

The Old but New Command in 1 John 2:7-8? A Proposed Emendation

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Abstract: In 1 John 2:7, the author of the epistle says that he is not writing the recipients a new command, but in the very next verse he seems to do an about face, now writing that the command is indeed new. According to most interpreters, this reversal can be attributed to the creativity of the author. This essay argues, in contrast, that the paradox is accidental, introduced through a primitive error in textual transmission. It proposes that 1 John 2:8 originally began *πάλιν γράφω ὑμῖν* (“Again I am writing to you”) and that *ἐντολὴν καινὴν* (“new command”) was mistakenly imported into v. 8 early on in the letter’s textual history. By emending the text, we are able to resolve the grammatical and contextual anomalies of the present reading.

Introduction

The command that Christians love one another is a hallmark of Johannine theology, a theme enshrined in Jesus’ new command in the Fourth Gospel (John 13:34) and reprised several times in the relatively brief epistles (1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12; 2 John 5). Despite the lack of explicit identification, this is surely also the injunction that lies behind 1 John 2:7-8, where it is said to be both old and new. Of these verses, Robert Law remarked over a century ago that “he [the author] announces his subject only by suggesting that there is no need to announce it—wraps it up in half-revealing, half-concealing paradox.”¹ This old-new command is, in the judgment of most commentators, ancient and modern, another Johannine riddle, a play on words, an intentional paradox.²

The line between paradox and contradiction of course is a thin one, and some have felt the tension in 1 John 2:7-8 more acutely than others. J. C. O’Neill goes so far as to excise v. 8 as an addition to a Jewish *Grundschrift*, and while O’Neill’s penchant for claiming to have found sources might make us cautious of the suggestion, his reconstruction nevertheless draws our attention to rough edges in these verses which are often smoothed out.³ Why is it precisely that

¹ Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 232.

² Rudolf Bultmann (*The Johannine Epistles* [trans. R. Philip O’Hara; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973], 27), for example, writes that “the author ... is not deterred by the paradox.” Urban C. von Wahlde (*The Gospel and Letters of John*, vol. 3: *Commentary on the Three Johannine Letters* [Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010], 68) is able to say that “the contrast is often seen as simply a clever reflection on the opposite of the ‘old-ness.’”

³ O’Neill, *The Puzzle of 1 John: A New Examination of Origins* (London: SPCK, 1966), 16-17. O’Neill may not have been the first to have been uneasy about the text as we have received it. The seventh-

the author switches so quickly from denying the novelty of the love command to affirming it? The purpose of this essay is to show that the apparent paradox is accidental, not a slip on the part of the author but a primitive error in the transmission of the epistle. I propose that 1 John 2:8 originally began *πάλιν γράφω ὑμῖν* and that *ἐντολὴν καινὴν* was mistakenly imported into v. 8 by dittography early on in the letter's textual history. This specific conjectural emendation, as far as I have been able to determine, has not been previously proposed.

1. Conjectural Emendation and NT Textual Criticism

The recent publication of Nestle-Aland²⁸ and the ongoing work on the *Editio Critica Maior* at the Institute for New Testament Textual Research in Münster have brought a renewed interest in the theory and method of textual criticism—as a vigorous output of recent studies on the matter indicates—and in its wake a reassessment of the role of conjectural emendation in establishing the earliest recoverable text of the NT.⁴ Broadly speaking, conjectural emendation is “the act of restoring a given text at points where all extant manuscript evidence appears to be corrupt,” as well as the result of that process.⁵ Conjectural emendations, in other words, do not have external manuscript support but are appealed to in order to make sense of problematic or unintelligible readings, or as a way to provide a missing element when constructing a local stemma for a variation unit.⁶ This process encompasses the addition of a word or phrase where all extant manuscripts are judged to have omitted the original, the excising of putatively erroneous additions, and the correction of words or phrases that are suspected to have undergone mutation, so to speak, into their present form.

century papyrus P⁷⁴ and a handful of minuscules preserve a curious reading, replacing *καινήν* (“new”) in v. 7 with *κενήν* (“vain,” “empty”). A lacuna exists in P⁷⁴ at v. 8, but the minuscules retain *καινήν* there, and it is probable that P⁷⁴ did as well. The variant reading may have arisen from orthographic confusion at some point during the process of transmission, as *αι* and *ε* are not infrequently interchanged, but the fact that no witness has *κενήν* in v. 8 and that this change alleviates a tension in 1 John 2:7-8 at least keeps open the possibility, albeit slim, that the variant reading arose from intentional scribal activity.

