

*On hospitality in 3 John
An evaluation of the response of
Malina to Malherbe*

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Abraham Malherbe

ABSTRACT

Abraham Malherbe wrote an article on hospitality in 3 John in which he describes the situation and conflict that arose when Diotrefes chose not to show hospitality. He approached the problem from a social perspective. Bruce Malina responded by criticizing Malherbe on theoretical and other levels. In this article the aforementioned ‘debate’ is evaluated.

OPSOMMING

Abraham Malherbe het ’n artikel oor gasvryheid in 3 Johannes geskryf waarin hy die situasie en konflik beskryf wat uit die weiering van Diotrefes om gasvryheid te bewys gespruit het. Hy benader die probleem vanuit ’n sosiale perspektief. Bruce Malina het op die artikel gereageer met skerp kritiek teen Malherbe, beide op teoretiese en ander vlakke. In hierdie artikel word hierdie “debat” geëvalueer.

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In 1977 Abe Malherbe published an article as his contribution to the *Festschrift* of Nils Dahl entitled, *The inhospitality of Diotrephes*. This article proved to be significant in subsequent research on 3 John.² The influential Johannine scholar, Raymond Brown, for instance, was in general agreement with Malherbe's thesis, following it with some minor changes in his commentary on the Letters of John (1982:730-732, 738).³ The article also invited a controversial response from Bruce Malina (1986), criticizing Malherbe's social approach as inadequate, particularly in the light of insights gained from the social-scientific approach practiced by the 'Context Group'. In this tribute to Abe Malherbe I would like to consider some of the most important insights gained from this 'discussion' between Malherbe and Malina. Unfortunately, Malherbe purposefully never responded to Malina in writing.⁴

Before continuing it must be mentioned that these two articles were published in the 70's and 80's of the previous century. My analysis will therefore focus on a debate that took place within that historical context and must be read as such. This article reflects on that portion of history. Since the 1980's the Context Group, of which Malina was to my mind the most influential member, addressed several of the criticisms levelled against them by the New Testament guild. Some of these issues are thus still evident in this article from Malina. Some of these criticisms also form part of my analysis, reflecting on what happened in the 1980's, although these criticisms were later addressed by Malina and the Context Group. Where I refer to Malina in

2 As examples, see Painter in his commentary (2002:362); Koenig (1985: several references); Von Wahlde (2010:268); Elliott (2000:753); Hock (1980:79); Mitchell (1998:299-320); Rensberger (2006:278-291) and many others. A Google search also reveals that Malherbe's article is frequently cited in commentaries and books on hospitality.

3 Malherbe responded to some of Brown's criticisms in his addendum to the reprint of the original article in *Social aspects of Early Christianity*, 1983.

4 Malherbe did discuss the issues involved in private discussions with me. I will, in the critical assessment of the different arguments, try to indicate as accurately as I can, some of his responses as I understood them. A point that is necessary to make here is that I know both Abe Malherbe (as academic and close friend) and Bruce Malina (having published a book together) well and respect both of them. Discussing this debate is therefore not an easy task for me, especially in dealing with the sharp rhetoric chosen by Malina. I will try to present both views as accurately as I can and would likewise try to be even-handed in my evaluation of the material. If preference for one or the other position is evident, then it is an academic preference rather than a personal one.

this article, the ‘earlier’ Malina is in focus.⁵ In order to reflect on this ‘debate’, it would be anachronistic to read either of the two authors as if they wrote today.

1 MALHERBE ON HOSPITALITY IN 3 JOHN⁶

Malherbe’s article was partly stimulated by the state of research into 3 John at the time of writing his article.⁷ Different scenarios were proposed regarding the situation suggested in 3 John, ranging from Zahn’s (1953:375-378) view that Diotrephes, the opponent of the Elder, used his authority negatively, to Harnack (1897:3) opining that on a broader level we have a clash between the older provincial missionary system (that tried to exercise authority by means of traveling missionaries) and the establishment of authority in local congregations, of which Diotrephes was an example. This would make Diotrephes the first local monarchic bishop whose name we know. Walter Bauer (1971:93-94) made efforts to interpret the events in 3 John as theological issues, understanding Diotrephes as representative of heresy against the orthodoxy represented by the Elder. Käsemann (1951:292-311) was of a different opinion. He saw Diotrephes as the traditional orthodox Christian who excommunicated the Elder. Considering these different opinions, Malherbe contends that the lack of clear evidence only allows for recognizing ‘possibilities’ and nothing more. In order to get some clarity he approaches the problem from a different angle, namely, the practice of hospitality, which is the major issue in the Letter, hoping to gain fresh insights through the social dynamics evident in the Letter.

