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1-3 JOHN

ROBERT W. YARBROUGH



Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

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Introduction to the Johannine Letters

This introduction will focus primarily on 1 John. Because 2 John and 3 John left a much smaller footprint in patristic annals, there is little to discuss by way of specific evidence for matters like their date, provenance, audience, and reception history until more than a century after their putative composition. What can be said is that the language and substance of 2 John and 3 John, like that of 1 John, relate them to the Gospel of John (demonstrated concisely long ago by Weiss 1887–88: 2.186–87, 198; see also Holtzmann 1908: 362).¹ And as Hill (2004: 450) shows, knowledge of John’s Gospel and at least two of his letters is probably attested in half a dozen writers prior to Irenaeus, perhaps as early as the late first century.² This would be within scant years of the epistles’ composition and not long after the Fourth Gospel’s first appearance. The Johannine tradition inscripturated in the extant canonical writings takes us back to within living memory of what the writer of John’s Letters seeks to describe and apply to his readers’ situation.³

Text

It would be frustrating, if not futile, to interpret ancient texts whose original wording is uncertain. The Johannine Epistles, in part or as a whole, have been preserved in about six hundred manuscripts, including two papyri (Klauck 1991: 4). They offer “relatively few text-critical problems,” and no proposed emendation has found wide assent (1991: 5, 8).

Metzger’s *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Metzger 1994: 639–51) discusses variants at some thirty-nine junctures:

1. Note Bauckham’s observation: “It is in any case generally recognized that” John’s Gospel and three letters “share characteristic linguistic usages, whether these belong to the ‘idiolect’ of one author or to the ‘sociolect’ of a school of Johannine writers” (2006: 371).

2. For an index of patristic references and quotations of 1 John, see B. Aland et al. 2003b: B98–B104; for similar references to 2 John and 3 John, see B. Aland et al. 2005b: B133–35.

3. For fuller discussion of the interrelation between John’s writings, see works cited below and junctures in this commentary where the language of John’s Epistles is shown to resonate with that of the Fourth Gospel (on the language of John’s Gospel itself, see Lieu 2005). For extended discussion of the full range of critical issues pertaining to 1–3 John, see the commentaries (Marshall 1978; R. Brown 1982; Smalley 1984; 2007; Schnackenburg 1992; Strecker 1996; and Kruse 2000) and standard NT introductions (R. Brown 1997; Schnelle 1998; L. Johnson 1999; and Carson and Moo 2005).

1:4 (2x)	2:20	3:14	5:1	5:18 (2x)
2:4	2:23	3:19 (2x)	5:2	5:20 (2x)
2:6	2:25	3:21	5:6 (2x)	5:21
2:7 (2x)	2:27	4:3 (2x)	5:7–8	
2:14	3:1	4:10	5:10 (2x)	
2:17	3:5	4:19	5:13	
2:18	3:13	4:20	5:17	

The variants listed are significant, first, in the sense that the Editorial Committee of the United Bible Societies deemed them important for Bible translators to be aware of in their work of rendering the NT into vernacular languages around the world. These variants have also been at the center of discussion in establishing what remains today’s standard critical Greek text for scholarly research (NA²⁷ = UBS⁴).⁴ As this commentary will demonstrate in detailed consideration of variants, no major doctrines or points of interpretation are seriously affected by manuscript deviation. The wealth of witnesses allows, if not definitive clarification, then at least well-informed conjecture, wherever ambiguities exist.

Work on the text of John’s Letters has not stood still since the labors of the UBS Editorial Committee several decades ago. The Institute for New Testament Textual Research at the University of Münster in Germany conducted its own investigations and published its impressive findings on 1 John (B. Aland et al. 2003a; 2003b) and 2–3 John (B. Aland et al. 2005a; 2005b). Their selection of significant manuscript witnesses stands at 143 (not all of the six hundred extant witnesses noted above are significant for text-critical purposes): 2 papyri (P⁹ [third century, containing several verses of 1 John 4] and P⁷⁴ [seventh century, containing much of 1–3 John]), 13 uncials, 117 minuscules, and 11 lectionaries (B. Aland et al. 2003b: B91). In addition, 37 other witnesses are excluded “because they are of minor importance for the history of the text” (2003b: B91), meaning that the selection of witnesses is actually about 180. There are said to be 761 “passages with variants in 1 John,” most of which are scribal miscues of no significance (B. Aland et al. 2003a: 28*), like spelling or word order or inadvertent errors. In the end, “due to the simple style of 1 John there are very few passages where difficulties lead to major variants.”