- ⁴ Even within the last three years, a number of important studies and collections of essays have appeared: J. K. Elliott, *New Testament Textual Criticism: The Application of Thoroughgoing Principles: Essays on Manuscripts and Textual Variation* (NovTSup 137; Leiden: Brill, 2010); Klaus Wachtel and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Textual History of the Greek New Testament: Changing Views in Contemporary Research* (SBLTCS 8; Leiden: Brill, 2012); John S. Kloppenborg and Judith H. Newman, eds., *Editing the Bible: Assessing the Task Past and Present* (SBLRBS 69; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012); Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestiones* (2d ed.; NTTSD 42; Leiden: Brill, 2013).
- ⁵ Ryan Donald Wettlaufer, *No Longer Written: The Use of Conjectural Emendation in the Restoration of the Text of the New Testament, the Epistle of James as a Case Study* (NTTSD 44; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3. Jan Krans (“Conjectural Emendation and the Text of the New Testament,” in *Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 614) states that the “defining element is the presence of a reading that is not found as such in any known manuscript.” In addition to the studies of Wettlaufer and Krans, see also John Strugnell, “A Plea for Conjectural Emendation in the New Testament, with a Coda on 1 Cor 4:6,” *CBQ* 36 (1974): 543-58; G. D. Kilpatrick, “Conjectural Emendation in the New Testament,” in *New Testament Textual Criticism: Its Significance for Exegesis: Essays in Honour of Bruce Metzger* [eds. Eldon Jay Epp and Gordon D. Fee; Oxford: Clarendon, 1981], 349-60; Georg Luck, “Conjectural Emendations in the Greek New Testament,” in *Verae Lectiones: estudios de crítica textual y edición de textos griegos. Exemplaria classica: Vol. Anejo 1* (eds. M. Sanz Morales and M. Librán Moreno; Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2009).
- ⁶ See Krans, “Conjectural Emendation,” 615.

The practice of conjectural emendation has a distinguished pedigree among scholars in the field of classics. Its reception among NT scholars, on the other hand, has been ambivalent. For many early text-critics, conjectural emendation was part of the standard repertoire of the craft, but the profusion of manuscript finds in the past two centuries has dimmed, if not quite snuffed out, its acceptance, as Ryan Donald Wettlaufer has recently documented.⁷ Even so, we must reckon with the reality that the temporal gap between the autograph and earliest extant witness for some books of the NT is over two hundred years and that manuscript loss is considerable even as the “manuscript base is quite rich.”⁸

The conclusion to be drawn from this state of affairs, I think, is not that we ought to harbor undue suspicion about the general reliability of the current critical editions but that, even with such an extensive manuscript base, the possibility that an original reading has been lost to the ravages of time and chance cannot be foreclosed upon. Both NA²⁷ and NA²⁸, for example, print the conjecture πρώτη[ς] in their text of Acts 16:12, even as the latter has removed all conjectures from its apparatus. Of greater exegetical consequence is the rendering of 2 Pet 3:10 in NA²⁸, which now reads καὶ γῆ καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ ἔργα οὐχ εὐρεθήσεται, against all Greek witnesses and against the text of NA²⁷.⁹ Undoubtedly, some will take exception to this editorial decision, but its mere presence in the latest edition of Nestle-Aland indicates that (at least some) mainstream textual critics have not abandoned the use of conjectural emendation *in toto*, even if many have expressed reservations.

The greater divide is that between theory and practice, since it is one thing to allow for this possibility and another to identify passages that have suffered from pre-archetypal errors without needlessly multiplying emendations. As with any of the canons of text criticism, there is no way to eliminate an element of subjectivity.¹⁰ The books of the NT and the manuscripts descended from them are products of human minds, which, experience teaches us, can be unpredictable and inconsistent. The best that we can do is to articulate some governing principles

⁷ Wettlaufer, *No Longer Written*, 5-60; Jan Krans (*Beyond What is Written: Erasmus and Beza as Conjectural Critics of the New Testament* [NTTS 35; Leiden: Brill, 2006]) has recently shown the importance of conjectural emendation in the early text-critical work of Erasmus and Theodore Beza. From the eighteenth and into the twentieth century, several collections of conjectural emendations were made, by William Bowyer in England (*Conjectures on the New Testament* [London: J. Nichols, 1782]) and by Clemens Könnecke in Germany (*Emendationen zu Stellen des Neuen Testaments* [Gütersloh: T. Bertelsmann, 1908]).

⁸ Wettlaufer (*No Longer Written*, 18) counts 2,355 extant lectionaries, 2,794 minuscules, 282 uncials, and 124 papyri as witnesses to the Greek text of the NT. Yet on the conservative supposition that ten manuscripts were produced within the whole of the Christian world each year until the first mechanical production in 1514, he estimates that “at most only a third of the New Testament manuscript tradition has survived till this day” (*ibid.*, 27).

⁹ Gerd Mink (“Problems of a Highly Contaminated Tradition: The New Testament,” in *Studies in Stemmatology II* [eds. Pieter van Reenen et al.; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004], 27) argues that context demands the negation, and therefore the reading γῆ καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ ἔργα εὐρεθήσεται must be regarded as erroneous.

¹⁰ In the twelve rules of text criticism developed by Kurt and Barbara Aland (*The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* [trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; 2d ed; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989], 280-82), for example, it is often said that the rules cannot be followed mechanically. Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman (*The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 305) compare the practice of text-criticism to teaching someone how to become a poet: “The fundamental principles and criteria can be set forth and certain processes can be described, but the appropriate application of these in individual cases rests upon the student’s own sagacity and insight.”

that guide the process and set parameters that help us weigh the probability of a reading or proposed conjecture.

