

New Testament Survey #6

THE WRITINGS OF THE APOSTLE JOHN

There are five New Testament books attributed to the apostle John: The Gospel of John, the epistles of First, Second and Third John, and Revelation. **John identifies himself clearly in the book of Revelation; the other four literary works are anonymous. Yet these “anonymous” books are so similar in style, vocabulary and emphasis that it may be attributed to the same author.**

AUTHOR

We know more about John than we do about the majority of the other disciples.

- **John was from Galilee, the younger brother of James, and son of Zebedee. Jesus nicknamed him and his brother “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17), probably referring to their impetuous temperament. His mother was Salome. John may have been Jesus’s cousin. A comparison of John 19:25 and Matthew 27:56 indicate that Salome may have been the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus.**
- **John had been a disciple of John the Baptist prior to meeting Jesus. (John 1:37)**
- **John was a member of the inner circle of disciples along with Peter and his brother James. John identifies himself in his Gospel as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23). John was the only disciple to stand by the cross at the time of Jesus’s crucifixion. He was among the first ones to see Jesus resurrected. (John 20:2-8)**
- **John became one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem. Early church history reports that John went to Ephesus after leaving Jerusalem, possibly between AD 65-69.**
- **He was eventually exiled to the Island of Patmos where he received the revelation he would later register in the book of Revelation. He was later freed from his exile and returned to Ephesus, dying there near the end of the first century.**

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The Gospel of John was written about thirty years after the other three Gospels had been in circulation. He writes it to a mature church; mature in the sense regarding the vast experience they had in what it means to follow Christ.

1. DATE AND LOCATION

- John most likely wrote his Gospel between AD 85 and 95. The book implies that the Apostle Peter was already dead. (John 21:19)
- John wrote his Gospel while living in Ephesus. Eusebius quoting Irenaeus writes: "Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who had even rested on his breast, himself also gave forth the Gospel, while he was living at Ephesus in Asia."

2. COMPARISON OF APPROACHES WITH THE SYNOPTICS

John emphasizes topics not emphasized in the Synoptic Gospels. His intention was to complement what his readers already knew. Over 90 percent of John's Gospel is unique to his work.

- John focuses on Jesus's ministry in Judea; the Synoptic Gospels focus on Jesus's ministry in Galilee. John recounts the Jewish feasts Jesus attended and the ministry that happened around them.
- John covers extensively Jesus's private conversations with individuals; the Synoptic Gospels focus on his public ministry. EXAMPLE: Nicodemus (3:1-21), the Samaritan woman (1:1-42), the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-15), the blind man (9:1-41), and Pilate (18:29-19:16).
- The Synoptic Gospels deal with events in Christ's life; John deals with the spiritual **meaning** of events. EXAMPLE: All four Gospels record feeding of 5,000, but only John gives the sermon on Bread of Life (John 6) to explain the meaning of the miracle.

3. PURPOSE & THEMES

- John clearly states his purpose in 20:31. He wrote so that his audience would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, in order that they would receive the life that comes with believing this gospel message.

- The number one theme in John is **BELIEF**. The word “belief” is used over 100 times in the Greek text.

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:11-13)

- The second theme is the deity of Christ. **John does not describe Jesus’s birth, but instead explains his eternal nature and incarnation. He uses the relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father to portray the divinity of the Son.**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son. (John 5:21-22)

Christ’s deity is proclaimed in the seven “I AM” statements of John’s Gospel: I AM the Bread of life (John 6:35); I AM the Light of the world (John 8:12); I AM the Door of the sheep (John 10:7); I AM the Good Shepherd (John 10:11); I AM the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25); I AM the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6) ; I AM the true Vine (John 15:1).

I JOHN

1. BACKGROUND

Establishing the background of John’s first letter is difficult because it does not contain a single proper name or any definite personal, historical, or geographical information.

- John wrote this letter sometime between 85-95 AD.
- It was written to a church (or churches) that was very close to the apostle’s heart.

John addressed the readers as his "dear children" (1 John 2:1, 13, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). This feature points that John was writing to a group of people with whom he

had a close relationship.

- False teachers were trying to infiltrate into the church teaching that Jesus had not come in the flesh. Some practiced asceticism, some licentiousness; both were heretic.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)

2. PURPOSE AND DISTINCTIVENESS

- John wrote this letter to warn the church against the false teaching concerning Christ, and to encourage a lifestyle conducive to followers of Christ.

John adduces that beliefs have practical implications; he expects the letter to produce tangible results in his readers.

My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. (2:1)

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God. (5:13)

- The book is filled with contrasts—light and darkness (1:6-7; 2:8-11); love of world and love of God (2:15-17); children of God and children of the devil (3:4-10); the Spirit of God and the spirit of Antichrist (4:1-3); love and hate (4:7-12, 16-21).
- Three recurrent themes in First John are:
 - Love (3:11, 14, 16, 17, 18; 4:7, 10; 5:2).
 - Truth (1:6; 2:4, 21; 4:6).
 - Obedience (2:3; 3:22, 24; 5:3).

John gives eight tests for knowing the truth using the verb “to know” each time.

And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. (1 John 2:3)

By this we may be sure that we are in Him: whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked. (1 John 2:5, 6)

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth. (3:18, 19)

Whoever keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in them. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us. (1 John 3:24)

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. (4:2)

We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:6)

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. (1 John 4:13)

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. (1 John 5:2)

II JOHN

1. This letter was written around the same time as I John: 85-95 AD. There are several parallels between passages in this letter and I John hinting that both works may have been written at approximately the same time.

- John wrote to a Christian woman and her family -- either her natural family or the fellowship of believers associated with her.

