

First, Second, and Third John



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Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2014 by George L. Parsenios

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Parsenios, George L.

First, Second, and Third John / George L. Parsenios.
pages cm. — (Paideia : commentaries on the New Testament)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3342-1 (pbk.)

1. Bible. Epistles of John—Commentaries. I. Title.

BS2805.53.P37 2014

227.94077—dc23

2014027924

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14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For Fr. Zosimas of Xenophontos

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Foreword



Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament is a series that sets out to comment on the final form of the New Testament text in a way that pays due attention both to the cultural, literary, and theological settings in which the text took form and to the interests of the contemporary readers to whom the commentaries are addressed. This series is aimed squarely at students—including MA students in religious and theological studies programs, seminarians, and upper-division undergraduates—who have theological interests in the biblical text. Thus, the didactic aim of the series is to enable students to understand each book of the New Testament as a literary whole rooted in a particular ancient setting and related to its context within the New Testament.

The name “Paideia” (Greek for “education”) reflects (1) the instructional aim of the series—giving contemporary students a basic grounding in academic New Testament studies by guiding their engagement with New Testament texts; (2) the fact that the New Testament texts as literary unities are shaped by the educational categories and ideas (rhetorical, narratological, etc.) of their ancient writers and readers; and (3) the pedagogical aims of the texts themselves—their central aim being not simply to impart information but to form the theological convictions and moral habits of their readers.

Each commentary deals with the text in terms of larger rhetorical units; these are not verse-by-verse commentaries. This series thus stands within the stream of recent commentaries that attend to the final form of the text. Such reader-centered literary approaches are inherently more accessible to liberal arts students without extensive linguistic and historical-critical preparation than older exegetical approaches, but within the reader-centered world the sanest practitioners have paid careful attention to the extratext of the original readers, including not only these readers’ knowledge of the geography, history, and other contextual elements reflected in the text but also their ability to respond

Foreword

correctly to the literary and rhetorical conventions used in the text. Paideia commentaries pay deliberate attention to this extratextual repertoire in order to highlight the ways in which the text is designed to persuade and move its readers. Each rhetorical unit is explored from three angles: (1) introductory matters; (2) tracing the train of thought or narrative or rhetorical flow of the argument; and (3) theological issues raised by the text that are of interest to the contemporary Christian. Thus, the primary focus remains on the text and not its historical context or its interpretation in the secondary literature.

Our authors represent a variety of confessional points of view: Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox. What they share, beyond being New Testament scholars of national and international repute, is a commitment to reading the biblical text as theological documents within their ancient contexts. Working within the broad parameters described here, each author brings his or her own considerable exegetical talents and deep theological commitments to the task of laying bare the interpretation of Scripture for the faith and practice of God's people everywhere.

Mikeal C. Parsons
Charles H. Talbert
Bruce W. Longenecker

Preface



My previous research and writing have focused on the Fourth Gospel, but one cannot for very long study that book without turning one's attention closely to 1–3 John. Writing this commentary has provided an invaluable opportunity to reflect on the connections that link these texts, and I would like to thank the editors of the Paideia series for asking me to produce this volume. C. Clifton Black deserves special thanks for the personal support and encouragement he offered from the very start. Charles Talbert, Mikeal Parsons, and Bruce Longenecker have offered insightful editorial help, and they showed tremendous patience when the volume took much longer to complete than originally planned. Their suggestions improved the book in every instance. From Baker Academic, James Earnest guided the work from beginning to end with expert care, while Rachel Klomp maker prepared the beautiful artwork, and the various Baker editors were always insightful, saving me from more than a few embarrassing errors. Portions of the introductory chapter reproduce elements from my essay “A Sententious Silence: First Thoughts on the Fourth Gospel and the *Ardens* Style,” in *Portraits of Jesus: Essays in Honor of Harold W. Attridge*, edited by Susan Myers; and portions of the commentary on 2 John reproduce elements from my essay “‘No Longer in the World’ (John 17:11): The Transformation of the Tragic in the Fourth Gospel.” *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005): 1–21. Both texts are used here by permission. Finally, this book is dedicated as a small token of friendship to Fr. Zosimas of the Holy Monastery of Xenophontos on Mt. Athos.

Abbreviations



General

AT	author's translation	i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
BCE	before the Common Era (= BC)	NT	New Testament
ca.	<i>circa</i> , approximately	OT	Old Testament
CE	the Common Era (= AD)	rev.	revised
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	trans.	translator, translation, translated by
ed.	edition, edited by, editor	x	times
d.	died	v./vv.	verse/verses
fl.	flourished in (year)		

Bible Texts, Editions, and Versions

JB	Jerusalem Bible	NASB	New American Standard Bible
KJV	King James (Authorized) Version	NEB	New English Bible
LXX	Septuagint, the Greek Bible	NIV	New International Version (2011)
NABRE	New American Bible, Revised Edition	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
		RSV	Revised Standard Version

Ancient Manuscripts, Papyri, and Inscriptions

P.Flor.	<i>Papiri greco-egizii, Papiri Fiorentini</i> . Supplementi Filologico-Storici ai Monumenti Antichi. Milan, 1906–15.	P.Oslo	<i>Papiri Osloenses</i> . 3 vols. Oslo, 1925–36.
		P.Oxy.	<i>The Oxyrhynchus Papyri</i> . 75 vols. London, 1898–2010.

P.Ryl.	<i>Catalogue of the Greek and Latin Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester.</i> Manchester, UK, 1911–52.	PSI	Publicazione della Società Italiana per la ricerca dei papiri Greci e Latini in Egitto. <i>Papiri Greci e Latini.</i> Florence, 1912–.
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Ancient Corpora

OLD TESTAMENT

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esther	Esther
Job	Job
Ps(s).	Psalm(s)
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hosea	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jon.	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah

Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

DEUTEROCANONICAL BOOKS

Bar.	Baruch
1–2 Esd.	1–2 Esdras
Tob.	Tobit
Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon

NEW TESTAMENT

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom.	Romans
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians
1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Philem.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
James	James
1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
1–3 John	1–3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

OLD TESTAMENT PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

<i>4 Ezra</i>	<i>4 Ezra</i>
<i>Jos. Asen.</i>	<i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>

Abbreviations

DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Dead Sea Scrolls not listed here are cited by cave number followed by the letter Q (for Qumran) and the document number (e.g., 4Q175).

1QM	<i>Milḥamah = War Scroll</i>
1QS	<i>Serek Hayahad = Rule of the Community = Manual of Discipline</i>

APOSTOLIC FATHERS

<i>Did.</i>	<i>Didache</i>
<i>Smyrn.</i>	<i>To the Smyrnaeans</i> , by Ignatius of Antioch
<i>Trall.</i>	<i>To the Trallians</i> , by Ignatius of Antioch

Other Ancient Authors

ANONYMOUS

<i>Rhet. Her.</i>	<i>Rhetoric for Herennius</i>
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ARISTOTLE

<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Rhetoric</i>
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ATHANASIUS

<i>Inc.</i>	<i>De incarnatione = On the Incarnation</i>
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CICERO

<i>Att.</i>	<i>Epistle to Atticus</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistles</i>

DEMETRIUS

<i>Eloc.</i>	<i>Elocution</i>
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DIO CHRYSOSTOM

<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orations</i>
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DIOGENES LAERTIUS

<i>Lives</i>	<i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i>
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EUSEBIUS

<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>Historia ecclesiastica = Ecclesiastical History</i>
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GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS

<i>Orat.</i>	<i>Orations</i>
--------------	-----------------

IRENÆUS

<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Adversus haereses = Against Heresies</i>
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ISOCRATES

<i>Nic.</i>	<i>To Nicocles</i>
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JOHN OF DAMASCUS

<i>Orth. Faith</i>	<i>An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith</i>
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JOSEPHUS

<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>
-------------	--------------------------------

LIBANIUS, PSEUDO-

<i>Epis. Styles</i>	<i>Epistolary Styles</i>
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LUCIAN

<i>Peregr.</i>	<i>The Passing of Peregrinus</i>
----------------	----------------------------------

LUCRETIUS

<i>Things</i>	<i>The Nature of Things = De rerum natura</i>
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ORIGEN

<i>Comm. Jo.</i>	<i>Commentary on the Gospel of John</i>
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PHILO

<i>Joseph</i>	<i>The Life of Joseph</i>
<i>Rewards</i>	<i>Rewards and Punishments</i>
<i>Spec. Laws</i>	<i>Special Laws</i>

PLUTARCH

<i>Col.</i>	<i>Against Colotes</i>
<i>Demetr.</i>	<i>Demetrius</i>
<i>Flat.</i>	<i>How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend</i>

SENECA THE ELDER

Suas. *Suasoriae* = *Declamations*

TACITUS

Hist. *Histories*

SENECA THE YOUNGER

Ep. *Epistulae morales* = *Moral*
Epistles

Series, Collections, and Reference Works

- ANF *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson. American ed. 10 vols. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885–96.
- BDAG *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. By W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- LCL Loeb Classical Library
- NPNF *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by P. Schaff and H. Wace. 2nd series. 28 vols. Repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.

First, Second, and Third John

Introduction to the Letters of John



A letter is a second self. People write letters when separation prevents speaking face-to-face, and the letter bridges the divide, making the absent person present. As an example of how letters convey the personal presence of their authors, Plutarch (ca. 46–120 CE) records what happened when the Athenians captured the letter carriers of Philip of Macedon (382–336 BCE). The Athenians read all the official letters addressed to Philip from his generals, as one would expect in a time of war. They left one letter unread. It was a letter to Philip from his wife. They did not even open this letter but sent it back to Philip, with the seal unbroken, and so demonstrated what Plutarch calls “the thoughtful kindness of the Athenians” (*Demetr.* 22.2). By refusing to eavesdrop on the intimate exchange of husband and wife, the Athenians treated a private letter like a private conversation between two people in their midst. The captured letter represented the personal presence of its author. In this same spirit, Demetrius of Phalerum (350–280 BCE) says that “one writes an image of one’s soul when one writes a letter” (*Eloc.* 227). In his own *Letter* 9, Basil of Caesarea (329/330–379 CE) says that “words truly are images of the soul.” A letter is a second self, stamped with the character of its author.

But if the Letters of John show us the soul of their author, they do so “only through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). Far from providing a window into the personality and character of the one who writes them, these letters cloak their author in anonymity. The author does not stand alone in being anonymous. The recipients are also unknown, apart from the Gaius mentioned in 3 John 1, and his identity is hardly clear. The Letters of John tell us virtually nothing about why they were written and who read them. By contrast, some letters in the NT reveal a great deal about the circumstances in which they were composed. First Corinthians tells us more than most. Because 1 Corinthians was written by Paul, we can compare it to the many other letters that come from Paul. Because it was

written to Corinth in the middle of the first century, we can coordinate what we read in 1 Corinthians with what we know in general about the Greek cities of the Roman Empire. Copious comparative material helps us to read between the lines of what Paul wrote and fill in the gaps in our knowledge.

The Letters of John present a different circumstance (Lieu 2008). Precious little can be gleaned from these letters regarding the people and problems that produced them since 2 and 3 John are the shortest writings in the NT, and they identify their sender only by the cryptic title “the Elder.” Their recipients are just as obscure: 2 John is sent to the enigmatic “Elect Lady and her children,” and 3 John tells us the name of its recipient—a certain Gaius—and refers to a figure named Demetrius. In 3 John we also hear of a conflict between the Elder and a certain Diotrephes, but the very brevity of the letter keeps us from knowing who any of these men are, or why they oppose each other. As for 1 John, it is much longer than the other two letters, and it contains an elaborate polemic against beliefs that it opposes; but it mentions nothing about where or when it was written, who sent it, to whom it was sent, and who specifically is committing the wrongs it seeks to correct. The echoes of the circumstances that produced 1–3 John are far more muffled than those that reverberate around 1 Corinthians.

And yet, if 1–3 John differ from 1 Corinthians in conveying little detail about their context and circumstances, they just as surely resemble 1 Corinthians in being produced in the midst of what Margaret Mitchell calls an “*agōn* of interpretation” (Mitchell 2010, 18; see also Mitchell 2003). The Greek term *agōn* means “conflict or trial,” and people in the Greek world were said to struggle in an *agōn* if they were contending in anything from a courtroom trial to a wrestling match. Mitchell applies the label “*agōn* of interpretation” to Paul’s Corinthian Letters because Paul regularly makes corrective comments like “I wrote to you in my letter . . . not at all meaning . . .” (1 Cor. 5:9). He struggles with his readers over the proper interpretation of his message. He had taught them something. They had misunderstood him. He writes 1 Corinthians to correct them. In his elaborate efforts at correction and clarification, Paul explains and interprets not only his own former words but also the words of Scripture, the words of the Corinthians themselves, and even his own personal behavior.

A similar “*agōn* of interpretation” lies behind 1–3 John. The view adopted in this commentary is that these letters represent one side in a struggle over the proper meaning of the Gospel of John (Smith 2009). In these letters, the heirs of the Johannine tradition are contending over a theological tradition that they share in common. A tense tone permeates each epistle, and this tension comes boiling to the surface in verses like: “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us” (1 John 2:19). So 1–3 John are the surviving relics of a contentious “*agōn* of interpretation.”

What specific factors might have caused this conflict? This simple question has inspired complicated answers. If 1–3 John reflect an *agōn* over the meaning of the Gospel of John, the *agōn* extends and expands when we attempt to interpret the letters themselves. Questions about the meaning, function, and historical setting of 1–3 John have initiated their own *agōn* of interpretation, and the remainder of this introduction will survey the contours of the various debates, beginning with a discussion of the relationship of the Letters to the Gospel.

The Relationship of the Letters to the Gospel

Raymond Brown states that the Letters of John were never meant to be read apart from the Gospel (1982, preface). The present commentary relies on the same presupposition and will argue that 1–3 John are interpretations of the Fourth Gospel. Other scholars, of course, explain the connections between the Gospel and the Letters in other ways, especially when it comes to deciding the order in which the documents were written. Some imagine that the Letters came first, others that the Gospel came first, and still others argue that the production of these various texts involved a more complicated process in which several texts were being written contemporarily with one another. The following discussion will not begin with a survey of scholarly opinion, though, but with a survey of the relevant primary texts, comparing the evidence from the Gospel of John with the evidence of 1–3 John. Several other

Terms Used in John and 1 John but Not Elsewhere in the New Testament

Anthrōpoktonos

John 8:44: "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer [anthrōpoktonos] from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him."

1 John 3:15: "All who hate a brother or sister are murderers [anthrōpoktonoi], and you know that murderers [anthrōpoktonoi] do not have eternal life abiding in them."

Paraklētos

John 14:16: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate [paraklēton], to be with you forever." (See also 14:26; 15:26; 16:7.)

1 John 2:1: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate [paraklēton] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

commentators have studied the common elements in these texts with great care (Brooke 1912; Brown 1982; Painter 2002). Their work provides the basis of what is presented here.