Wettlaufer outlines three guidelines that will be taken up here in part as a framework for identifying points of sensitivity in the text where emendation may help us retrieve a more original reading. Of first importance is the determination of an internal deficiency in the existing text. Are there grammatical, contextual, or theological incongruities that conflict with what we know of the author's style and character from the rest of the work or other works? Since authors too can be inconsistent or express themselves awkwardly by standards ancient or modern, we cannot attribute all textual problems to scribal mishandling.¹¹ But as we form a profile for the author, better judgments can be made about expected or unexpected ideas, turns of phrase, grammatical constructions, and so forth. Another way to state the principle is to ask when a difficult reading is too difficult, as the canon *lectio difficilior potior* has to be employed with proper discretion, lest we end up with an abundance of nonsense readings.¹²

Wettlaufer's second guideline is to look for patristic quotations or interpretations that signal knowledge of a divergent textual tradition or unease over an inherited reading.¹³ Finally, do advances in modern scholarship or shifts in social location alert us to a textual problem that had been previously overlooked? The accumulation of knowledge about the ancient and medieval worlds together with changes in our historical setting may give us a different window into the text than its previous transmitters.¹⁴ It is the first of these criteria that bears the greatest burden, and it will, accordingly, occupy most of the ensuing study of 1 John 2:7-8, to be supplemented by patristic and versional evidence.

2. The Tensions of 1 John 2:7-8

O'Neill has described the translation of 1 John 2:8 as "notoriously difficult," pointing in particular to the phrase ὁ ἐστὶν ἀληθὲς ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν.¹⁵ A perusal of the major commentaries on the Johannine epistles lends weight to that judgment. Although most exegetes hold that the oddities can be accounted for, it is recognized that there are problems on both 1) grammatical and 2) contextual levels.

1) Grammatically, the most puzzling feature of the verse is the gender of the relative pronoun ὃ, which does not agree with what appears to be its antecedent (ἐντολὴν καινὴν). Law proposes that the relative pronoun may be taken as the direct object of γράφω with ἐντολὴν καινὴν as "an accusative of nearer definition" or that it introduces a "parenthetic clause in apposition."¹⁶ He favors the latter, but neither position has found wide acceptance. Nor has the suggestion that the ὃ translates the Aramaic relative pronoun, which is not marked for gender, gained currency.¹⁷ According to Raymond E. Brown, "most scholars think ὃ introduces a relative clause and struggle to explain the gender."¹⁸

¹¹ So Wettlaufer, *No Longer Written*, 65-66.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

¹⁵ O'Neill, *Puzzle*, 18 n. 1.

¹⁶ Law, *Tests*, 376.

¹⁷ For this suggestion, see Jean Héring, "Y a-t-il des aramaïsmes dans la première épître johannique?" *RHPR* 36 (1956): 113-21. Georg Strecker (*The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John* [trans. Linda M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 50) states that the hypothesis has "no real basis."

¹⁸ Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 266.

To work around the grammatical disagreement, the antecedent of the pronoun has been sought in the whole of the preceding clause or in the idea of newness.¹⁹ The ὅ, then, might be translated “which thing” (so the κιν).²⁰ While not grammatically intolerable, the pronoun-antecedent disagreement is unexpected, even more so in light of the relative pronoun ἣν in v. 7, which does agree with its antecedent (ἐντολὴν παλαιάν). Instances of this solecism in the rest of the Johannine corpus are exceedingly rare—one might perhaps point to the translation formulas in John 1:41-42—though the opening of 1 John furnishes us with examples of a relative pronoun whose antecedent is never explicitly identified.

The second grammatical/lexical peculiarity is the presence of πάλιν at the beginning of v. 8. Few commentators devote more than a sentence or two to its meaning in this context, but their exegesis is almost invariably accompanied by a footnote that defends a mildly adversative translation (“yet,” “on the other hand”), a rendering adopted by many English translations (NRSV, NIV, NASB, etc.). It is clear that “again” in the sense of “a second time” is inappropriate here—as the author does not intend to introduce two separate commands. Πάλιν, whose original meaning was “back,” took on by extension connotations of opposition. As a substantive it could be translated “opposite” and, in its more typical adverbial role, “contrariwise.”²¹ It sometimes functions, moreover, in constructions in which “the information provided about both entities/constituents is exactly the opposite.”²² The sense of πάλιν in that case approximates “in turn” with the overtones of the reversal of a state of affairs provided by the other elements of the sentence. John 16:28, for example, reads, “I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father” (NRSV), where “again” (πάλιν) is the structuring device for the points of contrast. Some English versions have translated this loosely—but capturing the sense of the verse—as “now” (so the ESV and NIV), or have even omitted it (NASB).

The πάλιν in 1 John 2:8, on most interpretations, would have to extend the oppositional use of the adverb, softening the contrast so as to allow the proposition of v. 7 to stand intact. It must mean something like “on second thought” or “from another perspective.”²³ The impediment is that such an interpretation stretches the demonstrable nuances of πάλιν. Elsewhere in the NT, it can be translated “in turn” or “again” as a logical amplification or to present two alternatives (e.g., Luke 6:43).²⁴ But what we might expect if this were the construction in 1 John 2:7-8 is πάλιν ἡ ἐντολὴ ἣν γράφω ὑμῖν καινὴ ἐστίν.²⁵ This is how C. H. Dodd in effect renders the verse: “And yet it is a new command that I am writing to you.”²⁶ Brown, too, translates the first part of v. 8 as if γράφω ὑμῖν stood in the relative clause: “On second thought, the commandment I write you is new.” A true analogue to the πάλιν in 1 John 2:8, however, is harder to find, and the construction does not fit easily within the known range of its use.

