

‘SIN UNTO DEATH’ IN 1 JOHN 5:16: A MEDIA CRITICAL APPROACH*

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Abstract: Recent developments in the field of biblical media criticism, the study of the function and dynamics of various mediums of communication, offer potential for advancing our understanding of the referent of ‘sin unto death’ in 1 John 5:16-17. Indeed, precise interpretation has proven to be elusive for both ancient and modern scholars as questions abound. What type of death is in view? Which sin does the author have in mind? Can a true believer commit “sin unto death?” As it stands there is no scholarly consensus on these issues. To be sure, a recent commentary surveyed at least 20(!) possible meanings.

This paper will propose a way past the stalemate by considering the oral dynamics

of the text. It will apply John Miles Foley’s (*Immanent Art*, 1991; *Singer of Tales In Performance*, 1995) concept of “word power” to the passage, following Rafael Rodriguez’s adaptation of the method to NT studies (*Structuring Early Christian Memory*, 2010). I will argue that the apostasy of the false brethren from among the audience is the most likely referent, given the interpretation’s ability to best incorporate the oral dynamics of the text and it’s contextualizing tradition.

Key words: orality, oral tradition, New Testament, 1 John, “sin unto death”.

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Introduction

The task of decisively identifying the referent of “sin unto death” in 1 John 5:16 has proven to be an elusive exercise for both ancient and modern scholars. The text reads:

If anyone sees his fellow Christian committing a sin not resulting in death, he should ask, and God will grant life to the person who commits a sin not resulting in death. There is a sin resulting in death. I do not say that he should ask about that (NET).

Questions abound: What type of death is in view? Which sin is in mind? Can a true believer commit the “sin unto death?” As it stands there is no scholarly consensus on these issues.¹ To be sure, a recently published commentary surveyed at least 20(!) possible solutions.²

However, developments in the field of biblical media criticism – the study of the function and dynamics of various mediums of communication, and more specifically, the study of orality – have opened new avenues of inquiry for the NT that have the potential to move the discussion forward.³ Since the groundbreaking work of Albert Lord and William Perry in the first half of the 20th century on oral poetry and oral theory,⁴ scholars began to call for an increased recognition of the oral character of the NT.⁵ Soon, attention was being drawn to the limits of strictly “literary” approaches to what orality scholar John Miles Foley argues are “orally-derived” texts, that is, written texts “that either stem directly from or have roots in oral tradition.”⁶ In other words, a literary approach to orality-based texts is tantamount to bringing the proverbial “knife” to a gunfight. The difficulty, however, in properly arming ourselves lies in our inability to fully grasp all of the wide-ranging implications of primary orality on a society.⁷ In his influential 2002 Presidential Address to the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, James Dunn locates the problem:

[W]e naturally, habitually, and instinctively work within a *literary paradigm*. We are therefore, in no fit state to appreciate how a *nonliterary* culture, an *oral* culture, functions. And if we are to enter emphatically into such a culture, it is essential that we become conscious of our literary paradigm and make conscious efforts to step outside it and to free ourselves from its inherited

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009), 783.

² Gary Derickson, *First, Second, and Third John* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2012), 536-40.

³ For a short history of modern scholarship on oral tradition and biblical studies, see Robert C. Culley, “Tradition and Biblical Studies,” *Oral Tradition* 1, no.1 (1986): 30-65.

⁴ Albert P. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, in *Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature*, vol. 24 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁵ Among contemporary biblical media critics, see Birger Gerhardsson’s dissertation *Memory and Manuscript*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1961), and Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1983).

⁶ John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), xi.

⁷ Primary orality refers to cultures and people groups that are “untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 10.

predispositions. It becomes necessary to alter the default setting given by the literary-shaped software of our mental computers.⁸

The goal, then, of this paper is to reexamine 1 John 5:16 outside of our “literary mindset.” First, we will consider some of the basic characteristics of an oral culture and try to step into the oral world of John’s original audience, the world of his *hearers*.⁹ Second, we will survey the various interpretations of 1 John 5:16, locating our discussion within modern Johannine scholarship. Third, we will apply John Miles Foley’s concept of “word power” to the passage, following Rafael Rodriguez’s adaptation of the concept to NT studies. The focus will be on how “sin unto death” relates to its contextualizing traditional material in the OT, NT, and the situation, setting, and themes of 1 John.¹⁰

My aim is to interpret the text using concepts from Foley’s work, including performance arena, register, and communicative economy.¹¹ As a result, we will see how John’s written text signals its connections to its encompassing (= extra-textual) tradition. I will argue that the apostasy of the false brethren from among the audience is the most likely referent, given the interpretation’s ability to best explain how John’s “way of speaking” in his epistle becomes a “way of meaning” for his audience.

