

# Study 13: John's Letters & Revelation

John's three letters are "general epistles" but he has specific issues in mind – and probably a specific group of churches in Asia Minor.

Revelation closes the Bible canon with a message of hope in the face of a tumultuous persecution. Christ and His church will be victorious and has already triumphed over the enemy that seemed unstoppable.

## ***Introduction***

## ***John's Letters - Authorship***

## ***The Recipients of the Letters***

## ***Date and Occasion of the Letters***

## ***Gnosticism: Backdrop to the Letters***

## ***Outline of the First Letter***

## ***Outline of the Second Letter***

## ***Outline of the Third Letter***

## ***Revelation: Recipients of the Letter***

## ***Revelation – Authorship***

## ***Revelation – Date and Occasion***

## ***Revelation – Outline***

## ***Homework and preparation for next week:***

- Read the notes as a review of the study
- *Think about the trials you are facing in your life. How do they compare to those faced by the Christians in the first three centuries?*
- *How can we stand up to Satan's challenges today?*
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- Re-read Revelation chapters 21 & 22

## Notes for study 13: John's Letters & Revelation

### **Introduction**

Whilst John's letters are not addressed to a specific person or church, he clearly has a specific audience and situation in mind. So, whilst they are regarded as "general epistles" John doesn't let us in on just who they are!

Acceptance of first John as a part of the New Testament Canon is almost without question, although the second and third letters appear to have been questioned, even at an early date.

The second and third letters deal with the same issue from reverse sides. Whilst second John warns against fellowship with false teachers, the third letter is written to a specific Christian to instruct him to have fellowship with some travelling Christians.

### **John's Letters - Authorship**

The writer gives no claim as to who he is, but in the second and third letters simply claims to be "the elder" (2:1:1; 3:1:1). However the authorship of the first letter is almost without dispute, with both the internal and external evidence pointing to the apostle John:

**Internal evidence** cannot be separated from the authorship of the fourth gospel. There are great similarities between "John's letters" and the fourth gospel, with many common terms shared by both. These include *new commandment, lay down one's life, take away sins, pass from death unto life, water and blood, begotten of God*.

The author also claims to have had first hand experience with Jesus "...*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the word of life – the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested unto us – that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ...*" (1:1:1-3 NKJV).

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 writer of the fourth gospel.

**External evidence** for John's epistles (especially 1<sup>st</sup> John) is exceptionally strong. Irenaeus attributed 1 John to John "the disciple of the Lord" (*Against Heresies* III, 16, 5, and 8) and identifies him as the "disciple whom Jesus loved" and the one who "leaned on His breast" at the last supper (*Ibid.*, I, 9:2; II, 22, 5; III, 1,1). [Irenaeus died AD 130–202, and met the ancient Polycarp in his old age. Polycarp was himself a disciple of John. Irenaeus says "But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I saw in my early youth, for he tarried on earth a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true." (*Against Heresies*, III, 3)]. Irenaeus says about John "...the Church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles." (*Against Heresies*, III, 4).

Trajan was Roman Emperor from AD 98 – 117, so we know that John lived at least until AD 98.

Jerome (AD 340–420) says "John, the Apostle whom Jesus most loved, the son of Zebedee and brother of James ...wrote also one Epistle which begins as follows 'That which was from the beginning, that we declare unto you.' " He adds "In the fourteenth year then after Nero, Domitian

having raised a second persecution, he was banished to the island of Patmos, and wrote the *Apocalypse*, on which Justin Martyr and Irenaeus afterwards wrote commentaries. But Domitian having been put to death and his acts, on account of his excessive cruelty, having been annulled by the senate, he returned to Ephesus under Nerva Pertinax and continuing there until the time of the emperor Trajan, founded and built churches throughout all Asia, and, worn out by old age, died in the sixty-eighth year after our Lord's passion and was buried near the same city" (Jerome, *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, p. 364-5).

So, we can start to piece together some events from John's life. Traditionally, he remained in Jerusalem until Jesus' mother Mary died (Jn 19:26-27), although other traditions say that Mary came to Ephesus (to live with John) late in her life, and died there.