¹⁹ So A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 36; Strecker, *Johannine Letters*, 50; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary* (trans. Reginald and Ilse Fuller; New York: Crossroad, 1992), 105; Urban C. von Wahlde, *Gospel and Letters*, 62.

²⁰ Brown, *Epistles*, 266.

²¹ LSJ, s.v. Ι2 (p. 1292).

²² Antonio Revuelta Puigdollers, “Word Classes, Functions and Syntactic Level: The Case of πάλιν,” in *Word Classes and Related Topics in Ancient Greek* (eds. E. Crespo, A. Revuelta, and J. de la Villa; Louvain: Peeters, 2006), 462. He classifies this as a “parallel focus” construction.

²³ Brown, *Epistles*, 266.

²⁴ Luke 6:43 reads: “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit.”

²⁵ Puigdollers (“Word Classes,” 463), with respect to Attic Greek, describes these functions of πάλιν as additive and selective focus constructions.

²⁶ Dodd, *Johannine Epistles* (Moffatt New Testament Commentary; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), 33-34; Brown, *Epistles*, 266.

2) On the contextual level, what quickly comes to our attention is the denial in v. 7: οὐκ ἐντολὴν καινὴν γράφω ὑμῖν. If the author had wished to say that the love command is both old and new, why does he first reject novelty when a positive statement of each would have sufficed?²⁷ Of course, it would be a mistake to expect a writer to always oblige our sensibilities of what he or she ought to have said, but the negation of v. 7 does give us pause. If this is what was originally penned, what is its rhetorical purpose?

One possible answer to that query is that the rejection of the love command's newness served to stress the authority of the author's message against his "progressive" opponents. Expressing a judgment shared by many later commentators, Bultmann writes, "The sentence οὐκ ἐντολὴν καινὴν γράφω ὑμῖν κτλ. ... is presumably motivated by the fact that the author has the false teachers in mind, who do not want to adhere to the παλαιὰ ἐντολή ('old commandment'), but rather want to be progressive (2 Jn 9)."²⁸ In light of 2 John 5-9 and the value placed on antiquity of customs and teaching in the ancient world, with an accompanying suspicion of novelty, the exegetical inference is reasonable, though, as we will see shortly, it probably requires some qualifications.²⁹ The contrast is between the message which the recipients have heard from the beginning and that of the author's enemies who are upbraided in 2 John 9 as failing to remain in the truth. If this is indeed the import of the doubly accented antiquity of the love command, the prevailing opinion runs up against the rhetorical dissonance introduced by v. 8. Rudolf Schnackenburg captures the tension: "Ever since then [the moment the recipients became Christians] they have lived under its imperative ... while everything they have heard later that contradicts the original tradition is *new*, and lacks the required authority."³⁰

The problem is compounded when we observe that the theme of newness in Christ is not present elsewhere in the Johannine epistles where, in contrast, it is repeatedly urged on the hearers to remain in the teaching which they had from the beginning (1 John 2:7, 24; 3:11; 2 John 5). On one end we have a cluster of words and phrases that place great value on tradition and ancient teaching (παλαιά, ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, μένειν), and it is with these that the author aligns his own position. On the other end, the opponents are cast as innovators, implicitly and explicitly. It is through these purposefully created polarities that the author establishes his authority against the opponents. The old, that which is ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, is the true and the good, that which is new is deceitful and the mark of an antichrist. Why then introduce the command as new in 2:8, when it flows so profoundly against the author's purposes?

Noticing this pull in opposite directions, Georg Strecker has argued that the situations presupposed by 1 and 2 John are different. By the time of the writing of 1 John the "newness enthusiasts" had been integrated into the community's fold: a synthesis of "traditional and progressive thinking" had been achieved.³¹ But it is hard to see how the situations which underlie 1 and 2 John are as different as Strecker holds—the opponents are characterized similarly in both epistles (cf. 1 John 2:22-23, 4:2 and 2 John 7-8). And it is even harder to discern some sort of rapprochement between the feuding parties. Nevertheless, Strecker has seen the aporia: "The supposition that the age of the commandment is emphasized in vv. 7-8 (as in 2 John 9) in opposition to the false teachers who do not keep the commandment but strive to be 'progres-

²⁷ That is, something like: "On the one hand, the command that I write to you is old. On the other hand, the command that I write to you is new."

²⁸ Bultmann, *Epistles*, 27. This is also the conclusion drawn by Brown (*Epistles*, 264-65) and John Painter (*1, 2, and 3 John* [Sacra Pagina 18; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002], 178), among others.

²⁹ Judith Lieu (*I, II, and III John: A Commentary* [New Testament Library; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox], 2008] 77-78) stresses the presumption against novelty in the ancient world.

³⁰ Schnackenburg, *Epistles*, 104.