Media-Mix: Orality and Literacy

Envisioning what life might have been like in an oral society is difficult for modern scholars. We are all “children of Gutenberg.” As Dunn puts it, “[w]e belong to cultures shaped by the book.”¹² To make matters a bit worse, clear-cut and agreed upon definitions of “orality” are difficult to come by.¹³ In this paper, I am referring to orality and literacy in positive terms: orality as the *quality of being oral*, and literacy as the *ability to read and/*

⁸ James D.G. Dunn, “Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisioning the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition,” in *The Oral Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co.), 44.

⁹ I am assuming John the Apostle to be the author of both the Gospel of John and 1-3 John. See discussion in W. Hall Harris, III, *1, 2, 3 John—Comfort and Counsel for a Church in Crisis* (Galaxie Software, 2003).

¹⁰ Foley, *Immanent Art*; idem, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995); Rafael Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance, and Text* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010); *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide For the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

¹¹ For a helpful summary of these terms, see Rodriguez, *Oral Tradition*, 71-85.

¹² Dunn, “Altering the Default Setting,” 44.

¹³ Two recent introductory works on oral tradition define the terms “oral tradition” and “orality” by appealing to multiple definitions and qualifications. In *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 1-9, Eric Eve describes oral tradition as “always something spoken,” and then immediately adds, “but not everything spoken is oral tradition.” He later presents a characteristic list of oral transmission that “should be taken as indications of the way an oral tradition is quite likely to work, not as laws governing how all oral traditions must work.”- Rodriguez, in *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 7, bemoans the lack of clarity and intentionality with which scholarship has used the term “orality” over the past few decades and avoids using the term. “Unlike ‘illiteracy,’ ‘orality’ does not refer to an *inability*; it refers to a different set of abilities than does the word ‘literacy.’ Unfortunately,” he concludes, “it does not get any more specific than that.” Oral Tradition scholar John Miles Foley himself believed that “[o]rality alone is a ‘distinction’ badly in need of deconstruction...it is by itself a false and misleading category,” *Singer of Tales*, 170. See also Bruce A. Rosenberg, “The Complexity of Oral Tradition,” *Oral Tradition* 2, no. 1 (1987): 73-90.

or write written texts.¹⁴ There are also a few basic preliminary observations available that will help us begin to envision some of the dynamics of orality in 1st century Roman-Palestine. The following helps illustrate the dynamic interaction between orality and literacy in the world of Jesus' first followers:¹⁵

1. **Roman-Palestine had low levels of Literacy.** Studies done by William Harris and Catherine Hezser have indicated that actual levels of literacy in Roman Palestine were no higher than 10 percent, with as little as 3 percent of the total population having the ability to read.¹⁶ Although others have challenged that number as being too low,¹⁷ the reality is that the vast majority of the population were unable to personally access written texts. "What they *heard* was what they got."¹⁸
2. **Oral cultures lived in the "shadow of the text."** Although most people were unable to *read* written texts, they were nonetheless aware of their contents. Jews living in Roman Palestine would have learned orally the contents of the Hebrew Bible through oral transmission and memorization of the written texts.¹⁹

These first two points illustrate that orality and literacy, as features of a society, are not mutually exclusive to one another. Rather, like two ends of a spectrum, "oral and literate societies exist in a continuity."²⁰ Our task of envisioning an oral world must always leave room for the presence and influence of literary text. Two more observations follow:

3. **Reception of traditional material was primarily through performance.** In the ancient world, the public reading of traditional works or unique compositions were done out loud, often in public spaces. The authors of NT works also expected their texts to be read out loud.²¹ The recipients of 1 John *heard* the text. Rodriguez notes, "Written texts did not communicate their contents apart from the act of reading... [which] was often a performative event."²²
4. **Performance is contextualized through inherent tradition.** Under the limitations of what Foley calls "traditional referentiality," performances of verbal art depend on the ability of their audience to "understand their oral text in light of preexist-

¹⁴ Rodriguez, *Oral Tradition*, 22, 25-26.

