righteousness.
• Network B: The *revelation* of the righteousness of God in Jesus.

• Network C: Contrasting statements as a rhetorical strategy to alert God’s children to live righteously.

• Network D: The Parousia of Jesus as a rhetorical strategy to encourage the children of God to live righteously.

• Network E: Those who do *what is right* are righteous – they cannot sin anymore.

The *familia Dei* the environment and foundation of righteousness: (Network A)

The Presbyter depicts Christian life as the existence and experience of fellowship10 in a family (Van der Merwe 2005:443f), inferring a *familia Dei*. He refers to God as the Father (δ θεοῦ, 3:1) of the family and Christian believers as ‘children of God’ (τικα θεοῦ, 3:1–2, 10; 5:2), ‘born from God’ (γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, 2:29; 3:9; also cf. 4:2; 5:1, 4, 18) and that ‘God’s seed abides in them’ (σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν σώμα μένε, 3:9).

As a response, they declare God as ‘Father’ (πατήρ, 3:1; also cf. 1:2; 2:1, 14–15, 22–24; 2 John 4) and are ‘brother(s)’ (ἄδελφοι, 3:9, 13) to each other.12 Reference to Jesus as the ‘Son of God’ (υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, 3:8) occurs, to whom the children of God must amend their lives (2:6). The Spirit of God (το θεοῦ χρῖσμα διδάσκει ὑμᾶς, 3:9, 13) to each other.

In his application of family jargon, the Presbyter effects a ‘fellowship like that of an extended earthly family’ among the Father, Jesus the Son of God, the Holy Spirit and the children of God (cf. 1:3, 6, 7; Tollefson 1999:88; Van der Merwe 2005:443f.).

The Presbyter’s use of domestic metaphors enhances fellowship in the Johannine community. In effect, it evoked effective primary ‘actions, attitudes, and emotions’. These images embolden characteristic intellectual and emotional affections that exist within ancient families and have been applied to the Johannine community. These familial expectations are patterned in the interpersonal design of human circumstances. A ‘child’ perception, for example, implicates distinct ‘rights, duties, privileges, attitudes, pitfalls, problems, etc.’, which are related to the character of the family as determined by the father. Such connotations can establish ‘expectations, attitudes, emotions, and actions’ in God’s children, affecting them to feel ‘child-ish’. The same is applicable for ‘life in the family’ (Adams 1983:56).

13. The ‘Spirit of God’ has not been overtly mentioned in this pericope (2:28–3:12), although implied (2:29; 3:9).

14. Malherbe views the use of fictive kinship language as a mechanism to compensate for any form of trauma in actual kinship relations experienced by converts to the *familia Dei*. He writes, ‘Conversion was a disturbing experience that did not lead to a placid life in a safe harbor. The radical reorientation … required social, intellectual, and moral transformation that often resulted in confusion, bewilderment, and sometimes rejection’ (1987:36-37).


This divine love nominate for believers the *en route* to be transformed, henceforth, to be termed ‘children of God’ (τικα θεοῦ; Akin 2001:133). They will then experience the righteousness of God, encouraging them to live accordingly, righteously. In fact, God bestows perpetual love on God’s children (Akin 2001:133). This certainly has implications for living a life characterised by righteousness. The Presbyter, in 3:10, semantically associates the phrase ‘to do righteousness’ (ἔργα δικαιοσύνην) with love – to love fellow believers as God loves (cf. 3:11; Parsenios 2014-92).

The *revelation* of the righteousness of God in Jesus (Network B)

From the semantic network analysis, it is definite that Jesus plays a significant role in this pericope (cf. 2:28; 3:2–3, 5–7, 8).16

Van der Merwe 2009:96). Familial language14 seems to be used to reinforce communal boundaries (Parsenios 2014:94).15

In 1 John 3:1 (also 2:28), the Presbyter introduces the notion that believers are God’s children to remind his adherents of the extraordinary love of God16 for them. The verse commences with the verb ἀγαπέω (‘see’ or ‘behold’) in the imperative mode to emphasise and to reflect upon the remarkable love God has granted God’s children. No explicit references to love occur in the 1:5–2:2 pericope, nor to fellowship in the 2:28–3:12 pericope. However, it is evident from this context that love is essential to constitute fellowship where the righteousness of God is prevalent and experienced. Then consequently the children of God must live this accordingly.17 Hence, **righteousness** is embedded in **κοινωνία**, which subsequently is embedded in **λύπη** (cf. 3:11, 12), within the confines of the *familia Dei*. Humanity is incapable to discern the immensity of this transcendent kind of love. Therefore, the Presbyter tried to express the meaning of this love, revealed in righteousness. Because of this, the Presbyter directs his adherents to live lives of righteousness, effected by loving God and loving one another (3:11; cf. Van der Merwe 2012:5-7).