The similarities of the texts are most obvious at the level of vocabulary. Some important terms in John and 1 John occur nowhere else in the NT, like *paraklētos* (see sidebar on previous page). Listing these uniquely Johannine terms alone, however, does not show just how broad and deep are the connections. Even terms that are not unique to the Johannine tradition are used with a high degree of frequency and exclusivity in the Johannine literature, especially in John and 1 John. These two texts—John and 1 John—rely on the same limited and repeated set of terms. So extensive are the connections between the two that almost all the contents of 1 John correspond to something in John (Brooke 1912, ix). Table 1, abbreviated from John Painter’s exhaustive charts (2002, 63–73), shows how certain words appear with greater frequency in the Johannine texts than they do in other texts. The comparative categories are the Synoptic Gospels, the Pauline corpus, the entire NT, and each of the Johannine texts individually.

Table 1. Characteristic Language of the Gospel and Letters of John

		Synoptic Gospels	Gospel of John	1 John	2 John	3 John	Paul	NT
<i>agapan</i>	(to love)	26	36	28	2	1	33	141
<i>agapē</i>	(love)	2	7	18	2	1	75	116
<i>alētheia</i>	(truth)	7	25	9	5	6	47	109
<i>alēthēs</i>	(true)	2	4	2	–	1	4	26
<i>alēthinos</i>	(true)	1	9	4	–	–	1	28
<i>alēthōs</i>	(truly)	8	7	1	–	–	1	18
<i>hamartanein</i>	(to sin)	7	3	10	–	–	17	42
<i>hamartia</i>	(sin)	24	17	17	–	–	64	173
<i>ginōskein</i>	(to know)	60	56	25	1	–	50	221
<i>hina</i>	(in order to)	152	147	20	5	2	249	673
<i>martyrein</i>	(to testify)	2	33	6	–	4	8	76
<i>martyria</i>	(testimony)	4	14	14	–	–	2	37
<i>menein</i>	(to abide)	12	40	24	3	–	17	118
<i>oida</i>	(I know)	72	85	15	–	1	103	321
<i>skotia</i>	(darkness)	3	8	6	–	–	–	17
<i>skotos</i>	(darkness)	11	1	1	–	–	11	30
<i>phōs</i>	(light)	15	23	6	–	–	13	73
<i>pseudos</i>	(falsehood)	0	1	2	–	–	4	10
<i>pseustēs</i>	(liar)	0	2	5	–	–	3	10

Certain words immediately rise to the surface. For example, the verb *agapan* (to love) and the noun *agapē* (love) occur more in John than they do in Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined, and they appear 46 times in the five chapters

of 1 John—an average of just over 9 times in each chapter. The words *martyrein* and *martyria* are similar. Taken together, these words occur 113 times in the entire NT, and 71 of those instances are in the Gospel and Letters of John—almost 70 percent of the total. The concept of truth is also important. If we consider together the various nouns, adjectives, and adverbs referring to the notion of “truth,” the vast percentage of their occurrences would be in John and 1 John, especially the noun *alētheia*, for which almost half of the total usages (45 of 109) are in the Johannine literature. Two terms related to falsehood (*pseudos* and *pseustēs*) are not common in the NT as a whole, but 10 out of these words’ 20 total usages are in the Johannine literature. Finally, the verb *menein* is used in the entire NT 118 times, but the word is found 67 times in the Gospel and Letters of John. Examples of characteristic vocabulary could be multiplied further. The examples shown here make it clear enough, though, that John and 1–3 John rely on a similar set of fairly limited terms, and these words are not nearly so common in other books of the NT. A further point is worth stressing. Although the bulk of the following discussion will focus on 1 John, the list above shows that characteristic Johannine terms like “truth,” “abide,” and “testimony” appear with some prominence in 2–3 John as well. Their appearance in all three letters, as well in as the Gospel, points to a distinctive Johannine vocabulary. Attuning one’s ears to this specialized vocabulary is the first stage in recognizing the similarity between 1–3 John and the Gospel of John.

But it is only the first stage. Not only are particular words shared by the various texts but these same words are also combined in similar phrases and sentences. Common syntactical structures and common clusters of words are formed around this shared vocabulary (Brooke 1912, i–x). It is one thing to see, for instance, that terms related to “truth” are common in the Johannine literature, but it is even more compelling to list the various phrases that build around the word “truth,” as in table 2 (modified from Painter 2002, 66–68):

Table 2. Common Phrases and Syntax in John and 1 John

1 John		John	
1:6	We do not do the truth	3:21	the one who does the truth
1:8	the truth is not in us	8:44	truth is not in him
2:21	is not of the truth	18:37	everyone who is of the truth
3:19	we are of the truth		
4:6	spirit of truth	14:16–17	Paraclete, the spirit of truth
		16:13	the spirit of truth

In all these cases, terms are clustered in very similar ways. The most compelling example is the phrase “to do the truth.” The expression is a common

Semitic idiom in the OT, but it appears in the NT only in the Johannine literature, serving as a link between the Gospel and the Letters. Many other phrases are also shaped around common vocabulary, as table 3 shows.

Table 3. Further Common Phrases Shared by John and 1 John

1 John		John	
1:8	we have no sin	9:41	you would not have sin
2:11	he walks in the darkness	8:12	shall not walk in darkness (cf. 11:9, 10; 12:35)
2:28	abide in him	15:4, 7	abide in me (cf. 14:10; 6:56)
3:1	be called children of God	1:12	authority to be children of God
3:2	we are children of God		
3:4	everyone who does sin (cf. 3:8, 9)	8:34	everyone who does sin
3:14	we have passed from death into life	5:24	he has passed from death into life
4:16	we have known and believed	6:69	we have believed and known
5:4	conquers the world and this is the victory that conquers the world	16:33	I have conquered the world
5:9	if we receive the witness of men	3:33	the one receiving his witness
		5:34	but I do not receive the witness of men

Even larger literary structures than just phrases and sentences are also built around this shared vocabulary. Commentators regularly note, for example, that both John and 1 John begin with prologues that include the same key terms, like “word” (*logos*) and “beginning” (*archē*). John opens by describing the Word that was *in* the beginning, while 1 John opens by describing the word that was *from* the beginning. These twin texts will receive fuller comment in the appropriate place in the commentary, but it is important here to notice that both John and 1 John open with prologues that share the same vocabulary. John and 1 John share a common manner of concluding as well. As the Gospel winds toward its final chapter, John 20:30–31 says:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these things [*tauta*] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. (see also John 21:25)

Several key terms and phrases in this passage from John find a corollary in a similar statement near the close of 1 John (5:13):

I wrote these things [*tauta*] to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, who believe in the name of the Son of God.

Both texts refer to “these things” that are “written,” and both texts connect “belief” in the “Son of God” to “having” either “life” or “eternal life.”

The connections with the Gospel are not confined to 1 John. Third John 13 has a similar resonance, even if in a slightly muted form. Like the phrase in John 20, it apologizes for not writing more when the author says,

I had much more that I should write you, but I do not wish to write it out with pen and ink.

Thus the Fourth Gospel and 1 John not only open with prologues that resemble each other but they also draw near to their conclusions with summary statements that resemble each other. Third John seems to share in this relationship, at least as it relates to the closing formula.

More can be said at a further level of abstraction. The opening and closing sections of Johannine texts share another common quality, the reference to the notion of testimony through the verb *martyrein* (to testify) and the noun *martyria* (testimony). The Gospel of John begins by referring repeatedly to the testimony of John the Baptist, first in the prologue (1:7–8) and then in the opening line of the narrative (1:19): “This is the testimony [*martyria*] given by John. . . .” The final lines of the Gospel return to this term by underscoring the testimony of the Beloved Disciple: “This is the disciple who is testifying [*martyrōn*] to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony [*martyria*] is true [*alēthēs*]” (21:24). Testimony (*martyria*) also serves as a framing device in 1 John. First John opens by referring to testimony (1:2) and then winds to its close by saying in 5:11, “And this is the testimony [*martyria*], that God gave eternal life to us, and this life is in his Son.” Third John unfolds according to the same structure. The opening lines of 3 John refer to the brothers who testify (*martyrountōn*) about the manner in which Gaius walks (3 John 3), and the letter closes (3 John 12) by commending Demetrius and saying, “We testify [*martyroumen*], and you know [*oidas*] that our testimony [*martyria*] is true [*alēthēs*].” This last line has the added quality of reminding one of John 21, where it refers to the testimony of the Beloved Disciple, and announces, “We know [*oidamen*] that his testimony [*martyria*] is true [*alēthēs*]” (21:24). Once one accounts for the changes in the person of the verbs between 3 John 12 and John 21:24, the two statements seem evocative of each other, especially because of the common reliance on the terms “know,” “testimony,” and “true.”

Thus 1–3 John share with the Gospel of John not only a common vocabulary and basic syntactical structures but also larger structuring devices. To borrow a musical analogy, the texts not only use the same individual notes but also combine those notes into similar harmonies. The commonalities are both broad and deep.

Even so, similarity is only half the matter. The various points of correspondence that we have just surveyed also show how different the texts are. The

first and best case of such similarity-in-difference comes from a comparative reading of the prologues of John and 1 John. Both prologues rely on similar terms, such as *logos* (word) and *archē* (beginning), but the meaning of the terms is different in the different texts. The “beginning” referred to in John 1:1 is the cosmic beginning, before the creation of the world. The “beginning” that 1 John 1:1 has in mind is the beginning of Jesus’s earthly ministry. Similarly, John 1:1 refers to Jesus as the “Word,” but 1 John 1 applies the term “word” to the preaching of the apostles. In both cases a “word” has its origins in the “beginning,” which suggests an obvious connection between the texts, but the character of the word and the time frame of the beginning are not at all the same. A common set of terms and a common style are deployed differently in each text. Broad similarities are elided by important differences.

These complications extend to theological questions and to matters of content. One common issue is that the Johannine Letters ascribe to the Father things that the Gospel ascribes to Jesus. The famous “new commandment” offers a good example. In the Fourth Gospel, the command to “love one another” comes from the mouth of Jesus on the night when he was betrayed. He twice tells his disciples, “Love one another” (John 13:34; 15:12). The same command appears in the Letters (1 John 3:11, 23; 2 John 5), only now it is the command not of Jesus but of the Father (1 John 3:23). Matters become even more complicated when one compares the Gospel and Letters on a theological level. Some interpreters argue that the theology of the Letters and the theology of the Gospel are so different as to be incompatible. C. H. Dodd is an eloquent spokesperson for those who hold this view: “Eschatology, the Atonement, the Holy Spirit: these are certainly no minor themes in Christian theology. In all three the First Epistle of John represents an outlook widely different from that of the Fourth Gospel” (1946, liv). This bold statement is too stark, but for precisely this reason it provides a helpful starting point for discussion. The distinctions are real but not utterly irresolvable. Painter (2002, 59) elegantly and efficiently shows that Dodd overemphasizes the differences in each of these three areas of thought—eschatology, atonement, and the Holy Spirit.

The oversimplification is most obvious in eschatology. Dodd assumes that the Gospel has a thoroughly realized eschatology, in which the gifts of the end times are already available here and now, while 1 John has an entirely future eschatology, in which only the return of Christ will inaugurate a new world and a new way of existing. The Gospel certainly assumes a realized eschatology, which is most obvious in a verse like John 5:24: “Very truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and does not come under judgment, but has crossed over from death to life.” But this present experience is not total or complete. Jesus still points to a future and final fulfillment of the promise of new life, as when he says at 14:3, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so

that where I am, there you may be also.” John 14:3 is not alone. Other phrases also have a future orientation (5:21–29; 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 12:48; 17:24).

The hope of the Gospel is oriented toward the future, even as it affirms that the gifts of the future are available in the present. Jesus clarifies this dual eschatological hope: “A time is coming and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live” (5:25). First John shares in this dual hope, emphasizing both a future and a realized eschatology. Attention to the future is certainly more pronounced in 1 John, as when 3:2 says, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known,” and yet a concern for the present is hardly absent. First John 2:8 says, “Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining” (see also 5:20). These two verses in 1 John seem to reflect the theology of the Fourth Gospel, in which “the time is coming, and yet now is.”

John and 1 John are also not so far apart on the role of the Spirit. To be sure, the Spirit is nowhere in 1 John called “the Paraclete,” nor is the full panoply of imagery that the writer of John applies to the Spirit present in 1 John. Other things, though, are held in common. The Spirit of Truth in John 15:26–27 inspires the disciples to offer witness to Jesus, while in 1 John 4:2 the spirit of truth shows the difference between true confession and the confession of false prophets, who are antichrists. This is not exactly the same thing, but in both cases the Spirit of Truth empowers true witness in the face of opposition. On the question of atonement, it is true that John never calls Jesus an “atonement for our sins” (*hilasmos peri tōn hamartiōn hēmōn*, 1 John 2:2), but John does open by announcing that Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Sacrificial atonement may not be prominent in the Gospel, but it does seem to lie somewhere behind this announcement of John the Baptist. The theology of the two books is either more compatible (in the case of eschatology) or not nearly so incompatible (in atonement and the Spirit) as some assume. The theological visions of the two books do not separate them. The visions are related. To assume that they are related, however, only begets a further question: *how* are they related?

Chronology of the Letters

The present commentary assumes that the Letters represent a later period in the history of the Johannine tradition than the Gospel, but not every commentator shares this view. Three general approaches predominate. One view finds recent expression in the work of Judith Lieu (2008). While Lieu recognizes the various literary and syntactical connections that unite the various texts just surveyed, she argues the following in her commentary (17):

The position taken here is that there is no compelling evidence of a direct literary relationship between 1 John and the Gospel in anything like the latter's current form; on the contrary, the consistent subtle differences of wording, inference, context, and combination even where parallels appear close suggest that both writings draw independently on earlier formulations.

Lieu prefers to avoid the question of the literary dependence of one text (or texts) on another; she chooses to refer to a collective "Johannine tradition" in a way that implies nothing about whether one document is a source or model for the others (2008, 18). In making this argument, she echoes, in a slightly modified form, the sentiments expressed earlier by scholars like Georg Strecker, who also ascribes the similarities of the various Johannine texts to "the independent language and world of the Johannine school" (1996, 9n8).

The benefit of this position is that it so sharply deviates from the current standard reading (which assumes the literary dependence that Strecker and Lieu deny), reminding us to be careful about how much we presume to know about these mysterious letters. In her effort to resist the standard reading, Lieu helpfully avoids excesses in the standard view. For instance, the eminent Raymond Brown (1982, 116–30) seems to go beyond the evidence in arguing that 1 John and John actually share the same outline, beginning with a prologue (1 John 1:1–4 and John 1:1–18), followed by two major blocks of narrative in John (1:19–12:50 and 13:1–20:29) and two blocks of argument in 1 John (1:5–3:10; 3:11–5:12), ending with a closing formula that is followed by an epilogue (1 John 5:13, 14–21 and John 20:30–31; 21:1–25). Lieu (2008, 17) rightly argues that we might be seeing the connections too closely if we imagine two texts of such very different genres imitating each other to such a great degree. But even if she is correct to remind us that the evidence is complicated, her caution might go too far in the other extreme by suggesting that the evidence is so complicated and so mysterious as to defy any effort to decide whether the texts are linked by literary dependence.