¹⁵ Rodriguez refers to the interplay between orality and literacy as the "media mix." He defines it as "the distribution of and interrelationships between various media of communication within society. The term 'media mix' helps media critics remember and account for the simultaneous presence of multiple communicative media and to avoid treating them as mutually exclusive phenomena," *ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶ William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Catherine Hezser, "Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine," *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* 81 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

¹⁷ Craig A. Evans, "'Have You Never Read?': Jesus and Literacy," in *Jesus and the Remains of His Day* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2015): 88-89; see also Dunn, *Altering the Default Setting*, 50-51.

¹⁸ Casey, W. Davis, "Hebrews 6:4-6 From An Oral Critical Perspective," *JETS* 51, no. 4 (December 2008): 754.

¹⁹ Rainer Riesner, "The Orality and Memory Hypothesis," in *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views*, ed. by Stanley Porter and Brian Dyer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 94.

²⁰ Rosenberg, "The Complexity of Oral Tradition," 74.

²¹ Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 44.

²² Rodriguez, *Oral Tradition*, 79.

ing, circumambient tradition that provides the essential context within which the text acts as a vehicle for communication."²³ In other words, the performance of an event is able to convey meaning to its audience by referring to already established tradition.

The relevance of these observations to our problem in 1 John is twofold: (1) 1 John was written and performed to an audience who could only receive the information by hearing it, and (2) 1 John was written and performed in light of the circumambient traditions shared by both the author and the audience. More specifically, the idea of "sin unto death," John's *way of speaking*, becomes a *way of meaning* with reference to the shared tradition of the performer and the audience. In other words, how do John's style, word choice, and syntax interact with his audience to become meaningful to real people in real situations?²⁴ Analyzing this relationship is the purpose of this paper. Before we explore this further, it will be helpful to briefly survey the history of interpretation of our text.

Modern Interpretations of 1 John 5:16

In this section, I want to briefly summarize the three major interpretations that have been proposed for our text.

1. "Sin unto Death" refers to major sins which lead to physical death:²⁵ The idea of physical death as the consequence for certain sins occurs a number of times in the OT and may be the background for John's thought here.²⁶ Although sacrifices could be made for inadvertent sins, no atonement was possible for "highhanded" or deliberate sins, which amounted to a rejection of God's word. These sins were to be dealt with only by death and should be left up to God. Intercessory prayer has no place here.²⁷ The NT in some cases also speaks of sickness and physical death as the consequence of sin,²⁸ with the sin of Ananias and Sappihra as the most obvious

²³ Ibid., 75.

²⁴ For a discussion on the distinction between these two ideas, see *ibid.*, 72-75

²⁵ M. J. Harris, "Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, edited by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 1205-6; W. R. Cook, "Hamartiological Problems in First John," *BSac* 123 (1966): 249-60; S. M. Reynolds, "The Sin unto Death and Prayers for the Dead" *RefR* 20 (1973): 130-39; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1970), 124-25, suggests this as a possible interpretation. More recently, Derickson, *First, Second, and Third John*, who seems to favor the "physical death" view, although his final judgment on the issue is difficult to identify.

²⁶ In Num 18:22, the consequences for any non-Levite who approaches the tent of meeting are to "bear their sin and die." In Deut 22:26, the rapist is condemned to death, whereas the victim has not committed a *ἀμάρτημα θανάτου* ("sin of death") Isa 22:14 describes sin that will not be atoned for *until death*.

²⁷ Walter Kaiser, *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 132-33.