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16. Already in 2:5, 10 the Presbyter elaborates on the love of God to prepare the readers to recognise love as the essence of fellowship in the *familia Dei*. Therefore, his declaration in 3:11, ‘For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another’.

17. According to Geislerová (2021:12), the Presbyter uses three lexemes which unite the ontological and ethical notion of criterion to determine the status of the children of God: love, faith and righteousness.

18. Von Wahlde (2002:323) argues that ‘Within 2:28–3:10 there is a second, less pronounced structural feature consisting of four other statements that have Jesus rather than God as the focus. Not only do these elements focus on Jesus rather than the Father but in each of these there is a mention of the “manifestation” (or “revelation”) of Jesus and of the importance of this manifestation for the believer. The first two statements, refer to the future manifestation of Jesus. The implicit topic is judgment. The last two statements refer to the past manifestation of Jesus (within history). The issue here is the removal of sin. These four statements are particularly noteworthy, for they are the only such references in the entirety of 1 John’.
The role of Jesus in 2:28

This pericope begins with an appeal to ‘abide’ in him’. According to the literary context the personal pronoun ‘him’ (αὐτῷ), absolutely, refers to Jesus. Moreover, this clause operates to connect the preceded section with the current one (cf. 2:27). The significance of God’s children ‘to abide’ in Jesus is related to the future coming (παρουσία) of Jesus which is mentioned twice in 2:28: ‘if he is revealed’ and ‘at his coming’. This happens so as to remind God’s children about their future existence. If they abide in Jesus, constituting a permanent relationship with him, being righteous as he is righteous (3:7), they ‘will have confidence (παραγηγόμενοι) and not be put to shame before him at his coming’ (cf. Von Wahlde 2002:335).

Another conspicuous lexeme in this verse is the verb, reveals (φανερώθη), which occurs five times in this pericope (2:28; 3:2, 5, 8). This verifies the event of Jesus’ ‘revelation’ to be clearly a critical theme (see Figure 2).

The role of Jesus in 3:2–3

The ensuing declarations about Jesus (3:2–3; En cf. Van der Merwe 2012:3-4) present him as the prototype for the Children of God. However, for God’s children, aware of their existential status, this does not provide their conclusive status: ‘It has not yet been revealed what we will be (3:2).’ Consequently, the Presbyter focusses on the future: the children of God ‘must purify (ἀγνίζει) themselves, just as he [Jesus] is pure (ἀγνός)’. Here, their status parallels that of Jesus. The Presbyter unequivocally compares their behaviour with the behaviour of Jesus (Von Wahlde 2002:336).

In 1 John 3:3, the imitation of Christ (2:6), or living righteously, is concomitant with the Presbyter’s statement of purification, (ἀγνίζει), Christian identity and hope. In 3:2 he underlines, that God’s children already now can have confidence that ‘when Christ appears/is revealed’ (ἐφανερώθη) they will be ‘like him for we will see him as he is’ (cf. Rm. 8:29; Col. 3:4). Thus, 1 John 3:2 affirms the eschatological promise that ‘all who have this hope in him [. . .] is righteous, just as he is righteous’. In 1:5, the Presbyter depicts ‘God is light and in him there is no darkness at all’ and ‘in him [Jesus] there is no sin’ (3:5). Consequently, corresponding conduct is expected from the children of God. This infers they must ‘walk in the light’ as Jesus ‘walked in the light’ and ‘purify themselves, just as he is pure’ (3:3). Accordingly, they will be ‘righteous, just as (σωθικοί), he [Jesus] is righteous’ (3:7; cf. Van der Merwe 2014:7-8).