Malherbe outlines the practice of hospitality in the ancient world in order to create a framework within which he could interpret the events described in 3 John. He points out that the ancient practice of hospitality was common in ancient times and was practiced actively by Christians, by receiving people in their homes.

5 The developments within the Context Group should be applauded for critically substantiating their views with proper reference to ancient textual evidence, refining their own method and approaches, broadening their theoretical bases, etc. Without the fresh, original and innovative approach that characterized Malina and some of his colleagues New Testament scholarship would have been poorer today.

6 Since what follows is an overview of Malherbe and Malina’s positions taken in their respective articles I am not going to refer to the articles or pages from the articles in my description, except in cases of direct quotation. The reader could assume that the positions described are taken from the relevant articles.

7 The 1983 article was published in substantially the same form as the original 1977 article. All references are made from the original 1997 article except where there are references to the addendum, which was added to the article in 1983.

This practice of using houses for meetings as well as for receiving fellow Christians were not without its complications. It must be remembered that a house inevitably had a head (the father), who stayed the head of the house even if people with their own leader met in his house. Malherbe considers the possibility whether this would imply that the head of the house would by default also have been the bishop or leader of the church. Although he regards this as a tempting possibility, he does not find sufficient evidence in the New Testament, or 3 John for that matter, to come to such a conclusion. Being the head of the house, or offering hospitality, does not automatically qualify a person to be the head of the church simply because they are meeting in his or her house. The authority of the leader of the church is grounded elsewhere. This information proves to be important to Malherbe, since it leads him to put forward the argument that Diotrephes need not be a bishop of the church to exercise his authority over his own house and the people meeting there. As head of the house he could refuse certain people entry (just as was the case in 2 John 10-11). The issue in 3 John needs not be church authority, but simple power – Diotrephes refusing people entry into his home and forcing others to oblige, since they may also be refused entry into his house if they do not follow suit. This gives Diotrephes considerable power over the people gathering in his house.

Malherbe develops the picture by investigating the relationship between Gaius, to whom 3 John was addressed and Diotrephes who is criticized in the Letter. A major question in determining the power relationships is whether Gaius was part of the congregation of Diotrephes. In 3 John 9 a letter addressed to the congregation is referenced, of which Gaius apparently knew, leading many to conclude that Gaius was part of the congregation under Diotrephes' leadership. Malherbe argues that this need not be the case, since letters were often addressed to a group with the assumption that it should be passed around for others to read (see also 3 John 15). Gaius could have learned of the letter in this way. Looking at the available information about Gaius, there is no evidence that he had an official position in the church, rather that he was influential among his beloved (v. 15). The actions of Diotrephes apparently did not affect him directly, since he was still in a position to receive travellers without being excommunicated. Malherbe therefore concludes that there were at least two groups, Gaius and his beloved and Diotrephes and the group over which he exercised authority. According to Malherbe it is not clear what the relationship between these groups was exactly, but it is improbable that Gaius was part of the Diotrephes group, or that Gaius was excommunicated by Diotrephes. There were rather multiple (at least two) groups, as is attested in other areas of the same time, such as Corinth or among the Colossians.

