

An Introduction to the Epistles of John **By Dr. Kim Riddlebarger¹**

The historical circumstances which led to the writing of John's epistles is vastly different from that of the Book of James. James was written about ten years after Christ's death, resurrection and ascension to a group of persecuted Jewish Christians living throughout Palestine and Syria. John, on the other hand, is writing to a group of house churches in and around Ephesus (made up of Jews and Gentiles). Not only does John compose these epistles as much as a generation later, the churches to which he was writing are facing a number of false teachers who were denying that Jesus was God in the flesh. Sadly, many of those teaching such a thing are men who have departed from the faith. Thus John must deal with an entirely different set of circumstances than James. If James was the earliest letter in the New Testament, the epistles of John are surely among the last documents to be included in the canon of the New Testament.

The case is overwhelming that these three letters were written by John the Apostle. Based upon the grammar and style of these three letters, there can be no doubt that they were written by the same person who composed the Gospel of John.² In fact, virtually every line in this epistle demonstrates some sort of similarity to, or dependence upon, the Gospel of John.³ Although critical scholars go to unbelievable lengths to argue that these letters were not actually written by John the Apostle, they are not driven to this conclusion because of any evidence, but because of their rather ingenious, but purely speculative theories about gospel origins. The traditional view that the gospel and the three letters of John all came from John the Apostle, still has far and away the most evidence in its favor.⁴

The early church was unanimous in its testimony that both the gospel and these three letters come from the hand of John, son of Zebedee and brother of James. Recall that John's brother James (who is not the author of the Epistle of James—that epistle came from the other James, the brother of Jesus), also was a member of Jesus' inner circle (along with his brother John, and the Apostle Peter). A number of early Christian writings (written before the end of the first century) allude to John's epistles. Polycarp—who was an elder in the church of Smyrna and who was martyred about 165 A.D.—claimed to have been a disciple of John. He mentions John's teaching about antichrist in an epistle written about 140 A.D. Papias—an elder in the first part of second century in what is now Turkey—also knew of John's epistles. Other church fathers like Irenaeus, Clement, and Tertullian all knew of these epistles, and tie them directly to John the Apostle of whom they all believe to be the author of the fourth gospel. In fact, there are no challenges to John's authorship of these letters until much, much, later.

The more important questions for us are “when did John write these epistles?” and “did he write them before, or after, he wrote his gospel?” Here again, church tradition is helpful. Tradition holds that in the days immediately before Rome surrounded and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple (in A. D. 70), John along with Philip (the apostle) left Jerusalem and made their way to Ephesus (in Asia Minor), the city with which John was long associated, and where it is believed that he was buried.⁵

According to Luke 21:20, Jesus warned the disciples that when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies they were to flee because the destruction of the city was near. Apparently, John heeded Jesus' warning,

¹ Kim Riddlebarger is the senior pastor of Christ Reformed Church (URC) in Anaheim, California.

² Stephen S. Smalley, 1,2,3 John, Word Biblical Commentary, 1984), xxii.

³ Raymond E. Brown, The Epistles of John, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), 757-759.

⁴ See, for example Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1990), 858-864; Carson, Moo, Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 446-450.

⁵ Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, XXXI.

fled Jerusalem, and lived out the rest of his life in Ephesus, dying of old age at some point during the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan (who reigned from 98-117 A.D.). If John were a young man during the time he was with Jesus, he died as an elderly man (tradition says in his nineties) at some point after his exile to the Island of Patmos, where he has given the vision we know as the Book of Revelation (likely written about 95 A.D.).

Although some scholars tie the date of John's Gospel to the time of upheaval in Jerusalem (before A.D. 70), when there was been need to record the teaching of Jesus to proclaim in the churches, especially after the death of Paul (in Rome about A.D. 66), I think the evidence points toward a later period, after John had relocated to Ephesus. Given the similarities between the gospel and the epistles, we know that they came from the same hand and were likely within a few years of each other. So, either John's gospel is an expansion of the themes set out earlier in his three epistles, or else the epistles are written to elaborate on themes in the gospel and to correct false teachers who were distorting John's gospel.

The latter seems to me to be the case, especially given John's comments in 1 John 2:19–21, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth." John assumes the reader of this epistle already knows the truth, an indication that John wrote his gospel first (whether that be in Jerusalem or in Ephesus), and that the epistles were written a bit later, to more fully explain certain things in his gospel that were being distorted by false teachers, people whom John describes as having departed from the faith, and who were doing the work of antichrist.