Like the UBS Editorial Committee, the Münster Institute scholars find that about forty 1 John passages require discussion. In a striking confirmation of the UBS committee’s earlier work, as well as of the stability of the textual witness, the Institute after years of work and thousands of hours of labor concluded that it would correct the current NA²⁷/UBS⁴ Greek text at only three junctures in 1 John: (1) in 1:7 δέ (*de*, but) should be omitted; (2) in 5:10 ἐν ἑαυτῷ (*en*

4. As Moisés Silva (private correspondence) points out, some variation (e.g., Jesus Christ/ Christ Jesus) probably means little for exegesis or theology, though it will affect translation. Yet some variants that cannot be reproduced in translation may be important for exegesis or theology.

heautō, in himself) should be ἐν αὐτῷ (*en autō*, in him); and (3) in 5:18 αὐτόν (*auton*, him) should be ἑαυτόν (*heauton*, himself). In the world of scholarship, this counts as valuable corroboration of academic work old and new.

Our state of textual certainty for 1 John is very high. The numerous variants inherent in the manual copying process offer rich potential for reflection on lexical possibility and semantic nuance, but they offer no room for pessimism regarding whether we know almost exactly what the original text contained.

There are discussable variants in John's second epistle at 2 John 1, 3, 5, 8 (2x), 9, 11, 12, and 13 (Metzger 1994: 652–54). All are interesting but none critical for interpretation. The same can be said of 3 John, for which Metzger (1994: 655) discusses variants at 3 John 4, 9, and 15. These variants, plus about thirty more in 2 John and some three dozen more in 3 John, will be listed and discussed in the commentary.

Author

If the first concern of a commentary is the integrity of the text to be interpreted, the second is the identity of the writer, if this can be determined. The position taken in this commentary concurs with that expressed by Carson (2000: 132): “In line with the majority view among Christian students during the past two thousand years (though out of step with today's majority), I think it highly probable that John the apostle wrote the Fourth Gospel and the three letters that traditionally bear his name.”

Extended technical justifications for this position—that John's Letters have the same author as John's Gospel and that all were written by Jesus's disciple John son of Zebedee—are accessible in NT introductions like that of Carson and Moo (2005: 229–54), in newer commentaries like those of Köstenberger (2004: 6–8) and Keener (2003: 81–114),⁵ and in monographs like Blomberg's (2001: 22–41). The emerging work of Hill (2004) appears to be tending in this direction as well. Yarid (2003) makes a detailed comparison between 1 John and the Upper Room Discourse (John 13–17). Scholtissek (2004) writes of the close relationship between John's Gospel and 1 John seen in recent German scholarship, though his view that 1 John is simply an ad hoc epistolary rewrite of elements taken from the Fourth Gospel is unconvincing. Each of these studies cites corroborating sources. Finally, Bauckham (2006: 358–411) argues convincingly for the eyewitness origin of John's Gospel and John's Letters, though he thinks John is the Beloved Disciple mentioned in the Gospel, who was in turn the Elder who wrote the epistles. Bauckham's view concurs with that of this commentary that the Johannine corpus is not a literary contrivance or spiritual meditation but grows out of personal historical reminiscence of the life, teaching, and abiding will of Jesus.

5. Other commentators of the last generation or so to affirm Johannine authorship in this sense include Robinson 1985; Ridderbos 1997; and Kruse 2003a. For older commentators upholding this view (B. F. Westcott, E. Abbott, A. P. Peabody, J. B. Lightfoot, W. Sanday, H. P. V. Nunn) see Bauckham 2006: 413n2.

The Disputed Nature of the Authorship Question

It would be possible to leave the matter there. But as the series preface indicates, this commentary targets people who are “involved in the preaching and exposition of the Scriptures as the uniquely inspired Word of God.” Such readers typically want to know whether what the text says is true. Some may be reading and teaching John’s Letters in parts of the world where Christians face ostracism and even persecution for the faith they profess. No responsible teacher wants to be sending people into danger and perhaps death based on old writings that lack veracity. The opening verses of 1 John claim that the author was an eyewitness of Jesus’s life. If this was really the case, the credibility of the letter is considerably enhanced. And since 2 John and 3 John stand in close conceptual relation—to each other and to 1 John—the gravity of their admittedly sketchy content is maximized. The Jesus Christ presupposed and presented in John’s Letters takes the shape of a savior and master worthy of serious consideration and perhaps personal devotion. Luther (1967: 219) grasped this regarding 1 John: “This is an outstanding epistle. It can buoy up afflicted hearts. Furthermore, it has John’s style and manner of expression, so beautifully and gently does it picture Christ to us.”