³¹ Strecker, *Johannine Letters*, 49.

sive' ... is disproved by the emphasis on the newness of the command in what immediately follows.³² It might be hypothesized that the epistolary author co-opted the language of newness to pull the rug from under his adversaries' feet, but this is unlikely.³³ It is more probable that the source of the aspersions is the author himself. The so-called newness enthusiasts, that is, would not have branded themselves in that way. They may even have styled themselves the true inheritors of the venerable tradition, its authentic interpreters rather than progressive innovators.

2.1. *The Love Command of 1 John 2:7-8 within Johannine Tradition*

The most compelling reason for the juxtaposition of old and new, even when the latter rubs harshly against the exaltation of tradition as community norm, is that according to John 13:34, Jesus himself described the command of mutual love as new: Ἐντολὴν καινὴν δίδωμι ὑμῖν, ἵνα ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους, καθὼς ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους. The author of 1 John, most commentators hold, knows the tradition and incorporates it into the letter.³⁴ That Jesus' issuing of the command was a known and influential tradition in the circle of Johannine churches cannot be doubted, yet it is not as if the author was compelled by the adjective καινή in the Gospel to appropriate it here, since 2 John 5 alludes to the same tradition without calling it new, even denying as much.

It is generally agreed, moreover, that the command is not new from the author's perspective because he is looking back at some temporal distance to the beginnings of the movement; what was once new is now long established and therefore old.³⁵ This requires the status of the command as new in v. 8 to be qualitatively different. It is new existentially as it is realized in the lives of believers.³⁶ Not much in the surrounding context supports or develops this idea, however, and the exegesis may owe something to a half-conscious importation of Pauline theology or conflation with the theme elsewhere in the NT.³⁷

Indeed, new-old is not among the pairs that reflect the dualistic ideology of the Johannine thought-world (above-below, from God-from the devil, light-darkness). In the Gospel of John, καινή occurs only twice, in John 13:34 and in 19:41, the latter describing the garden tomb in which Jesus was laid. It has been argued that in 13:34 Jesus' command is eschatologically new, which would bring us closer to the reading we now have in 1 John 2:8.³⁸ But it could be maintained just as easily that the command is novel because of its christological content: Jesus' injunction is not only that they love one another, which they would have known from Scripture,

³² Ibid., n. 10.

³³ Von Wahlde (*Gospel and Letters*, 68), for example, states that the author "is adopting as his own what was probably a claim of the opponents ('to have a new message')."

³⁴ Among these: Bultmann, *Epistles*, 27; Brown, *Epistles*, 266-67; Schnackenburg, *Epistles*, 105; Painter, *1, 2, 3 John*, 179; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3, John* (rev. ed.; WBC 51; Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 51.

³⁵ Painter (*1, 2, 3 John*, 178) representatively remarks, "What was new from the perspective of Jesus' ministry is now deemed old, part of the foundational tradition upon which the life of the community was built. They know it, they have heard it. It is not new." Similarly, Schnackenburg, *Epistles*, 104; Strecker, *Johannine Letters*, 49; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 51-52.

³⁶ On the precise nuance of this newness, see Fernando F. Segovia, *Love Relationships in the Johannine Tradition* (SBLDS 58; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1978), 43-44.

³⁷ Sometimes this is not so subtle. Dodd (*Epistles*, 34-35), for example, remarks that the command is new "in the sense in which 'all things are made new' in Christianity," referring to 2 Cor 5:17.

³⁸ So, for example, Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB 29A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 613-14; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972), 463-64.

but that they do so καθὼς ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς.³⁹ It is, in that respect, a command which the disciples are hearing for the very first time.

That the present reading harmonizes with John 13:34 also cuts the other way. If the dittography proposed here did take place, its result was an accidental harmonization. Early readers and modern commentators alike have read the epistle in light of the Fourth Gospel, blunting the grammatical and contextual peculiarities in 1 John 2:7-8 that have been delineated above. The harmonization with John 13:34, therefore, will have lent the transcriptional error immense staying power and provides a rationale for the spread of this reading over and above manuscript loss itself. It made enough sense that it was not seen as in need of correction, and it drew readers' minds to Jesus' words in the gospel tradition.

Admittedly, we cannot rule out the possibility that the author of the epistle simply wanted to intensify the paradoxical quality of the expression, to amplify the rhetoric, as it were. The Fourth Gospel, after all, whose affinities to 1 John are universally recognized, is replete with irony, misunderstanding, and related literary devices as the pioneering work of R. Alan Culpepper and the host of studies that have followed have shown.⁴⁰ But upon closer examination, it is seen that intentional paradox on the part of the author is not as common as we might first suppose. Rarely does he purposefully create what seems to be a logical inconsistency or contradiction for literary effect.

To be sure, Jesus' statements in the Gospel are often counterintuitive or puzzling, but they are not necessarily paradoxical. In John 12:24-25, for example, Jesus states the following in anticipation of his impending death:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.⁴¹

We might suppose to have here a clear example of Johannine paradox, but several observations temper that conclusion. First, at least the second half of this catena of sayings is dependent upon synoptic-like tradition, as versions of it are found in Matt 10:39 and 16:25, Mark 8:35, and Luke 17:33. Consequently, we cannot ascribe its style to a narrowly Johannine literary predilection. Nor is it of the same type as that in 1 John 2:8, since it does not assert both "X" and "not X." Second, the saying may not even raise a logical dilemma for the ancient reader if the death of the seed was thought to be a fact of the natural world, as Paul's remarks in 1 Cor 15:36 might imply. The sayings do not so much create a contradiction as overturn readers' assumptions about the nature of true life and its attainment.