²⁸ John 11:4 is used to support physical death as the referent where Jesus proclaims that Lazarus' sickness "is not unto death." There, physical death is almost certainly the idea and the same construction, preposition with the accusative, *πρὸς θάνατον*, is used indicating result: M. J. Harris, "Prepositions and Theology," 1205-6; Moisés Silva, "Πρὸς," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 143.

example.²⁹ This view also avoids the suggestion that a believer's prayer can give eternal life, since the contrast is between physical death and life, not spiritual.³⁰

2. "Sin unto Death" as the total rejection of the Gospel:³¹ The one who continually and habitually refuses to live according to the conditions of "true Christian existence" laid out by John throughout the letter has committed the "unpardonable sin." "To 'sin unto death' is to have a heart unchanged by God's love in Christ,"³² to reject the message and work of Christ through behavior, and to be outside of the atoning work of Christ. Those who commit this sin are unbelievers on their way towards death.³³
3. "Sin unto Death" is the apostasy of the secessionist:³⁴ More specific than the previous interpretation, this view argues that the "sin unto death" is committed by nonbelievers who reject Jesus, God's son come in the flesh. In 1 John, the nonbelievers are the former brothers who have gone out from among the church, showing themselves as never having been a part of it.³⁵ The secessionists have departed into the world, speak its language, and have been received by it. "Refusal to believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God is the one sin which cannot be forgiven, because it denies the only means of forgiveness there is."³⁶

Aside from these main views, there are still those who claim a decision cannot be made, arguing the text simply does not make it possible in light of all the options.³⁷ This brief survey notes well Smith's comment that the task of identifying our referent "has launched an avalanche of exegetical and theological discussion."³⁸

²⁹ Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor 5:5; 11:29–30; cf. also 1 Tim 1:20; Jas 5:15; Rev 2:23.

³⁰ Cf. Jas 5:15, 20: Here both ideas are mentioned, as prayer can save one from sickness and also lead one to repentance, with the result that they are saved.

³¹ A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1912), 146–47; I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1978), 247–48; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 51, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1989), 297–99; Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 38, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001).

³² Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 311.

³³ A number of commentators have lumped this interpretation together with "blasphemy against the Spirit," where it is more broadly defined. See John Calvin, *The Gospel according to St. John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John*, translated by T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964).

³⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1982); Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); D. Moody, Smith, *First, Second, and Third John*, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991); Harris, *1, 2, 3 John*.

³⁵ Moisés Silva ed, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 143.

³⁶ Harris, *1, 2, 3, John*, 232.

³⁷ Rudolf, Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, Hermeneia, trans. by R. P. O'Hara, L. C. McGaughey, and R. W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973); David Walls and Max Anders, *I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude*, vol. 11, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999);

³⁸ Smith, *First, Second, and Third John*, 133–34.

This paper has thus far covered the following areas: (1) the importance of recognizing the oral life world in 1st century Roman-Palestine. Low levels of literacy characterized the population. (2) At the same time, however, Jewish culture displayed a general awareness of the contents of sacred literary texts. (3) It's been suggested that in an oral society, oral performance of verbal art depends on tradition as the enabling referent (or context) through which a work generates meaning. (4) Finally, a brief survey of the different interpretations of 1 John 5:16 found that not only is there no consensus on the issue, but that the number of available options has made not a few scholars regard the matter as unattainable. The rest of this paper will develop further the suggested relationship between performance and tradition and argue for apostasy of the secessionists as "sin unto death."

An Oral Perspective: Word-Power and Performance

1 John As "Voiced-Text"

If 1 John is a product of a predominantly oral 1st century culture, what kind of work is it? In other words, how is it that discussions of "orality" and "oral tradition" bear any relevance on a work we only know through its written form? Here Foley's model of differentiating various kinds of orally derived texts is helpful.³⁹

	Composition	Performance	Reception
Oral Performance	Oral	Oral	Aural
Voiced Texts	Written	Oral	Aural
Voices from the Past	Oral/written	Oral/written	Aural/written
Written Oral Poems	Written	Written	Written

In this model, we identify the epistle of 1 John as a *voiced text*.⁴⁰ That is, it's composition is written,⁴¹ but it's performance is oral and it's audience receives it aurally. These kinds of works are written beforehand and are destined for performance in front of an audience. They "aim solely at oral performance and are by definition incomplete without that performance."⁴² As a "voiced text," 1 John conveys meaning through the combination of performance and tradition. And so it's to the dynamics of these two factors we now turn.

³⁹ John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 38-56; Foley notes that the options in the model can have significant overlap and that it is best viewed in varying degrees, not absolutely demarcated categories.