The role of Jesus in 3:5–6

Already in 2:1, the Presbyter denotes Jesus as righteous (Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν δίκαιον). In advance he prepares the reader for his explicit statement in 3:5, that ‘In him [Jesus] is no sin’. This orientation decodes the righteousness of Jesus from a soteriological perspective. By using the present tense, the Presbyter indicates that ‘Christ always has been, is, and will be without sin’. Therefore, those Christians, whose sin has been forgiven, must sin no more. Christians must combat sin powerfully and attempt purposefully to live righteously. Characteristic of God’s children is their liberation from the control and sovereignty of sin. Then claims from those living in sin, and simultaneously being children of God, would be irrelevant (Kistemaker & Hendriksen 2001:299).

This reasoning is verified by two exclamations: the first refers to the fact ‘that he [Jesus] was revealed to take away sins’ (3:5); the second is the exclamation that ensues in 3:8. The historic-salvific role of Jesus is consequently confirmed: he has abolished sin to empower a future life without sin.

A comparison occurs between the following two phrases: ‘who abides in him’ and ‘one who sins’ in 3:6. Accordingly, the linguistic context distinctly refers the personal pronoun ‘him’ (αὐτῷ) to Christ, and the phrase ‘remaining in him’ evokes the fundamental (Von Wahlde 2002:336) exhortation at the beginning of this pericope (2:28). Brown (1982:393–394) expounds: ‘If the logic of this statement flows from the preceding verse: there is no sin in Christ, and so those who abide in him should have no sin in them’. On the other hand, ‘no one who sins has either seen him or known him’, echoing the similar statement in 3:1 that ‘it [the world] did not know him [God’.

The role of Jesus in 3:7

Both God (1:9; 2:29) and Jesus (2:1; 3:7) are referred to as being ‘righteous’. In 2:1, the Presbyter refers to Jesus exposing righteousness as a quality of God (2:1). Therefore, there is the reference in 3:7 that ‘Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous’.

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Therefore, already at the beginning of this pericope, in 2:28–29, the Presbyter encourages the children of God to act rightly, to expose the righteous character of God. Then, in 3:7 he relates (καθὼς) their righteous living (‘ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην δίκαιος ἐστιν’) with the righteous living (δίκαιος) of Jesus. The last statement in 3:7, ‘just as he [Jesus] is righteous’ (καθὼς ἐκεῖνος δίκαιος ἐστιν) is analogous to that of ‘just as he [Jesus] is pure’ (καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἁγνός ἐστιν) in 3:3. Both statements highlight the nature of Jesus as the foundation of moral transformation. In 3:3, both the equivalent verb ἁγνίζει (‘purify’) and adjective ἁγνός (‘pure’) are ἀρχαί legomena. The fact is that Jesus’ purity provides firstly, an ethical paradigm and secondly, a powerful Christian impetus to be committed contrary to the attractions and offences in this adversative world (Leung 2018:127).

Hence, people are identified by their actions.24 Merely birth from God (2:29; 5:1) and faith in Jesus (5:1) enable people to obey the Jesus paradigm of living righteously. Such conduct is nourished in the familia Dei.

The role of Jesus in 3:8

In 3:8, the Presbyter disturbs his comparison of ‘the one who does not sin’ with ‘the one who does’ with reference to the ‘Son of God’. Again, he refers to Jesus having been ‘revealed’. This time it is to ‘destroy the works of the devil’. The reference to Jesus as the ‘Son of God’ emphasises the contrast between Jesus and the one who is ‘of the devil’ (3:8a) or a ‘son/child’ of the devil (3:10). Thus, the Presbyter endeavours to emphasise Jesus’ role in enabling the children of God not to sin (Von Wahlde 2002:337), but to live in the light. The one who does what is right according to God’s standard and who, therefore, acknowledges and accepts God’s authority is righteous in the same way that Jesus was’ (Jobes 2014:209, epub).

A rhetorical strategy for living righteously: Contrasting parallel statements (Network C)

In his rhetorical strategy to motivate his readers to live righteously to encounter ‘fellowship with us; and … with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1:3)’, the Presbyter uses different figures of style. One rhetorical strategy of amplification is his usage of ‘contrasting parallel statements’. We will briefly focus on some ‘contrasting parallel statements’ occurring in this pericope.