D. F. Strauss (1808–74) is commonly credited with being among the first of an illustrious line of scholars who worked hard to destroy the status of the canonical Gospels as possible sources of firsthand information regarding the things they report.⁶ In the judgment of many, he largely succeeded, as the generations of Gospels criticism since then attest. Grant and Tracy (1984: 12) observe that “more than a century of modern critical study make[s] it impossible for us to employ the Gospel of John in interpreting the thought of Jesus himself.” But Strauss (1972: 69) also stated, “It would most unquestionably be an argument of decisive weight in favour of the credibility of the biblical history, could it indeed be shown that it was written by eye-witnesses, or even by persons nearly contemporaneous with the events narrated.” I believe it can be and has been shown on cogent grounds that John’s Gospel, and following from that John’s Letters, are rightly understood as authored by an eyewitness to Jesus’s ministry. The classic treatment, never really refuted, is Westcott (1881: v–xxxv; 1908: ix–lxvii), whose findings on this point are substantially confirmed and extended more recently by Blomberg (2001) as well as in commentaries and other works already cited above. Reim (2005: 101n15) states: “As far as I can see, in the Johannine Jesus-discourses there are virtually no words of serious substance not contained in the Synoptic words of Jesus and in Old Testament words of God or of the Messiah.” The distance between John’s writings and the Jesus of which they speak may be less vast and total than commonly supposed.

Nevertheless, it will not escape the notice of many conscientious preachers, students, and other thinking persons that a considerable mass of scholarly

6. For primary sources that help sketch the story, see Dawes 1999. More specifically on Strauss, see C. Brown 1985: esp. 183–87. For a lighthearted but piercing gibe at the loss of conviction of John’s truth even among contemporary Christians, see Trueman 2005.

literature weighs heavily against the notion of the possibility of the Johannine tradition's close proximity to Jesus and his actual times. And so I offer a short characterization of Johannine studies in recent decades to help explain why I do not view the current majority consensus as compelling. I want readers to see why the consensus rejecting Johannine and eyewitness authorship commands respect but not necessarily obeisance. This is in no way to detract from the hard empirical work (which I do not intend to recount or extend here) that scholars like Carson, Köstenberger, Keener, Blomberg, Hill, Bauckham, and others have done, from several important vantage points, to call the consensus into question and establish the plausibility of a more credible historical account. It is enough to provide a larger context for viewing some currently dominant opinions that leave no room for dissent and a different conclusion. The point is to provide soft justification (harder justification is found in the works of the scholars referred to above) for the starting point of this commentary's reading of the texts before us.

John Son of Zebedee: Banished from the Canon

From early times and through most of the history of the church, 1 John, like the Gospel of John, was generally thought to have been written by the disciple of Jesus who bore that name (so also Witherington 2006: 394, 396). (Due probably to their brevity and limited horizon, 2 John and 3 John were much slower to receive widespread circulation and approbation in the early Christian centuries. To this day, most churches could function a whole lifetime without 2 John or 3 John in their Bibles and never miss their absence.) Rensberger (2001: 2) notes that "early on, by the second century in fact, Christian tradition identified their author as John son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles."⁷ In the first Christian centuries, until Eusebius, there is scant record of anyone *but* this John being associated with the five books of the NT with which he is traditionally associated.⁸ Witherington's peculiar claim (2006: 395n5) that "from a very early date . . . there was doubt that the Fourth Gospel, at least in its final form, was written by the same person who wrote these Epistles" is unconvincing and seems to be based solely on a statement by Isho'dad of Merv (ninth century). Similarly, Perkins (2004: 19) makes it sound like the identification of the Gospel writer with the author of one or more Johannine Letters was a post-fourth-century development. But the historical evidence runs in the exact opposite direction. Behind this encroachment of misinformation in some circles lies a fascinating story.