Another important question Malherbe considers is the nature of the relationship between Diotrephes and the Elder, since the Elder obviously assumes that there was and will be social interaction between them (3 John 10). Scholars like Bauer (1971) and Käsemann (1951) argued that the conflict was theological in nature. Malherbe doubts this. The evidence points in a different direction. The fact was that Diotrephes refused to receive or extend hospitality to traveling missionaries even though they carried letters of recommendation from fellow Christians. This was not a theological but a social act of power. Most probably Diotrephes saw this practice with the letters as a threat to his authority and position in his circle or congregation. Receiving such a letter with its carrier is a social act of goodwill, showing acceptance of the person, his supporters and the situation. It would imply that Diotrephes is part of this missionary circle. By not showing hospitality towards these travellers Diotrephes rejects not only the travellers, but also the whole system of which the Elder was part. He openly illustrates his bad attitude towards the Elder by rejecting his authority and aggravates the situation by spreading false charges against the Elder and forcing others to follow his example.

The question is of course what Diotrephes' reasons for this decision were. It is not clear from the letter why he acted in this way. Malherbe notes that expelling people from the church certainly lies within the power of a bishop. Whether he indeed was a bishop is not clear from the text itself; that could have been the case, or it could have been that he aspired through these actions to be acknowledged as a bishop. Malherbe warns that the situation should not be over-interpreted. For him the weight of the evidence points to an individual who wanted to exercise his own power rather than acting with ecclesial authority. Malherbe reminds us that gathering in a house gave the owner of the house power to welcome or refuse people entry into his home. This did not automatically qualify him as head of the church or entitle him to any ecclesial power. People who challenged his power could be refused entry into his house, as is evident from 2 John 10-11. This again has social implications – not being with the group (i.e. not being in the house) means that you are socially cut off from the group. It should therefore not be automatically assumed that Diotrephes was a bishop and that the quarrel was theological.

2. MALINA'S REACTION TO MALHERBE

In 1986 Bruce Malina⁸ wrote an article in *Semeia* (pages 171-194) entitled: 'The received view and what it cannot do: III John and hospitality.'⁹ Rhetorically it is a 'sharp' article aimed at the so-called 'Received View', which as a 'label' is regarded as a sarcastic and unfriendly term in the article (p. 171). The term 'Received View' 'is a philosophy of science label to characterize the prescribed way of asking and answering questions in a given academic discipline' (p. 171). This 'View' 'dictates the criteria that are to control "convincing" and "unconvincing" contributions to the field' (p. 171). Malina's article is aimed at critically dismantling this view 'because it is not adequate to its aims and claims, i.e. to interpret texts historically'. He chooses Abe Malherbe – according to him an advocate of the 'Received View' – as his 'straw man' (p. 176), and specifically the above-mentioned article on hospitality in 3 John. He motivates his reasons for choosing Malherbe as follows: 'Malherbe offers all the hallmarks of the *au courant* advocates of the updated Received View: a disdain for theory; a remarkable unconcern for defining the terms under discussion (here hospitality); a passion for up-to-date historical bibliography, the more soteric the better; a sort of hand-count assessment of previously published work generally beginning with the historical "stars" of the past who most often turn out to be German in training and/or primary en-culturation'. This maps out the 'academic frame' Malina reacts against in his response to Malherbe.

In his discussion of the inadequacies of the 'Received View' Malina remarks that the appreciation of the social systems within which texts were produced is of crucial importance in historical analyses. According to him proponents of the 'Received View' are generally unaware of or unconcerned with these social *systems* – the important word is *systems*. On the other hand – and this was true for the 80's of the previous century – literary theories tended to approach texts in an ahistorical way. As a position of compromise the so-called 'social history' developed, which according to Malina had its weaknesses, especially the tendency of being arbitrary and unsystematic. Malina distinguishes between making texts understandable on the one hand and making them interpretable on the other. In the former case one will understand what the text says, but will not be able to interpret the meaning

8 Bruce Malina was a leading member of the Context Group at this stage, which was very active and creative. In this 1986 article one still reads an 'earlier Malina'. Certain criticisms leveled at the Context Group at this stage – inter alia their focus on models that were not 'developed' from ancient material – were addressed later on.

9 Since the following part of the article will focus on the arguments of Malina references will not be constantly made to his article.

within a social system. It is with the help of social science that the latter can be attained, since the prevailing social system should be spelled out in order to provide the interpreter with the meaning it yielded to the original recipients. For this some social science models are needed. Malina then uses what he calls 'the social system scenarios within which the original communication took place' (p. 176), based on social science theories and models (for which the Context Group of Malina and others became known).