Watson (1993:99–123) in his research on ‘Amplification techniques in 1 John’ made a useful contribution to ‘the interaction of rhetorical style and invention’ of the Elder. From his research he points out the relevance of the statements made by Longinus (1890) and Cicero (1954, 2010) about amplification. Longinus (Subi. 12.1) proclaims that ‘Amplification…is language which invests the subject with grandeur’, ‘a sort of weightier affirmation, designed to win credence in the course of speaking’. According to Cicero (Part. Or. 15.53) ‘Amplification…is arousing emotion’. It is ‘a sort of forcible method of arguing, argument being aimed at effecting proof, amplification at exercising influence’ (Cicero, Part. Or. 8.27), ‘Amplification is used to underscore and augment the argument of the rhetor, positively or negatively’ (Cicero, De Or. 3.26.104).

Watson then relates the varieties of amplification (denoted to by Longinus & Cicero) with similar occurrences in the New Testament because of varieties of subject matters. Some examples incorporate discussions of significant matters allied to the heavenly and divine, the love of God, moral considerations, what is beneficial or detrimental to humankind, and love of close kin’. This occurs also in the First Epistle of John. Particular modes of amplification appear that ‘work both independently and in conjunction with each other’ (Watson 1993:115).25

In this pericope (2:28–3:10), four sets of parallel contrasting statements (2:29b; 3:4a; 3:6a–6b; 3:7b–8a) occur. Each pair amplifies satisfactory conduct (founded on Johannine custom) with unsatisfactory conduct among the secessionists (deviating from Johannine custom; Watson 1993:115; also Parsenios 2014:92).

Each pair begins with the Greek adjective ἁγνός (all, every), coupled with a participle. This then constitutes a generalisation that partitions the world into two divergent groups. The objective behind this composition is to confront the members of the community with two unambiguous options. Then finally, the Presbyter invites them to make a choice (Parsenios 2014:92).

The first specific set (syntactical structure) occurs in 2:29, consisting of the statements, ‘Everyone acting justly…’ (2:29), which is paralleled and juxtaposed with ‘everyone committing sin…’ (3:4; Von Wahlde 2002:322). The second set consists of ‘Everyone remaining in him…’ (3:6a), which is contrasted with ‘everyone sinning…’ (3:6b). The third set consists of ‘The one acting justly…’ (3:7b), which contrasts with ‘the one committing sin…’ (3:8). The fourth set consists of ‘Everyone born of God…’ which contrasts with ‘everyone

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24Significant to mention is that the pursuit of holiness emerges as the central impetus of Leviticus 19.2. This also provides the reason behind a fundamental Old Testament text regarding the Judaic concept to imitate God. According to the Old Testament, the Israelites, as God’s people, had the ethical responsibility to expose the holiness of God in their daily conduct. Analogously, in this epistle of John the children of God must imitate their character and conduct according to Jesus’ example of purity (Leung 2018:126–127). Also cf. Proverbs 20:11. A person is what that person does: ‘ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην δίκαιος ἐστιν, καθὼς ἐκεῖνος δίκαιος ἐστιν’ (3:7). Living in righteousness is to live according to God’s expectations.

25Other relevant modes of amplification pointed out by Watson (1993) that occur frequently in this Johannine pericope (2:29–3:10) are: Strong Words: Strong words can be used to augment. Such words can be ‘ordinary words, synonyms, compounds, exaggerated words, or words used metaphorically’ (Cicero, Part. Or. 15.53; Quintilian II.4.1–3 [as discussed by Leeman 1963]; Watson 1993:101). Comparison: Amplification can also be prompted by comparison. ‘Comparison as amplification seeks to raise from the lesser to the greater to raise the greater. Also, a parallel can be used to make something desirable: to exaggerate, to seem greater (e.g. 3:2)” (Watson 1993:101). Repetition: ‘Several figures of speech and thought of a repetitive nature are used to amplify the message of 1 John’ (Cicero, Part. Or. 15.54; Watson 1993:103). Synonymy: Synonymy (interpretatio) is a figure of speech that ‘does not duplicate the same word by repeating it but replaces the word that has been used by another of the same meaning’, in 2:29, olóos and vivéous (‘know’) are paralleled and in 3:4, ἀμαρτία (‘sin’) and ἀνομία (‘lawlessness’) are paralleled; Antithesis: referring to the juxtaposition of contraries (cf. four sets of parallel contrasting statements; Cicero, Part. Or. 16.55; Her. 4.15.21; Watson 1993:115). All five, above-mentioned, types of amplification occur in 2:29–3:10.
not acting justly…’ (3:10c). In these, the Presbyter repetitively contrasts proper with improper conduct.