⁴⁰ Most scholars today recognize that 1 John is most accurately designated as a homily or an epistle, since it lacks the standard features of a letter from the 1st century AD. For a detailed discussion, see Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians* (Dover's Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 425, and Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 86-92.

⁴¹ Cf. "γράφω" in 1 John 1:4; 2:1, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 21, 26; 5:13.

⁴² Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 43.

Word-Power and Performance

One of the few areas of agreement among commentators of 1 John is that the mention of “sin unto death” is parenthetical to the author’s main thought in the final section of chapter 5. John anticipated that his audience would be able to interpret the referent without much trouble which is likely why he does not bother specifying the sin. They were well equipped to fill in the interpretive gap we are stuck in. To his original audience, the expression “sin unto death” had enough of what Foley refers to as *word power* to effectively and efficiently communicate the message John intended.⁴³ Word power is the ability of a term or phrase to tap into the larger inherent meaning that the author and audience share to “enable communication between performer and audience,” provided that “the performer and audience are both sufficiently fluent in the traditional idiom”.⁴⁴ Foley presents us with three aspects of verbal art that combine to give words their power. Each of these will be examined as they relate to 1 John and “sin unto death.”

Performance Arena

The first leg of Foley’s “theoretical tripod” is the *Performance Arena*. The performance arena is the setting or situation within which a work and words of verbal art are “invested with their special power.”⁴⁵ The performance arena provides the framework within which a special language and idiom are dedicated for a purpose both the performer and the audience understands. A concrete example today of this is the pulpit as a performance arena. A pastor who prepares a sermon for his congregation does so in a special “discourse of tradition” that both he and his audience understand.⁴⁶ This includes the use of repetition, intonation, and what today is known as “Christianese.” The performance arena establishes what receptionalists refer to as the “horizon of expectation,” the context “prompted by textual strategies signals, allusions and the like”⁴⁷ from which the audience will interpret the performance.⁴⁸

In 1 John, the opening prologue immediately situates the epistle within the larger tradition of the Gospel of John, which the audience would have been intimately familiar with.⁴⁹ The proclamation in 1 John 1:1-4 deliberately recalls John 1:1 and “all that it implies about the career of the pre-incarnate Word.”⁵⁰ The author wants his audience to know that the content of the Apostolic witness in the prologue is based on Jesus’ earthly ministry. This sets up the “showdown” between John and his associates and the secessionist opponents who would deny the very truths the prologue establishes.

⁴³ Foley, *Singer of Tales*, 42-60.

⁴⁴ Rafael Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory*, Library of New Testament Studies, vol. 407 (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 97.

⁴⁵ Foley, *Singer of Tales*, 47.

⁴⁶ Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory*, 99.

⁴⁷ Foley, *Immanent Art*, 40.

⁴⁸ Foley, *Singer of Tales*, 49.

⁴⁹ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 35; Wescott, *The Epistles of John*, xxxi.

⁵⁰ Harris, 1, 2, 3, *John*, 50.

Apostolic Witness	Secessionist
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God is Light/Walk in light (1:5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walk in darkness (1:6)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have fellowship (1:7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outside of fellowship (1:6)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All are guilty (1:8) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deny guilt (1:8)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confess Sins (1:9) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claim to be without sin (1:10)

We do well to note also that John presents the secessionists as first being in the dark and second as having denied guilt of any sin (1:6, 8). This follows closely with the testimony of John the Baptist, who in the prologue of the Gospel is sent to testify *concerning the light* and later announces Jesus as the “Lamb of God,” come to take away the sins of the world (Jn 1:7, 29). The secessionists are portrayed as having rejected the prophetic precursor to Christ, the life and ministry of Christ, and the apostolic witness of Christ.

In sum, the performance arena locates the Jesus tradition in the Gospel of John as backdrop and clearly distinguishes between the protagonists (John, his associates, and the audience) and antagonists (those who deny the Apostolic witness). This sharp divide and hostile opposition towards the apostolic Gospel colors the ensuing discourse sections. The audience is to understand that the secessionist’s views are categorically opposed to the entire Johannine tradition and that there is no common ground between the two parties.