- John moved to Ephesus later in his life, and was sent to exile on Patmos in AD 82 (14 years after Nero died in AD 68)
- He lived on Patmos, and wrote Revelation, returning to Ephesus in AD 96, after the death of Domitian (Emperor from AD 81-96).
- He continued to live in Ephesus, but travelled around Asia until he died around AD 100 (since we don't know exactly when the Lord died – traditionally AD 33) This is consistent with his death during Trajan's reign.

Polycarp (AD 69-156) wrote a letter to the church at Philippi, and in it he quotes from 1 Jn 4:2-3 "To deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is to be Antichrist" (*The Epistle of Polycarp to the Ephesians*, vs 7). 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.*"<sup>1</sup>

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.

### ***The Recipients of the Letters***

Although not specifically identified, the letters were written to a church, or a group of churches, most likely in the region of Asia Minor. Quite likely they were the same churches addressed in the Revelation. There is little reference to the Old Testament, or to Jewish traditions, which suggests that the audience might have been largely Gentile. Of course, many of the churches commenced by preaching to the Jews in the Synagogues, so in most cases there were both Jews and Gentiles within the congregations.

John must have had a close association with the brethren, since he describes them as "My little children" (1:2:1), "Beloved" (1:4:1); and "Our friends greet you" (3:1:14). He also writes that the false teachers "went out from us ... were not of us" (1:2:19). He must also have had some degree of personal contact with them, as he intended to personally come and straighten out a problem in the church (2:1:9; 3:1:10).

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, p. 246 (Origen's writings have been lost, but his catalogue has been preserved in Eusebius' writings)

## ***Date and Occasion of the Letters***

### **Occasion:**

Gnosticism had arisen in some churches, with the Gnostics teaching a different doctrine than the orthodox teaching that they had previously learned, and casting great doubt and dispersions over those who held the *traditional* teaching. Eventually, these false teachers left (or were thrown out), but a nasty residue aftermath remained in the church, and left them wondering whether there was any substance to the accusations.

John's first letter is written to assure the brethren of the truth of the original teaching, and to encourage them to be faithful despite the fact that their teachings had been called into question.

It is a letter of encouragement in the face of such false teachers who were denying the physical manifestation of Jesus. John exhorts the brethren to put these teachers to the test by asking for a confession that Jesus was the Christ come in the flesh (1:4:1).

The purpose of the first letter is best given from John's own statement, "...*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...*" (1:5:13 NIV) so, it was written to give a reassurance to the faithful brethren.

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.

The third letter follows on from the second. 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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, to show fellowship and hospitality to him.

### **Date:**

The date is hard to ascertain, although it is most likely towards the end of the first century. Whether the letter was written during the exile on Patmos (AD 82-96), or during his latter time in Ephesus (AD 96-101) is not clear. It does not have the tenor of a "prison epistle" like Paul's prison epistles. While Paul's letters are full of historical allusions that can be identified from other sources, John's letters contain almost no references to known persons or places.

The letter appears to have been written after John's gospel, as the introduction reflects on the gospel that he has already delivered. Therefore a date before the exile to Patmos seems unlikely.

A date after John's return from exile seems likely, and is more consistent with the rise of Gnosticism, which really grew and blossomed in the second century. The letter is therefore placed as being written from Ephesus to churches in the area that were personally known to John very late in the first century (AD 96-100).

Further, there is a period of at least a year or more between the second and third letters, as the situation had grown decidedly worse. Working back from John's death (AD 100 – 101), the first letter must have been written soon after his return to Ephesus from Patmos.

There is a period of at least a year or more between the second and third letters, as the situation had grown decidedly worse. Working back from John's death (AD 100 – 101), the second letter must have been written around AD 98.