The copious lists of similarities sampled above suggest otherwise. The larger structural bonds that connect the texts are even more suggestive in showing literary dependence, and they make it extremely difficult to imagine how a "Johannine tradition" does not rely on literary dependence in some form. The opening lines and closing formulas shared by 1 John and the Gospel of John are the best place to see the problems with Lieu's approach, since it seems difficult to imagine that, in an unrelated and nonimitative fashion, the same Johannine tradition led two authors to refer in their opening lines to so many common terms. The two texts mention either what was "from the beginning" (*ap' archēs*) or "in the beginning" (*en archē*) and then proceed to use several common phrases such as "in the presence of God" (*pros ton theon* in John 1:1) and "in the presence of the Father" (*pros ton patera* in 1 John 1:2), and common terms such as "testimony," "light," "word," and "life." This kind of

close association suggests more than a coincidence arising from a common tradition. If the various terms and phrases that the texts share were randomly scattered throughout the works, then their similarities might be merely coincidental. But the fact that 1 John and John both employ these common phrases and words in their opening lines suggests that one of them is imitating the other. The same is true of the summary phrases that appear in John 20:31 and 1 John 5:13, as recognized above. More than a common tradition seems to be at work when two texts not only use the same words but also use them in the same places. This is why the vast majority of scholars assume that one of the Johannine texts is the model for the others, which leads us to the next question. If one text is copying the other, which text is copying which?

The monumental commentary of Urban C. von Wahlde (2010) argues that the Gospel copies its prologue from 1 John. The initial and most primitive form of the Fourth Gospel took shape prior to the writing of 1 John, he argues, but the final form of the Gospel copies 1 John. Support for this theory relies on first accepting several presuppositions about the source and editorial history of the Johannine tradition, especially as this relates to the Gospel. That matter cannot be discussed here in full since it would distract us too far from our present concern (but see Parsenius 2012a). It is important to stress, however, that von Wahlde has strong support for his theory. A chief piece of evidence in his favor comes with the use of the term “Paraclete.” In John 14:16, Jesus refers to the Spirit as “another Paraclete.” No one else is ever called a Paraclete in the Gospel, which makes it difficult to see why Jesus adds the adjective “another.” Yet 1 John 2:1 refers to Jesus as “a Paraclete before the Father.” This could very well mean that 1 John preceded the Gospel. If Jesus is first called a Paraclete in 1 John, and if 1 John was written before the Gospel, then the Gospel could very naturally refer to the Spirit as “another Paraclete.” The first Paraclete is Jesus in 1 John, and the Spirit is “another Paraclete” in the Gospel, written later.

The present commentary will argue the opposite and assume that the Gospel precedes 1–3 John. The prologue is again a decisive text. To assume that 1 John was written before the Gospel, we would have to imagine that the author of 1 John first coined the phrase “from the beginning” in the opening line of 1 John for reasons unknown, and that subsequently the Fourth Evangelist recognized a possible connection between this phrase and the phrase “In the beginning” from Gen. 1:1. The Evangelist then changed the phrase “from the beginning” into the scriptural phrase “In the beginning.” Such a scenario does not seem likely. More likely is the possibility that the Evangelist first used the phrase “In the beginning” in the Gospel as a way to connect the story of God’s work in Jesus to the story of God’s work in Genesis by repeating the phrase from Genesis, “In the beginning.” Then, later, 1 John changed this evocative phrase into the new formula “from the beginning” and reapplied the new phrase to a new problem in a new setting in the letter.

Rhetoric and the Opposition

If the author of these letters has obscured himself behind a veil of silence, that same veil covers the people to whom he writes and, even more, the people whom he opposes. The gaps in our knowledge provide room for scholarly debate, and interpreters have found several different ways to reconstruct the opponents against whom the author writes. Scholarly opinion varies so widely because the author does not consistently tell us who the opponents are, or even what they believe—even as he says a great deal about them. He paints a rhetorical portrait of them in order to interpret them for his readers. The opponents are “antichrists” and “false prophets” (2:18–22; 4:1, 3), and these labels tell us how the author of 1 John understands the opponents and how he wants his readers to understand them. But he does not tell us what the opponents themselves think. The rhetorical portrait in the letters is our only access to the opponents. On one level, then, the rhetoric of the letters is an obstacle to reconstructing the opponents and the problems plaguing the community. The veil of silence that covers the opponents is a veil of words.

And yet for some scholars the rhetoric of the letters does not impede historical reconstruction of the opponents but facilitates historical analysis. Duane Watson has argued not only that the rhetorical style and shape of the Letters of John rely on ancient rhetorical categories but also that particular categories were chosen in order to respond to specific problems in the Johannine orbit (1989a; 1989b; 1993). For instance, Watson shows that 1 John relies on the rhetorical technique of “amplification,” wherein an author repeatedly returns to and develops a particular set of ideas to “amplify” their importance (1993). But this is not merely a literary or rhetorical insight; it also has historical consequences. Watson argues that 1 John relies on “amplification” in order to win the greater adherence of its readers to the Johannine tradition in the face of the opponents who undermine that tradition. Rhetoric and historical reconstruction are tightly linked in his work.

Other interpreters connect the rhetoric of the letters to historical reconstruction in a different way, and their work will provide the impetus for the rhetorical concerns of this commentary. For these interpreters, the rhetorical presentation of the opponents not only shows us how to understand the rift in the community but also actually shows that the rift was not so great. They view the heated rhetoric of 1–3 John as mere rhetoric, and the supposedly permanent rift in the community as nothing more than a minor squabble among people still living in communion. This way of reading is articulated clearly by Pheme Perkins, who deserves to be quoted at length to make her position as clear as possible:

Scholars who are not sensitive to the language of oral cultures often misinterpret statements about opponents in ancient writings. You would get the impression

from reading some modern interpreters of the Johannine letters that the community was being violently ripped apart by the debates to which the author refers. In an oral culture, infused with rhetoric at every level, minor debates could produce major rhetorical responses that were often not indicative of the nature of the problem. . . . The point of rhetoric was to use every means possible to see that one's own position, the true or good one, prevailed over its "bad" opposition. Even sciences and medicine were discussed in terms of conflicts between forces, of battles that had to be won. (1978, xxi–xxii)

With this in mind, the heated rhetoric of the Johannine Letters might not imply such an elaborate schism. Perkins writes:

When the author speaks of his opponents having broken fellowship with his community, we perhaps have to think of the various types of feud and breaking off of association that occur in close-knit oral societies. . . . Such disputes do not destroy the whole fabric of a community. . . . Several hours after the most dire exchange of insults and threats, the opponents may be going about their business as though they had never fought. (1979, xxii–xxiii)

According to Perkins, we should not imagine some grand schism existing behind these letters but something more like a family quarrel that, once it blows over, is forgotten and a thing of the past. Fellowship continues.

Two aspects of this approach will be influential in what follows, with qualifications. First, the suggestion by Perkins that the quarrel in these letters is best compared to a family fight is helpful. The Letters of John regularly rely on familial language when they refer to the members of the church, as in the regular practice of addressing the readers as children (1 John 3:1, 2; 5:2; 2 John 1, 4, 13; 3 John 4) or "my little children" (1 John 2:12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). This may be an important sociological move on the part of the author. In antiquity, when people converted to a minority religion like Judaism or Christianity, they often strained or completely severed their ties to their natural families. Philo of Alexandria writes about the situation of Gentiles who became Jewish proselytes. By abandoning the polytheism of their past to follow the one God of Israel, they also abandoned the various family, social, and political ties connected to Greek and Roman religion. Since such proselytes had lost their former friendly and familial relations, Philo writes, "Let them not be denied another citizenship or other ties of *family and friendship*, and let them find places of shelter standing ready for refugees to the camp of piety" (*Spec. Laws* 1.52). Jews or pagans who follow Christ experience the same loss of family and friends, and so use kinship language to describe their relations to members of their new faith (see "Theological Issues" following section 2:12–3:10). This familial character of Christian community plays a subtle role in the conflict behind these letters. For example, 1 John 2:9–10 refers to those who remain in the community

as those who love their brothers, and to those who leave the community as those who hate their brothers.

But the familial character of the conflict raises the issue of how complete and total the conflict was. While some interpreters follow Perkins in downplaying the polemical edge, viewing the struggle as either not very great, or at least not very central to the argument of the letters (Lieu 1991, 5–6, 13–16, 66), others argue against this view. Raymond Brown (1982, 48–49) is prominent among them. He thinks that Perkins too quickly dismisses passages like 2 John 10–11: “If someone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house and do not say to him, ‘Greetings!’ For the one who says to him, ‘Greetings,’ has fellowship with his wicked deeds.” These verses imply a serious break of fellowship that is more extreme than Perkins’s approach allows. Brown’s position has broad support (see Painter 2002, 88–90). One is left to ask, Is the heated rhetoric mere rhetoric, or does it reflect historical reality?

The present commentary will develop a hybrid approach to this question. Perkins and Lieu may very well be correct that the division in the community is not so great, at least not yet. While certain people have left the fellowship (otherwise 1 John 2:19 could not have said, “They went out from us”), an ongoing relationship with these people seems to exist, since 1 John 3:7 tells the readers that they “are trying to deceive you.” A group of people have separated themselves from the community and seek to persuade others to follow them. And yet the readers of the letters might not yet realize just how dangerous the secessionists are. Following the argument of Perkins, the rift might not yet seem great to all members of the community. First John is written in order to make the danger plain. The forceful rhetoric of the letter may not imply that there already is a crisis. Perhaps instead it seeks to produce a crisis. Understood this way, the rhetoric is not simply “mere rhetoric” but is to be taken seriously as reflecting a grave situation for the author of 1 John. The community, as tightly knit as a family, is nevertheless susceptible to pollution by false teaching and is already experiencing some degree of division. All the community members may not yet know the danger that lies before them, and the author writes to oppose this teaching and to marginalize his opponents.

The Rhetoric of the Letters: *Sententiae* and Social Division

Since such a grave historical circumstance lies behind the forceful rhetoric of 1–3 John, more needs to be said about the rhetorical posture of the letters. A fruitful way to proceed is to focus on a rhetorical style that has not yet been explored in regard to 1–3 John: their reliance on the rhetorical *sententia*. A *sententia* (*gnōmē* in Greek) is a maxim that expresses some broadly held truth in a pithy, pointed style, such as the comment of Shakespeare’s Polonius:

“Neither a borrower nor a lender be” (*Hamlet*, act 1, scene 3). Maxims like these had been discussed and divided into different types as early as Aristotle (*Rhet.* 2.21), but they had a particular prominence in the rhetoric of the early Roman Empire.

The Stoic Seneca the Younger often expresses the paradoxes of Stoic philosophy in *sententiae*. For example, he urges Lucilius not to fear the criticism of others by saying, “One must scorn scorn itself” (*contemnendus est ipse contemptus*; *Ep.* 76.4; translations of Seneca in this paragraph are taken from Holloway 1998). Elsewhere, Seneca writes of the unimportance of wealth for the Stoic sage by insisting, “The shortest way to riches is to despise riches” (*brevisissima ad divitias per contemptum divitiarum via est*; *Ep.* 62.3). These *sententiae* rely on the common devices of antithesis and paradox. Equally common is paronomasia. This device exploits the various possible meanings of a word, or adds a prefix to a word, in order to create a surprising expression, as in a phrase from Seneca the Elder: “Shall, then, Cicero’s scribings [*quod scripsit*] perish, and Antony’s proscribings [*quod proscripsit*] remain?” (*Suas.* 7.11).

The Gospel of John expresses the paradoxes and antitheses of its theological vision by relying on a similar style of discourse. This is most obvious in a verse from John 3: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (3:5–6). Paradox is further present in the claim that “those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (12:25). This line also exploits the device of paronomasia, since the paradox that death leads to life is extended by a shift from earthly life to eternal life.

The Johannine Letters share this same style, which is especially prominent in 1 John. Several *sententiae* exploit antithetical realities, as follows:

- 1:5: God is light; in him there is no darkness.
- 2:9: Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness.
- 2:15: If anyone loves the world, love of the Father is not in him.
- 2:17: The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

Although 2 and 3 John are shorter and less rhetorically shaped than 1 John, this style nevertheless appears in 3 John: “Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God” (v. 11).

To identify the presence of *sententiae* in the Letters of John, though, is to say simply that these letters were written in the first century in the Roman Empire, a time and a place when *sententiae* were common and popular. The bigger question is: how do these *sententiae* function? Patrick Sinclair provides an answer to his question with an elegant phrase, “*Sententiae* speak to those

who understand” (1995, 33). *Sententiae* have a social function, drawing boundaries and establishing a social connection between author and audience. This was recognized as early as Aristotle, who writes:

The maxim, as has been already said, is a general statement and people love to hear stated in general terms what they already believe in some particular connection: e.g., if a man happens to have bad neighbors or bad children, he will agree with anyone who tells him, “Nothing is more annoying than having neighbors,” or, “Nothing is more foolish than to be the parent of children.” (*Rhet.* 2.21, trans. Roberts and Bywater 1954)

This is how *sententiae* function in the rhetoric of the early Roman Empire. Tacitus especially uses *sententiae* to solidify the boundaries of the Roman social elite, in order to separate Romans from barbarians and from anyone who does not live like a Roman. Tacitus defines the boundaries that divide Jews and Romans, for instance, with a *sententia* rich in antithesis: “The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred, and yet permit all that we abhor” (*Hist.* 5.4.1). *Sententiae* continue to function in this same way in the modern world, as many have shown in the writings of Rudyard Kipling. Kipling defines the relationship between England and its Asian and African colonies with phrases like “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (“The Ballad of East and West”). The line that separates England from India is drawn by such maxims in order to make absolutely sure that East will always be East and West will always be West, separate and apart. Kipling’s novel *Kim*, for instance, includes phrases like “Kim would lie like an Oriental.” Equally pointed in its chauvinism is the line “all hours of the twenty-four are alike to Orientals.” Edward Said argues that these maxims are *derived* from British perceptions of India, and in turn also *fortify* those perceptions as objective truths (2005). Social, cultural, and religious divisions find their rhetorical expression in *sententiae*.