The set of statements most properly classified as a paradox concern the Son's judgment of the world. According to John 3:17 and 12:47, Jesus did not enter the world to judge the world

³⁹ Similarly Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 562; Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:924.

⁴⁰ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Foundations and Facets: New Testament; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); also Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985); Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). These literary features, of course, had been noticed by readers before the advent of narrative criticism; see, for example, Herbert Leroy, *Rätsel und Missverständnisse: Ein Beitrag zur Formgeschichte des Johannesevangeliums* (BBB 30; Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1968).

⁴¹ George L. Parsenios ("A Sententious Silence: First Thoughts on the Fourth Gospel and the *Ardens* Style," in *Portraits of Jesus* [ed. Susan Myers; WUNT 2/321; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012], 18-19) briefly discusses this saying as a paradox in the context of ancient *sententiae*.

but to save it. Yet in 9:39, after opening the eyes of the man born blind, Jesus declares, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” This has been understood to mean—plausibly, in my estimation—that, although the Son was not sent for the purpose of judgment, the very presence of the light in the midst of the surrounding darkness exposes it as evil, thus by necessity placing the world under divine κρίσις.⁴² However construed, this mode of expression is not typical of the Gospel as a whole, even if the discourse material often has an enigmatic air to it.

Apart from 1 John 2:7-8 as it now stands, possible candidates for intentional paradox in the Johannine epistles appear to be limited to the notorious *crux interpretum* presented by 1 John 1:8-2:2 and 3:6-10. While the first passage seems to presuppose that believers will sin and stand in need of Jesus’ intercession, the second identifies impeccability (καὶ οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν, ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται) as the *sine qua non* of the true believer. Whether this is an actual paradox depends on several factors. How much weight are we to put on the verb tenses in each passage? That is, may we invest the present with a strong sense of durative action, so that it is acknowledged that Christians sin on occasion but denied that they sin habitually as a way of life? Are we to understand the quasi-apodictic declaration that the believer is not able to sin as an exhortation not to sin rather than a statement of fact?

Brown outlines seven streams of interpretation before concluding that none is completely satisfactory.⁴³ More could probably be added, but the bewildering array of interpretations shows that if the author of 1 John was trying to be clever, this has been completely lost on later readers. Consequently, if the purpose of 1:8-2:2 and 3:6-10 was to construct a paradox, an unlikely proposition by most accounts, we are not now in a position to say so with any degree of confidence. The upshot of the preceding discussion is that the paradox of “not new” and “new” in 2:7-8 is peculiar from the perspective of the Johannine corpus as a whole and more so within the first epistle, where the author’s style is more paraenetic and didactic than enigmatic and riddling.

3. The Emendation: Mechanics and Explanation

I have tried thus far to show that there are grounds for a conjectural emendation in 1 John 2:8 on the weight of its grammatical and contextual anomalies. The other task, if the proposed conjecture is to stand, is to explain how it originated. Although some variants arise from what Wettlaufer refers to as “subconscious substitution”—mental jumps which are fascinating in their own right but defy easy logical reconstruction—many stem from well-known scribal errors.⁴⁴ The conjectural emendation offered here is consistent with these mechanical missteps. Visual leaps of the sort proposed are not uncommon in the NT papyri and later manuscripts, and it needs to be kept in mind that the physical act of copying was an onerous process. James R. Royse, in an extensive study of the scribal habits in several of the early NT papyri, describes their copying procedure:

Moreover, it is tempting to imagine that an ancient scribe copying a book would proceed much as we do today in copying some passage by hand. We would have the exemplar on the table before us along with some paper to the side of it, and would often use one hand to follow along in the exemplar while the other hand copies the words, our eyes going back and forth. While this may seem natural or even inevitable, it seems certain that this was not the way our scribes

⁴² So famously, Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 155-57, 340-42, though he is not alone in this assessment.

⁴³ Brown, *Epistles*, 411-16.

⁴⁴ Wettlaufer, *No Longer Written*, 71.

proceeded. Instead, they wrote in what appears to us to be a most awkward position: they held the papyrus roll or folio in one hand while writing with the other. Perhaps the writing material rests on the scribe's knee or lap, but that is all.⁴⁵

The consequence of copying in this manner was that the scribe had no way to keep his place in the exemplar; visual misplacement through homoeoteleuton, homoeoarcton, and similar mechanisms resulted in omission, dittography, haplography, and other assorted errors.⁴⁶ While we must allow for the possibility of dictation, a physical procedure like the one sketched out by Royse could very well hold for early transmitters of the text of 1 John.⁴⁷ In our case, the mechanics of the dittography do not require complex reconstruction. A scribe, having written *πάλιν* at the beginning of 1 John 2:8 and anticipating *γράφω ὑμῖν*, will have shifted his eyes up to the *γράφω ὑμῖν* of v. 7 and mistakenly placed *ἐντολήν καινήν* in its present position. The duplication having been made, the scribe will have moved back to v. 8 and resumed at the relative pronoun.

