

A Note on the Relationship between II and III John

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1. A Thesis

With the assumption voiced by some, that III John 9 contains a clear reference to II John, the problem of the chronology of the Johannine Epistles, at least as far as II and III John are concerned, seems to be solved.¹ That there are a number of problems is also noticed by e.g. Schnelle,² who is the starting point here. He acknowledges, that some³ have thought II John to be a letter of recommendation for so-called *Wandermissionare* to suit the kind of letter referred to in III John 9. Clearly, II John does not fit this category. Schnelle for example, objects that in III John 9, the presbyter is not at all referring to traveling missionaries (*Wandermissionare*), but to

¹ Cf. probably most recently: Schnelle, Einleitung 487: „Bei den kleinen Johannesbriefen kommt dem 2Joh die zeitliche Priorität zu, denn offensichtlich verweist 3Joh 9 auf den 2Joh.“ Schnelle finds support among the exegetes by (more recently) Strecker, Johannesbriefe 357-358.367; Vogler, Briefe 204, however much more careful than Schnelle: „Macht es nach dieser Erklärung keine Schwierigkeit, in dem in V.9 erwähnten Brief des Johannes ‚an die Gemeinde‘ (dann sogar) den 2. Johannesbrief zu sehen (...).“ Vogler does not refer to a certainty, or even a likely possibility, he only notes that there need be no problem; Hengel, Frage 132; Vouga, Johannesbriefe 16-19, esp. 18: II John was not written to the community of III John, but is the letter referred to in III John 9; Grayston, Epistles 160; cf. Schnelle, Einleitung 487 n31. For Schnelle’s view on the Johannine school, cf. Schnelle, Schule 198-217.

² Cf. Schnelle, Einleitung 487.

³ Cf. The objections are put forward by a.o. Dodd, Epistles lxvi.161 with arguments, which are more than valid today. Further Schnackenburg, Johannesbriefe 326; Bultmann, Johannesbriefe 10; Wengst, Brief 248, refers to Schnackenburg, Johannesbriefe 326, the objection is the one referred to by Schnelle; Schunack, Briefe 120. On the Schnackenburg argument; cf. Brown, Epistles 716. Lieu, Epistles 110-115, does not discuss the problem. Further discussion is found in Klauck, Johannesbrief 97-100; Kruse, Letters 225-226; Edwards, Epistles 110-203, esp. 151 (erroneously referring to III John 10 rather than III John 9). Beutler, Johannesbriefe 180, referring to Klauck, rejects the connection on the basis of the different theological contents of II and III John. Westcott, Epistles 240, simply notes that the letter referred to in III John 9 has been lost. He notes as well that the use of *ti* to denote ‘something of importance’ is unknown in the New Testament.

himself: he was not received by Diotrephes⁴ on the basis of his theological position as expounded in II John. That there are quite a few other problems and assumptions involved, goes unnoticed by the reader.

In the following, I will outline some of the assumptions underlying this thesis regarding the chronology of II and III John, in order to show that this thesis should be voiced more hesitantly than appears e.g. in Schnelle's *Einführung*, and that hence the relationship between II and III John is much more opaque than one would think in the first place.

2. The Implied Assumptions

The thesis mentioned above implies the following assumptions:

1. Both letters (II and III John) are written by the same author.
2. Both letters (II and III John) are addressed to the same community.
3. Diotrephes is one of those holding a different theological position from the presbyter as presented in II John or at least the problems of the community in III John must be the same as in II John.

The scope of this contribution will only allow for a limited amount of discussion, but at least it will become clear that all three assumptions are not all that certain, especially nos. 2 and 3, which will lead to the conclusion that the hypothesis that III John 9 refers to II John cannot be sustained.

2.1. Authorship

It is true that both letters have been handed on assuming that they were written by one author, namely John. Also the identification of the author in the letters is similar, ὁ πρεσβύτερος. It is questionable, however, whether this must imply *the same* author, or merely a similar one: could the title or designation of elder / presbyter be claimed only by one person in the Johannine 'School' or by more? Key evidence for a presbyter Johannes is the reference by Papias to someone of that name, carrying the designation ὁ πρεσβύτερος.⁵ However, in the body of the letters, the author remains anonymous, which is commonly taken to imply that the designation presbyter could only refer to one person: one of the foremost leaders of the early Johannine community: it would have been well-known who this Elder was, if not, the use of the title without a name would not make sense.⁶ That this presbyter was used to writing letters (at least two of them, if one takes III

⁴ Cf. Taeger, *Rebell* 275-277, for an extensive discussion of the person of Diotrephes.