It is addressed to “the chosen lady and her children.”

- Unlike First John, Second John has the typical characteristics of a letter: a salutation, introductory greeting and final greeting.
- The warnings in this letter are against the same false teachings warned against in First John.

II John 1:7-11

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves that you might not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in

the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.

III JOHN

1. This letter was probably written before First and Second John, possibly between A.D. 80 and 90.

There is no trace in III John of the conflict over the person and work of Christ that is so prevalent in I and II John.

- Third John is addressed to Gaius who was probably a convert of John's and someone he loved very much. Four times John refers to him as "beloved."

III John 1:3, 4

For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

- John wrote this epistle to encourage Gaius in his hospitality toward those who minister the Gospel.

John sent a group of ministers to the church where Gaius was, but the domineering leader Diotrephes did not receive them. Gaius showed hospitality to them in spite of the excommunication threats of Diotrephes. When the ministers returned to Ephesus, they reported Gaius's hospitality to John. A second group, led by Demetrius, the bearer of the letter, was then sent from John with a request to Gaius for hospitality. John planned an upcoming visit to deal with the factious Diotrephes.

- This letter presents a brief glimpse into the intricate relationships between apostolic leaders and local church leaders.

This letter goes beyond the theory of how these relationships *should* work and shows how sometimes, unfortunately, they *do* work.

- Third John is the shortest book in the New Testament (219 words).

REVELATION

The book of Revelation has the ability to fascinate and intimidate people. *“No portion of the Holy Scriptures has been the subject of so much controversy and of so many varying interpretations as the Apocalypse of John.”*¹ For this reason it is crucial to know the original context of the book in order to understand its meaning and application for our lives.

1. AUTHORSHIP

- John wrote Revelation from the island of Patmos during a time of persecution. (1:9)
- The date of Revelation is a matter of much debate. **Two dates are suggested for the writing of the book, an earlier date during the time of the Roman emperor Nero, and/or a later date during the time of the Roman emperor, Domitian.** A late first century date during the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96) is better supported.

2. GENRE & BACKGROUND

Revelation is apocalyptic literature, the only example of it in the New Testament. Revelation is also a letter that was addressed to a specific group of churches. This is important because any interpretation of the book has to be in accordance with the occasion and intention of the book for the original audience.

John addressed Revelation to seven churches in Asia Minor: *Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.*

These churches were undergoing severe persecution. They were facing pressure to compromise their loyalty to Christ; some had resisted the pressure, others were giving into licentiousness.

“Revelation speaks to churches both alive and dead, but most of the churches are in danger of compromising with the world than of dying from it.”²

3. PURPOSE & THEMES

- John writes Revelation to encourage the church that was

¹ Terry, Milton. *Biblical Hermeneutics*. London: Forgotten books, p.466.

² Keener, Craig. *The NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan, p. 39.

undergoing severe persecution. He reassures his readers that Jesus knew their suffering, he was in control, and that he would certainly return and reward his faithful followers, and fulfill every promise the Bible had made about Him.

- The most prominent theme in Revelation is the glory, majesty and authority of Jesus Christ. Revelation proclaims Christ's Lordship explicitly and frequently. Jesus is the First and the Last, the Alfa and Omega; he shares God's titles, he is "The Living One" (1:8); he holds the keys of death (1:18); he seats on God's throne and is worshiped (5:8-14).

Revelation 19:11-16

And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems; and He has a name written upon Him which no one knows except Himself. And He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. And from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may smite the nations; and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS."

4. SCHOOLS OF INTERPRETATION

There are four primary approaches for interpreting the book of Revelation.

- The Preterist Approach says that most of the things predicted in Revelation were fulfilled close to the time of its writing. **The most common form of Preterism says that Revelation was written prior to the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and that most of its prophecies were fulfilled by that time.**
- The Historical Approach says that Revelation is a survey of church and world history from the apostolic age until the end of time. **People who hold to this view see history unfolding in its entirety through the various symbols in the book. One of the drawbacks to this approach is that there is a considerable**

amount of subjectivity and even contradiction from one interpreter to the next.

- The Futurist Approach says that Revelation is a prophesy of the last days and, with the exception of the first three chapters, is yet to be fulfilled.
- The Idealist Approach says that Revelation is not prophecy at all but rather a metaphorical representation of the struggle between good and evil that is relevant to all people in every culture at any time.

5. HERMENEUTICAL APPLICATIONS

We can draw some applications from Revelation that are the same today as they were for the seven churches of Asia Minor. We confront opposition not by softening our witness of Christ but by exalting and proclaiming him more boldly.

- Christ is worth dying for.
- Do not dare to render to Caesar what belongs to God alone!
- Regardless of how things seem now, sin does not go unpunished; God will judge the world.
- “Revelation provides a better hope for a church enamored with this age or despairing of the next.”³

Revelation is a pertinent book, because the state of the Church in the 21st century is very similar to that of the ones in Asia Minor. We find coexisting in different places persecuted yet vibrant churches, and those that are complacent yet spiritually anemic. Revelation provides the hope and exhortations that both need.

Discussion Questions:

³ Keener, Craig. *The NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan, p. 42.

1. How do you think the knowledge of John's background will influence the way you read his Gospel?
2. The three recurrent themes in I John are: Truth, Love and Obedience. In your own context how do you see tension between these three?
3. How should the assurance found in Revelation that Jesus will return and consummate his kingdom affect the way we live our lives?

Homework:

1. Read Revelations 2-3 and fill in the chart for the seven letters to each church.

Church	Description of Jesus	Evaluation of the church	Blessing	Threat of Curse