Soteriology, as it is dealt with in the Johannine epistles, is among the most complex (cf. Edwards 2000, 193) teachings in the New Testament. Nowhere in these epistles do we find a clear or categorical explanation. The soteriology is so intricately interwoven with other themes that a discussion of its various components cannot escape repetition. Like the gospel of John, 1 John has often been likened to a spiral. Throughout the epistle the author regularly returns to a point where he has been before, but by bringing in a new element he moves a step further. This spiral is not merely a technique of literary style and structure, but is equally an expression of thought-structure.¹ This would imply that themes and ideas are interwoven. Therefore, it would be impossible to explore one without saying something about the others as well.

The argument to be expounded in this chapter will be dealt with as follows: Initially various soteriological expressions will be determined. This will help to construct the profile of the discussion. These expressions will be interpreted within the social framework of the Johannine community, which gave rise to the writing of these epistles. This will help readers understand the presentation and argumentation of certain themes and the choice and meaning of specific expressions. Some orientation will be provided regarding the approach to soteriology in the Johannine epistles, and the role of Jesus in the salvation events will be discussed. Special emphasis will be placed on how a person becomes saved and, finally, the implications of salvation in the lives of God’s children will be expostulated.

To introduce this research, a methodological remark is necessary: Since there are close connections between the three Johannine epistles, we shall look at 1 John as the main source for this discussion on soteriology, and 2 and 3 John will be incorporated where applicable and necessary. Any similarities or differences between these sources will be pointed out only when it is relevant and will contribute to the discussion.

2. Identification of the Various Soteriological Expressions in the Johannine Epistles

Within scholarship, two distinct and disparate views have developed concerning the message of 1 John. They have arisen as a consequence of two variant perceptions of the purpose of the epistle. The one comprises “salvation” (τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον) and the other “fellowship” (κοινωνίαν) (see Derickson 1993, 89–105; cf. also Kenney 2000a). In fact they are complementary to one another. Both these themes are mentioned in the prologue of 1 John, where the author (hereafter referred to as the elder) gives, as we may expect, a synopsis of his principal motifs.

Like the Fourth Gospel, 1 John concentrates on the assurance of the present experience of eternal life. It mentions eternal life at least 10 times, always emphasising the present: ἡμεῖς οἴδαμεν ὅτι μετέβηκαμεν ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν (3:14). In Christ God has already given us eternal life: ὁ ἐξων τὸν νιόν ἔχει τὴν ζωὴν (5:11–12). The purpose here is to reassure the adherents of the elder, who rejected the teaching of the deceivers and abided in the teaching they had heard from the beginning (2:24), that they might know that they have eternal life (2:25; 5:13).

This purpose of the epistle, according to Lieu (1997, 22; cf. also Thomas 1998, 379; Kenney 2000a, 47), is stated explicitly at the

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2 In this chapter it has been accepted, in agreement with the point of view of most scholars, that the three Johannine epistles were written by the same person, referred to in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1 as the πρεσβύτερος (Brown 1997, 398; Culpepper 1998, 251; Kenney 2000, 12). Therefore, in this document, the author will be referred to as “the elder”.

3 “Eternal Life” is mentioned in 1 John in: 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20. The adjective αἰώνιος is often silently understood when ζωὴ is used in an absolute sense: 1 John 1:2; 3:14; 5:11–12, 16 (Von Wahlde 1990, 16).