In dealing with 3 John, Malina agrees with Malherbe that it is a letter of recommendation. Such letters assume mobility and consequently the need for hospitality. This Malherbe points out, by noting the dubious nature of inns, which made the use of hospitality of acquaintances by travellers popular. According to Malina this description of Malherbe is 'replete with ambiguity', 'the interpretative model being applied is left at the implicit and impressionistic level... the resulting observations are simply ethnocentric' (p. 177). This, of course, represents Malina's view and not everybody will agree with his evaluation. Malina motivates his view by pointing out that within social analyses different types of mobility are distinguished, something Malherbe overlooks according to him.¹⁰ He also criticizes the focus on 'office' by Malherbe, asking whether this was really the concern of the first century Christian or whether it is more suitably a concern of the 20th century churchman? To Malina this question is irrelevant and misleading, since it was a non-issue in the first century Mediterranean world. 'Moral brokerage, ability and honour' were chief issues in this regard. Malina also complains about Malherbe's superficial treatment of other terms, leaving central terms like hospitality undefined and undescribed and not explaining why a good testimony in ancient times was of any value. Malina continues by arguing that Malherbe's terms like 'theological' or 'personal' reasons used in explaining the difference between the Elder and Diotrephes hide dogmatic presuppositions and concludes: 'It is important to underscore the fact that such opinions for the most part are rooted in implicit assumptions and impressionistic models' (p. 180). This makes the 'positions generated by the Received View... simply untestable' (p. 181). From the short summary above it is clear that Malina's analysis of Malherbe is indeed not friendly. We will return to this.

10 In trying to understand Malina's critique it remained unclear to me why he discusses the 'four dimensions' of mobility in such length and detail (p. 178), since three of these dimensions do not really apply to the situation under discussion. The type of mobility which is in focus here, namely, a missionary on a trip, is so clear from the text that it scarcely requires, or warrants, such a long discussion as the one presented by Malina (p. 178).

The bulk of the rest of Malina's article is spent answering the question what hospitality in the Mediterranean world meant. This is intended to show the 'alternative view' that should serve as correction to the 'Received View'. He defines *hospitality* 'as the process by means of which an outsider's status is changed from stranger to guest... the outsider is "received" and socially transformed from stranger to guest' (p. 181). Since 'the human tendency is to treat outsiders as simply non-human' (p.182) strangers are either eliminated (physically or socially) or shown hospitality. The process of hospitality would have three stages to it: a) evaluating the stranger, b) the liminal phase where the stranger is a guest, c) movement from guest to transformed stranger.

The first stage of testing the stranger 'is undoubtedly to know where the stranger fits into the purity arrangements of the world' (p. 182). Hospitality puts a person in an intermediary position on the inside, but not as an insider since the person must return to the outside. Based on the practice of patronage the 'protégé/client' is received as a guest. Offending the protégé/client is to offend the patron. The host acted as protector and patron of the guest. Obviously this would imply that the guest acts according to the expectations the receiving group has of a guest.

In the second phase, where the stranger is given the status of a guest, acting in accordance with one's role becomes important. A guest may infringe on the requirements of hospitality by insulting the host or showing hostility towards the host, by 'usurping the role of the host' (p. 185), or by refusing what is offered. The host may infringe by insulting the guest or showing hostility towards him; by not protecting the honour of the guest, or not properly attending to the guest's needs. So, hospitality involves a whole system of expectations. Malina therefore notes that hospitality 'can nevertheless be viewed as a reciprocal relationship between communities' (p. 185), which was expected and practiced among Christians. He concludes: 'Such a society required a law of hospitality: do as you would be done by, receive the stranger so you be well received' (p. 186).

The third phase is when the guest leaves the host either as a friend or as an enemy, with accompanying praise or dissatisfaction.