⁵ Cf. Eusebius HE III 39,4.

⁶ Cf. Taeger, *Rebell* 280, it does not need further discussion here.

John as composed by him, together with the reference to another letter in III John 9, and at most four of them, I, II, and III John – counting I John as a letter, and taking the reference in III John 9 as a reference to a fourth letter, now lost, are known to us), is clear from III John 9. I do not see a compelling reason to identify Papias' presbyter John with the author of these letters. It remains a rather uncertain inference. One argument that might be put forward, is that John is the only one who is called presbyter by Papias, that is to say: the whole group of authorities mentioned is identified as a group of authorities, but only John, not Aristion is called 'presbyter John.' The most likely explanation seems to me, however, that it was important to Papias to discern between John the disciple and John the presbyter, not emphasizing John's status as presbyter. Schnelle and others can claim that there is nothing that speaks against the identification of the presbyter of II and III John and Papias' presbyter John,⁷ but there is not much that speaks in favor of it either; the issue might be slightly more speculative than one would think.⁸

However, by probing these waters, nothing is said about the authorship of II and III John as such. This will have to be deduced from the content of the letters. First, it should be noted, that both letters have originated in quite different situations: in III John, it is the purpose of the presbyter to (re)gain access to the community of which Gaius is a member and Diotrephes the leader, or at least a very dominant member. In II John, the presbyter aims at preventing 'heretics' from entering into a certain community, the letter is addressed to this whole community as well, as opposed to III John, which is a letter from 'man to man.' This makes the contextuality of both letters evident, and the amount of agreement one may expect from them.

One very clear formal feature stands out: the opening and concluding formulas of both letters are virtually identical, which suggests one source of authorship. At the same time, however, fixed formulas might point towards a community as well as towards a single author. Even in the first case this would strongly suggest at least one 'communal' hand in authoring the letters. Furthermore, the vocabulary of the two letters shows a host of similarities.⁹ This issue needs therefore no further discussion: it can safely be assumed that the two letters have an author, at least stemming from the

⁷ Cf. Schnelle, Schule 207.

⁸ Cf. e.g. Klauck, Johannesbrief 22.

⁹ This is an opinion held by many, cf. Wengst, Probleme 3755.

same community, and most likely even being the same person. Who he (rather than she) was, however, remains an issue of discussion.¹⁰

2.2. Addressees¹¹ and Theological Problems

A common author may be assumed, but the case for a common addressee will prove to be difficult indeed. If III John 9 does indeed refer to II John, one will need to assume that both letters were addressed to (problems in) the same community as well. For this we will have to focus on the problems caused by Diotrephes.

Surveying III John, one will see soon enough that nothing much can be said about any *theological* differences leading to Diotrephes' refusal to host or even to the presbyter in the community of which he is a dominant member.¹² Even from the few hints III John offers us: he does not receive people from the presbyter's party (III John 9.10, ἐπιδέχομαι), he is said to be fond of ruling (III John 9, ὁ φιλοπρωτεύων), and he is saying bad things about the presbyter and his party (III John 10, ποιεῖ λόγους πονηροῖς φλυαρῶν ἡμᾶς), we cannot learn anything concrete. As the text is clearly polemical, one will have to be careful to credit the presbyter with honesty as he attributes all these epithets to Diotrephes, as Diotrephes would probably be saying the same things about the presbyter, as one would expect in a row like this. This can be substantiated by the fact that III John is clearly aiming at (re-)establishing the presbyter's influence in a certain community where this is (no longer) the case – (φιλοπρωτεύω, III John 9, means at least that Diotrephes is fairly successful!) and the evidence from II John 10, where the presbyter advises (another?) community not to host adversaries, resp. those disagreeing with (at least) the presbyter's theology. There has, of course, been a host of sophisticated suggestions about the core of the

¹⁰ Cf. Klauck, Johannesbrief 19-22; Kruse, Letters 7-9; Beutler, Johannesbriefe 31; Wengst, Brief 26-30; Schnackenburg, Johannesbriefe 297 (295-301), referring to the eschatological passages at the end of II and III John.