The Johannine Letters do something similar, as when they say such things as “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Light and darkness are as separate as Kipling’s East and West. This rhetorical reality is also present in the Gospel of John. Just like Kipling’s insistence that East is East and West is West is the comment of Jesus to Nicodemus: “That born from flesh is flesh, and that born from Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). The immediately preceding verse (3:5) has already informed us that one born of flesh cannot enter the kingdom of heaven or, to return again to Kipling’s language, never the twain shall meet. The connection to Kipling here is more than stylistic. No less than Kipling’s maxims, Jesus’s *sententiae* in the Nicodemus dialogue provide a rhetorical expression of stark contrast. While Kipling illustrates the contrasts between England and India, the Fourth Gospel describes the contrasts between people of the flesh and people of the Spirit, those “from above” and those “from below” (3:31).

With no less immediacy 1 John insists that its readers are also caught between two realities: to behave and believe rightly, or to behave and believe wrongly. So 3:7–8 resembles both Kipling and the Nicodemus dialogue: “The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning.” The comment right before this verse says: “No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him” (3:6). In other words, “never the twain shall meet.” *Sententiae* shore up the boundaries that separate two realities and show that those boundaries cannot be crossed.

And yet when Kipling says of East and West that never the twain shall meet, he is saying something that is both true and false for the function of *sententiae* in the Johannine orbit. It is certainly true that flesh and darkness are utterly and irreconcilably separate from the Spirit and light. And yet the chasm between people of the flesh and people of the Spirit is not impassable. The chasm is vast, but the bridge that leads a person across this chasm is faith in Jesus Christ. The rhetorical *sententiae* of the Gospel do not define the realms of darkness and light so sharply in order to signal that people are locked in one realm or the other, with no chance to change or choose, but rather, in order to emphasize the need to choose the one over the other.

The *sententiae* of the Johannine Letters function in this way. The passage already cited above from 3 John 11 is instructive: “Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.” But right before this sententious statement comes a warning: “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good” (v. 11). The stark separation that the *sententiae* draw is intended to show the necessity of choosing one side or the other. The author is writing to people within his orbit, urging them to live in such a way that they remain within the realm of light. Light and darkness may be separate and apart, but people are not irredeemably consigned to one realm or the other. They can—and must—choose by their actions which realm they will inhabit. Thus 1 John 2:17 sets up the same choice: “The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” Right before this, 2:15 says, “Do not love the world or anything in the world.” The rebellious world and God are as far apart as Kipling’s East and West, but this contrast is drawn not to show that believers are locked securely within one or the other category but to show the importance of choosing to stay in the light.

The rhetoric of 1–3 John, therefore, is not mere rhetoric, and the problem in the community is not a mere family squabble. It is a profound crisis. The members of the community seem not to share the author’s sense of immediacy, and the extreme posture of the letter is meant to jar them into greater awareness. We should, perhaps, imagine something similar to the situation in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, where Paul is driven by such furious intensity precisely because his community is not so energized. Likewise, 1–3 John were

written to combat developing errors and to inoculate the community against being infected by error.

Settings and Purposes of 1–3 John

Setting and Purpose of 1 John

For decades, the setting and purpose of 1 John were defined by reconstructing the opponents against whom the letter argues. This practice has been called into question by recent interpreters, especially by Judith Lieu (2008, 9–14). Lieu helpfully and insightfully shows how our elaborate theories about the beliefs of the opponents can often be founded on unsteady hypotheses, which too easily become the (supposedly solid) foundation for further hypotheses. Reconstructing the opponents also takes our focus away from the argument of 1 John itself.

First John is our only window into the thought of the opponents, and it gives us its own interpretation of the views it opposes. Even more important, the letter tells us very little about those views. We do not even know for certain whether all the condemned views were held by one group only or by many different groups. The letter sees these issues as part of a coherent whole, but it is not clear whether there was a coherence in the opposition. It is difficult to know where to begin in reconstructing the rhetorical situation to which the letter responds. Painter provides a helpful way forward:

My assumption is that the Johannine Epistles are directed to the continuing Johannine community. 1 John is directed to the situation subsequent to the schism referred to in 2:18–19. It is addressed to those who have been confused and made unsure by the departure of the schismatics who were, until recently, members of the Johannine community. (2002, 85)

The schism to which Painter here refers appears in verses 2:18–19:

Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

The departure of some members of the community is clearly one of the precipitating factors that inspired the letter. There has been a schism, and 1 John urges the remaining believers to stay with the community and not to join the schismatic group. This concern for communal concord is not only of minor importance, and not something that comes into view only in chapter 2. The opening lines of 1 John already show the need to maintain communal

concord: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). To leave the fellowship of the community is not to choose an equally viable option but to choose a false community. The letter is written “so that you also may have fellowship with us.” In Galatians, Paul tells his readers that to choose another gospel is to choose a non-gospel (1:7). First John makes a similar point. The only path to fellowship with the Father and his Son is to abide within this one community, and within no other. Communal coherence is a major concern in 1 John.

By coordinating the contents of 1 and 2 John we gain greater insight. The evidence of 2 John suggests that this schism was not only a break in fellowship but also a disagreement over theology. Hence 2 John 7 reads, “I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.” This verse evokes 1 John 2:18–19 by (1) labeling its opponents as antichrists and (2) referring to them as “going out.” Yet 2 John 7 adds a theological element to the secessionists: “They do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh.” Something very similar appears in 1 John 4:1–3:

Dear friends, 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. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

Thus 2 John 7 shares several concerns with 1 John but pulls the various parts together into one problem in a way that 1 John does not. The separatists did not merely separate themselves; they also held a deficient Christology. Thus the rift that tears apart the community is theological, and maintaining communion with the proper community is connected to maintaining proper belief. These two issues find further coordination in other parts of 1 John, such as 4:15: “God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.” First John 1:3 has already said that having fellowship with God means having fellowship with the Johannine community, and 4:15 says that abiding in God means holding the proper faith. In these and other verses (see 3:23; 5:1, 5–13), 1 John seems to connect inclusion in the proper community with adherence to the proper faith, and both are necessary for fellowship with God.

False belief is clearly a problem, but less clear is the content of the belief that is considered false. The error of the opponents is mentioned in several places in 1 John (2:22–23; 4:15; 5:1, 5), but the error is not fully explained.

This commentary will assume, following many commentators, that the theological issue motivating 1 John is the reverse of the problem that motivated the Gospel of John. The Gospel was written to people who refused to believe that the man Jesus is God. They saw him as a mere human (cf. John 6:42). In response, the Gospel emphasized his divinity. First John faces the opposite problem. It is written to people who are Christians and who believe that Jesus is God. But in their certainty that he is God, they have come to deny that he was a human. This is why so much emphasis is placed, in both 1 and 2 John, on Jesus having become “flesh.” More certainty than this about the beliefs of the opponents is not possible.

The history of scholarship has seen many attempts to identify more specifically the opponents of 1 John as one or another of the groups known in the second century whose Christology seems to correspond to what is rejected in 1 John. For example, Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 98–117 CE) struggles against docetists who say that Christ only “seemed” (*dokein*) to suffer in the flesh (*Trall.* 2.1; *Smyrn.* 2). Because 1 and 2 John argue against those who say that Jesus did not come in the flesh (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7) and make several allusions to the reality and significance of Christ’s Passion (1 John 1:7; 2:2; 4:10), some have argued that Ignatius and 1–2 John share the same opponents. Another well-known candidate for identifying the opposition is the figure Cerinthus (ca. 100 CE), described by Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 180 CE; *Haer.* 1.26). Cerinthus did not believe that the earthly Jesus who existed in the flesh could be equated with the divine Christ, who was spiritual and who descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove at baptism. Cerinthus devised a scheme in which the earthly Jesus in the flesh had a particular identity that was temporarily joined to the Christ of the Spirit, but only very superficially. They were actually separate figures. Because 1 and 2 John insist that “Jesus Christ” came in the flesh, and strictly connect “Jesus” and “Christ,” some say they seem to respond to Cerinthus. Gnosticism, of course, is often mentioned in this debate, because certain gnostics devalued the physical quality of Jesus’s life and ministry in the manner of figures described above. But scholars continue to struggle to delimit gnostics as a social group (Layton 1995b), and there is no clear evidence in 1–3 John that the opponents adhere to the details of the gnostic redeemer story (see Layton 1995a).

In addition to second-century groups and personalities like the ones just listed, other groups have been proposed to define the teaching of the opposition behind 1–2 John (Brown 1982, 55–68), but the letters do not provide nearly enough information about the beliefs of their opponents to make a clear connection to any particular figures or groups known from other texts (Lieu 1991, 14–16). One does not need to make a specific connection to a particular group or individual, however, to learn from these second-century figures. They all show a failure to appreciate the full reality of the incarnation: they devalue the belief that Jesus appeared in the flesh. If the opponents

Possible Opponents behind the Letters of John

Docetists

“Be deaf, then, when someone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, of the family of David, of Mary, who was truly born, both ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died, . . . who was also truly raised from the dead.” (Ignatius of Antioch, *Trall.* 9–10, trans. Schoedel 1985, 152)

Cerinthus

“A certain Cerinthus . . . proposes Jesus, not as having been born of a Virgin—for this seemed impossible to him—but as having been born the son of Joseph and Mary like all other men, and that he excelled over every person in justice, prudence and wisdom. After his baptism, Christ descended on him in the shape of a dove from the Authority that is above all things. Then he preached the unknown Father and worked wonders. But at the end Christ again flew off from Jesus. Jesus indeed suffered and rose again from the dead, but Christ remained impassible, since he was spiritual.” (Irenaeus of Lyons, *Haer.* 26.1, trans. Unger 1992, 90)

of the Johannine Letters have no specific connection to known entities in the ancient world, they do reflect the same general concerns that known figures debated regarding the salvific significance—or lack thereof—that should be ascribed to the human flesh of Jesus.

Was there also a debate with the secessionists over morality? The question is hard to answer for certain. First John is clearly concerned about Christian behavior and raises the issue several times in relation to Christology. From the perspective of 1 John, belief and behavior are closely connected. In 3:23 we read, “And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us” (see also 4:7–5:5). Likewise, the letter opens with a lengthy section on the proper way for Christians to live (1:5–2:11) and says a great deal about sin in several places (1:5–2:11; 2:28–3:10; 5:16–18), as well as the effect of Jesus’s death for human sin (1:7; 2:12; 4:10). Tremendous stress is also placed on the need for Christians to love one another (2:9–11; 3:10–18). Could this emphasis relate in any way to the christological debate? It is possible. One could speculate that the opponents who rejected the sacrificial life of Jesus on earth in the flesh also rejected that they needed to live their own lives in a sacrificial manner. This would explain why 1 John 3:16–17 says:

We know love by this: that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

We can only speculate over how such comments relate to what the opponents actually taught and believed about Christology. On the one hand, it is conceivable that their very different Christology led to a very different view of morality. On the other hand, if their only deviation was in the area of Christology, the author of 1 John might connect Christology and behavior so closely in order to show that they are inherently inseparable. The opponents might have believed that their behavior could remain correct, even if they altered their Christology. The Johannine Letters connect behavior and belief in order to show that believers cannot have one without the other: true belief and true behavior are inseparable. In the end, the only thing clear is that the author of 1 John connects these issues. We cannot know what he argues against, but we can see clearly what he argues for. The loving sacrifice of Christ, when properly understood, requires his followers to live lives of loving sacrifice themselves.

Interpreters often describe this intersection of Christology and the love command under the twin titles of “Christology” and “ethics.” David Rensberger rightly shows the poverty of these categories for describing 1 John:

The epistles are not concerned with ethics. . . . The only ethical category of interest to the author is love for one another, and love rather than “ethics” seems the more appropriate heading. . . . In Jesus was revealed not only the God who is love, but [also] the good news that human beings can love one another with this same love. (1997, 35)

First John responds with such alarm to the theology and the secession of the opponents precisely because their Christology imperils the proper understanding of such love. Their anemic Christology diminishes the profundity of the incarnation, and their act of separating themselves from the broader community diminishes the love expressed through the concord of the community.

Thus 1 John is, broadly and loosely speaking, an example of paraenetic literature. The Greek word *parainesis* means “advice” or “exhortation,” and a large body of paraenetic speeches and letters survive from antiquity, designed to give advice and exhortation. More specific treatment of the concept of paraenesis will be given in the commentary on 2 John, but 1 John also has a basic paraenetic quality. Essentially, paraenetic discourse has two functions: to encourage people to follow one course of action, and to dissuade them from following another (Libanius, *Epis. Styles* 5). First John certainly fits these broad criteria for paraenetic discourse: its basic concerns are to urge people to follow the true teaching enshrined within the community and to avoid the false teaching associated with those who have left the community. Second John even more closely fits the model of the paraenetic letter, and we can turn to 2 John now.

Setting and Purpose of 2 John

Second John seems to respond to the same crisis as 1 John, and to do so in the same way. Most commentators agree on this point. Commentators disagree, though, on what explains this similarity. Why did the same author write the same argument twice? Was 2 John sent to a different community? Was it sent to the same community, but following 1 John? Or, rather, was it sent before 1 John? Was it, in this way of thinking, the quick, rough draft of the argument that was sent out when the crisis first exploded, followed by 1 John when time had permitted a longer, more reflective response? Or did it actually accompany 1 John? It is hard to know for sure which of these scenarios corresponds to reality. We can only say for certain that 2 John closely resembles 1 John. In at least one important way, though, 2 John differs from 1 John: we see that 2 John actually tells its audience how to respond to the secessionist opponents. In verses 10–11, readers are told not even to welcome anyone who teaches a different theology from the one approved by the author. Literary issues also distinguish 2 John from 1 John. While the genre of 1 John is difficult to discern, 2 John is obviously a letter (see below, under “The Relationship of the Johannine Letters to Ancient Letters”).

Setting and Purpose of 3 John

Third John is simultaneously the most clear and the most enigmatic of all the Johannine Letters. It is the clearest because it is the only one of the three documents that provides names for the people it mentions. It begins by praising Gaius for help that he has provided for traveling missionaries (1–8), condemns Diotrephes for refusing to provide similar help (9–10), and then urges Gaius to show further support for Demetrius (11–12). Thus it is a letter of recommendation, a type common in ancient epistolography. When journeying abroad, travelers would need the support of people dwelling in the areas they visited. A letter of introduction/recommendation from a person who was known in the foreign land would win the support of locals for the unknown traveler. But if the status of 3 John as a letter of introduction/recommendation is clear, the relationship of 3 John to the problems raised in 1–2 John is not at all clear. Diotrephes rejects the emissaries of the Elder. Does this mean that Diotrephes is one of those who has left the community, the secessionists described in 1–2 John? Some believe that we can say nothing positive about Diotrephes in this regard (Lieu 2008, 265–66), while others believe that he is indeed a secessionist (Painter 2002, 361–65). This commentary will follow the position laid out by Brown (1982, 732–39), who argues that nothing specific can connect Diotrephes to the secessionist group. After all, if the Elder teaches not to receive emissaries from opposing groups in 2 John, why would he be angry if Diotrephes did not receive any emissaries? Indeed, why would such emissaries even be sent?

