

Study 9: Introduction to 3rd John

Introduction

Third John is the shortest letter in the New Testament, and the shortest book in the entire Bible. It was written to a specific christian (Gaius) to instruct him to have fellowship with some travelling christians.

Acceptance of the second and third letters as a part of the New Testament Canon appear to have been questioned, even at an early date.

Body of the Study

The Recipients of the Letter

The Author of the Letter

Date and Occasion of the Letter

The style of the letter

Outline of the letter

Find the Themes

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the whole book in a single sitting, and a few days later read it again.

Read the notes as a review of the study

Find the key words and themes from the letter

Notes for study 9: Introduction to 3rd John

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The Recipients of the Letter

The third letter is addressed to “...*my dear friend Gaius...*” (3:1:1 NIV), or “...*beloved Gaius...*” (NKJV). John uses the Greek word *agapetos*, which shows the depth of the relationship. The letter is a personal letter, written to an individual in contrast to other letters that he wrote to the church (3:1:9).

Gaius was a very common Roman name, and we are unable to determine much else about him. There were several other men named Gaius in the New Testament, although we are unable to identify whether they are the same man mentioned in several places:

- Gaius of Macedonia, was one of Paul’s companions, who was arrested during the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:29)
- Gaius of Derbe, who was also a companion of Paul (Acts 20:4)
- Gaius who was Paul’s host in Corinth (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 1:14). He was converted and baptised by Paul.

It is possible that some of these are references to the same Gaius who was converted by Paul during the first visit to Corinth. However, one of them is from Macedonia, and another is from Lyconia. It is also possible that it is one of them that John is writing to, and that he has now settled into one of the churches in Asia – but this is speculation – we do not know, and we must not conclude that it was the same Gaius who was mentioned in other places, when we know that there were at least two others.

There is little external evidence to help us identify who this Gaius is, or where he is. It is probable that he was a prominent person in one of the churches of Asia.

The Author of the Letter

As with the second letter, the writer simply claims to be “the elder” (3:1:1), which probably refers to “an old man” who is well known to and respected by his readers. There is a sense of separation of distance between John and Gaius, but a very strong sense of closeness and fondness.

The authorship of the second and third letter are clearly the same.

Internal evidence cannot be separated from the authorship of the second letter. They both deal with a similar theme – fellowship – and there are many common terms shared by both, pointing to the apostle John as the author.

Some common terms from the second letter and John’s other writings include *children walking in truth, beloved, truth and love, we also bear witness, (and the truncated conclusion)*.

So, whilst he doesn’t mention his name in the letters, we can make a strong identity of the writer as one of Jesus’ disciples, and the one who wrote the fourth gospel, and the other two letters.

External evidence for John’s epistles (especially 1st John) is exceptionally strong, although weaker for the second and third letters. Irenaeus attributed 1 John to John “the disciple of the

Lord” (*Against Heresies* III, 16, 5, and 8). Clement of Alexandria (died AD 211) regarded the apostle John as the author of “John’s letters”.

The Muratorian canon (AD 170) is one of the earliest lists of New Testament books, and includes John’s letters amongst the books which were generally accepted.

Origen created a catalogue of Canonical books around AD 220 (or only about 100 years after the death of John), and of John’s letters he says: “*What shall we say of him who reclined upon the breast of Jesus, I mean John? who has left one gospel, in which he confesses that he could write so many that the whole world could not contain them. He also wrote the Apocalypse, commanded as he was, to conceal, and not to write the voices of the seven thunders. He has also left an epistle consisting of very few lines; suppose, also, that a second and third is from him, for not all agree that they are genuine, but both together do not contain a hundred lines.*”¹

So, we can see that by the early second century the authenticity and authorship of the first letter was strongly accepted, although there were some questions about the second and third letters.

Date and Occasion of the Letter

Occasion:

John had written an earlier letter to the church instructing them on dealing with hospitality towards travelling brethren (3:1:9). This is likely the letter we know as 2nd John, which warns against fellowship with false teachers.

However, Diotrophes had either suppressed the letter, or he had denied the extension of fellowship to those to whom it was due. The second letter was written as a warning against having fellowship with the false teachers, and the third letter provided the flip side to that situation – a letter of recommendation for Demetrius, that the church might show fellowship and hospitality to him.

Date:

The letter was written towards the end of the first century, and probably about a year after the second letter. Most likely it was written during John’s latter time in Ephesus (AD 96-101). Working back from John’s death (AD 100 – 101), the third letter must have been written around AD 99 or 100.

The style of the letter

Both the second and third letters are of a size that would have been written on a single sheet of papyrus. Both letters are truncated at the end, with the writer shortening them off and promising to come for a visit, which suggests that he might have run out of room on the page.

The third letter is personal in style, and written to Gaius, whilst the second is more general. John’s letters do not carry the usual greetings that are associated with many of the other letters of the New Testament, probably because of the close relationship that he has with the brethren.

¹ Eusebius, p. 246 (Origen’s writings have been lost, but his catalogue has been preserved in Eusebius’ writings)

Outline of the letter

The following outline is adapted from Fee & Stuart²

- 1-2 *Salutation*
 - 3-8 *About Gaius, who received the letter*
 - 9-10 *Condemnation of Diotrophes, who provoked the letter*
 - 11-12 *Commendation for Demetrius, who carried the letter*
 - 13-14 *Conclusion from the elder, who wrote the letter*
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Find the Themes

From the letter, find the words that are repeated (for example “truth”) and note where the words appear in the letter (for example, “truth” appears 4 times in the first three verses, and then not again in the letter).

Highlight the key words and thoughts throughout the letter. What is John saying about his purpose in writing? (Quotation taken from NIV).

^{3JN 1:1} The elder, To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth. ^{3JN 1:2} Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. ³ It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. ^{3JN 1:5} Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. ⁶ They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. ⁷ It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. ⁸ We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth. ^{3JN 1:9} I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. ¹⁰ So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

^{3JN 1:11} 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. ¹² Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone--and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true. ^{3JN 1:13} I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. ¹⁴ I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

² Fee & Stuart, p. 422