It is necessary to note that in three of the four sets the dominant issue comprises the question whether a person is ‘from God’, ‘born of God’, ‘a child of God’ or whether the person is ‘from the devil’, ‘a child of the devil’? Hence, the concern in these sets relates to the person’s parentage, with either God or the devil as possible options. This is a major thematic feature in this pericope (2:29–3:2; 3:4; 3:7–8; 3:9–10). The fourth set of contrasts has been shaped in a different way as the others. No mention of parentage occurs, although the focus remains on the conduct of a person and the importance of not sinning. Here the focal point consists of ‘abides in him’ (3:6).

A second rhetorical strategy for living righteously: References to the Parousia (Network D)

Parallelism: Twice, in this pericope (2:28; 3:2), the Presbyter refers to the Parousia of Jesus. Figure 3 expresses the close liaison between these verses.

His objective? This is a constructive rhetorical strategy of the Presbyter to motivate his readers to live righteously. This parallelism explicates the consequences emanating from a life of righteousness from two related perspectives on eschatology, articulated in idiosyncratic terminologies. One of the dominant elements in the structure of this pericope (2:28–3:12) is the stereotypical pattern of apocalyptic reasoning in which two groups are labelled, coming ‘from God’ or ‘from the devil’. This derivation arises from the activities of the two groups, activities construed as either good or evil (Von Waldé 2002:324). The Presbyter uses a similar configuration to describe the situation in the Johannine community (Von Waldé 2002:329) to which he related moral alternatives with either God or Satan. He amended it to include the role of Jesus to encourage God’s children to live righteously.

Revelation: In this pericope, the Presbyter uses the verb φανερώω as a terminus technicus in a triplet sense: as reference to Jesus’ incarnation in the past (1:2; 3:5, 8; 4:9), to expose the apostates in the present (2:19), and to explain expectations in the future (2:28; 3:2). An apparent future revelation is validated by the equation of Jesus’ revelation with his Parousia (Strecker 1996:79). The Presbyter depicts the two events (incarnation and Parousia) as a ‘single, all-embracing manifestation or epiphany of God’ on earth. With his incarnation God’s Son accomplished salvation (4:9, 10, 14) and ‘destroy the works of the devil’ (3:8). Jesus’ incarnation (ὁφανερωθη, 1:2) continues the triplet because it revealed God’s righteousness (1:9), God’s redemptive involvement (3:5), and the love of God (4:9). At the Parousia, Christ’s appearance will be as Judge (Schnackenburg 1992:152). It will be an epiphany and extension (a different, though complementing act) of Christ’s and the righteousness of God (1:9; 2:1, 29). As a matter of fact, what ensues ‘today’ has ‘eternal’ consequences.

Prepare: In these two eschatological orientations, the Presbyter encourages God’s children to ‘abide in Jesus’, ‘do what is right’, ‘purify themselves’ for the Parousia (2:28) and the day of judgement (2:28). This will cause them ‘to have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming’, and ‘to become like him, for they will [then] see him as he is’ (3:2). These appeals have been related with Jesus, ‘the eternal life that was with the Father’ (1:2). On the day of judgement, Jesus, himself, will be the measuring stick (καθὼς ἐκάντων δίκαιος ἐστιν, 2:7). Because of both the righteousness of God and the Son (2:1; 1:9 and 2:29), God’s judgement will be just:

3:3 ‘... αὐτῷ ἐγνώκατε ἀδικίαν, ................. καθὼς ἐκάντων ἐκάντων ἐστιν, εἰστιν’
3:7 ‘...δικαιοσύνη ἐστιν, .................καθὼς ἐκάντων δικαιοσύνη ἐστίν’

In 1 John, Jesus’ characterisation parallels that of the Father. For that reason, the Presbyter advocates God’s children to conform to be righteous to experience fellowship in the familia Dei ‘now’. This will prepare them for the coming of Christ.