That there is a space of eighteen words between the *γράφω* of each verse, not including the *ἐντολήν καινήν* presently there, mitigates the proposition of dittography to some degree. But with just under seventy-five letters in *scriptio continua*, the distance between the two on a single-columned sheet of papyrus could theoretically be one to two lines. The visual similarity between *πάλιν* in v. 8 and *παλαίαν/παλαία* of v. 7, furthermore, could have facilitated the process. Papyrus size, letter spacing, and personal handwriting style varied considerably from document to document and from scribe to scribe. Many of the early NT papyri average between twenty and forty characters per line but others, such as P⁴⁵, could reach upwards of fifty.⁴⁸ Cramped penmanship or sloppy handwriting could contribute to errors in transcription.⁴⁹

Let us assume for the moment an estimate of forty characters per line for an early papyrus of 1 John 2:7-8. In the exemplar, the scribe could have seen something like the following:

ΑΓΑΠΗΤΟΙΟΥΚΕΝΤΟΛΗΝΚΑΙΝΗΝΓΡΑΦΩΥΜΙΝΑΛΛΕΝΤΟ
ΛΗΝΠΑΛΑΙΑΝΗΝΕΙΧΕΤΕΑΡΧΗΧΕΝΤΟΛΗΠΑΛΑΙΑΕ
ΣΤΙΝΟΛΟΓΟΝΗΚΟΥΣΑΤΕΠΑΛΙΝΓΡΑΦΩΥΜΙΝΟΕΣΤΙΝΑ
ΛΗΘΕΣΕΝΑΥΤΩΚΑΙΕΝΥΜΙΝ

The arrangement, of course, will vary depending on the letters per line and where each line begins, but we could produce a similar effect in a number of configurations. In any case, one gets a sense of the challenge of the scribal task and of the possibility of a visual shift from the second *γράφω ὑμῖν* to the first as the scribe's eyes moved back and forth between exemplar and copy.

The second ground for the emendation is that it resolves the grammatical difficulties and rhetorical tension of the present reading without introducing problems of its own. The *ὃ* be-

⁴⁵ Royse, *Scribal Habits*, 98.

⁴⁶ On the physical mechanics of copying, see also Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 16-33.

⁴⁷ Royse (*Scribal Habits*, 752-54) has further discussion on the question of dictation with bibliography.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 282 n. 479. Philip W. Comfort and David P. Barrett, eds. (*The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts* [rev. ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2001) have collected many of the earliest NT papyri and a few uncials with physical descriptions, transcriptions of the Greek text, and photographs for a number of the manuscripts.

⁴⁹ I refrain here from making a judgment about the education level of early Christian scribes. Kim Haines-Eitzen has detailed the complexities in *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

comes a general relative pronoun, and the phrase γράφω ὑμῖν ὃ parallels the constructions in 1 John 1:1-3 and 2:24. πάλιν takes its more familiar meaning of “again.” Verse 8a-b will then read, “I am again writing to you that which is true in him and in you,” namely, that the recipients love one another. Rather than contrasting with v. 7, v. 8 reiterates that the command is one the hearers of the letter already know. They can attest to its age because it has been realized in them from their entrance into the community. The following ὅτι clause will then be explanatory. It is ἀληθές in the community because the realm of light, one of whose defining qualities is brotherly love, is dispelling the darkness. The emended reading thus aligns with the rhetorical strategy pursued in the rest of the epistle and in 2 John 5-11. Intriguingly, the πάλιν of 1 John 2:8 could even look back to 2 John 5 and would help explain why 1 John 2:7-8 never explicitly states the command.

4. Patristic and Versional Witnesses

The question remains whether these internal considerations outweigh the witness of the extant textual tradition, but two things should be kept in view. First, early attestation to 1 John is relatively slim compared to other NT writings.⁵⁰ Assuming that it was written around the turn of the century, we have to wait between 200 and 250 years—apart from Clement of Alexandria, who, as we shall see, preserves a variant reading—until vv. 7-8 are recorded in extant sources. Neither ʔ⁹ (second century) nor the second- and third-century church fathers who know 1 John (Clement again excepted) witness to these verses. If the error was introduced at one of the earliest stages of copying, the time between autograph and first witness is of less importance, but there is ample time for a copying error to have crept into the manuscript tradition without our notice even if a few generations had passed.

Second, the early evidence is not as unambiguous as we might first suppose. The most ancient witness to these verses is Clement of Alexandria, whose commentary on the Catholic Epistles, the *Hypotyposes*, was translated into Latin by Cassiodorus in the sixth century. Clement’s text of 1 John 2:7-8 and his accompanying remarks run as follows:

“I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment, which ye had from the beginning,”—through the Law, that is, and the prophets; where it is said, God is one. Accordingly, also, he infers, “For the old commandment is the word which ye have heard.” Again, however, he says:—“This is the commandment; for the darkness” of perversion, that is, “has passed away, and, lo, the true light hath already shone,”—that is, through faith, through knowledge, through the Covenant, through prepared judgments, working in men. (ANF 2:575)⁵¹

Presumably underlying the Latin of the independent clause of v. 8a, “But this is the command” (*Mandatum autem hoc est*), is a Greek phrase very similar to the one in 2 John 6 (αὐτή

⁵⁰ As to date, the most thorough examination of the history and inter-relationship between manuscripts of the Johannine epistles is that of W. L. Richards, *The Classification of the Greek Manuscripts of the Johannine Epistles* (SBLDS 35; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977).

