
The Epistles of John

An Introduction

Various Passages ~ John 1:1-4

Truth is missing from today's culture. And the greatest attacks on truth are attacks against God's truth. And the most insidious ones are the ones from within Christendom, attacks against the orthodox foundations of the gospel, the truths of the scripture. But this is nothing new. This problem has been going on since the birth of the church. In fact it is this kind of attack that John is concerned with in his epistles, so ...

This morning we are going to start a series of studies in the Epistles of John. The study will take about 16 lessons. Today I will provide a general introduction to First John. As we will see, much of what is said here will remain true for both Second and Third Johns. The areas to be examined include the authorship, background, dating, and purpose of the letter. I will give you one outline of the book. Finally, we will examine John's own introduction to his first epistle. This is found in the first four verses of Chapter 1.

I Introduction

A. Author

B. Background

C. Dating

D. Purpose

II Prologue

Verses 1-4

I Introduction: A. Author: The accepted author of all three letters is the Apostle John. This acceptance is based on the content and style. The texts themselves don't contain an authorial statement. Not surprisingly some of the modern critical scholars have denied the Apostle John's authorship but they, as usual, are in a minority position. Unger's Bible Handbook has this to say regarding the authorship of 1st John.

"The writer was the apostle John, also the author of the fourth gospel. This fact is demonstrated by such internal evidence as a similar vocabulary in both the gospel and the epistle. They contain such expressions as light, new commandment, works of the devil, take away sins, eternal life, love, abide, lay down one's life, Paraclete, Saviour of the world, born of God. Both also have the same simple, direct Hebraic style, employing similar types of parallelism and sentence construction.

*Johannine authorship is also attested by external evidence which is both early and substantial. Polycarp, Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, the Muratorian fragment, the Syriac Peshitta, Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria and Eusebius all lend their testimony to the authenticity of the epistle and Johannine authorship."*¹

B. Background: Glenn Barker² notes that unlike Paul's writings there is very little internal detail to use as a basis for developing a background to the epistle. As a result the only infor-

¹ Larson, Gary N. reviser, The New Unger's Bible Handbook, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1984, p. 629.

² Baker, Glenn W., The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 12, 1, 2, 3 John, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1981, p. 293.

mation we have is early church tradition. This is not best source material but nevertheless should be considered.

The text does give a clear picture of the John's concern over a growing schism within the Christian community. Individuals had broken away from the local body. These people were endeavoring to pull believers away from the church. The differences between the two groups related to disagreement over the Sonship of Christ, and rejection of Christ's coming in the flesh. These divergent teachings also denied the authority of Christ's commands and personal sinfulness. Additionally, other teachings of the Apostles were rejected. We will be examining these as we study the letter.

John in his arguments seems to be speaking against a specific group of teachers. This sect could have been espousing a heresy identified as Gnosticism. Certainly much of what was taught by Gnostics is consistent with what John was speaking against. This system was not well defined, but was ...

*“ ... characterized by belief in the evil of matter, in mediating beings, and in salvation through knowledge.”*³

Understanding these points it becomes clear why this group would reject the Incarnation.

Another position holds that John was dealing with Docetism,⁴ a view which held Jesus only appeared to be human, but this was an illusion. Since these letters were written during the early days of the church it would probably be a mistake to try to identify an established heresy. John states that he is speaking out against a number of false teachers.

Tradition states though that John was especially concerned with Cerinthus, the leader of a specific cultic sect. Ireanaeus quotes Cerinthus as having

“ ... represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation, while he nevertheless was more righteous, prudent and wise than other men. Moreover, after his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassible, inasmuch as he was a spiritual being.”

Similar views are found today in some of the cults and in New Age teachings. Often this position is identifiable by discussions of the “Christ Consciousness.”

Taking the above into consideration, conservative scholarship holds that the letter was published in the providence of Asia. (This Asia, not to be confused with the continent of Asia, would have been located in western Turkey.)

C. Dating: There are a number of views related to the dating of the epistles. One position is that the first epistle was written sometime between 85 and 90 AD. This conclusion is based

³ Vaughan, Curtis, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 11, Colossians, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1978, p.166-167.