Register (a way of speaking)

“When an experienced performer and an audience ‘with ears to hear’ enters the performance arena, they speak in a dedicated register, a language or idiom that transcends the everyday denotative meanings of its words...”⁵¹ In other words, the performance of a work of verbal art will employ idiomatic language best suited to convey meaning in the performance, language that would be “ordinary” outside of the performance arena. A skilled performer will employ a register that carries *inherent* meaning. Foley notes that modern literary works are praised and given “highest priority” when they *confer* new original meaning to their work. However, traditional works “[depend] primarily on elements and strategies that were long in place” before the current performance.⁵² They depend on *inherent meaning* in their performance.

The inherent language that permeates 1 John is the polarized imagery that was present in the Gospel of John and continues in his epistles.^{53 54} In 1 John 1:5, the audience is told that “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.” Those who walk in the light (1:7) and love their fellow Christians are also in the light (2:10). Those who walk in the darkness

⁵¹ Rodriguez, *Oral Tradition*, 81

⁵² Foley, *Immanent Art*, 9.

⁵³ W. Hall Harris III, “A Theology of John’s Writings,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, edited by Roy B. Zuck and Darrell L. Bock (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 172.

⁵⁴ John’s epistles evidence significant interaction and awareness of John’s Gospel, placing their composition after the appearance of the Gospel. For a complete discussion, see Yarbough, *1-3 John*, 16; Harris, *Church in Crisis*, 3-40.

and hate their brother are in the darkness and by extension in direct opposition to God. This imagery directly in line with John 3:19-21, where evildoers are said to have hated the light, which came into the world, instead choosing to love darkness.

Perhaps the most extensively developed contrast in 1 John is that of love and hate, specifically in relation to fellow believers, which I believe is key for our text in 1 John 5:16. How one loves 'his brother' seems to be the key factor in determining one's relationship to God, the light, and life. In 1 John 2:9-10, the one hates his brother is in the darkness, while the one who loves his brother "resides in the light." Being fathered by God can be tested by whether or not one loves his fellow Christian (cf. 3:16, 17; 4:7, 20, 21). The one who does not love his fellow brother is decisively "not of God." The implications of the failure to love one's brother are a matter of life and death. In 3:14, those who love their brother can "know that [they] have passed over from death to life," and indeed no one who hates his brother has eternal life. The secessionist's decision to abandon their brothers and sisters (1 John 2:19) has placed them outside of God's family, in the darkness, and on the wrong side of the divide between life and death.

This language of polarization is the *lingua franca* of the setting and situation in 1 John, what we have already termed the performance arena. Terms such as "children," "life," "light" and "love" all transcend their denotative use and are employed to communicate the idea that there is no 'middle ground' in relation to how one responds to the Apostolic witness of Jesus Christ.

Communicative Economy (a way of meaning)

The final aspect of verbal art of Foley's 'theoretical tripod' is communicative economy, the "referential power of the dedicated register used within the circumscribed social environment of the performance arena."⁵⁵ In other words, when both the performer and audience have entered into the performance arena and have access to the special register employed in that arena, "signals are decoded and gaps are bridged with extraordinary fluency, that is, *economy* (emphasis mine)."⁵⁶ The performance arena has established 1 John within the struggle between the true apostolic witness of John and the incompatible claims of the secessionists, who reject the Jesus tradition preserved in John. The register used polarized language to illustrate just how sharp the divide is between the two groups, with the audience identified as true believers. Both of these elements combine to allow the performer to communicate with increased efficiency, or economy, trusting that the audience will be able to "read between the lines," as it were, thanks in part to their awareness of the performance arena and the dedicated register.

A Way Forward

With all three elements of Foley's theory of verbal art and traditional referentiality, we are now in a position to approach "sin unto death" in 5:16 with an ear towards how John's "way of speaking" becomes a "way of meaning" for his audience.

⁵⁵ Rodriguez, *Oral Tradition*, 81

⁵⁶ Foley, *Singer of Tales*, 53.