Functionally, Malina places letters of recommendation within this framework, pointing out that rejecting the recommendation implies a challenge to the honour of the recommender, a challenge that must be answered. Malina then argues that 3 John is an effort by the Elder to seek some satisfaction for the dishonour and indeed regain some honour by recommending Demetrius and any others he might send to Gaius. In this way Malina argues that both understanding and interpretation of 3

John takes place, since broader attention is given to the social system within which the letter was written.

3. TWO VIEWS: CONSIDERING THE EVIDENCE

Comparing these two articles is not an easy task, although Malina's is in a way a response to Malherbe's article. There are several reasons for that. The nature of the articles differs considerably. Malherbe's article is based on a thorough discussion of the Greek text of 3 John, while Malina barely mentions or refers to the text at all. Malherbe departs from certain, for him, basic textual questions that should be addressed, while Malina wants to degrade one approach in favour of an alternative view that should, according to him, be much better. This impacts on the rhetoric of the articles. Malherbe's article concentrates on arguing the issues that seem to relate to the text, while Malina's article is strongly polemic, resulting in a rhetoric that is (unpleasantly?) sharp for what is intended to be an academic article.¹¹ Apart from that the categorizations he uses are very broad to the point of being an oversimplification, as if there are only two main groups¹² of academics or academic approaches. This constantly plagues his analysis, since what he says may be categorized as a very broad abstraction of reality that is certainly prone to many exceptions. This weakens the integrity of his intended attack on the 'Received View' as well as on the position of Malherbe. The lack of real engagement with the position of Malherbe by illustrating how his approach would yield better results than that of Malherbe is also problematic, since it makes it difficult to pinpoint the advantages of the one approach in relation to the other. A lot of what Malina discusses in connection with hospitality does not seem to be that relevant to the situation of 3 John and no clear effort is made to illustrate how this information leads to a better understanding.

One of Malina's main concerns seems to be that Malherbe did not define his terms well enough and is consequently unable to interpret the text properly. He should rather have used a social *system* to categorize what he says, since he would then

11 Remarks like the one referring to Malherbe's '*chutzpah* [= audacity; self-confidence in a negative sense] makes him a good illustration' (p. 181), as well as several other personal remarks, do not belong in an academic discussion where respect and dignity should be part of our moral behaviour.

12 His distinction between the 'Received View' and the literary approaches that influenced the social historical approach is also factually wrong (Malherbe wrote some of his seminal works before the awareness of the literary methods dawned on New Testament scholars and therefore was not a merger of the two approaches) and analytically incorrect. Most of the 'Received View' scholars also became practitioners of the literary methods, since there was a natural development in that direction within New Testament science.

have succeeded in penetrating the *meaning* of the text. Interestingly enough Malina also treats just one or two words, namely, mobility and hospitality, although he embeds these in the social dynamics he regards as typical for ancient Mediterranean societies. Although much of what he says is not directly relevant to the text of 3 John, it seems to broaden the picture of what hospitality is all about in the ‘ancient Mediterranean world’. It is however a question whether the material Malherbe discusses does not pointedly suggest the same, even though it would seem to do so without the unnecessary ‘extras’.

Let us evaluate some specifics from the two articles. Since Malina’s article is a response to that of Malherbe, it influences this evaluation in the sense that Malina’s article will usually serve as the point of departure.

I. Malina’s descriptions of mobility (p. 176) and hospitality (p. 181-187) make for interesting reading. He gives an overview of the social aspects that should be considered in each case. Malina criticizes Malherbe for ambiguity, for using an interpretative model that is impressionistic resulting in observations that are ‘simply ethnocentric’ (p. 177). As an illustration he underlines that Malherbe does not define what he means by mobility or the quality of mobility to which he refers. Malina then remarks: ‘Presumably he means physical mobility’ (p. 177). This is indeed the case and Malherbe is very clear about it. Mentioning all the other possibilities of mobility would thus be unnecessary. Weighing the critique of Malina, he falls short, for several reasons. With such a rhetorically strong attack one would assume that Malina would point to the advantages of his own approach with equal strength. Unfortunately this does not happen. He discusses ‘four “mobility” dimensions’ (p. 178) without any substantiation of his views, neither by argument nor by referring to any ancient or modern sources (with the exception of two secondary sources when he discusses the so-called first dimension). The question is of course: Why should we believe this elaborate construction of mobility in the 1st century Mediterranean’ world (p. 178)? Malina gives us no help in this regard. Most of his description seems irrelevant to me for the issue at hand, namely, the understanding of 3 John. Malina also does not show how this material would help us with a better understanding of the textual meaning of 3 John. Like Malherbe he focuses on physical mobility and does not really move beyond what Malherbe maintained.¹³ It is surprising that Malina did not explore his own model further