Further, no clearly doctrinal problems are attached to Diotrephes. The only error on his part is to reject the agents sent from the Elder. This act

of rejection is an act of inhospitality, according to the conventions governing letters of introduction, but it is not a dogmatic error, and not obviously connected to the problems appearing in 1–2 John. And yet, at a certain level of abstraction, there is an oblique way to connect 3 John to the problems of 1–2 John. Diotrephes may not have been a member of the secessionist group, but he might still have been motivated by the problems between the Elder and the secessionists when he refused to welcome the agents of the Elder. It is possible that he no longer knew whom to trust, given the presence of traveling missionaries (as in 2 John), and so refused to welcome any traveling teachers, even those sent by the Elder. This is the position taken in the commentary, but it cannot be proved beyond a reasonable doubt.

The Letters in Relationship to One Another

Though it is not entirely clear how all these letters fit into a coherent narrative of activity, it is, nevertheless, reasonably clear that they all were produced by the same source. Shared vocabulary is the most immediate tie that binds the three texts, as seen in the discussion above. The texts can be bound together even more closely. At first, 1 and 3 John seem the most remote and different, but these two texts do not exist in isolation. They stand together alongside 2 John, and each has important connections with 2 John. Regardless of the order in which the separate documents were produced, we can see 2 John as the link that holds the other letters in a single chain. Both 2 and 3 John, for instance, share the same sender, “the Elder.” This makes their link secure. In the same way, 2 John and 1 John address the same basic theological problems and the same schism. When 2 John 7 refers to “many deceivers who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh,” one cannot help but hear an echo of 1 John 4:2: “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” Thus 2 John is the common ground that shows the shared origin of 1 and 3 John. Each of them is so tightly connected to 2 John that they are reasonably connected to each other. Because the author of 2 John seems to have written 1 John and 3 John, we can surmise that the same author (or authors) wrote them all. But if the same author wrote all three documents, the one thing he changed was his manner of presentation. The manner of writing in 2 and 3 John is typical of ancient letters, but 1 John is much more distant in form from a standard letter. To explain the differences, we must look now at the conventions of ancient epistolography.

The Relationship of the Johannine Letters to Ancient Letters

The most definitive elements of an ancient letter come in the opening line. As John Muir (2009, 1) says succinctly, “Most ancient letters are easily

recognizable. . . . They begin with ‘A to B, greetings’ (or a slight variation of that) and usually end with a single word of good wishes ‘Farewell’ or ‘Best wishes.’” A letter from Cicero in 58 BCE to his colleague Atticus (*Att.* 3.7) begins with three Latin words: *Cicero Attico sal*, where *sal* is short for *salutem dicit*, “offers greetings.” These three words can be translated roughly as “Cicero [sender] offers greetings [the greeting] to Atticus [recipient].” A Greek letter from a certain Apollonios in third-century Egypt demonstrates the model in Greek as follows (P.Oxy. 2783): *Apollonios Artema tō adelphō chairein*, which can be roughly translated, “Apollonios [sender] to his brother Artemas [recipient], greetings [the greeting].” As a good example of the type in the NT, 1 Thessalonians (1:1) opens as follows:

Senders: Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
Recipients: To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Greeting: Grace to you and peace.

This pattern appears not only in almost all the Letters of the Pauline corpus (Rom. 1:1–7; 1 Cor. 1:1–3; 2 Cor. 1:1–2; Gal. 1:1–5; Eph. 1:1–2; Phil. 1:1–2; Col. 1:1–2; 2 Thess. 1:1–2; 1 Tim. 1:1–2; 2 Tim. 1:1–2; Titus 1:1–4; Philem. 1–3; Hebrews alone opens without such an epistolary greeting) but also in every other letter in the NT, though with some variations.

2–3 John and Ancient Letters

Following these standard conventions, 2 and 3 John begin by naming both their senders and recipients. They both identify their sender as “the Elder,” and 2 John is sent to “the Elect Lady and her children,” while 3 John is addressed to a certain Gaius. They also share many other elements with the typical ancient letter. For instance, 3 John offers a wish for good health (v. 2), a thanksgiving (v. 3), a standard promise to follow up the letter with a personal visit (vv. 13–14), and the offering of greetings to and from a third party prior to a farewell (v. 15). In addition, 3 John is classified as a letter of introduction or recommendation, a category of letter that will be further discussed in the commentary on 3 John. Second John is more generally a paraenetic letter. Paraenetic letters were often used as opportunities to offer advice to distant friends, relatives, and associates.

1 John and Ancient Letters

Because 1 John begins with an introductory paragraph that is often called a prologue, and because it lacks the epistolary opening that is found in 2 and 3 John, it is rare for commentators to classify the document as a letter. The evidence does not entirely prevent calling it a letter, of course. Support for seeing 1 John as a letter comes first from the early church, which had no

trouble calling it a letter (Lieu 2008, 5). Also, 1 John does contain certain other features common in letters, which should not be ignored. Hans-Josef Klauck writes (2006, 343), “The motif of joy in 1:4 . . . , the frequent reflection on the act of writing by *graphō* (2:1, 7, etc.) and *egrapsa* (2:14, etc.), and the repeated direct address of the audience can all be considered indications of an epistolary act of communication.” It is certainly possible that the epistolary introduction to 1 John was removed when it was collected with the other Johannine Letters. It is sometimes argued that the opening and closing elements of a letter could be removed when collected, or they could drop out when letters were incorporated into a larger literary work (Stowers 1986, 20), like the letters collected in the histories of Thucydides and Herodotus (Trapp 2003, 23, 37, for examples). But the evidence for this is not unambiguous. It is possible that when these histories were written (fifth century BCE), the opening epistolary forms had not yet solidified completely. If this is so, then the standard epistolary features of these excerpted letters were not removed but never actually existed (Muir 2009, 1). Given these complications, the safest conclusion is to recognize that the epistolary quality of 1 John is not at all clear. This commentary will call 1 John a letter, but with the recognition that this label is more convenient than it is certain.

Authorship

Questions about the authorship of 1–3 John align along two broad areas of inquiry: (1) Do all three letters share the same author? (2) Did the author of the Gospel write the Letters? Scholarly responses to these questions are almost as numerous as there are scholars. The position of this commentary is that the three letters are the product of a single mind, given their close association on various levels. All three letters also share common features with, and allude in various ways to, the Fourth Gospel, suggesting associations with that book as well (see earlier discussion under “The Relationship of the Letters to the Gospel”). Irenaeus of Lyons (fl. 180) attributed the Gospel and 1–2 John to John the son of Zebedee already in the second century (*Haer.* 3.16.5, 8), and a comment by Origen (184–253) suggests that 2 and 3 John were considered by some to be the product of the same disciple in the third century (preserved in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.9–10). An even earlier notice of the existence of the Johannine Letters comes from Papias (early second century), who knew of “the former letter of John and likewise that of Peter” (in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.17). Even so, the final acceptance and inclusion of all three letters in the canonical Scripture was a long process, with many fits and starts even in the fourth century (Lieu 1986; C. Hill 2004). By the later fourth century, the famous Festal Letter of Athanasius (367), the Synod of Hippo (393), and the Council of Carthage (397) all accepted the three Letters of John, but 2–3 John

never appear in the corpus of writings of John Chrysostom (d. 407) or of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428).

Scholarly approaches to the problem of authorship span a broad spectrum. Raymond Brown believes that the antiquity of the tradition about Johannine authorship means that John the apostle was the source of the theology and traditions expressed in the Gospel. Yet he adds (1) that the final form of the Gospel shows refinement and development of these traditions and (2) that he cannot prove John as the source of these traditions to someone who does not take seriously either the ancient ecclesiastical traditions or the claims of the Gospel itself to be the product of an eyewitness (1966, 1.cii). The letters, Brown adds, were written by a later leader in the Johannine community (1982, 69–115). Judith Lieu adopts a polar-opposite position and emphasizes both the anonymous quality of these letters and their differences in purpose and form from one another (2008, 2–9). She recognizes that they have certain qualities in common, and so can be gathered together into a group under the label “Johannine,” but emphasizes their uniqueness from one another and their anonymity. Finally, some have argued that both the Gospel and the Letters were not written by John the disciple but by John the elder (Hengel 1989; Bauckham 2007). Papias of Hierapolis (early second century) mentions a group of “elders” who transmit the traditions of the apostles (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.3–4), (although it is not entirely clear how these elders relate to the apostles), and among them he lists John the elder. Scholars have tried to connect this John the elder to the elder who wrote 2–3 John, on the assumption that ecclesiastical tradition confused John the elder and John the disciple. However, these arguments always rely on accepting several contested interpretations of ancient texts, and then rely on these contested interpretations as the basis for further interpretations of other texts, until one loses confidence in the practice (see Lieu 1986, 12–14, 55–63; Rensberger 1997, 19).

It is beyond the scope of the present format to evaluate and explore all the relevant evidence and all the scholarly debates about authorship. A few tentative things can be said about this point, though. Irenaeus represents an ancient tradition that attributes at least the Gospel of John and some combination of 1–2 John to John the disciple. Other ancient testimonies complicate matters, but none of them is as unambiguous as Irenaeus (see Painter 2002, 44–50). As Brown noted above, not everyone accepts this ancient ecclesiastical tradition, and it is not possible to prove a connection to the historical John while following the canons of critical historical study. Furthermore, the documents themselves do not claim common authorship. The Gospel is attributed to the “Beloved Disciple,” 2–3 John are attributed to the “elder” and 1 John is anonymous. These facts cannot be ignored. But neither do I see any reason to deny the traditional attribution to John the disciple of any of these texts, as long as this attribution is understood in a broad sense, meaning that the documents may not have come from the pen of John, the son of Zebedee, but at least from his

Irenaeus Attributes John, 1 John, and 2 John to John the Son of Zebedee

Adversus haereses 3.16.5

"As John the Lord's disciple affirms, saying, 'But these things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and believing might have eternal life in his name' (John 20:31). . . . Wherefore also in his Epistle he has borne this witness unto us: 'Little children, it is the last hour: and as you have heard that Antichrist comes, now many Antichrists have appeared, whereby we know that it is the last hour' (1 John 2:18–19)."

Adversus haereses 3.16.8

"His disciple John in the aforementioned Epistle bade us fly from them, saying, 'Many deceivers have gone out into this world, who do not confess Jesus Christ come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an Antichrist' (2 John 7). . . . And again he says in the Epistle, 'Many false prophets are gone out into the world' (1 John 4:1)." (trans. Painter 2002, 48–49)

Irenaeus is writing circa 180 CE. The latter passage conflates 2 John 7–8 and 1 John 4, suggesting that perhaps he knew them as one epistle.

orbit of followers and from the teaching associated with him. There seems to me no reason to deny this. Luke Timothy Johnson makes a similar claim in regard to a different biblical book when he argues that the Epistle of James was produced by James of Jerusalem, the "brother of the Lord" mentioned by Paul (Gal. 1:19). Johnson writes, "I will not try to do the impossible and demonstrate beyond the possibility of cavil that James of Jerusalem was indeed the author of James, even though I share the view that preponderance of evidence makes that position one that can be held with a high degree of confidence" (2004, 3; for a different point of view on James, see Allison 2013).

This does not mean, however, that critical historical arguments must be put aside in evaluating the authorship of the epistles, especially when it

Reference to 1 John 4:2–3 in Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians

"Let us be eager with regard to what is good, and let us avoid those who tempt others to sin, and false brothers, and those who bear the name of the Lord hypocritically, who lead foolish people astray. For everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist." (6.3–7.1 [ca. 115 CE], trans. Holmes 2007, 289; cf. 1 John 4:2–3; 2 John 7)

comes to assessing their relationship to the Gospel. I am simply more and more convinced that one can reasonably believe that the Gospel and Letters of John are products of the same mind, whether that mind is a single person or a collective body, because the books seem bound to one another at various levels of abstraction. We have already seen above that they share a common vocabulary, combine that vocabulary into common expressions, and share larger rhetorical and structural complexes (see above, “The Relationship of the Letters to the Gospel” and “The Rhetoric of the Letters: *Sententiae* and Social Division”). The commentary that follows will try in various ways to show that the Gospel and Letters share additional commonalities which bind them very closely. These shared qualities will be cataloged briefly at the close of the commentary on 1 John, in the “Theological Issues” section following 5:21.

And yet the historical question about authorship, while obligatory in the commentary format, is not the only way to explore the anonymous authorship of these letters. Judith Lieu very helpfully emphasizes that all the documents in the Johannine tradition mask the identity of their authors. The Gospel lists explicitly the names of many of Jesus’s disciples, but its own author is identified not by name but only by the epithet “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (21:20, 24). The very title that reveals his identity also conceals it. The Letters are similarly reluctant to name their authors. Although ancient letters identify their sender as a matter of course, 1 John tells us nothing at all about its author. Also, 2 and 3 John operate like the Gospel. They simultaneously reveal and conceal the identity of their author by identifying him not by a name but by the epithet “the Elder” (2 John 1; 3 John 1). Anonymity seems intentional in all of these texts. Lieu refers to “the chosen anonymity of the letters” as “a deliberate technique in the Johannine literature” (2008, 9). Whether we have in mind the Beloved Disciple of the Gospel of John, the Elder of 2–3 John, or the total silence of 1 John, all four texts are alike in being produced by an author who obscures himself. This commentary will understand such anonymity as an important statement on the nature of discipleship in the Johannine tradition (see the “Theological Issues” section following 1:1–4).

Date and Place of Composition

Because this commentary assumes that the Letters follow the Gospel, the date of the Letters—at least in part—depends on the dating of the Gospel, but assigning a date to the Gospel is more complicated than it once was. The Fourth Gospel was often assigned to the late first century, on the traditional belief that the earliest manuscript of John, \mathfrak{P}^{52} (P.Ryl. 3.457), is to be dated to the early second century. Brent Nongbri has shown that such a specific date is not so certain, so

the date of the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel is now less clear (2005). But Charles Hill (2004, 418–19) argues that 1 John 4:2–3 and 2 John 7 are referenced in Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians* (7.1), which is generally dated to about 115 CE (Holmes 2007, 272–79). Against a long history of suspicion that the Gospel of John was read only by gnostic interpreters until the late second century, Hill (2004, 421–43) also argues convincingly that much earlier writers, like Ignatius of Antioch, cited the Fourth Gospel in the early years of the second century. The Gospel had to be written before this then, and if the Gospel seems to have been produced sometime in the last two decades of the first century, the letters would have been written soon thereafter. The letters themselves tell us nothing about their place of origin. Tradition has often connected the Gospel and Letters of John to the city of Ephesus or its environs, and the very first reference to the Letters of John comes in the *Letter to the Philippians* of Polycarp. Because Polycarp was bishop of the city of Smyrna, a close neighbor of Ephesus, the Ephesian origin of the letters seems a plausible assumption but hardly one that can proven beyond any doubt (cf. von Wahlde 2010, 14–15).