¹¹ One thing about the two letters which is seldom noticed as a thematic similarity is the following: the aim of both letters can be described as different, as I have done above, but, at another level, it is exactly the same: in II John, the presbyter wants to reach the opposite of the goal he wants to reach in III John: preventing hospitality in the one case stands in contrast with the attempt to gain access resp. hospitality in the other. The dynamics of hospitality seem to have been at the core of the Johannine dispute here, be it not as the content, but rather as the form of the conflict.

¹² Schnelle, Einleitung 494.

conflict,¹³ but none of them can be deduced from the text of III John alone, and reach a higher level than that of speculation. One may, however, assume a link between Diotrephes' refusal to host the party of the presbyter (and the presbyter himself) and his objections to this party. The background of this is, as stated above, relatively unclear. Whether this has only to do with church authority, resp. the authority of the presbyter,¹⁴ or whether there are other theological issues at stake, has to remain open here. Both might be the case: indications for conflicting (personal) authorities seem to be hinted at by the fact that the presbyter claims that one of the issues behind Diotrephes' inhospitality is ruling in the community (III John 9), and that another one is that of saying bad things – on what level has to remain open (personal / ethical, doctrinal) – against or about the presbyter and his party (III John 10). Diotrephes does not seem to be inhospitable in principle, but clearly has something against the author of III John and his group. A recent lexicographical contribution to the discussion by Mitchel reinforces this point: ἐπιδέχεται should, both in III John 9 and 10, be taken in the sense of 'receiving,' or 'hosting,' rather than 'accepting someone's authority,'¹⁵ the latter has been suggested as the meaning of ἐπιδέχεται in III John 9, but would have been the only instance where ἐπιδέχομαι carries this meaning. Not receiving members of the presbyter's party, or the presbyter himself, possibly carrying letters with them (III John 9)¹⁶ or some of the brothers (probably carrying messages or letters as well, cf. III John 10) would amount to cutting diplomatic ties. Something is at stake, what exactly is unclear, visible is, however, that Diotrephes is doing everything he can to keep the presbyter and his party out of his community, maybe because of his wish to remain independent, maybe because he wants his community to remain orthodox (in the technical sense of the word). Another conclusion that can be drawn from this review is that, looking at the contents of III John, there is no way of assuming that this letter is addressed to the same community as II John, as there is no way of getting to know Diotrephes anything precise about theological problems with the presbyter, as all we can see is that he is trying to keep him away.

¹³ Schnelle, *Einleitung* 496-498; cf. also Mitchell, *Diotrephes* 299 n.1, as well as Wengst, *Probleme* 3765-3766, for overviews of the problem and its possible solutions.

¹⁴ Taeger, *Rebell*, argues in favour of an issue of authority, suggesting on the basis of II John, that the presbyter is trying to strengthen his position in order to safeguard tradition.

¹⁵ Cf. Mitchel, *Diotrephes* passim.

¹⁶ Letters were commonly sent this way, cf. White, *Light* 214-216, esp. 215f. Furthermore Funk, *Form*; Brown, *Epistles* 788-790.

More recently Hengel has also made a case for a reference in III John 9 to II John on a theological level,¹⁷ but it is hard to see how his argument can rise above the level of speculation. He suggests that Diotrephes might have been offended by the presbyter's call in II John not to offer the 'heretical' teachers any hospitality – as was the early Church. However, this is very difficult to find in any of the letters. Indeed, even if it is likely that Diotrephes would be offended by this, it does by no means mean that it was exactly this that made him oppose the presbyter, it could have been anything else. Especially as Diotrephes seems to be paying back the presbyter in exactly the same way as the presbyter is treating his adversaries. Assuming that Diotrephes was offended by precisely this, it would be surprising to find that Diotrephes is actually copying the presbyter's behavior he found so offensive.