This brings us to a discussion as to why John wrote these epistles. If these letters were written after the gospel, then John is writing to do two things. One purpose in writing is clearly pastoral. Like the epistle of James, this letter lacks the formal introduction and closing personal greetings we see in the letters of Paul. One explanation as to why John's epistle comes in the form of a letter—the content and structure of these epistles seems disjointed at first—is that like James, John's first epistle is actually a sermon of sorts, intended to be read in the churches. In fact, a number of scholars believe that both 2nd and 3rd John were cover letters, sent along with this epistle to different destinations.

That this letter is really a sermon is supported in 1 John 5:13 when John spells out his basic purpose in writing. "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life." This virtually echoes the familiar purpose statement of John's gospel, found in John 20:31: "These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." To those who haven't read his gospel, this epistle will give them a helpful summary. To those who have read his gospel previously but have questions about its content, hopefully, this letter will clarify and correct any misunderstandings or questions they may have about what it means to have eternal life. And so in a sense then, John preaches to his reader. He presents the truth in a very direct and positive way, knowing that truth drives out error.⁶

But John also has another important purpose in writing. We can deduce from the contents of this letter, that there were false teachers in and around Ephesus who were actively attempting to deceive God's people. As I mentioned a bit ago, John indicates that some of these false teachers "went out from us," meaning that at one time, apparently, they were professing Christians. Now they are apostates, teaching a dangerous false doctrine. The specific error they were teaching is addressed by John in 2:22—"who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the

⁶ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 866-868

Son.” Some had believed that Jesus was the son of God, the word made flesh, but had abandoned that belief. John speaks of those who now reject Jesus as God manifest in the flesh as having been seduced by the spirit of antichrist (1 John 4:3). What John says about antichrist and what the contemporary prophecy pundits say about antichrist are two very different things!

What led people to embrace this heresy? We do know that Asia Minor (modern Turkey, where Ephesus was located) was home to an early form of Gnosticism. Gnosticism did not become a full-blown religious system for another half-century—but the seeds of this heresy had already been sown in Hellenistic [Greek] soil. Therefore, it is important to understand a few things about Gnosticism so as to understand what John is combating. Gnostic thinkers set up a dualism between pure spirit (the good) and matter (which is evil). The word “gnostic” comes from the Greek word “to know” and refers to the secret knowledge that enlightened followers gain, usually through some sort of religious experience taught them by an “enlightened teacher.” Only “insiders” are in the know. Gnostic teachers often claimed to possess secret teachings of Jesus, which is why all the apocryphal gospels appear after this time (i.e., the “lost books”—like the Gospel of Thomas) which are attributed to apostles, but are obvious forgeries, and filled with Gnostic and heretical ideas about Jesus.

But the primary issue with which John must deal is the gnostic dualism which holds that matter is evil because it is matter. If matter is evil, how can Jesus Christ be God manifest in the flesh? How could God (who is pure spirit) ever take to himself a true human nature (i.e. “flesh”)? The false teachers whom John opposes are troubled by the very idea of Christ’s incarnation—God manifest in the flesh is an impossibility for them. This explains why John emphasizes the point that God was made manifest so emphatically. If flesh is evil because it is material, then how can Jesus take to himself a true human nature? Pure spirit could never exist in an incarnate form. But if Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, the supposed dualism between matter and spirit has been completely overturned. This is why John anchors the very truth and essence of Christianity in the fact of the incarnation. Christianity is true because in Jesus, God was made manifest in the flesh. To deny the incarnation is to embrace the spirit of antichrist.

The Gnostic counterclaim to Christ’s incarnation was to argue that while Jesus was fully God, he only appeared (or manifested himself) in human form. In other words, Jesus was fully God, but he only took the form, or the appearance of a man. This is the ancient heresy called docetism (from the Greek word to “seem”). When John speaks of people denying that Jesus is the Christ, it is to this heresy that he is referring. And John speaks of those who teach such a thing as “antichrists”—hardly a complementary term. This is why the docetic heresy is such a threat to Christianity and why John opposes it so militantly. There is a famous story recounted by Polycarp of how the Apostle John had been in the public bath house in Ephesus and encountered a man named Cerinthus, who was a noted gnostic teacher. John supposedly exclaimed, “Let us save ourselves: the bath house may fall down, for inside is Cerinthus, the enemy of truth.”⁷ John could not countenance being in the same building with the man.

The serious threat posed by this early form of Gnosticism, the possible presence of an arch-heretic like Cerinthus in the area around Ephesus, along the rise of the docetic heresy (Jesus was God, but only appeared in human form) explains why John opens his epistle by making the truth claim that Jesus was God manifest in the flesh. Despite the docetic heresy and the claims made by heretics like Cerinthus, John knows otherwise. John has seen, heard, and touched the very word made flesh.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4.