Outline of First John

Introductory prologue (1:1–4)

The light and the darkness (1:5–2:11)

Three boasts: “If we say . . .” (1:5–2:2)

Three boasts: “Whoever says . . .”
(2:3–11)

Who are the children of God? (2:12–3:10)

“I have written . . . I am writing”
(2:12–14)

God and the world (2:15–17)

The Christ and the antichrists (2:18–27)

Born from above, born from below
(2:28–3:10)

Love for God, love for one another (3:11–4:21)

Love one another (3:11–18)

Believe in the Son (3:19–24)

True teaching is “from God” (4:1–6)

True fellowship is “from God” (4:7–21)

Testimony and witnesses (5:1–21)

Witnesses (*martyriai*) for God’s Son
(5:1–12)

Martyrs (*martyres*) for God’s Son
(5:13–21)

Outline of Second John

Epistolary prescript (1–3)

The true faith and the true way of life (4–6)

The false faith and the false way of life (7–9)

False teachers and hospitality (10–11)

Epistolary farewell (12–13)

Outline of Third John

Epistolary opening (1–4)

Hospitality for missionaries (5–8)

**The inhospitality of Diotrephes
(9–10)**

**The recommendation of Deme-
trius (11–12)**

Epistolary closing (13–15)

1 John 1:1–4

Introductory Prologue



Introductory Matters

The opening lines of a literary work serve as a threshold that a reader crosses in order to leave behind the broader world of human experience and enter into the more limited world of a text. Some interpreters have compared a written work's opening lines to the *introitus* of a piece of music, which introduces listeners to the musical composition that follows (Betz 1995, 92). Others have looked to architecture and compared the opening lines of a book, like the prologue of the Gospel of John, to the opening staircase of an ancient temple, which ushers one from the mundane world of the public street to the sacred space of the divine presence (Phillips 2006, 1–2; but see Fish 1980). The opening lines of 1 John function like such a threshold, but not in the usual way. These opening lines invite us into the world of the text by stopping us short and forcing us to pause. Complicated syntax and a peculiar use of key terms keep the reader from smoothly moving forward. If these verses orient us to the text that follows, they do so only by disorienting us. The misdirection is not haphazard, though. It has a theological purpose, grounded in the incarnation. Through the incarnation, according to 1 John, the invisible, immaterial God has become a person whom we can touch and see (1:1–4), while still continuing to be the God whom no one has ever beheld (4:12). A world in which God has become flesh, and yet continues to be the immaterial God, is a new and mysterious world, a world of paradoxes. God is infinitely distant and apart, and yet at the same time intimately present and near. He has been revealed,

and yet remains concealed. Ephrem the Syrian neatly expresses this reality when he writes about the incarnation as follows:

Who will not give thanks to the Hidden One, most hidden of all,
Who came to open revelation, most open of all,
For he put on a body, and other bodies felt Him,
Though minds never grasped Him? (*Hymns on Faith* 19.7, trans. Brock
1992, 28)

When Ephrem says, “He put on a body, and other bodies felt Him,” one hears a poetic restatement of 1 John 1:1: “That which we have seen and our hands have touched.” Ephrem’s phrase “minds never grasped Him” corresponds to a later verse, 1 John 4:12: “No one has ever seen God.” The revelation of God in the incarnation does not mean that humans now understand all there is to understand about God, or even that we understand what has been revealed with mathematical certainty. It means, rather, that we are invited into a mystery that everyday patterns of speech cannot express. Ephrem presents his own theology in a poetic format for precisely this reason, so that (like all Greek and Syrian patristic writers) he can emphasize the paradoxes that lie at the heart of the incarnation. On this point, Sebastian Brock writes, “For this purpose poetry proves a far more suitable vehicle than prose, seeing that poetry is much better capable of sustaining the essential dynamism and fluidity that is characteristic of this sort of approach to theology” (1992, 24). The opening lines of 1 John operate in the same fashion: they orient us toward a paradoxical view of the world by necessarily disorienting us. Three points of confusion are especially prominent: (1) authorial anonymity; (2) style and syntax; (3) and the relationship between 1 John and the Gospel of John.

Authorial Anonymity

We call 1 John a letter, following a precedent extending back to ancient Christian commentators. In many ways the text behaves like a letter, but it does not begin like a letter. Ancient letters ordinarily open by naming their senders and recipients, and then by offering a greeting. The First Letter of John is different. It tells us neither who sent it nor to whom it was sent, and so we know very little about the circumstances that produced the document. To many interpreters, the lack of such an opening means that the document should not be understood as a letter at all (see “Introduction to the Letters of John”).

Style and Syntax

The second source of confusion and of scholarly discussion is the unusual prose style of 1:1–4. Here, too, we find opacity. Opacity does not mean sloppiness, though, and George Strecker (1996, 8) and Martin Culy

(2004, 1–2) rightly argue that this style not only seems intentional but also shows an obvious plan. The circuitous syntax is easy to follow once one recognizes that the author has employed a “topic construction” (Culy 2004, 2). In a topic sentence, the item to be stressed is placed at the start of the thought in order to give it prominence. In the case of 1 John 1:1, the phrases that are given focus are the several relative clauses placed in apposition to one another. Their relationship to the rest of the sentence is not at first clear. The text simply begins by saying, “that which we have heard, that which we have beheld with our eyes, that which we have seen and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—” (1:1). These clauses are the direct objects of the verb *apangellomen*, “we announce,” but *apangellomen* does not appear until two verses later, in 1:3. Between these opening relative clauses and their accompanying verb stands a lengthy parenthetical comment in 1:2, which further delays the coordination of all the pieces of the discourse. The effect of these various delays and misdirections is to give the reader pause and to create a heightened tension that draws the reader into the discourse.

The topic construction focuses on what “we have seen and heard,” which clearly refers to the incarnate Jesus, but the name of Jesus is not given until 1:3. The most important name is thus delayed. The same effect exists in the Gospel of John, where the name of Jesus is not mentioned until 1:17, and Jesus himself does not appear in the narrative until 1:29. He does not speak until 1:38 (Culy 2004, 2). When all these effects are understood in concert in 1 John, the reader is simultaneously drawn forward into the text and repelled by the unusual syntax. Or, to repeat the language from above, the reader is oriented to the text by being disoriented.

The Relationship between 1 John and the Gospel of John

A similar quality characterizes the relationship between the opening lines of 1 John and the opening lines of the Gospel of John. The first four verses of 1 John seem in many ways to echo the prologue to the Gospel by employing the same key terms, such as “word” (*logos*; John 1:1, 14; 1 John 1:1); “life” (*zōē*; John 1:4; 1 John 1:1, 2); “testify/witness” (*martyria/martyrein*; John 1:7, 8, 15; 1 John 1:2); “beheld” (*heōraken*; John 1:18; *heōrakamen*; 1 John 1:1, 2, 3); “saw” (*etheasametha*; John 1:14; 1 John 1:1); Father (John 1:14, 18; 1 John 1:3); Son (John 1:14, 18; 1 John 1:3).

Connections between John and 1 John extend beyond the mere repetition of key terms. Phrases and styles of speech are also shared in common. For example, the Gospel famously opens by announcing, “In the beginning was the Word,” while 1 John opens with the phrase “that which was from the beginning” (1:1). The relationship between the two phrases is more obvious in Greek, where in both cases the term “beginning” (*archē*) is the object of a preposition and is joined to the verb of “being” (*ēn*, “was”) as follows:

John 1:1	<i>en arche ên</i>	<u>in</u> the beginning was
1 John 1:1	<i>ên ap' archês</i>	was <u>from</u> the beginning

Similarly striking is the parallel use of the preposition *pros*. John 1:1 famously says that the “Word was *with* God,” which translates the unusual phrase *pros ton theon*. First John repeats this unusual phrase yet varies the preposition’s object, saying that the Word of life was “with the Father,” *pros ton patera* (1:2). The use of *pros* with the accusative case as a preposition meaning “with” is uncommon. The fact that this uncommon usage appears in the opening lines of both texts suggests a relationship between the two works. Thus in various ways they are strikingly similar.

And yet their similarity is a similarity-in-difference. The same words and phrases are used, but they are not used in the same way. While the Fourth Gospel opens (1:1) by speaking of the word (*Logos*) that was *in* the beginning (*archê*), and 1 John discusses the word that was *from* the beginning (*archê*, 1:1), the respective meanings of “beginning” are different. In the Gospel, Jesus is the Word who existed in the beginning, where the term “beginning” refers to the time before creation. The point is clear: the Word existed before the world was created. By contrast, the “beginning” in 1 John cannot refer to a time before the existence of the physical world, since it so clearly refers to something physical that can be touched and seen and heard (1:1). Thus the same terms are used in both prologues, but they are used in very different ways, reflecting different realities and rhetorical concerns.

To sum up briefly, the opening lines of 1 John disorient the reader in various ways. First, the document does not open like a typical letter, so we do not know who sent it or to whom it was sent. Second, whatever information 1 John does provide in its opening lines is presented in a swirling array of phrases that have an obvious meaning in the end, but only after one is led along a circuitous path. Finally, the opening verses of 1 John evoke the language and style of John but in a way that makes the relationship between the two texts difficult to determine. The shared language is familiar, but only in an oblique and opaque manner. These apparent forms of madness are not without method, though. Such acts of misdirection and confusion seem designed to prepare us for the argument that follows, which is centered on the mysterious character of the incarnation.

1 John 1:1–4 in the Rhetorical Flow

► Introductory prologue (1:1–4)

Tracing the Train of Thought

1:1. First John opens by referring to **that which was from the beginning** (*ex archês*). This phrase has generated considerable discussion among commentators, not only

because of its similarity to the opening phrase of the Fourth Gospel but also because it is not immediately clear when “the beginning” was. Several possibilities present themselves. The term “beginning” is common in the Johannine literature, occurring eight times in the Gospel (1:1, 2; 2:11; 6:64; 8:25, 44; 15:27; 16:4), and ten times in 1 and 2 John (1 John 1:1; 2:7, 13, 14, 24 [2x]; 3:8, 11; 2 John 5, 6). Because the word does not always appear in the same context, it seems to carry different shades of meaning in different settings. Such an elastic use of language is not at all unusual for the Johannine literature. For example, the term *pneuma* in John 3:8 refers to both the wind and the Holy Spirit—a shift in reference that takes place within a single sentence. Different shades of meaning over the range of entire texts are thus very plausible, and other meanings of the term “beginning” may be operative in other verses in 1 and 2 John. But the sense in 1 John 1 seems to be that expressed in various NT texts that use either the noun *archē* (beginning) or the verb *archein* (to begin) in reference either to Jesus’s baptism (Mark 1:1; Luke 3:23; Acts 1:22) or to the beginning of Jesus’s ministry (John 6:64; 15:27; 16:4). This is clearly how the word is understood in 1 John 2:7; 3:11; and 2 John 5, 6. “From the beginning” in 1:1, then, means “from the first association” with Jesus (Brown 1982, 157). To say that the teaching extends “from the beginning” means that it is grounded in the life and ministry and teaching of Jesus.

A further matter that deserves attention is the possible legal quality of the phrase “from the beginning.” The expression “from the beginning” is a technical phrase in legal proceedings, appearing not only in Greek and Latin courtroom rhetoric but also in scenes from dramas that imitate a legal setting. The phrase is not only legal, of course; it also has a more general usage and is found in the opening lines of narratives of all sorts. To introduce a narrative with the phrase “from the beginning” is a way to alert the reader that an elaborate and full narrative will follow (Carey 1992, 93). In Plato’s *Symposium* (174.1), for example, when Apollodoros begins to recount the speeches that took place at a dinner party so long ago, he says, “But it might be better for me to try to tell you the whole story right from the start [*ex archēs*].” Alongside this general use of the phrase exists a specific usage that applies to the legal *narratio*, the part of the speech in which a person presents his version of the events in question during a courtroom trial. As Alan Sommerstein says, “The phrase is regularly used by prosecutors in introducing their narrative of the facts of the case” (1989, 192). Lysias, for example, opens his speech *Against Eratosthenes* by saying, “Nevertheless, I will try to inform you of the matter from the beginning [*ex archēs*] as briefly as I can” (12.3). Demosthenes

Jesus as the *Archē* in the Book of Revelation

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning (archē) and the end.” (22:13)

does the same in his speech *Against Conon* (54.2): “I shall state to you from the beginning [*ex archēs*] each incident as it occurred in the fewest words I can” (cf. also Lysias 32.3; Isocrates, *Nic.* 7.3). Playwrights followed these rhetorical models in staging trial scenes and legal scenarios of various kinds. In the famous trial that takes place in Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, for example, the goddess Athena dubs the chorus leader “the prosecutor [*ho diōkōn*]” and invites the leader to recount the details of the issue in dispute “from the beginning [*ex archēs*]” (line 583). Plautus’s *Andria* shows the same device in Roman comedy, when the character Simo initiates a legal narration by saying, “You will hear the whole story from the beginning [*a principio*]” (cf. Scauro 1997, 361). Thus in legal texts as well as in texts that imitate legal scenarios the phrase “from the beginning” is a technical forensic expression.

A legal reading of this phrase in 1 John not only relies on such external evidence, though, but also on the legal context of the phrase in both 1 John and the Gospel of John, where the expression “from the beginning” is joined with the language of testimony, *martyria*, an inherently legal term (Lincoln 2000; Meeks 1967, 65). In John 15:27, Jesus says to the disciples, “You also are to testify [*martyreite*] because you have been with me from the beginning [*ap’ archēs*].” The term “testify” (*martyroumen*) is used here in 1 John 1:2, adding the same legal color to the expression. The testimony of the author is grounded in what he saw and heard “from the beginning.” In the Gospel of John, the disciples can provide trustworthy testimony because they know the facts of the case, thoroughly and from the very start. In the same way, the argument of 1 John will be a prosecution of the opponents’ false beliefs based on the same solid testimony.

A further point can be made about the notion of testimony and its value in the Johannine literature. The Gospel famously opens by referring in its prologue several times to the testimony of John the Baptist (1:7–8, 15), and as soon as the prologue ends, the first line of the narrative of the Gospel is “This is the testimony [*martyria*] given by John” (1:19). The Fourth Gospel returns to testimony as it draws to a close and refers to the testimony (*martyria*) of the Beloved Disciple (21:24). Very similar is the function of testimony in 1 John, which not only opens by referring here in 1:1 to testimony, but returns to this notion again in 5:10–11. Third John does the same by discussing the testimony of the faithful in its opening lines (v. 3) and then by referring to the testimony that people provide for Demetrius as its argument concludes (v. 12). The notion of testimony, then, has a prominent position at both the start and the conclusion of the Fourth Gospel, 1 John, and 3 John. This common device can very likely be understood as a development from the legal character of the Gospel of John, in which Jesus collects testimony on his behalf from various quarters. Those who continue to live by the pattern he laid out (the author of 1 John and his fellow believers) also continue to offer testimony.

