

INTRODUCTION

John's writings have been my favorite books of the Bible. This does not mean that they are more important than any others, but I like the spirit and tone as well as the content of his writings. They show how one can develop from a "son of thunder," as John was called by Jesus (Mark 3:17) to become the great apostle of love. His teachings on love are the deepest and most precious in the Bible. It was said early in church history (Jerome) that when John would come to the assembly of Christians, he would be carried to the door of the place of meeting where he would pat the Christians on the head, saying, "my little children, love one another."

The greatest memory I have about John comes from my freshman year in college when I began studying Greek. First John was the first place we began reading and translating. I remember it as a simple, clear, and challenging book. It was written in simple, unencumbered Greek, and this impression has stayed with me.

AUTHORSHIP¹

These three epistles we are studying are referred to as "general epistles." They were not written to specific churches, as were the letters by the apostle Paul. While Jesus was on

¹See the exemplary discussion of dating and authorship for Johannine writings in John A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), pp. 254-311. He attests to the diverse range of scholars who agree on John's authorship.

earth, he selected three of his twelve disciples to be a sort of “inner circle.” In his treatise on the life of Jesus, John referred to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:7). There are several indications of John’s special relation to Jesus. He was one of the select three (Peter, James, and John) with Jesus at the transfiguration. He shared a lonely night in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, and he leaned on Jesus’ breast and enjoyed a close encounter with Jesus at the last supper.

Some commentators prefer to separate the introductions to 1 John from one for 2 and 3 John. Given their differences, it is understandable to treat them accordingly. We will consider an overview of the three epistles together for this commentary. Traditionally, John the apostle has been accepted as the author of all three books but not without controversy over the centuries. First John is not structured like the typical first century letters and has *not* been called an epistle in the same light as both 2 and 3 John, which are very typical of early letter form and style. One of the greatest evidences for the books is that all three are found in the earliest Greek manuscripts. Irenaeus attributed authorship to John (*Against Heresies* III, 16, 5, and 8).

Internal evidence for the three letters point to the same author as that of the Gospel of John most credibly because of the claim of being an eye witness (1 John 1:1-3).² Language, key words, thought, scope and style are similar. A.E. Brooke in his commentary used the comparative work of John’s first

²*The NIV Study Bible* suggests that “he may have been a first cousin of Jesus (his mother may have been Salome, possibly a sister of Mary; cf Mt 27:56; Mk 15:40; 16:1; Jn 19:25 – this view assumes that ‘his mother’s sister’ in this verse refers to Salome; some further assume that ‘Mary the wife of Clopas’ in this verse stands in apposition to ‘his mother’s sister,’ which would mean that this Mary and Salome were one and the same person” – Kenneth Barker, General Editor, *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 1904. The possibility of two “elders” living in Ephesus has not been successfully defended through time leaving John as the most likely author.

epistle with his Gospel by Holtzmann who wrote in 1882.³ The comparison of phrases and terminology provide sufficient evidence to convince the honest seeker of John's authorship of the first epistle. If the commonality of the first epistle with the other two can be shown, the authorship problem is settled on John the apostle. (For example, 1 John 2:7 compares with 2 John 5 and John 13:34-35. Second John 12 compares with 1 John 1:4 and John 15:11; 16:24. The use of "my children" in 3 John compares with 1 John 2:1, etc.)

DATE AND OCCASION

All three letters can be safely dated at the end of the Apostle John's life. If this is accurate, it explains the brevity of 2 and 3 John especially since they would have been written by an old man. We are at a loss to discover from the letters themselves when and from where they were written. John had been exiled to the Isle of Patmos, as is stated in the book of Revelation. Whether John wrote these while he was on the Isle of Patmos, we do not know. It is most commonly thought that John wrote from Ephesus in the last decade (the middle of the 90s) of the first century⁴ where John spent his last days.