13 Malina implicitly blames Malherbe for not giving ‘culturally specific meaning’ to the mobility in 3 John. He mentions that mobility could be for pilgrimage, business travel, mass exile, etc. which would then determine the cultural meaning of the movement.

in this case by analysing the social dynamics of the relationship between the Elder and Diotrephes. For instance, it seems to me that a lot of up-down mobility (another category of mobility) was going on – Diotrephes regarding himself as more important than what he ought to, the elder coming to talk to him to rectify the ‘placement’, Gaius being moved up in the ranks through the letter, etc.

- II. This brings us to a next point. The negative and often degrading way Malina deals with the ‘Received View’ as well as the ‘straw man’ Malherbe, unfortunately weakens Malina’s contribution considerably, again for several reasons. Malina creates high expectations, not the least by very critically pointing out what he regards as the weaknesses of the ‘Received View’. Yet he leaves the reader disappointed in the end by not really addressing the problems the text offers, also not illustrating how his ‘alternative view’ would help to better understand the meaning of the text. He, for instance, maintains that Malherbe does not define the words he is using, for example, mobility, office, and hospitality. Malina then discusses hospitality in the ‘Mediterranean world (sic)’ at length (pp. 181-187). This effort leaves one both with excitement and disappointment. One is left excited because of the interesting discussion; yet at the same time disappointment because of the lack of any evidence that supports the proposed notion that this system was operative in ancient times. It is an unproven construct (at least in this article) and as such it remains a construct of Malina, nothing more and nothing less. As a result, every conclusion will only be as valid as Malina’s unmotivated construct of the system of hospitality. By saying this I am not implying that what Malina assumes is necessarily wrong, but it is not substantiated. It is also a bit simplistic in places, for instance, that when a guest leaves he leaves as either a friend or an enemy who will either offer praise or seek satisfaction (p. 186). Were these the only two options? What happened to *parresia* that was part of friendship, which could and should also criticize a friend? Malina made a poor defence for his alternative reading, since there is virtually no reading of the text of 3 John, except for presenting what seems to be an unmotivated structure, which he then assumes should be applied to the text of 3 John.

It is unclear to me why Malina insinuates that Malherbe sins in this regard by being ambiguous, impressionistic, ethnocentric, etc. (p. 177), since Malherbe is more than clear about the nature of the mobility, which he indicates to be missionary mobility within the early Christian context. He also provides a discussion about mobility practices in the Christian context by referring to the available ancient texts.

Let's look at one example. Malina rejects Malherbe's question about 'office' in 3 John, rhetorically linking Malherbe's concern not to 'the first century Christian' but to 'the 20th century churchman' (p. 179). Malina (p. 179) continues: 'I find the question simply irrelevant and misleading relative to the real issues at stake in the first century Mediterranean world. Here a chief issue is not "office", but the moral brokerage, ability and honour of the Elder/Presbyter'. Of course this remark is based on Malina's desire to apply his explicit social science theories and models to reading the text (p. 176). Returning to Malherbe's view, which is according to Malina part of the 'Received View' it is interesting that Malherbe rejects the idea that the Diotrephes episode in 3 John has much to do with 'office', as a source of the exponents of the 'Received View' want to argue. It is a question of power in the society rather than a quarrel about office that is at stake; in the words of Malherbe: 'the situation reflected is one in which power rather than ecclesiastical authority is exercised' (p. 228-229). Malina would seem to agree with this conclusion. Again, for me, it remains an enigma why Malina misinterpreted, or even worse, misrepresented Malherbe here. Why does he further simply state, without any argumentation, that asking about office is irrelevant or a non-question, while Malherbe carefully shows that it was indeed an issue in Christianity in the latter parts of the first century and we know from documents like the Didache or 1 Clement from Rome that such issues were certainly discussed. Malina (p. 179) also links the question of Malherbe about the 'office' to the Elder as the 'chief issue', i.e. did the Elder have an 'office'. The main issue Malherbe is concerned with is whether Diotrephes, and not the Elder, had an office or aspired for one. How could Malina miss this and then blame Malherbe a few paragraphs later for holding opinions that are 'for the most part rooted in implicit assumptions and impressionistic models' (p. 180)? The sweeping statement of Malina, that concerns like whether there is some reference to early types of leadership or 'office' is a non-issue, does not make sense within this context.