## **Gnosticism: Backdrop to the Letters**

Gnosticism grew strongly in the second century, but the beginnings of it were evident by the mid first century, and it influences the Corinthian letters, as well as the Pastoral Epistles. Roberts describes Gnosticism<sup>2</sup>:

“...it is also applied to the general tendency which seems to have existed among the fringe Jewish groups and influenced the Christian churches as early as Corinthians and the Prison and Pastoral epistles. The term comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, “knowledge.” Members of the group held that they possessed a special revealed knowledge which was deeper and more genuine than that held by ordinary Christians. This knowledge had been delivered by Christ to special disciples and emerged in teachings and writings which had not been generally known among the churches. In theology they were dualistic, holding that the world was created by a lesser deity, who was a fallen spirit (generally identified with the Jehovah of the Old Testament). Man’s body was of matter, which was evil, and only because divine spirit had been breathed into him by God did he escape being wholly evil. Sin was defined mainly as ignorance of man’s condition, and the knowledge needed for man’s redemption was the Gnostic gospel. When the Gnostic was baptized, he spiritually experienced the “resurrection” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 23, 5) and became otherworldly so that the bodily resurrection was denied and sin was held to be a matter of indifference (*Ibid.*, I, 24,5). At death the knowledge gained in the Gnostic system allowed the spirit to return to the spirit world, called the *pleroma* or “fulness.” There was a tendency to asceticism (due to the idea that flesh or the body was evil and should be abused), which included abstaining from meats and wine and marriage. And somewhat in the opposite direction, it was argued that even licentious living meant nothing to those who had already gone beyond sin (*Ibid.*, I, 25,3).

Whilst some of the terms used here may be “technical”, the thrust of the Gnostic belief can be easily identified. It is to precisely this backdrop that all of John’s epistles were written.

## **Outline of the First Letter**

The following outline is adapted from Fee & Stuart<sup>3</sup>

- 1:1-4 *Prelude, First Theme*
- 1:5-2:2 *Second Theme: Sin and Forgiveness*
- 2:3-11 *Third Theme: Love and Hatred*
- 2:12-14 *Interlude: Some Reasons for Writing*
- 2:15-17 *Prelude to Warnings: Do Not Love the World*
- 2:18-27 *Warnings: On Denying the Son (first theme again)*
- 2:28-3:10 *Second Theme Repeated: On Sin and Being God’s Children*
- 3:11-24 *Third Theme Repeated: On Love and Hatred*
- 4:1-6 *First Theme Repeated: On Denying the Incarnation*
- 4:7-21 *Third Theme Wrapped Up, and Tied to the First*
- 5:1-12 *First Theme Wrapped Up, and Tied to the Third and Second*
- 5:13-21 *The Finale: The Second Theme Tied to the First*

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<sup>2</sup> Roberts, J.W. “The letters of John” The Living Word Commentary R. B. Sweet Co.; Inc. Austin, Tx; p. 8

<sup>3</sup> Fee & Stuart, p. 413-416

## **Outline of the Second Letter**

The following outline is adapted from Fee & Stuart<sup>4</sup>

- 1-3            *Address and greeting*
- 4-6            *Urging for love and walking in truth*
- 7-11          *Warning against the false teachers*
- 12-13        *Conclusion and greetings*

## **Outline of the Third Letter**

The following outline is adapted from Fee & Stuart<sup>5</sup>

- 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*

## **Revelation: Recipients of the Letter**

The letter is specifically addressed to *The seven churches of Asia*, and John then goes on to list and describe them for us. Each of these churches has unique characteristics, although similar characteristics can be found in churches everywhere. Consequently, the message is relevant to all churches in every age and in every place.

The churches are addressed beginning with Ephesus (the fourth largest city in the world at that time, and the logical place to start a journey of the area), and then proceeds in a clockwise journey around Asia Minor.

## **Revelation – Authorship**

Authorship of the letter is attributed to the apostle John, the brother of James, and son of Zebedee, although we are not told in the letter which John wrote it, and whether it was an otherwise unknown prophet named John, “the elder” named John who lived at Ephesus, or the apostle John.

