

The Johannine Epistles

The Johannine Epistles consist of one long and two short pieces. 2 and 3 John are brief letters from the "elder" to a community, designated the elect lady and her children, and to the presbyter Gaius. 1 John, a longer piece, does not begin with the usual epistolary formulas, but immediately engages the message of encouragement that its sender, probably the same "elder," wants to convey. The teaching of this letter has many elements that remind us of the Fourth Gospel and scholars have often worried about the relationship between the two works. Some hold that the epistle assumes the Gospel and tries to reinforce or correct it. Others argue that the letter was written before the Gospel and paved the way for the famous narrative. As you read the text, you might be attentive to parallels with the Gospel and see if you have a judgment about their relationship. To give you a start, some of the parallels will be noted here.

Author and Circumstances of Composition of 1 John

We know nothing about the author of the 1 John. It may be the figure known in the early Church as the Elder or Presbyter John, a leader of the Christian community in the Roman province of Asia (now the western part of Turkey) with its major city at Ephesus. Early church tradition reports that this Elder was a disciple of the Beloved Disciple, usually identified as John the son of Zebedee, to whom the Fourth Gospel was attributed. Some scholars think that the Elder John was actually the author of the Fourth Gospel, who may have drawn on traditions associated with the Beloved Disciple. Others think that he may be the John mentioned in the Book of Revelation.

The association of the Johannine tradition with Ephesus suggests that the letter's addressees were Christians living there sometime in the late first or early second century who needed guidance and support in their faith. The addressees are usually called "little children"

(2:12) or simply children (2:18), which suggests that they are thought of as part of the new family of God but are also in need of guidance and support. That language is also found in the Fourth Gospel (John 13:33), and is implicit in the "new family" created at the cross (John 19:26).

In providing his support the author weaves together a number of major themes in intricate web. Rather than reproducing that tapestry, we will highlight the major issues addressed and frame them for discussion.

What God Has Done in Christ

The author offers brief, quasi credal, summaries of the faith he professes near the beginning and the end of the letter. He first affirms that through Christ God has made known to human beings the possibility of eternal life (1:2), based upon Christ's atoning death (1:7), which washed away sin and made possible a relationship, a "fellowship" (1:3, 7) with God. Using a term common in the Gospel the author will describe that fellowship as a mutual "abiding" (2:27, cf. e.g., John 14:23).

In the last chapter he grounds the command to love in the affirmation that Christ is born of God (5:1) and that he came in "water and blood" (5:6), recalling the Johannine crucifixion scene (John 19:24). He also affirms that the Spirit testifies to him, recalling the promises of the Paraclete or Advocate (John 14:16–17; 16:1–11). Through that Son of God, believers have access to eternal life (5:11).

There is, by the way, a kind of "Trinitarian" formula in the references to Son and Spirit, although it is not developed with the clarity that will mark later orthodox formulations of Trinitarian doctrine. Some scribes, perhaps disturbed by the imprecision, corrected the text of 1 John 5:7 so that it referred to Father, Word, and Holy Spirit, three who are one. This verse known as the *Comma Johanneum*, may be the best-known textual variant in the New Testament.

The Reality of Sin

A major concern of the epistle is the attitude of the community toward sin, which is a reality (1:8), despite the fact that Christ has atoned for the sins of the world (2:1–2; 3:5). In general, it is incompatible with being a "child of God" (3:4–10). More specifically sin can consist

in hatred of another (2:11), which can lead to violence (3:12). It can also be less dramatic, as when one ignores another's needs (3:17). Anyone who commits sin is a "child of the devil" (3:8).

Correct Belief

While the author may be concerned about the moral behavior of his addressees, he is also concerned about their beliefs and about theological disagreements that have arisen in his community. The author suggests that the house has been divided; some have "gone out" from us, he claims (2:19). The author is disappointed but rationalizes the development by saying that those who departed did not belong to the community in the first place. He suggests that they had a defective Christology, not believing that Jesus was the Christ (2:22–25). Scholars are divided over what the problematic position might have been. The author's initial statement suggests that those who departed denied what seems to be a basic and general early Christian affirmation. He later (4:2) suggests that the problem was their understanding of the human reality of Christ (4:2–3) and were labeled "Docetists," people who held Christ only appeared to be human.

Getting the understanding of Christ right is important for our author, but there are other doctrinal. The author also believes that he and his addressees are living in end time, the "last hour" (2:18), a time when the "antichrist" is present (4:3). This kind of belief is not surprising, since many in the early period of the Christian movement hoped for Christ's imminent return and thought that they were living in the last days. What is remarkable is that the Fourth Gospel does not articulate such an expectation and has often been read as defending a "realized eschatology." 1 John does not seem to move in that direction.

The Centrality of Love

1 John is probably best known for its strong affirmation of a central message of the Fourth Gospel, the command to love, which stands opposite the reality of human sin. The command to love, repeated several times (3:11, 18; 4:7; 5:2) is grounded in a succinct way in the best-known line of the epistle, that "God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God in them" (4:16). The author meditates at length on God's abounding love, manifested in his sending of his Son (4:10), grounding the imperative for us to love (4:11). That imperative summarizes the commandments that are to be kept (5:2–3). The command to love is not

something new that author is teaching, but something the addressees have heard from the beginning (2:7–8), an affirmation that superficially contrasts with the Gospel (John 13:34) but is finally compatible with it. What the author teaches has ever been a part of the message delivered by Christ. The command pervades the life of the believer and also has practical consequences, to help those in need (3:17).

The Shorter Johannine Epistles

2 John contains brief summaries of some of the key points of 1 John, that believers should love one another (v 5) and that there are opponents, "deceivers," who have separated from the community (v 7) who should be avoided.

3 John offers rather vague admonitions to avoid evil and do what is good (v 11), but it also gives a glimpse about who some of the opponents might be. The elder notes one Diotrephes who does not acknowledge his authority. Instead, he "likes to put himself first," which might in fact be an allusion to his position of authority in the Church. He may have held the position of bishop, which seems to have been of increasing importance in some circles in the early second century, a probable time for the composition of the epistles.