Eschatological consequences: The righteousness of believers will bring forth two eschatological consequences: (1) To ‘have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming’ (2:28) and (2) to ‘be like him, for we will see him as he is’ (3:2). ‘Confidence’ (παρθηρίσαν, 2:28; 4:17), denotes the responsive experience of the children of God as they move toward the ‘day of his [Jesus] coming’. This denotes the experience of a ‘good conscience, fearlessness, and confidence, when standing before the judge’ (Schnackenburg 1992:223). Only God’s children who ‘abided in Jesus’ (2:28), who ‘have lived as Jesus lived’ (2:6, 28; 3:3, 7; 4:17) could have developed lives of righteousness.

The exhortation to ‘abide in Jesus’ is a dynamic practice of continuous changing (present tense verb) to become like Jesus. The consequence ‘for we shall see him as he is’ (‘ὅτι ὁμοθήμα τοῦ αὐτοῦ καθὼς ἐστιν’) was for the adherents of the Elder not only a future expectation but also a present (νῦν, now) existential experience. This infers that continuous reading of the text and subsequent responses to it by living righteously would already have generated an emergent ‘lived experience’ of the identity and character of Jesus in the children of God. This experience will culminate in the future such that they ‘shall be like him’ (‘ήμων αὐτῷ ἐσομάθηται’, 3:2). The spiritualities embedded in these assurances will...
strengthen their faith and certainly intensify their yearning to be with Christ.

Those who do what is right are righteous – They cannot sin anymore (Network E)

Two opposite groupings – To understand what is right

In 1 John 2:29, the Presbyter writes, ‘If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who does righteousness has been born of Him’. In this verse, the Presbyter uses a syntactical structure that he repeats in this pericope (2:29; 3:3, 4, 6, 9, 10). He pairs the Greek adjective, ἁγνός (all, every) with a participle. His objective is to partition the world into two opposite groupings. The motive behind this is to make the readers take cognisance of two severe options and to consequently understand what is right. He then invokes them to make a choice (cf. 2:29; 3:3, 4, 6, 9, 10). This syntactical structure clearly relates to the rhetorical sententiae style (cf. Parsenios 2014:16–19).

To achieve this, the Presbyter compares the living of the children of God with children of the devil (3:10). Unbelievers continue to demonstrate that they have no fellowship with Christ. In fact, the Presbyter announces that those who persist in sin have neither ‘seen him [Jesus] nor known him’ (3:6). Also, ‘Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God’ (Jn 3 11). The verb to see (ἰορθάω, in the perfect tense) should be interpreted in a spiritual sense. It parallels with the verb to believe. Hence, those, who delight in sin have no faith in Christ. Consequently, they do not know him personally. They are unbelievers (Kistemaker & Hendriksen 2001:299–300).

Jesus the model of righteousness

The Presbyter explains in 2:29 why faith in Jesus makes the difference: it is because ‘he is righteous’ (δίκαιος ἐστιν), ‘in him there is no sin’ (ἁμαρτίαν ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν’, 3:5). The reference to Jesus to be sinless is complemented by the approbative claims of the Presbyter that Jesus Christ was δικαίος (2:1, 29; 3:7), ἁγίος (2:20) and ἁγνός (3:3). This is why Jesus can liberate sinners and when they abide in him they will be liberated from sin (Smalley 1984:157). Therefore, they, ‘...ought to walk just as he walked’ (2:6).

In this pericope, the Presbyter explains an epitome, an image of the character of the children of God. He urges them to take on the perfect character of Jesus Christ, even though it seems impossible (Burge 2011:253).

Present tenses – A denotation of ‘continuous, repeated activity’

