CHAPTER ONE

PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE STYLE OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL IN PAST RESEARCH

I. Introduction

The style of the Fourth Gospel is a subject which receives relatively little attention in modern Johannine research. This in fact holds true for most of the research done since the beginning of this century. A close scrutiny of the well-known lists and catalogues of research publications on the Johannine writings reveals that, although questions related to Johannine language and literary criticism were indeed of importance, with the exception of Malatesta (1967:36-40), McPolin (1980:3-26) and Van Belle (1988:55-56, 120-128) not one of the catalogues has a specific rubric on the question of Johannine style or language. Hartwig Thyen (1974:1), in an exhaustive and formidable compilation of literature on the Johannine writings set himself a number of objectives and states that 'schliesslich sollen Sprache und Stil des Evangeliums erörtert... und die künftigen Aufgaben der Forschung präzisiert werden'.

In subsequent years Thyen (1977:211-270; 1977:328-354; 1979:97-134) continued to publish research accounts in the Theologische Rundschau but never completed his set task of also discussing Johannine language and style and identifying future fields of study.

His successor, Jürgen Becker (1982:279-301, 305-347; 1986:1-78) who took it upon himself to complete this task, has as yet also not dealt specifically with Johannine style in his bibliography of Johannine research up to 1984. Becker perhaps did not deem it necessary to do so for the simple reason that virtually no research had been done during the preceding decades dealing specifically with the question of Johannine style, although some aspects of style and language were dealt with indirectly. This is also reflected in other research surveys and bibliographies on Johannine research, where no mention of specific interest in Johannine style is made. We mention only a few of these bibliographies and research surveys done in the past fifteen years to prove this point: Nicol (1972b:8-18), Kysar (1975; 1983:314-323), Scobie (1976-77:185-193), Smith (1981:41-44), O'Grady (1982:54-58), Schnackenburg (1983:281-287), Olsson (1985:106-126) and Carson (1983; 1989). McPolin (1980:3-26) is one of the few who makes at least some mention of a limited interest in Johannine style and Carson (1983; 1989) mentions a growing interest in 'new literary criticism', but does not refer specifically to 'style'. The very exhaustive bibliography by Van Belle (1988:53-103) has under the heading 'Philological
studies’ a subdivision ‘style and language’ where the Aramaic question, grammar and syntax, and stylistic characteristics are treated. Under ‘stylistic characteristics’ only nineteen titles of studies on the style of John since 1965 are mentioned, and a number of these deal only incidentally with style in the pursuit of other objectives, such as Nicol (1972a:16-27), Ruckstuhl (1977:125-147) and Teeple (1974:253-260). We will return to the nature of these so-called stylistic characteristics a little later.

It would seem that the whole question of the style of the Johannine writings and specifically the style of the Gospel is a rather neglected field in both past and current research. (For earlier bibliographies see Haenchen 1955:295-230 and Malatesta 1967:25-54.) With some reservations therefore, we can agree with Olsson (1974:3) that

the linguistic problems occupy little space in modern Johannine research. This is dominated by Source Criticism and Religionsgeschichte. The perspective is almost invariably comparative and historico-genetic. To arrive at analyses of Johannine language and style one must, if one ignores the commentaries, go back to works published at the turn of the century and the decades immediately thereafter, or, for investigations of ‘style statistics’, to Schweizer 1939 and Ruckstuhl 1951 and some papers in between [Olsson's italics].

Although it is true that most of the studies done during the past few decades have been, in Olsson’s terms, ‘comparative and historico-genetic’, it cannot be conceded that the only real analyses of Johannine style and language were done at the turn of the century or that the work done at that time was in fact different from later work. The works mentioned by Olsson (1974:3) can to a great extent also be classified as historico-genetic and comparative, and the approach in determining style is not really different from that of the later ‘style statisticians’. From this one can furthermore conclude that essentially the approach to Johannine style, where it functioned at all, has remained static for most of this century and its scope has been very limited. The same type of methodology has been used repeatedly, and the same type of research has been prevalent regardless of what the reason for the interest in the style of the Gospel was. Only in the last two decades or so has the study of the language of John received some new stimuli. We will describe these developments a little later.

Another important aspect which must be kept in mind is that, although very little specific research has been done on the style of John’s Gospel, the whole question of style in the Fourth Gospel was by no means ignored completely. The problem is that the style of John was invariably studied not for the sole purpose of determining its and the function of the features in the Gospel, but for subsidiary reasons such as to prove or disprove authorship, sources, redaction and so forth. This will become clearer as different approaches to John’s style during this century are discussed. The survey presented here is necessary in that it analyses the research done and determines what perception