⁴ Hodges, Zane C., The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament, 1, 2, 3 John, Victor Books, 1987, p. 881.

to some extent on the writing of the book of John, written to establish faith, sometime between 75 and 80 AD. The epistle focuses on heresies that had arisen in the established Christian Community.

Others have dated the letters as early as 60 AD. In contrast Dr. J Vernon McGee, along with other expositors hold for a very late date. He notes that:

*“...in recent years some of us have come to the position that John wrote his epistles last. Therefore he wrote his first epistle after his imprisonment on the Island of Patmos. This places the date about A.D. 100.”*⁵

The two other epistles would have been written immediately after the first and so would fall into the same time frame whatever that may be.

D. Purpose: As we have already seen the intent of this letter was to expose the false teachings that were arising in deviant groups. John takes the position that one demonstrates the fallacy of the new teachings by holding them up to the light of Spirit-revealed truth.

John is not one to mince words. He identifies the false teachers as a serious danger to the Christian community. If they were left unchallenged, they would bring destruction to the believing body. And implicit, to the very truth of the Gospel. The church would do well to stand as unflinching for the truth as John did. Too often there is more concern with loving at all costs than a willingness to pay the cost of standing for Truth. Keep in mind though, truth must be given in love, desiring to save the unbeliever and disciple the believer.

John will not allow the truth, that Jesus is the Christ, to be compromised. It is this truth that is lost in the cults, and at times even by those who claim historic Christian roots. It is for this reason the epistles of John are tested weapons in the fight against heresy and cultic teachings.

“We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20).

It is for this reason that these letters, along with the Gospel of John, are some of the clearest teachings to be used against false doctrines within Christendom and the larger world of the cults which claim the name, but deny the deity of Christ.

The message of this first epistle is one of the hope of our salvation. John presents God as light, righteousness and love, the One who exposes sin and provides the way of salvation. This letter should bring comfort to us in the midst of trials, for it will remind us just how much we are loved, and how wonderful our Lord truly is.

Outline: I have looked at a number of outlines for this first letter and I decided to go with Barker.

⁵ McGee, J. Vernon, Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee, Vol 5, Thomas Nelson Publishes, Nashville, TN, 1983, p. 752.

Prologue:	1:1-4
I God is light	1:5-2:27
A. Communion with God and confession of sin	1:5-2:2
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C. Attitude toward the world	2:12-17
II God is righteousness	2:28-4:6
A. The righteous children of God	2:28-3:10
B. The righteous love of the children of God	3:11-18
C. Confidence before God	3:19-24
D. Warning against the spirit of antichrist	4:1-6
III God is love	4:7-5:12
A. The nature of true agapé	4:7-21
B. Necessity of faith in Jesus	5:1-12
Epilogue:	5:13-21 ⁶

Prologue: John doesn't give a typical salutation to this first epistle. In fact because of this some scholars believe it is a sermon given to the church at Ephesus instead of a letter. Nevertheless we will approach it as a letter sent by John to believer who he was concerned for.

Because of the difficulties involved with the translation of the Greek into English for this introduction, I am going to read it in the amplified version of the Bible. Baker notes that:

“ ... the four verses represent a single periodic sentence in Greek. But the main verb and subject “we proclaim” (apangellomen), which controls the whole sentence, does not appear until v.3.” ⁷

[We are writing] about the Word of Life [in] Him Who existed from the beginning, Whom we have heard, Whom we have seen with our [own] eyes, Whom we have gazed upon [for ourselves] and have touched with our [own] hands.

2 And the Life [an aspect of His being] was revealed (made manifest, demonstrated), and we saw (as eye-witnesses) and are testifying to and declare to you the Life, the eternal Life [in Him] Who already existed with the Father and Who [actually] was made visible—was revealed—to us [His followers]

3 what we have seen and [ourselves] heard we are also telling you, so the you too may realize and enjoy fellowship as partners and partakers with us. And [this fellowship that we have which is a distinguishing mark of Christians] is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

4 And we are now writing these things to you so that our joy [in seeing you included] may be full—and your joy may be complete.” ⁸

Verse 1: The main thrust of this passage is the reality of the incarnation. All that is to come must be grounded in the truth of this reality. The fact that Christ was born God in human form, very God and very man is absolutely essential in order for Him to be able to provide for our salvation.

Only a mediator having the attributes of both parties for whom He mediates could bring peace between God and Man. Only a man who was sinless, and therefore not carrying the

⁶ Baker, p. 298-299.