This case might be strengthened by a glance at the content of II John, where the theological problem, as in I John, is much clearer. Central is II John 7, where the presbyter refers directly to the 'heresy' of his opponents, apparently missionaries attempting to gain access to the community to which the letter is addressed (the opposite of the situation in III John), οἱ μὴ ὁμολογοῦντες Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐρχόμενον ἐν σαρκί. This is a theme completely missing in III John, and, arguing from silence, one wonders why the presbyter, who had apparently no problems calling things by their name in II John, would not have done so in III John as well, a letter which has approximately the same length as II John.¹⁸

In this context, to me the objection quoted earlier to not identifying II John with the ti in III John 9 by rejecting the relevance of the claim that II John would have had to refer to traveling missionaries (which it does not), by pointing out that in III John 9 not *Wandermissionare* but the presbyter is view, who does indeed in II John 12 announce his future visit, and by pressing further that there is by consequence no objection to identifying the 'something' in III John 9 with II John, does not seem to be enough. Of course, even if the presbyter is not a *Wandermissionar*, which is quite likely, he can still send letters, normally transferred by letter carriers, *Wandermissionare* or not, which can be refused together with their carriers by Diotrephes. However, by this one cannot prove, not even from silence, that III John 9 refers to II John, or even its likelihood.¹⁹ Even worse: in my view no concrete visit is mentioned in II John, indeed, except for the concluding formula which fits into standard closing formulas of ancient letters; the difference between the conclusions of II John (v. 12) and III

¹⁷ Cf. Hengel, Frage 132.

¹⁸ Cf. on II John 7, Klauck, Johannesbrief 52-54.

¹⁹ Schnelle, Einleitung 487.

John (v. 13-14) on the one hand, and III John 10 on the other is clear: the pious wish in a closing formular for a visit does not have too mean that much, III John 10 seems to be more concrete as far as visits are concerned. The case of II John also differs from III John as far as the aim of the letter is concerned, whereas I suggested above that in II John the presbyter wants to keep people out of a certain community, by means of III John he wants to get Demetrios into a community (III John 12). But even if this counters one objection to the possibility that III John 9 refers to II John, it does not prove the opposite either.

One last observation on the level of III John, already made by Westcott, is that the use of $\tau\iota$ to refer to something of importance, as a letter of recommendation certainly would have been, is rather unusual in the New Testament.²⁰

Two, more speculative, observations will strengthen the case that not only III John 9 does not refer to II John, but that the letters are addressed to two different communities.

1. II John is written to a community over which the presbyter exercises a certain amount of authority, the theory which assumes that one community is the addressee of both letters, will have to assume that things changed in this community very quickly indeed, as both the presbyter's first letter is supposed to be remembered, and the balance of power has to have shifted fundamentally.

2. If one assumes that II and III John are written to the same community, one assumes furthermore, which is not necessary at all, that the presbyter was occupying himself mostly with one or two communities (depending on the evaluation of I John), rather than dealing with a larger number. Or was this one community so important that only part of the correspondence with this one has been preserved?

In any case up until now, one does not have enough additional evidence to III John 9 and the same authorship to justify supplementing the lack of information we get from III John about the community to which it was addressed with information from II John.

3. Conclusions

3. 1. The Relationship between II and III John

On the basis of the evidence presented above, I would suggest that there is no good reason to assume that III John 9 refers to II John. This is neither

²⁰ Westcott, Epistles 240.

necessary nor likely, both on a textual basis and on the basis of the theology or theological problems addressed in both letters.

As it is very hard to know anything precise about the theological problems involved in the community to which III John is addressed, and the actual textual basis of the link with II John is shown to be rather weak exactly on the level of the problem of the hospitality in III John, one will have to refrain from inferring issues from II John into the discussion of III John.²¹ There is, on the basis of III John, no way of knowing whether the two communities were the same or not. The question of the order in which II and III John were written, will have to remain open or to be judged by different criteria.²²

Summary

In the paper the thesis that the relationship between II and III John can be decided on the basis of III John 9, which contains a reference to an earlier letter, is examined, concluding that the reference in III John is too vague to allow for any conclusions regarding letter referred to there. For this reason one should refrain from inferring information from II John into the exegesis of III John.

Zusammenfassung

In 3Joh 9 wird auf ein früheres Schreiben des Presbyters hingewiesen. In der Forschung wird gelegentlich angenommen, dass dieses ‚etwas‘ (ti.) mit 2Joh. zu identifizieren wäre. In diesem Beitrag wird auf diese Annahme eingegangen und zwar mit der Schlussfolgerung, dass dies nicht aus dem ti. abzuleiten ist, was Konsequenzen hat für die Argumentation bezüglich der Reihenfolge der Johannesbriefe und für das Ausmass, in dem Informationen des einen in den anderen Brief hineingelesen werden dürfen.

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²¹ Schnelle, Einleitung 494.497f.

²² Cf. Brown, Epistles 30-32; Klauck, Johannesbrief 23.

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