One reason to handle all three books in one introduction is the fact that they share a common occasion with similar circumstances. Three major problems existed during this time: the spread of persecution by the Roman Empire, the development of false teachings of various kinds in the Christian community, and the rise and growth of Gnosticism. False prophets

³A.E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1971), pp. ii-ix. Holtzmann compares the Greek text of both the similarities and the differences and peculiarities, such words as "life," "truth," "fellowship," and "the Spirit."

⁴Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (London: Macmillan, 1883), p. xxxii.

or false teachers were attacking the church and that prompted the need for an authoritative response (see the section below, *Gnosticism, Docetism*). John, as perhaps the last living apostle at the time of writing, could speak with apostolic authority from the Lord. Deceivers and antichrists were calling to the sheep and the Lord sent John to shepherd God's flock. All three situations were faced with the need to strengthen fellowship among the true believers in order to recognize the counterfeit gospel being preached. The heretics were unsettling the firm moorings of the gospel causing some to doubt the first commands of Christ. Were they still loved by God? What is truth? Who are the children of God? Can I have one foot in heaven and also have one on earth? Did Jesus become a man? How could he be divine too? Who is my neighbor and how do I treat him? What if I do not feel saved? What if you have a problem with a "ruling elder?" Diotrephes in 3 John was wanting more authority. It is my view that this could well be the beginning of a striving for power. Ignatius, in the early second century, tells us of a bishop, elders, and deacons in some early churches. The bishop seems to begin to take power within the local church with the elders and deacons working "under" him. These questions challenge the letter writer for solid, inspired answers. John delivers!

Some commentators, such as Lenski and Marshall, have suggested that 2 and 3 John may have been written first and then 1 John. I simply mention this possibility and direct you to these commentators for further discussion.

Why did John write these short letters? First John 5:13 specifically states the author's purpose in writing, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." The theme of 2 John may be expressed in verse 9, "Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son." John summarizes the content

of 3 John in verse 11, “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.” Commentators vary in their opinions as to the epistles’ key words and verses, but these will serve as one-verse representatives of their respective themes.

RECIPIENTS

It has been suggested that 1 John was a circular or an encyclical letter much like Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. This is partially reasoned from the lack of an addressee. If both of these books were connected to Ephesus, they may have shared a similar tradition. If 2 and 3 John were also encyclical, they were intended to be passed around to various churches and individuals for all to read. All three of John’s letters are sent to Christians.⁵ Other than that we do not know who they were or where they lived. Area churches in Asia Minor (now Turkey) have been the most commonly proposed recipients. This opinion is based on the place of composition being Ephesus and that strikingly similar heresies are addressed, albeit incipient, in the earlier writings of the apostle Paul. John must have given much tender care and love to many of these churches in his last years around Ephesus. Based on Jesus’ charging John to care for Mary at the time of the crucifixion, it is believed that Mary went home with John and spent her life at Ephesus. There is a traditional tomb of Mary in the ancient ruins of Ephesus today. John may have played an actual role in the founding and fostering of the church there.

⁵Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 447 – mentions the possibility that the readers of 1 John could be Gentiles based on 1 John 5:21 and the warning about idols.

GNOSTICISM, DOCETISM

What we face today in humanistic and New Age teachings we can identify as merely a refashioning of the old gnostic falsehoods. There is indeed nothing new under the sun! To understand the noxious weeds we fight today, we must turn back the pages of time to expose their beginning roots.

Whatever part John played in the birth and development of the Ephesian congregation, he was certainly involved in protecting them from the encroaching dangers of Gnosticism in the final years of the first century and following. As a witness to all of Jesus' personal ministry, John was quite capable of bearing witness to the historical Jesus and could certainly testify of the dual human/divine nature of Jesus Christ.

The rise and development of Gnosticism had a tremendous impact on the Christian movement. Around the middle of the first century, a monster in the form of Gnosticism arose that threatened the very roots of the Christian religion. The apostle Paul used the term *ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως* (*pseudōnymou gnōseōs*, "falsely-named knowledge") to identify this threat, Gnosticism (1 Tim 6:20). It presented a new worldview on the relationship between God and humanity which threatened Christianity at the time of its burgeoning growth.