**Internal evidence.** The writer claims to be “John” four times in the letter (1:1; 1:4; 1:9; 22:8), and further claims to be a “prophet” (1:3; 22:7; 22:10; 22:18; 22:19).

The style of writing is different to any other book in the New Testament, so we cannot draw comparison from those writings to help us understand who the author might have been.

**External evidence** for the apostle John is exceptionally strong. Justin Martyr (AD 110-165) says “There was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied by a revelation” (*Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, LXXXI*). He then refers to the thousand years, the resurrection and the judgment of Revelation 20.

## **Revelation – Date and Occasion**

John traditionally remained in Jerusalem until Jesus’ mother Mary died (Jn 19:26-27), although other traditions say that Mary came to Ephesus (to live with John) late in her life, and died there.

- John moved to Ephesus later in his life, and was sent to exile on Patmos in AD 82 (14 years after Nero died in AD 68)

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<sup>4</sup> Fee & Stuart, p. 418-419

<sup>5</sup> Fee & Stuart, p. 422

- He lived on Patmos, and wrote Revelation, returning to Ephesus in AD 96, after the death of Domitian (Emperor from AD 81-96).
- He continued to live in Ephesus, but travelled around Asia until he died around AD 100 (since we don't know exactly when the Lord died – traditionally AD 33) This is consistent with his death during Trajan's reign.

**Occasion:**

The letter was written at a time when the Romans were demanding Emperor worship, and which would result in persecution to those who refused. This put the Christians on a collision course with the government, and the situation was likely to get worse before it got better.

**Date:**

There has been much dispute over the date of Revelation, and the date is significant to our understanding of the book. An early date (prior to AD 70) would lead to a conclusion that the book is dealing with the preparation for the persecution associated with the destruction of Jerusalem. A later date would suggest that it is dealing with something else altogether – the persecution that arose by the Roman Empire against Christians everywhere.

Consequently, two dates are usually proposed – either around the time of Nero's death (AD 67) – or during Domitian's reign (AD 91-96).

As discussed under "Authorship" we conclude from the external evidence that the letter was written during John's exile on Patmos (AD 82-96), which should remove all doubt about earlier writings. One final thought on the context for the date. If it were around 67 AD and the tribulation that John has in mind therefore is turned towards the destruction of Jerusalem (beginning in AD 67 and concluding in AD 70), then why would John write about it to the *Seven churches in Asia*? It is of little relevance to them, and would miss the mark for those in Jerusalem for whom it had major importance. In conclusion, a late date of writing is accepted.

**Revelation – Outline**

The following outline is adapted from Fee & Stuart<sup>6</sup>

- 1:1-8 *Prologue*
- 1:9-3:22 *Second Theme: Sin and Forgiveness*
- 2:3-11 *The Historical Setting*
- 4:1-8:5 *Introductory Visions: The Scene in Heaven and on Earth*
  - 4:1-5:14 *A Vision of the Heavenly Throne*
  - 6:1-8:5 *The Opening of the Seven Seals*
- 8:6-11:19 *Preliminary (Temporal) Judgements on the Empire*
  - 8:6-9:21 *The Judgement of the Seven Trumpets*
  - 10:1-11:19 *The Two Interlude Visions*
- 12:1-14:20 *Conflict between the Church and the Evil Powers*
  - 12:1-17 *War in Heaven and its Aftermath*
  - 13:1-18 *The Beasts out of the Sea and the Earth*
  - 14:1-20 *Outcome of the Holy War: Vindication and Judgement*
- 15:1-16:21 *The Seven Bowls: God's Judgement against "Babylon"*
  - 15:1-8 *The Prelude*
  - 16:1-21 *Babylon is Judged*
- 17:1-22:21 *The (Original) Tale of Two Cities*
  - 17:1-19:10 *God Judges the Harlot for Economic Oppression*
  - 19:11-20:15 *The Last Battle*
  - 21:1-22:11 *The New Jerusalem: The Bride of the Lamb*
  - 22:12-21 *Epilogue*

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<sup>6</sup> Fee & Stuart, p. 430-436