⁵¹ I have modified the translation slightly to better reflect the Latin. The phrase “working in men” follows “through the Covenant” in ANF. Latin Text in [Clemens Alexandrinus:] *Adumbrationes in Epistolas Canonicas* (eds. O. Stählin et al.; GCS 17; 2d ed.; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1970), 212: “Non mandatum novum scribo vobis, sed mandatum vetus, quod habuistis a principio, per legem scilicet et prophetas, ubi dicitur: ‘unus est deus.’ Idcirco etiam inferet, quoniam ‘mandatum vetus est verbum quod audistis.’ Iterum autem dicit: ‘Mandatum autem hoc est, quod tenebrae transierunt,’ perversionis scilicet, ‘et lumen verum ecce iam claruit,’ secundum fidem scilicet, secundum intellectum, secundum testamentum, secundum praeparata iudicia in hominibus operans.”

ἡ ἐντολή ἐστίν). Why Clement lacks the first half of v. 8 and has in its stead the formulation given above is hard to determine. It is improbable that the translator has assimilated the verse to a Latin version, since the OL and Vulgate do not give evidence of the reading, and Cassiodorus in his own commentary shows that he is aware of the “old-new” distinction.⁵² Clement does omit some material in the chapter—for example, leaving off the end of v. 9—but if he knows the reading of the new command, we must account for his failure to give any comment on it and for placing a different reading in the running quotation of 1 John itself.

The Sahidic Coptic version may also point to some fluidity in the textual transmission of 1 John 2:7-8. The witnesses are divided, but a few manuscripts, ranging from the fourth to tenth centuries, duplicate the denial of a new command in v. 7, so that v. 8 states, “Again I am not writing you a new command” (ΠΑΛΙΝ ΟΝ ΝΟΥΕΝΤΟΛΗ ΝΒΡΡΕ ΔΝ ΤΕΤΣΖΑΙ ΜΜΟC ΝΗΤΝ).⁵³ Whether this variant stems from a Greek ancestor or was introduced with or after the translation into Coptic we cannot determine, though I suspect the latter. If a Greek *Vorlage* did contain the variant, it likely lacked or reformulated the relative clause in 8b. It may be that a Coptic copyist was troubled by the quick reversal from “not new” to “new” and found his own solution to the dilemma.

Conclusion

Many scholars are understandably wary of the practice of conjectural emendation. By their very nature, conjectures proceed from textual silence, but they are not arguments *ex silentio*. It is a matter of weighing probabilities. Does a better reading that lacks external support among Greek manuscripts make more sense, from what we can ascertain of the particular NT writer and book, than a difficult reading which is widely attested? In most cases, the reading which we do have will be favored over the one which we do not have, but that cannot be a foregone conclusion. *Lectio difficilior potior*—except when it is not. There is no substitute, in other words, for case by case judgment and balancing of possibilities. The nature of early manuscript loss means that the door remains open, slightly perhaps, but still open, for the use of conjectural emendation.

The suggested emendation of 1 John 2:7-8 is put forward here on several bases. First, the grammatical and contextual problems of the dominant reading are more significant than most translations and commentaries would indicate; we can make sense of it, but it clashes with other stylistic and rhetorical tropes in the letter. The emendation resolves the tensions and situates vv. 7-8 more comfortably in their context. Second, a relatively simple reconstruction of the mechanical process which brought the suggested dittography into circulation can be imagined, attributable to a single scribe. Finally, a rationale can be given for the spread of the present reading in the manuscript tradition. The accidental harmonization to the Gospel of John ensured its place in the manuscript base and curtailed any unease over the simultaneous denial and affirmation of novelty. A confirmation of this conjecture would have to await future manuscript discoveries of 1 John, but in that absence of external support, it will of necessity remain on the scales of internal probability.

What, in the end, is the consequence of this proposal? If the emended reading is correct, it reinforces the accent pervasive in 1 and 2 John that the love command lies at the very founda-

⁵² For the text of Cassiodorus: *Complexiones in Epistolas Apostolorum* (PL 70.1.369-76).

⁵³ Sahidic text of 1 John in Karlheinz Schüssler, ed. *Die Katholischen Briefe in der koptischen (sahidischen) Version* (CSCO 528; Scriptorum Coptici 45; Louvain: Peeters, 1991), 33-50. The text given is that of Pierpont Morgan Library M 572 and MS 3813 with variant readings presented for the collated MSS in the apparatus. For the dating of the MSS, see pp. LXXIII-C of the introduction.

tion of the community. That the command was given from the beginning and is actualized in the lives of its members shows it to be old, that is, authoritative and true. There emerges, then, a thoroughly consistent approach in the Johannine epistles to present the author's position as the stable pillar of community life, reaching back to its origins, and to discredit the opponents as innovators. Instead of displaying the author's creativity or cleverness, 1 John 2:7-8 would once more drive home these characteristic themes.