Gnosticism, in my view, was a combination of three major strains of thought: Zoroastrianism, Platonism, and Christianity. Zoroastrianism, the religion of Persia, contributed at least two major elements: dualism (the worship of two gods) and the light-darkness views of Gnosticism (referred to in both John's Gospel and the Epistles of John). The dualism – the presence of two gods (a god of the Old Testament who created all things including evil and materialism and a god of the New Testament for the Gnostics whom they believed was the God of Jesus Christ) was expressed by Zoroastrianism by their two gods – Ahura Mazda (god of light) and Ahura Mainyu (god of darkness). The Jewish nation, having been exposed to

the Persian religion during the Babylonian Captivity, were certainly influenced by this ideology.

Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy contributed to the Gnostic theories through the concept of Plato's "world of ideas," which suggested that nothing exists except in an unseen world of ideas. The gods could not be approached or seen, said the Gnostic. God was at a distance from human-kind, the Gnostics argued. In gnostic thought, humans could approach God through a series of "aeons" or "angelic" types of beings.

Some of the elements of Christianity found a welcome home among the Gnostics. The goodness of the God of the New Testament and the importance of knowing about God were some of these elements. The followers of the gnostic religion created a higher level of Christians, the gnostic Christians whom they regarded as the ultimate essence of their spiritual life.

John was not called one of the "sons of thunder" for nothing! Over the course of his lifetime he learned to direct his anger, or euphemistically called "righteous indignation," toward heretical causes aimed at the Christ. One of John's crucial reasons for writing was to answer the attacks by the false teachers faced by the recipients of all three letters.

Christians saw Gnosticism as a threat to the church as early as the last half of the first century. We can find some elements in some of Paul's writings and certainly in John's first epistle. When many biblical critics, especially the critics of the Tübingen school and others in America, began their critical analyses of the New Testament, they generally agreed that many of the New Testament books could not have been written in the first century because they reflected and even opposed the Gnostics, which they argued did not exist until the second century. At that time, many scholars argued that Gnosticism was a second-century phenomenon. I argued in the late 1950s that it originated much earlier. In fact, I wrote

that “Until fairly recent times, scholars did not realize the vast span of history that Gnosticism had. Though it was not called such, it can be traced to pre-Christian times.”⁶ This claim was questioned by some, but later research by more eminent scholars than I have supported this theory. William F. Albright, eminent paleontologist, had espoused the late authorship of several canonical books of the New Testament. However, near the end of his life he wrote, “all the New Testament books were probably written during the late forties and the early eighties of the first century A.D., possibly even between A.D. 50 and A.D. 75.”⁷

The gnostic movement was a prominent influence on first century thought, very strong by the end of the century. That Gnosticism was prominent by the middle of the first century is further evidenced by the presence of the Nag Hammadi Manuscripts, gnostic documents discovered in the late 1940s. They are believed by some to have been nearly as old as the Dead Sea Scrolls. They are gnostic in character and must have been known by many of the period. Gnosticism was a dualistic religion (arguing for the existence of two opposing gods) and taught that Jesus was not really human but that Jesus was probably adopted by God at the time of his baptism (often referred to as the “Adoptionist Theory”). It was a divisive religion and was causing many problems in the early church.

Incipient Gnosticism⁸ had been introduced in Colossians

⁶Morris Womack, “A Study of Heresies of the Second Century” (B.D. thesis, Butler University, 1958), p. 15.

⁷William F. Albright, “Retrospect and Prospect in New Testament Archaeology,” in *The Teacher’s Yoke: Studies in Memory of Henry Trantham*, E. Jerry Vardeman and James Leo Garrett, Jr., eds. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1964), p. 35.