The various relative clauses that follow in 1 John 1:1—**that which we have heard, that which we have beheld with our eyes, that which we have seen and touched with our hands**—share two qualities in common. They all refer to sensory perception (hear, see, touch), and they all have first-person plural (“we”) verbs. The “we” subject of the verbs continues in 1:2–4 and is so common in 1 John that Raymond Brown refers to “the striking ‘we’ motif” of this letter (1982, 158). In these opening lines, there is a strong separation between “we” who send the letter and “you” who receive it. The separation between the two groups will soften as the letter proceeds, since the “you” who are addressed also seem to have access to the knowledge of what was given in the beginning (2:7). Likewise, the author will later refer to himself as “I” when he describes the task of writing (2:1, 7, 8, 12–14, 21, 26; 5:13, 16). In these early lines, though, there is an important rhetorical reason for referring to the author as “we” and the recipients as “you.”

In Greek and Roman authors, the careful use of such personal pronouns helped to reinforce community boundaries (Parsenius 2012b). The Roman historian Tacitus often separates Romans from non-Romans in his writing by referring to the Romans as “us.” For example, he writes, “The Jews regard as profane all that we [*nos*] hold sacred, and yet permit all that we [*nobis*] abhor” (*Hist.* 5.4.1). By referring to “we” in this way, Tacitus “clearly and unmistakably co-opts his reader into an ‘us-against-them’ relationship based on Roman partisanship and solidarity” (Sinclair 1995, 19). Tacitus regularly draws the reader into his view of reality with the careful and selective use of first-person plural verbs and pronouns. This use of *nos* and *noster* in Tacitus should be understood not as something akin to the so-called royal we but as the *pluralis sociativus*, the “associative plural” that establishes a bond with the reader (Sinclair 1995, 19). The same phenomenon appears in other texts as well, such as in Longinus’s *On the Sublime*. Longinus’s concern is to distinguish Romans from Greeks. He writes of Greek authors as “we” and refers to his Roman patron Terentianus and other Romans as “you” (12.4–5). A telling comment of Timothy Whitmarsh defines this device well: “This schematic polarity between ‘we’ and ‘you’ then is not so much an articulation of a self-evident fact as an artful structuring device, designed to create a dilemma for the reader: which side are you on? Are you with ‘us’ or ‘them?’” (2001, 69; see also 68).

The Johannine literature uses the same device in the same way. When Jesus speaks to Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus initially and naturally refers to himself as “I” and to Nicodemus as the singular “you” in Greek (cf. 3:3, 10). As the conversation proceeds, Jesus modifies his persona. He suddenly speaks of himself as “we” and refers to Nicodemus as “you” in the plural, as follows (3:11–12):

I tell you, we speak [*laloumen*] of what we know [*oidamen*] and testify [*martyroumen*] to what we have seen [*heōrakamen*]; yet you do not receive [*lambanete*]

our testimony. If I have told you [*hymín*] about earthly things and you do not believe [*pisteuete*], how can you believe [*pisteusete*] if I tell you [*hymín*] about heavenly things?

Interpreters have long identified three groups in John, and the use of pronouns is related to these groups. Jesus refers to himself and those who believe in him as “we.” Other people are not in this group and reject Jesus. But there is a third group, a middle group standing between the “we” who stand around Jesus and “those” who oppose Jesus. This group is the “you” of Nicodemus. In John 12:42 we again hear of this middle group: “Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue.” Between the “we” that represents the explicit followers of Jesus and the people who explicitly oppose Jesus stands the “you” of those who believe, but who believe in a way that needs to be corrected and encouraged. To quote Whitmarsh, they need to choose: “are you with ‘us’ or them?” (2001, 69).

The point of separating people into groups is not to suggest that they are locked into predetermined states that they cannot escape, but precisely the opposite. As Leander Keck so rightly argues, John does not emphasize the distinction between people of the Spirit and people of the flesh in order to define two polar realities to which people are irrevocably bound. Rather, John emphasizes the difference between the two in order to underscore the immediate necessity for people to cross from one pole to the other, from flesh to Spirit (Keck 1996, 277). In John 8, a stark distinction is made between those who follow Jesus and those who do not (8:25–27). But John does not leave the matter there, with two groups locked in their respective realms. Jesus adds, “I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I AM” (8:24). The operative phrase here is the last one: “unless you believe that I AM.” Those who reject Jesus can choose a different destiny. They can be born from above—if they believe. The necessity of making a choice is made urgent.

“We” Greeks Opposed to “You” Romans in Longinus’s *On the Sublime*

“Wherefore it is, I suppose, that the orator shows . . . all the glow of a fiery spirit. . . . And it is in these same respects, my dear friend Terentianus, that it seems to me (supposing always that we Greeks are allowed to have an opinion upon the point) that Cicero differs from Demosthenes in elevated passages. . . . Our orator [i.e., Demosthenes] . . . can as it were consume by fire and carry away all before him, and may be compared to a thunderbolt or flash of lightning. . . . This, however, you [i.e., Romans] will be better able to decide.” (12.3–5, trans. Rhys-Roberts, LCL)

Precisely this rhetoric operates in 1 John. A group designated as “we” is writing to a group designated as “you.” But there is a third group—the opponents of the author and his allies. We hear of them when we read, “*They* went out from us, but they were never of us; for if *they* had been of us, *they* would have remained with us” (2:19). The addressees, designated as “you” and lying somewhere between “we” and “they,” seem to be in danger of falling away just as “they” did. That is the reason for the letter, to urge the readers to maintain what was heard from the beginning. The recipients of the letter are still within the fold, but they are in danger of leaving it. In this sense, the use of plural pronouns to describe separate groups is of a piece with the regular use of rhetorical *sententiae* (maxims, or aphorisms), which is common in the Johannine literature (see “The Rhetoric of the Letters: *Sententiae* and Social Division” in the introduction).

A long tradition of interpretation has attempted to sort out more precisely the identities of these various groups in 1 John. The opponents of the author are often understood to represent some form of docetism or gnosticism (see “Setting and Purpose of 1 John” in the introduction) because they seem to accept that the human Jesus was truly God but not truly human. In this way of thinking, his divinity is certain but not his humanity. He entered the world in a way that seemed human but was not actually and fully human. At least some of the opponents seem to ascribe to such a belief.

Just as much, if not more, attention has been paid to the identities of the author and his allies. Much of the debate revolves around whether the author is an actual eyewitness of Christ’s ministry. The repeated emphasis placed on actually seeing, touching, and hearing (1:1–4) the realities that are the subject of the letter leads many to insist that the author is an actual eyewitness of the events he describes. Others reject this view. Brown (1982, 160) suggests that this is a false debate, based on a long tradition in the Bible and in early Christian authors of collapsing the distance that separates the later people of God from their earlier history. For example, the prophet Amos (2:10) says to his readers, who lived long after the exodus, “I brought you up out of the land of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness.” Gregory of Nazianzus (*Orat.* 39.14) similarly says to his fourth-century CE audience, “We ran with the star, and we adored with the Magi,” even though they live three hundred years after the birth of Christ. The same telescoping of time is a feature of the hymnography of the Greek Orthodox Church. A central hymn from the Matins for Good Friday (the fifteenth Antiphon) announces, “*Today* he is suspended on a tree who suspended the earth amidst the waters.” What happened thousands of years ago is said to be “today,” just as Amos says that the Israelites of his day were led out of Egypt and just as Gregory of Nazianzus says that his fourth-century audience witnessed the birth of Christ. Finally, Irenaeus says to his audience in the late second century, “We could have learned in no other way than by seeing our Teacher, and hearing his voice with our own ears” (*Haer.*

The Eternal Today

*"Today, Hades groans and cries out,
 'My authority has been destroyed.
 I took one who died, as though he were
 mortal,
 But I am powerless to contain him.
 Along with him I lose all those over whom
 I had ruled.
 I had held the dead from all ages, but be-
 hold, He raises them all!'
 Glory to Your Cross and Your Resurrec-
 tion, O Lord!"*

(Greek Orthodox Hymn from Saturday
 Vespers in Holy Week, Sticheron, sung
 at "Lord, I Have Cried," trans. Dedes)

5.1.1). Here the “we” is the body of believers who “heard” Jesus, even though they lived long after his earthly ministry. The “we” in whom Irenaeus counts himself is a generation of Christians who lived long after the ministry of Christ. And yet in some sense they share the experience of those who beheld the incarnation. A similar usage of “we” may operate in the Johannine Letters. To accept such an argument is not to demand a minimalist view of authorship, nor does it rule out the possibility that here we have eyewitness testimony. It is simply to change the emphasis of the question from the identity of the one who sees,

and to place it rather on what is seen, and on the universal and timeless character of what was seen—God in the flesh.

The various forms of sensory perception in 1:1 underscore the reality of the incarnation when this verse announces, “We have heard . . . we have seen with our eyes . . . we have looked at and touched with our hands” (1:1). These statements about sensory perception show their significance when they are connected to what is said later in 1:2: “the life that was with the Father was revealed to us.” This is a clear statement about the incarnation and can be seen as a restatement of the famous phrase in the prologue to John, “The Word became flesh” (1:14). The emphasis is different, though. John begins with the divine life of the Word, while 1 John begins with the earthly life of the incarnate Jesus. The Gospel opens by referring to the time when the Word was “with the Father” (1:1) because it was written to prove and to demonstrate that the man Jesus was actually God. First John begins at the other side of the calculus, with the humanity of Jesus, emphasizing that he could be seen, touched, and heard (1 John 1:1). While the Fourth Gospel emphasizes that Jesus was really God, 1 John stresses that God was really the human Jesus (Smith 2009, 375). In 1 John, the opponents of the author already believe that Jesus is divine. In fact, so high is their belief in his divinity that they neglect his humanity. To combat this mistake, the letter opens by underscoring the human side of the incarnation, its palpability. Emphasis will be placed on the reality of Jesus appearing in the flesh throughout 1 and 2 John (cf. 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). Those who reject the reality of the incarnation are like those throughout

human history who have refused to see and hear the work of God. Psalm 115 insists that the idols of the nations are mute and dumb and blind, and those who worship them will be equally unperceiving. This may well explain why 1 John draws to a close by insisting, “Guard yourselves from idols” (5:21). To follow any other god than the one preached here is to follow a false god, with the spiritual insensitivity of those who worship idols.

First John 1:1 draws to a close by referring to that which our hands have touched **concerning the word of life**. When 1 John refers to the “word of life,” does the term “word” (*logos*) in this phrase carry the same christological weight that it does in the Johannine prologue, referring personally to Jesus? Many commentators believe that it does, but just as many believe the term means something akin to “message.” Support for translating the word as “message” comes from the rest of 1 John. Every other instance of the term *logos* in 1 John is impersonal (1:10; 2:5, 7, 14; 3:18). The term functions in this same impersonal sense throughout the Gospel of John, apart from the prologue. After Jesus is personally called “the Word” in the prologue, such a personal sense of the term is never used again in John. The term *logos* in the narrative body of John always means “message” or “commandment,” and carries no personal quality. A good example appears in John 5:24: “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word [*logos*] and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.” This is the sense of the term generally in 1 John, where we read of those who “keep his word” (2:5) and of “the old commandment, which is his word” (2:7; see also 1:10). The “word” in 1 John seems to be the message about Jesus. When 1 John 1:1 refers to the “word of life,” the phrase seems to mean “the message about life” regarding new life in Jesus, as distinct from the false message peddled by the opponents. The phrase “word of life” seems not to apply to a person but to an impersonal word, a message, or a teaching.

If this seems the most likely reading, the other reading is not wholly implausible. First John 1:1 may very well refer to Jesus as the “Word of life” in its opening lines in a personal sense, and then thereafter employ the term *logos* to refer to the message about Jesus in an impersonal sense. This would imitate the procedure of the Fourth Gospel, which applies the term “Logos” personally to Jesus in its prologue (1:1, 14), but thereafter it uses the term to

Sensory Perception in Psalm 115:4–8

“Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk. They make no sound in their throats. Those who make them are like them, so are all who trust in them.”

mean “message” or “commandment” (see 5:24 cited above). While the weight of probability lies with those who see the term *logos* as impersonal in 1 John, the very presence of the ambiguity may signal that there is no need to definitively choose one side or the other.

1.2. The same problem becomes even more complicated in the next line, with the parenthetical comment in 1:2: **And the Life was revealed and we have beheld it and we testify and we announce to you the eternal Life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.** At first these phrases are puzzling and difficult to unpack. The easiest way to read them is to begin with the second phrase, where we hear about “the eternal Life that was with [*pros*] the Father and was revealed to us.” The phrase “with the Father” uses the pronoun *pros* in the same way that the prologue to John says, “The Word was with [*pros*] God” (1:1). Does this cryptic phrase refer personally to Jesus? The opening lines of the prologue to the Gospel of John call Jesus the Word, and then say that in him was Life (1:1–4). If this similarity with the Gospel has any value for reading 1 John, the personal “Word” of John seems to be equivalent to the “Life” in 1 John 1:2. In both cases, the Word/Life that was “with” the Father was revealed to humanity. Referring to Jesus as “the Life” in 1 John is very natural because, even in the Fourth Gospel, the Word has life (1:4), and Jesus calls himself “the Resurrection and the Life” (11:25). When the letter says that “the Life” was revealed and was available to be seen and touched and heard, this is equivalent to the Gospel’s saying that the Word became flesh (1:14).

1.3. The point of the entire letter is clarified here near the close of the prologue, with the mention of fellowship (*koinōnia*) in 1:3: **in order that you might have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.** The rhetoric of these opening lines forces a decision on the readers, to make them answer the question, “Are you with us or not?” The immediacy behind that question is now clear, since having fellowship (or not) with “us” implies having fellowship (or not) with God. The term *koinōnia* does not appear in the Gospel, and the noun form of the term appears in 1 John only in this cluster of verses in 1 John 1:3–7, where it is used four times. Having such fellowship with other believers, however, is not at all alien to John’s Gospel, where the image is that of “being one” with fellow Christians (17:11, 21, 22, 23). The idea of having fellowship with God is also an extension of the notion of “abiding” in the Fourth Gospel, especially in the famous image of the vine in John 15. The language of abiding in God is very common in 1 John (cf. 2:5–6 and comments thereon). But this promise of fellowship with God is mentioned after a circuitous series of clauses that underscore the importance of the incarnation and the divine status of the human Jesus. Jesus was with the Father, and then was revealed in the flesh. The point is clear: fellowship with God is possible through the incarnation, and only through the incarnation. If the opponents have a false view of

the incarnation, they are imperiling their fellowship with God. The readers of 1 John are thus being advised regarding the immediacy of their decisions about their faith.