A helpful solution in understanding this ‘risky statement’ is to concentrate on the verb tenses. Normally, in Greek, a present tense denotes ‘continuous, repeated activity’ (Burge 2011:253). In verses 3:6, 9, the following four verbs occur in the present tense: οὐχ ἁμαρτάνειν (present active indicative, 6a); ὁ ἁμαρτάνων (present active participle, 6b); ἁμαρτάνοι οὐκ ἔχων (present active indicative, 9a); οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν (present active infinitive, 9b). (1) In 3:6a and 5:18, the Presbyter states that God’s children ‘do not sin’. The use of the Greek verb in the present indicative is to alert them to abstain from ongoing sin. (2) In 3:6b, the translation of the present participle, ‘the one who continues to sin’ expresses the same idea, that is, the implication of an ongoing activity. (3) In 3:9a the Presbyter uses a different phrase combination, a noun for sin (ἁμαρτίαν) with a different verb οὐκ (present indicative), ‘to practice sin’. (4) Finally, in 3:9b (cf. 3:9a) the Presbyter describes God’s children as ‘not able to sin’. Both verbs, οὐ δύναται (‘cannot’) ἁμαρτάνειν (‘to sin’) appear in the present tense. The Presbyter uses this interpretation to emphasise that continuous, habitual sin should be banned from the lives of God’s children (Burge 2011:253). Righteousness should be the new mode of existence, ‘to walk just as he [Jesus] walked’ (2:6).

Righteousness – The mode of living in the familia Dei

The Presbyter explains that the σπέρμα (seed) of God makes believers children of God. Although he does not define this seed explicitly, according to the theological context of this pericope, it refers to the gospel (word) revived through the Spirit, through which believers became part of the familia Dei.

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Within Johannine convention, *word* and *Spirit* operate in combination to become a ‘life-giving word’. The Presbyter regarded this *word* as the foundational message which they have heard from the beginning (3:11): that is, those ‘who have been born of God’[35] have the ‘seed’ (*σπέρμα*)[36] of God abiding in them (3:9). In this verse the explanation moves from ‘do not sin’ (3:9), to ‘they cannot sin’ (3:9; Painter 2008:535f.). This implies that God’s children take on God’s character (their Father).

The Presbyter adds a new perspective which he already alluded to in 3:8. In 3:8, 9, he adopts the impossibility of the children of God to continue to sin. Already in 3:6, his reference about ‘sinlessness’ is founded on when people abide in God. They have ‘been born of him (God)’ (cf. 2:29) and consequently became children of God (3:1–2). In 3:9, the Presbyter turns the sequence around, namely, that the children of God became in a sense ‘supernatural’, ‘because God’s seed abides in them’ (Schnackenburg 1992:174).

He repetitively refers to those who live in Christ and have continuous fellowship with him, while obeying the Word of God. However, he is fully aware that God’s children occasionally stumble into sin and when confessing their sins, God forgives and cleanses them.

This moves the Presbyter in 3:6, to discuss the condition of God’s children, by referring to the fact that ‘No one who abides’[37] in him ‘sins’. This declaration is a contrast to his assertion about Christ that ‘in him there is no sin’ (3:5). The present participle (*μένων*) postulates the person’s ‘ongoing’ way of life. An adversative analogous assertion, ‘no one who sins has either seen him or known him’, also includes a present participle to define an opposite category of people.

These two interpretations ‘imply a state of being rather than an act’. This relates to, and has consequences for, the Presbyter’s communication in his references to ‘sinlessness’ (Painter 2008:531–532). The Presbyter uses this contrast to emphasise the fundamental transformation that is founded via abiding in Jesus (2:6; Van der Merwe 2011:3–4). Firstly, they share an identity as children of God. Secondly, he then refers to the implications of this extraordinary claim in the previous verse (2:29), declaring that those born of God will live in ‘righteousness’ (*δικαιοσύνη*), that is in one of the divine characteristics.[39]

For John, the moral anthroplogy of believers is grounded in their identity as children of God. This new familial identity entails a new mode of conduct, corresponding to the divine family ethos. (Rhodes 2021:82–83)

Finally, a consideration is required to understand the sense of ‘sin’ for the children of God in as much as there is a difference between the pre- and post-experience of being born of God. The consequence of all sin committed prior to ‘being born of God’ is death (Rm 6:23). On the other hand, ‘been born of God’ (2:9) eradicates the penalty of death. ‘Been born of God’ does not abandon moral accountabilities at any stage (e.g. Mt 18:15–17; 1 Cor 11:29–32; Heb 12:4–13). Children of God are henceforth ‘forgiven’ (Jn 1:1–10) and ‘sinless’ (Jn 3:9; 5:18) because of their confession of sin (Jn 1 1:8–10; 5:16), ‘ultimately resulting in their sanctification and perfection in purity’ (Jn 3:3; Min 2017:89–90).