III. Considering the above remarks, it is also a question whether Malina really understood (or tried to understand) what Malherbe was doing. Malina (p. 177) remarks that Malherbe's 'social description lacks the theoretical modelling and explicit use of generalizations that the sociological approach utilizes to remove ambiguity'. But this is the whole point, and also the point of difference between the two. Malherbe's shied away from terms like sociology (which Malina frequently uses in connection with Malherbe – p. 177). Malherbe refers to social aspects or the social dimensions of the text.¹⁴ He felt that the term sociology or sociological implies constructing models which should

14 Malherbe confirmed this to me in numerous discussions.

then be applied to textual information. He maintained that the lack of adequate information upon which to build and then check and validate these models for ancient societies made it very dangerous to apply such models to ancient texts. He preferred a more cautious approach, namely, to try and establish what the ancient society looked like, what was possible and what not according to the existing evidence. Obviously, the ancient societies were markedly social in nature. That is why he talks about 'social aspects'. However, he resisted the temptation to build models and say this or that happened all over the Mediterranean (a generalization that frustrated him) and therefore all information should be interpreted within, and only within, that framework. His approach, as is also evident from the article under discussion, was rather to establish the possibilities in the ancient world, regarding people moving around as missionaries, where they stayed (in inns, with friends, etc.) and read the text under discussion within such a social 'world'. He tried to utilize those contexts that were chronologically and spatially closest to the texts he was dealing with (see his discussions about Paul on pages 224-225 as example). He does not automatically assume that because something is evidenced in the ancient social world, it must also be like that in the text under discussion (i.e. following theories of dependence, or theories of social construction). By analysing the textual evidence as carefully as he could, bearing in mind the social information available to him, he would make his conclusions. These conclusions will reflect the available social information, the strength being that he could credibly argue that what he concluded is a possibility in related ancient contexts and is not an idea carried into the text without any contemporary evidence in that direction. This can be clearly seen in the way he discusses the conflict between the Elder and Diotrephes: the possibility in ancient times of a house owner to exercise power without being in an 'ecclesiastic office' allows him to pose the argument that the issue in 3 John is not about office. That is much more than what Malina does with his approach that simply leads him to say that it is a non-issue, without any further motivation.

The problem even extends a little further. It is remarkable that Malina hardly engages with the text of 3 John as such, illustrating how his approach helps in uncovering the meaning of 3 John. Although he, for instance, gives a lengthy description of how he sees hospitality in the first century Mediterranean world, it is not clear how this information impacts on the text of 3 John. At the end of the article one still wonders what was at play in this situation, what influenced the original situation and what the outcomes would have been. What Malina concludes is that the letter was written

by the Elder who seeks satisfaction for the dishonour he suffered at the hands of Diotrephes. ‘III John is the Elder’s culturally required attempt at satisfaction’ (p. 187). This is what Malina’s model apparently offers us: it has everything to do with the Elder who wanted to save his own honour, and that seems to be it.¹⁵ Reading the article of Malherbe, it immediately becomes apparent that there is much more than this. The question, which I will leave unanswered, is: was it Malina’s method or just his oversight that made him miss so much in reading 3 John? Since I am a keen user of many of the (more reliable and proven) materials used by Malina, I can only guess that it must have been the result of his polemic against the ‘Received View’ or a superficial reading of Malherbe or even a lack of understanding of what is at stake with the reading of 3 John that lies behind these oversights. Malina’s remarks that Malherbe’s ‘interpretative model being applied is left at the implicit and impressionistic level’ (p. 177) thus has an ironic ring to it.¹⁶