1:4. The opening section of the letter comes to a close in 1:4 by explaining another reason for writing: **in order that our joy [*chara*] might be complete/fulfilled [*peplēromenē*]**. In 1:3 we are given one reason for the writing: “in order that you might also have fellowship with us.” Now another reason is given. The language of “joy” (*chara*) vaguely conjures the standard expression of greeting that usually opens a letter in the wider culture, *chairein* (greetings), but this epistolary association is made only vaguely. A more immediate reason for the mention of joy comes from within the Johannine tradition itself, where the fulfillment of joy is a common theme (Brown 1982, 173–74). John the Baptist announces, for instance, “He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled” (John 3:29; see also 7:8). The term *chara* appears nine times in the Gospel of John, and eight of the nine instances (all except in 3:29) occur in the Farewell Discourses (John 13–17). In these chapters, joy is a gift that will come to the disciples after Jesus has risen from the dead, and the Gospel shows the fulfillment of this promise after the resurrection, as we read, “At the sight of the Lord, the disciples rejoiced” (20:20).

But the joy of the community is based in having fellowship not only with the Lord but also with one another. One of the important statements about joy in the Farewell Discourses comes in John 17, where Jesus prays to the Father as follows: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. . . . But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves” (17:11–13). Joy for the believers comes not only from fellowship with the risen Lord but also from the fellowship they share with fellow believers. Thus the two purposes given for the letter in these opening lines coincide. The letter is written to ensure that the recipients have fellowship with the Father and the Son, and also that they might have fellowship with the author and the community he represents. In this way, the joy of the community will be fulfilled.

Theological Issues

The opening lines of 1 John emphasize that Jesus is immediately present in the incarnation yet distant and remote in his divine identity. The author of the letter has a similar character as the God he describes. He is at the same time both present and remote. His presence is almost palpable, even as it remains hidden and impossible to identify. The author speaks of himself repeatedly

as “I” and as part of a collective “we,” and yet he remains anonymous. This anonymity is the topic of the present theological comment, since it provides insight into the notion of discipleship in the Johannine literature. The present discussion applies not only to 1 John, where the author is not mentioned at all, but also to 2 and 3 John, where the author is identified only by the epithet “the Elder.” The author is hidden in all three letters. Judith Lieu has insightfully argued that this anonymity is an intentional technique in all the documents in the Johannine corpus, beginning with the Gospel (2008, 9). The anonymity of the author in each Johannine document guides us to reflect further on the nature of discipleship that these books convey. We can begin to see this by looking at the first anonymous author, the Beloved Disciple who produced the Gospel.

The Gospel of John is attributed to the enigmatic “disciple whom Jesus loved” (21:20, 24) but we never learn this disciple’s name. We know him only obliquely. Harold Attridge (2012) argues that this is by design and is connected to the role of the Beloved Disciple as witness par excellence (21:24). The reader who struggles to learn the identity of the Beloved Disciple will return again and again to the text in order to clarify the nature of the Beloved Disciple’s witness. But the concept of witness is a “vortex” (Attridge 2012, 29), drawing the reader ever more deeply into the text and to other witnesses, because so many other figures—John the Baptist, the Scriptures, the Father—are all witnesses to Jesus (John 5:31–46). Eventually the reader is left with no other witness but “the Word enfleshed, nailed to a cross. If one can understand that witness, then everything else will make sense. No other witness will count for ought” (Attridge 2012, 29). The anonymity of the Beloved Disciple is designed to do nothing else than to point to Jesus, and to cause people to see through him to Jesus. His very anonymity witnesses to Jesus. To see the Beloved Disciple is to look through him to Christ.

The author of 1–3 John seems to function in the same way. To see him is to look through him to Christ and, more specifically, to the Christ of the Gospel of John. Raymond Brown shows how this is true by noting the similarity in style that 1 John shares with the Fourth Gospel. He defines this similarity in an elegantly pointed statement: “The Johannine Jesus *speaks* as the author of the Johannine Epistles writes” (1982, 24, emphasis original). When 1 John opens, for instance, by emphasizing what “we” have seen and testified to, an obvious echo is heard from Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:11, where Jesus refers to what “we” have seen and testified to. The author of 1 John couples his anonymity with an imitation of Jesus. When the author speaks, one hears the voice of Jesus.

A compelling comment of Origen elevates this discussion to a higher order of contemplation. When Origen interprets the Johannine scene at the foot of the cross, he focuses on Jesus’s conversation and actions with the Beloved Disciple and Mary. John 19:26–27 reads, “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple

whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.” Origen sees more than a symbolic act here. The Beloved Disciple, he says, does not become “like” Jesus, nor does he simply take on a role that Jesus once performed when he becomes the son of Mary. He does not become “like” Jesus. He becomes Jesus. Origen says,

We may therefore make bold to say that the Gospels are the firstfruits of all the Scriptures, but that of the Gospels that [Gospel] of John is the firstfruits. No one can apprehend the meaning of it unless he has rested on Jesus’s breast and received from Jesus Mary to be his mother also. He must become another John, and must have shown to him, as to John, by Jesus himself Jesus as he is. For if Mary . . . had no other son but Jesus, and yet Jesus says to his mother, “Woman, behold thy son,” and not “Behold, you have this son also,” then he virtually said to her, “Lo, this [i.e., John] is Jesus, whom you have borne.” Is it not the case that everyone who is perfect lives himself no longer, but Christ lives in him? (*Comm. Jo.* 1.6; ANF 10:300, modified)

Thus when the Beloved Disciple is handed over to Mary, and Mary to the Beloved Disciple, John conforms his life to the life of Jesus. The Beloved Disciple has taken on the role of Christ. Anonymity and imitation combine so that when one seems to see the disciple, one actually sees Christ. For Origen, to be a disciple of Christ is to become “another Christ.” When Jesus says to Mary, “Here is your son,” he means that John has conformed his life to the life of Jesus to such an extent that he can say in the words of Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). The shape of John’s life is conformed to Christ. He is a christomorph.

Jeffrey Hamburger has discovered a small group of images in medieval Western art that depict John the Evangelist—understood as the author of both the Gospel and Letters—as a christomorph in a variety of ways (for the following survey of images, see Hamburger 2002, 43–64). The images range in date from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. Amounting to only a couple dozen pieces in total, these illustrations convey the same idea in a variety of ways, depicting John as someone whose life is uniquely conformed to the life of Christ.

The Language of Jesus and 1 John Compared

The author of 1 John writes like the Jesus of the Gospel speaks. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify [*martyroumen*] to what we have seen [*ho heōrakamen*]” (John 3:11). The author of 1 John writes, “We have both seen [*heōrakamen*] and testify [*martyroumen*] and declare to you. . . . What we have seen [*ho heōrakamen*] and heard we declare” (1 John 1:2–3).



Foto Marburg/Art-Resource, NY

Figure 1. Christ enthroned in majesty. Weingarten Gospels, Tours, ca. 830.



Foto Marburg/Art-Resource, NY

Figure 2. John the Evangelist, enthroned in majesty, facing the viewer in the manner of Christ in the same manuscript. Weingarten Gospels, Tours, ca. 830.

One such image appears in a fifteenth-century Psalter from Freiburg. At first glance, the image is a typical depiction of Christ at the moment of creation, with the central figure raising his right arm in a gesture that is very common for the depiction of the Christ-Logos as he points to the world when it is created. But the image is not at all typical. The central figure is not Christ but the Beloved Disciple, who is identified with absolute certainty in the inscription above his head. And he does not point to the creation of the world told in Genesis, the beginning of biblical history, but rather to various scenes from Christian history. The upper roundel, for example, refers to the birth of Christ and is circumscribed by a text that reads “And the Word became flesh” (John 1:14).

Other examples are just as emphatic in casting John as a christomorph, especially in relation to the other evangelists. In the Weingarten Gospels, dating to the early decades of the ninth century, Jesus is seated upon an orb at the frontispiece to the Gospel collection. John is seated in a similar posture soon thereafter, while the other evangelists are given other poses, not at all like those of Christ. A group of miniature portraits that were added in about the year 1000 to a Carolingian Gospel book originally from the diocese of Mainz in Trier do something similar. These miniatures depict the synoptic evangelists as authors seated at their desks, writing their Gospels, while John is depicted facing the reader, just as Christ does, underscoring the special identification of John and Jesus. The other evangelists are portrayed in profile and writing,



Figure 3. John the Evangelist, seated in glory, facing the viewer in the manner of Christ in the same manuscript. Miniature added at Trier, ca. 1000, to a Gospel book from St. Maximian, Mainz, ca. 900–950.



Figure 4. Luke the Evangelist, writing at his desk. Miniature added at Trier, ca. 1000, to a Gospel book from St. Maximian, Mainz, ca. 900–950.

while John faces the viewer directly, raising his hand in a gesture of address comparable to Christ's gesture of blessing. Like Christ, who both embodies and also displays the Gospel on his knee, John holds a book on his own left knee.

An even more explicit portrayal of the christomorphic John appears in the Limburg Gospels from the beginning of the eleventh century. Each of the evangelists is depicted in a way that emphasizes their divine inspiration. Matthew looks upward while he writes and witnesses Christ in majesty. Mark is also shown writing his Gospel, and Luke faces the viewer head on, framed by curtains from the temple. But John is depicted from within an almond-shaped mandorla, as only Christ is depicted.

All these images, as well as the comments of Origen, derive from the special insight that the Beloved Disciple shows in the Gospel of John. He has a special proximity to Jesus. But the Beloved Disciple and the Elder are not alone in enjoying this special insight and union with God. Conformity to Christ—becoming a christomorph—is a defining quality of discipleship in the Johannine literature for all disciples.

One of the most compelling comments in 1 John regarding discipleship is the statement from 1 John 2:6: “The one who says that he abides in him ought himself to walk just as that one walked.” The earthly life of the Christian is supposed to be a mirror image of the earthly life of Christ. Every Christian is supposed to be a christomorph. Other texts in 1 John make the same point, as when 2:3 says, “And in this way we know that we have known him: if we keep his commandments.” Such imitation is equally pronounced in 1 John 4:19: “We love, because he first loved us.” Discipleship means conformity to the life of Christ.

Other images in 1 John make the same point. Thus 1:3 speaks of “fellowship with the Father [God],” and one of the most common terms in the Johannine Letters for describing this fellowship is the verb *menein*, “to abide/dwell.” The abiding/dwelling that is implied by this word is a mutual indwelling of God and believers. By walking as Christ walked, believers abide in God (2:6), but the opposite is also true: “If we love one another, God abides in us” (4:12). There is more here than symbolic language, as 3:24 makes clear: “The one who keeps his commandments abides in him, and he [God] in him [the believer]. In this we know that he abides in us—he has given to us from his Spirit.” Thus imitation is not just moral copying but a spiritual connection between God and the believer. The believer abides in God, and God in the believer. The profundity of this connection is finally and fully expressed in 1 John 3:2: “We will be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” What is in view here is not merely moral imitation but spiritual indwelling.

The depth and profundity of such a christomorphic life can be explicated more fully by looking at a particular scene in the Gospel of John, that of the blind man from John 9. The man in John 9 who was born blind provides the best example of the combination of anonymity and discipleship that the Beloved Disciple shows. Jesus promises his disciples in John 15–16 that they will be hated as their Lord was hated. In detailed and compelling ways, the activity and experiences of the blind man in John 9 are a mirror image of the activity and experiences of Jesus in John 7–8. Both Jesus and the blind man, for instance, are driven away after being interrogated. Throughout chapters 7 and 8, Jesus is interrogated by the leaders of Israel. Legal language about judgment and witness dominates the debates. In the end, the leaders of Israel condemn Jesus for blasphemy, expel him, and wish to stone him (8:59). The same thing operates in the case of the blind man. He is interrogated by the Pharisees until he is expelled from the synagogue for being a sinner (9:34). Jesus and the man born blind are also both questioned over their identity: the crowds cannot determine whether Jesus is a prophet or the Christ (7:40–41; cf. 7:25–27); and regarding the blind man, “The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’” (9:8).

In both cases, there is also a *schisma*. In the debates over identity, both Jesus and the man born blind create a division (*schisma*) among their interlocutors,

some holding one position and others another (7:41–43; 9:16). But the most compelling feature of the shared fate of Jesus and the blind man has not to do with what people say about them but with what they say about themselves. In one statement, the man born blind identifies himself with a simple phrase that might be easily overlooked and its significance missed. But in light of the other associations between Jesus and the blind man, this phrase carries considerable significance. John 9:8–9 reads: “The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’ Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am [*egō eimi*].’” Just a few verses before this one, at the end of chapter 8, Jesus was almost stoned for saying to his interlocutors (8:58), “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am [*egō eimi*].” When Jesus uses this phrase, he applies to himself the divine name that God used to reveal himself to Moses, of which we hear in Isa. 52:6 LXX: “My people shall know my name; in that day (they shall know) that ‘I AM’ [*egō eimi*] is the one who speaks” (cf. LXX of Exod. 3:14 and Isa. 43:25). As Brown writes:

No clearer implication of divinity is found in the Gospel tradition, and “the Jews” recognize this implication. Leviticus [24:]16 had commanded: “He who blasphemes *the name* of the Lord shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him.” We are not sure what the legal definition of blasphemy was in Jesus’ time; but in John’s account the use of the divine name represented by *egō eimi* seems to be sufficient. (1966, 367)

The last verse in John 8 ends with Jesus’s use of the divine name, which leads immediately into the episode of the blind man in John 9, when the blind man also says, “I am [*egō eimi*]” (9:9). In light of the many ties that bind the blind man in John 9 to the activity of Jesus in John 7–8, this phrase sounds striking on the lips of the blind man, and more than striking—perhaps also as blasphemous to some modern ears as the original statement of Jesus sounded to those who tried to stone him. But I think we should take it seriously, in a particular way. It is clearly not a christological statement with the same force as the comment of Jesus, but neither should we dismiss it as irrelevant, coming only a few verses after the same comment was on the lips of Jesus. In his *Ambiguuum* 21, Maximus the Confessor reflects on the nature of discipleship in a way that is very appropriate for understanding the Johannine notion of abiding in God, and how it applies to the issue of discipleship in the case of the blind man. Maximus writes:

Those who choose the pure and undefiled life of the Gospel, through their strict exercise of the commandments, take possession of the likeness of the good things of the age to come, and are made ready by the Word through the hope that they will be spiritually vivified by their union with the archetype of these true things, and so become living images of Christ, or rather become one with

Him through grace (rather than being a mere simulacrum), or even, perhaps, become the Lord Himself, if such an idea is not too onerous for some to bear. (21.15, trans. Constatas 2014)

This comment of Maximus expresses well the teaching on discipleship in 1–3 John. Fellowship with God and abiding in God are a direct result of the incarnation, in which God entered humanity and opened the possibility of union with him. Where there had been separation from God, there now is union with God. The anonymity of the author of both the Gospel and the Letters of John makes a great deal of sense in light of this notion of discipleship, because the process of following Christ means nothing less than becoming, in the words of Maximus, “living images of Christ” and “the Lord Himself.” The individual disciple, and in this case the individual author, no longer reflects his own individuality but rather the person of Christ. Anonymity points not into oblivion but to the Lord himself.