The first proposed solution to “sin unto death” we encountered was that John was referring to a specific kind of sin that leads to premature physical death. We can rule out this proposal primarily on the basis that language denoting physical death had not been employed at any point in the epistle. In fact, every instance of “life” in 1 John clearly refers to spiritual life, and the only other mention of death is spiritual, not physical.⁵⁷ Moreover, the purpose statement just a few verses prior for the entire epistle is that the audience would know they have *eternal life*. A sudden shift from spiritual to physical death without any explanation would be inconsistent with the register used up to this point. It would be outside of the “horizon of expectation” as well, as Brown notes that John’s audience has been taught *not* to fear death multiple times in the Gospel.⁵⁸

The second option we viewed was the suggestion that “sin unto death” is the rejection of the Gospel. This view fits the context of 1 John well in that it accounts for the performance arena established by the prologue. The apostolic witness is indeed the Gospel message. Those who reject the life, ministry, and work of Christ are in the dark and have no atonement for their sins, while those who trust in God have an advocate. Rejecting God’s Son and the atoning work of the cross is an unforgivable sin as it rejects the only possible forgiveness of sins. “Sin unto death” could very well be identified as the rejection of the Gospel. This would be an intentional “high handed” sin against God’s revelation and fits with Jesus statements in the Gospel of John that those who rejects him “will die in their sin,” (John 8:19-21) and they “no longer have any excuse for their sin,” (John 15:22). But the opponents of the apostolic witness in 1 John are not seen as generic unbelievers, but are the former brothers who have abandoned the congregation.

This leads us to the third option, that “sin unto death” in 1 John 5:16 is the apostasy of the former “brothers” whom John has consistently portrayed as unbelievers in the epistle. Specifically in 3:14-15, these are those who “hate their fellow Christian” and so remain in death. The secessionists knew the Gospel and the commandment of love and yet refused to love their brothers. “While in their own self-estimation the secessionists may be Christians,” by their hatred it is evident that (1) they reside in the darkness, (2) they are children of the devil, (3) have not passed on from death to life, (4) do not know God, (5) does not keep his commandments, (6) and are practicing unrighteousness.⁵⁹

“Sin unto death” in 1 John 5:16 is the sin of the secessionists who have rejected the gospel and have refused to obey the new commandment given by Christ: loving one another. John’s audience was well equipped to recognize the *word power* in “sin unto death” and to fill the “gap” left by the parenthetical nature of John’s statement.⁶⁰ The OT and NT traditions of sins resulting in death would be brought to bear on John’s phrase here, but not without reinterpreting it in light of the current concerns in 1 John. Here Brown notes that although 1 John 5:16 isn’t speaking of the same *exact* sin as the OT and NT traditions, “they supply the background and terminology” for the current sin of

⁵⁷ 1 John 1:1, 2; 2:25, 3:14, 15; 5:11, 12, 13, 17, 20.

⁵⁸ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 614-15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 618.

⁶⁰ Commentators have long noted how John’s introduction of “sin unto death” into his epistle would not have been difficult for his audience to comprehend Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 247; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 297; Harris, *1, 2, 3 John*, 232.

the secessionists.⁶¹ The secessionists “sin unto death” because they have deliberately rejected the life, ministry, and apostolic witness of Christ. There is no atonement for their sin because it rejects *the* atonement for sin: Christ. In this sin “[they] will die” (John 8:19-21). The concrete evidence of their sin is their hatred for those whom they should have loved as brothers. The combination of performance arena and register enable the phrase “sin unto death” the ability to communicate in light of extra-textual tradition, to go from a *way of speaking* to a *way of meaning* for the audience.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper has been to reevaluate the debate on 1 John 5:16 in light of John Miles Foley’s concept of *word-power* and how it operates in the performance of verbal art. We sought to show that the recognition of NT documents as *orally derived* texts is crucial to our ability to recreate the oral world of their audience and to recognize orally evoked registers that are extra-textual. Methods that take into account how NT texts function in oral settings are better equipped to identify evidence of how the performer and audience would make connections between the performance of an event and its larger, circumambient traditions.⁶² My argument has been that “sin unto death” is best understood as the apostasy of the secessionist and his abandonment of the obligation to love his Christian brothers. This view, although similar to other proposals and perhaps a subcategory of “rejecting the Gospel,” fits best with established performance arena and register used in 1 John and would have been the most likely available referent to the audience made possible by the communicative economy of “sin unto death.”

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⁶¹ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 618.

⁶² Rodriguez, *Oral Tradition*, 82.

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