**Conclusion**

This research investigated the Presbyter’s understanding of ‘The righteousness of the children of God’. From the discourse analysis and semantic networks of 1 John 2:28–3:12 it became evident that the Presbyter explicates this *righteousness* from five different perspectives. He succeeded proficiently in explaining his understanding of the ‘righteousness of God’s children’ in their relationship and affiliation with the righteousness of God and the Son of God.

The first perspective explains the ‘environment’ in which the righteousness of the children of God is constituted, namely the *familia Dei*, because of the various occurrences of the metaphor of family. It also justifies the foundation on which the righteousness is structured, namely the love of God and the corporate love for and fellowship with one another.

The second perspective expounds the revelation, the seeing and knowing (3:6) of ‘Jesus as the axiom’ in the constitution of the righteousness of God’s children.

The third perspective points out a, ‘comparison of contraries’, rhetorical strategy employed by the Presbyter in this pericope, to alert the readers about the radical distinction between having God as Father and living in righteousness, or the opposite when having the devil as father. In this rhetorical strategy, he uses several contrasting statements to convince these believers about this foundational difference between

35. The verb *γεννάω* “to beget” occurs 10 times in 1 John and 18 times in John. In 1 John, the dominant use is with the passive voice (*γεγέννηται*), with *ἐξ* to speak of those begotten of God, and only once in the active to refer to God as the begetter’ (Painter 2008:498, epub).

36. The Presbyter refers to the *σπέρμα* of God as the agent of birth into the *familia Dei* (3:9). The *σπέρμα* can be interpreted as the word of God, creating new life (cf. Lk 8:11; Pt 1 1:2).

37. See the following passages: 1:3, 7; 2:3, 5, 23, 29; 3:3, 4, 9, 10, 15; 4:7; 5:1, 3, 4, 18.

38. The following two related references, ‘begotten of God’ and ‘having the seed of God’ reflect the ‘abiding of God in God’s children’. These references (3:6, 9) designate how the Presbyter deals with this theme:

- 3:6 ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ τὸ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ μένει
- 3:9 ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ τὸ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ μένει

The formal similarity at the beginning of these verses (*μένων* ὁ) constructs a parallelism. The phrase ‘ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ τὸ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ’ (3:6a) equals the two phrases in 3:9, ‘ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ’ (3:9a), and ‘οὗ τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ’ (3:9b). The accuracy of this evaluation and perception of equivalence is endorsed in 5:18. Therefore, the mutual abiding of God and God’s children results in God’s children ‘ζωὴν ἐν αὐτοῖς’ (cf. Painter 2002:23).

39. God is light (1:5); God is love (4:8, 16); God is righteous (2:29); Jesus is righteous (2:21) and pure (3:3).

40. Although the phrase ‘to do righteousness’ (2:29; 3:7) is not that clear in this pericope, the Presbyter explains that ‘to do righteousness’ does not denote to live morally, it concerns something much greater. Likewise it denotes to *love* as God loves (3:11–23; 4:7–21, Parsenios 2014:92, 94–97).

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sin and living righteously. This authorises him to invite them to act righteously.

The fourth perspective is complementary to the previous contrasting strategy. The Presbyter also incorporated two references of the approaching Parousia to encourage the children of God as a rhetorical strategy for living righteously. They must live righteously, that is abide in Jesus, purify themselves, and do what is right. This assures the children of God that at the Parousia they will have confidence and not be put to shame before him [Jesus] at his coming (2:28) and ‘they will be like him [Jesus], for we [they] will see him [Jesus] as he is’ (3:2).

The fifth perspective, the Presbyter comforts God’s children, namely, that when they do what is right, they are righteous and accordingly cannot sin anymore.

In conclusion, the objective of this essay was to investigate the righteousness of the children of God according to 1 John. The motive behind it was to get a more complete view of the righteousness of God according to 1 John. Therefore, the essence of this research seems to be an exhortation to the children of God ‘to live righteously’. The five colored perspectives discussed in this essay complement one another. Briefly, the Elder constructed via metaphors, the familia Dei as the environment in which this righteousness should be pieced together. He revealed Jesus as the axiom of righteousness. He made use of two rhetorical strategies, ‘a comparison of contraries’ and ‘reference to the approaching Parousia’ to achieve this purpose, to invite the readers to act accordingly, comforting them then that they ‘cannot sin anymore’.

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