IV. Part of any academic heritage is the importance of considering the opinions presented by peers in the field and interacting openly and honestly with them. Naturally this interaction takes place within the stated confines of the theoretical framework. In this way the wheel is not discovered over and over again, opinions are weighed and refined, you avail your own opinion to scrutiny and further discussion, and so on. Academic work is not seen as the brilliance of one person (although such brilliance occurs every now and then) but the common endeavour of people seeking the clarity and the best answers to their questions. Hence it is not easy to understand Malina’s reaction against Malherbe when considered within the broad variety of opinions about 3 John.

15 Another unsubstantiated remark, which is stated as fact, reads: ‘With III John, we have evidence of unreceptive reaction to Johannine Christianity’ (Malina 187). He argues that John’s advocacy for a ‘metaphorical variant of the real world, of real society’ (p. 187) led to its ‘demise as unworkable and unrealistic in the first and second century Mediterranean world’. This is obviously highly debatable, since most of the early Christian documents, not only John, work with a transcendental reality that is by definition metaphorical. That could not be the major reason (perhaps a reason) for the demise of Johannine Christianity. John’s theology is indeed idealistic, not least because of its dualism, but to maintain that it is unworkable and unrealistic should be argued properly. Efforts arguing in this direction usually treat the Johannine material selectively.

16 This may also be seen in the discussion of Malherbe (p. 227-228) on 3 John as letter of recommendation. He bases his discussion on the work of Kim, a book Malina also refers to as a basic work. He then argues from the context of the function of such letters and refers to several examples. This is far from impulsive, or merely intuitive, as Malina implies.

Malina's reaction against the normative practice of scholarship is illustrated by the fact that he does not really refer to published material on 3 John because that would put him on par with Malherbe's 'Received View'. However, he does rely on the academic tradition provided in 44 other sources. Why he feels he should not use existing academic information in the case of 3 John, but that his other views should be substantiated by scholarly work from those disciplines, is not clear to me. This approach to is like shooting oneself in the foot.

The attack on Malherbe and the 'Received View' for their 'passion for a full bibliography' (p. 172 and 176) seems to be a bit ironic. Malherbe refers to more or less 50 sources while Malina refers to 47, of which only three deal with 3 John (the one of Malherbe, one of Funk, who wrote on the form and structure of 3 John and the commentary of Brown on the Letters of John). In his bibliography he has sources such as, *Toward understanding Germany* (by Lowie 1954) or 'The image of the Indian in the Southern Colonial mind' (by Nash 1972). Some of these books or articles serve as sources for the stereotypes Malina uses in his description of the 'Received View' that is basically German-driven in his perspective (p. 176).¹⁷

4. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Both authors make some very insightful remarks, Malherbe pointing out how some practices impact upon the text of 3 John, pointing the reader to different interpretations. Malina in turn showed that social data should not be approached in isolation, but as systems, interrelating and integrating several aspects in the process of interpretation. Although Malherbe resisted working with systems and larger constructs, he nevertheless had a keen feeling for the integration of social material in order to interpret texts. His commentary on Thessalonians (2004) is evidence of that. Malina's approach helps one to see that broader picture and one is often invited to explore unexpected avenues. Take for instance his description of mobility, which not only draws attention to physical mobility in interpreting 3 John, but also social up-down mobility, which was so central to the dynamics in ancient communities.

Polemic academic activity tends to polarize, as has happened in this case. Two of the 'greats' of the past 30 years, who are known for applying social material to the understanding of the New Testament, never interacted academically after the appearance of Malina's. This remains a great pity.

17 Malherbe never researched in Germany. He did his PhD work in the United States, worked for a year with van Unnik in Utrecht in the Netherlands during which time he also visited Sweden for a few weeks. He was however well versed in German theology, as well as in other theologies (to use these terms).

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