⁷ Ibid., p. 306.

⁸ The Amplified Bible, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI, 1983, pg. 374.

fallen nature, could pay the price for our sin. This means if Christ wasn't virgin born, then we have no savior.

John says that Christ was there from the beginning. It would appear that here contextually he is referring to the beginning of the incarnation. This is in contrast with the beginning of all things that John talks about in the introduction to the book of John.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

John wants to make sure his readers understand the reality of the incarnation isn't just a theological issue. He notes that he and others, the apostles, were living witnesses to the physical manifestation of God. He says that they saw the risen Lord and touched His resurrected body. John states that they had seen, heard, and touched the living God. He is preparing the groundwork for the arguments that he would be bringing to support the orthodox teachings of Christianity.

Verse 2: And the presence of God is the presence of life, for without Christ there is not life. We receive eternal life when we receive Christ, for He is that life. This is the heart of the gospel message. All people are dead in their sins. ***“The wages of sin is death.”*** This doesn't mean that because of sin we one day die, though this is true. What this means is because of the fallen nature of mankind, individuals are already dead in their sin. It is only by accepting the gift of life from the God who is life, that the dead can come to life, eternal life.

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies’” (John 11:25).

Verse 3: John reiterates the statement that he is an eyewitness to the truth which he is presenting. This is a must because he saw that which he testifies to, in contrast to those who deny the incarnation. HE WAS THERE.

It is this truth that brings, when accepted, fellowship with God and with members of the body of Christ. Relationship can only exist where there is an acceptance of Christ based on who Scripture says He is. And from the way he makes this statement regarding fellowship, it is safe to conclude that he is writing to believers.

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“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12).

Verse 4: The letter then is not intended to be an evangelistic statement as much as a call to stand for theological orthodoxy. False teachings can bring about disruption in the life of the body and the individual believer. False teaching can steal the joy of believers.

The false teaching that a believer can lose salvation steals the joy that comes with the confidence that one day I will spend eternity with the Lord. The false teaching that Christ will only return after the church has ushered in the millennium can steal the joy that comes from the comfort that the Lord will return at any moment to take us to be with Him.

Even out of balance teachings can bring disharmony and unhappiness to the body and to the individual believer. Legalism leads to dependency on rules and not the Lord. A judgmental spirit leads to disruption instead of a desire for restoration and comfort. *Can you give any examples you have observed?*

Orthodoxy of theology and balance of walk are a must for the maturing of both the believer and the body. These must be in place if we are to demonstrate the love of God. And, God's love must be demonstrated if we are to be effectively used by the Lord in the giving out of the Gospel.

John then desires that the life of the believer be one of joy because of the truths underlying our salvation. I pray that as we go through this study, that we will find the joy of our salvation. May you pray so as well.

Let me close with Matthew Henry's introduction to these epistles.

*“ This epistle is a discourse upon the principles of Christianity, in doctrine and practice. The design appears to be, to refute and guard against erroneous and unholy tenets, principles, and practices, especially such as would lower the Godhead of Christ, and the reality and power of his sufferings and death, as an atoning sacrifice; and against the assertion that believers being saved by grace, are not required to obey the commandments. This epistle also stirs up all who profess to know God, to have communion with him, and to believe in him, and that they walk in holiness, not in sin, showing that a mere outward profession is nothing, without the evidence of a holy life and conduct. It also helps forward and excites real Christians to communion with God and the Lord Jesus Christ, to constancy in the true faith, and to purity of life.”*⁹

*With our lips let us sing one confession,
With our hearts hold to one truth alone;
For He has erased our transgressions,
Claimed us and called us His own, His very own.
We're the people of God, called by His name,
Called from the dark and delivered from shame;
One holy race—saints every one,
Because of the blood of Christ Jesus, the Son.*¹⁰

⁹ Henry, Matthew, “[Matthew Henry's Commentary](#) (condensed), Public Domain.

¹⁰ Watson, Wayne, [The Celebration Hymnal](#), “*People of God*,” Word/Integrity, Waco, TX, 1997. #427.

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(1 John 5:20)

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Verse 1:
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Verse 2:
(John 11:25).

Verse 3:
(1 Corinthians 12:12)

Verse 4:

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