⁸Gnosticism takes its meaning from the Greek word γνῶσις, *gnōsis* “knowledge.” They taught that matter was totally evil and that spirit was totally good. Cult leaders were such men as Simon Magus (Acts 8), Valentinus, Basilides, Marcion and others. Later two extremes emerged: one that indulged the flesh (libertine) and one that denied the flesh (ascetic).

and somewhat in Corinthians.⁹ John in his letters continues the battle he addressed in his Gospel, the battle most likely directed against “archheretic Cerinthus”¹⁰ and his docetic followers.¹¹ One of the major concepts of the Christian gnostic movement was that Jesus was not born of human flesh, but that he only *seemed to be* human, hence the docetic philosophy. John had answered the docetic teaching that Jesus only “seemed” to be in the flesh¹² with his poetic Gospel opening. Later in 19:16-37, he explicitly describes the reality of Jesus’ crucifixion.

The opening verses of 1 John clearly answered some of the heresy by giving an *eyewitness* account of knowing Jesus. As the popular saying goes, “been there, done that.” John could say, “I have been there and seen Jesus do that.” John also addressed the false belief “we have no sin” because they treated sin with indifference. And, there was no “special knowledge” or “special illumination” to be obtained by a few! Contrary to the false teachings, Jesus *did* come in the flesh and suffered and rose from the dead to give us life. John and those with him knew Jesus intimately. Jesus, Son of God, Creator of life, appointed John as an apostle with all the

⁹David Fiensy, *New Testament Introduction*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994, revised 1997), p. 297 – the Colossian description was of a more advanced Gnosticism than that possibly mentioned in 1 Corinthians. Also it is mentioned in 1, 2 Timothy, Titus and 2 Peter.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 153-154, 352-353.

¹¹Donald W. Burdick, *The Epistles of John* (Chicago: Moody, 1970), p. 13 – he believes in a more positive approach that 1 John was *not* specifically addressed to the Gnostics but to Christians. He does point out that Gnosticism was probably the most dangerous heresy facing the church in the first three centuries (p. 11).

¹²Docetism and docetics take their meaning from the Greek word δοκεῖν, *dokein*, “to seem.” It has a long history and is difficult to specify any one teaching. See the helpful condensation of the topic in D.F. Wright, “Docetism,” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, Ralph P. Martin & Peter H. Davids, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), pp. 306-309; a good summary of the main tenets of Gnosticism is given in *The NIV Study Bible*, p. 1905.

rights and authority given by God. Any commands are to come from God and not from man.

STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Alexander Ross organizes the main part of 1 John, apart from the preface and conclusion, under two main points: I. God Is Light (1 John 1:5–2:29), and II. God Is Love (1 John 3:1–5:12).¹³ Robert Law outlined 1 John according to cycles of tests for truth and righteous living.¹⁴ Regarding 2 and 3 John, virtually all commentators provide a simple outline for their brief contents.

J.W. Roberts offers a unique analysis of John's letters in relationship to his peculiar style. Among the ones Roberts¹⁵ describes are John's use of "Antithetic Parallelism" (Hebrew device of contrasting two thoughts), "Genuine Antithesis" (or reverse of the same statement, as in 1 John 3:7-10), "Recapitulation" (as in 1 John 3:4a, repeating a word like "sin," "love," or "truth" and discussing it), "Word Parenthesis" ("inclusion of a thought unit between the first and last use of the same word" as in 1 John 5:16), and "Anaphora" (beginning with the same phrase like "If we say").

John's three letters have endeared themselves to the church since they were written in the first century. The original writer and the original audience have a much clearer view of things than we do. Were John's words heeded by his

¹³For one example of the two-point assessment see: Alexander Ross, *Commentary on the Epistles of James and John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 118.

¹⁴See Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), one of the best approaches to 1 John for treatment of the Christian disciplines and holy living.

¹⁵J.W. Roberts, *The Letters of John*, The Living Word Commentary, Everett Ferguson, ed., Vol. 18, Second printing (Austin, TX: Sweet, 1969), pp. 13-15.

recipients? Obviously some did because the gospel message has continued through the preservation of the letters. As long as they are taught and preached, they will continue to instruct, warn, and encourage their readers. God bless you as *you* nobly search the Scriptures with the Lord Jesus.