At the time of the Enlightenment (eighteenth century), a revolutionary approach to biblical study began to establish itself, particularly in Germany,

7. Rensberger, however, rejects Johannine authorship of these writings. R. Brown 1982: 14n26 writes that Eusebius rejects the common authorship of John's three letters, but on p. 11 he cites Eusebius's claim that the apostle John wrote all three (*Demonstration of the Gospel* 3.5.88).

8. Dionysius of Alexandria raises the question of the author of Revelation, whom he suggests could be some other John, but he underscores his conviction that the Gospel and the epistles come from the same hand (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 7.24.7; 7.25.6–8).

where Lutheran and Reformed scholars excelled in scholarly attention to the Bible. “In nineteenth-century Germany the critical movement reached its peak” (Grant and Tracy 1984: 5). It was revolutionary foremost in the success it met, not in its genius, for doubt, skepticism, and hostility toward the message and person of Jesus as his followers understood him were virulent already in Jesus’s lifetime. The treasured hallmarks of (post)modern Western intellectual belief—doubt, skepticism, and in the end indifference if not hostility toward the message of the cross—can be reconstructed in considerable detail from the NT and extra-NT sources.⁹ Hill (2004: 204–93) shows how second-century gnostics reacted to John and responded to his ideas in either an adversarial or supersessionary way. Biting skepticism of Christian claims can be studied in fairly full dress in the form of Celsus’s powerful “intellectual” attacks on Christians (and Jews) around 180 (Hoffman 1987). So in a fundamental sense the Enlightenment *in biblical studies* marks a political victory as much as an intellectual one,¹⁰ as it did not really arrive at new objections to Christian faith so much as it set in motion dynamics that gradually enshrined repristinated versions of ancient disbelief of historic Christianity in European Protestant universities that trained pastors. For example, when Adolf Schlatter enrolled in theological college in Switzerland in 1871, taking classes to prepare him for parish ministry, his philosophy professor was Friedrich Nietzsche. Two generations earlier, D. F. Strauss was taught NT by a professor (F. C. Baur) who rejected the historic Christianity he had embraced as a youth in favor of the Hegelian panentheism eventually immortalized as a central plank in the platform of the Tübingen School (Harris 1975). Handing over theological education to people with waning or no appetite for creedal Christian belief had the trickle-down effect of schooling generations of parishioners in post-Christian convictions, even though broadly speaking the gradually spreading consensus offered few critical insights that were not at least latent in ancient objections to Christian truth claims.

To sum up, at the Enlightenment the theological synthesis of historic Christianity (see Oden 2003) was rejected by influential individuals who were often not very sympathetic to it in the first place. To justify this, and to extend alternate syntheses like Continental rationalism (growing out of English Deism),

9. Given the considerable continuity between the saving message of the OT, understood as part of the Christian Scriptures, and the NT, many of the dynamics of modern/postmodern disbelief in God’s saving but also damning self-disclosure are already discernible in the critiques of misguided Hebrew and Jewish belief and behavior found in the OT prophets.

10. The Enlightenment’s greatest intellectual achievement in biblical studies was to have used historical interpretation to show how ecclesial hermeneutics were sometimes disloyal to the Bible they claimed to interpret. Theological systems were brought under scrutiny of biblical passages seen in their historical settings and thus freed from dogma to speak afresh and to correct the systems. But it was not long before the servant became the master. For some generations now the dogma—the theological or philosophical systems—informing historical interpretation has stood in need of hearing a fresh theological voice (see Yarbrough 2004b). This explains in part the recent rise of “theological interpretation of Scripture”; see, e.g., Cummins 2004 and Vanhoozer et al. 2005.

Hegelian philosophy of religion, Ritschlian liberalism, and the dogmatics, as it were, of the so-called history of religions school, the foundational historical bases of Christian doctrine were increasingly assaulted.¹¹ Within a few generations leading universities and theological schools were increasingly teaching the Christian Scriptures from the basis of post-Christian construals of them. Today, while attempts are continually made to argue that the effects of historical criticism (a convenient term for the hermeneutical approach that the Enlightenment championed and that is still dominant among many biblical scholars) are or by rights should be irrelevant for faith (e.g., Culpepper 1998: 37; Schnelle 1998: 14; Ehrman 2004: 14), this could be true only of a faith foreign to biblical writers. For they predicated their confessional claims on a God who created the world, superintended history, and revealed himself definitively and knowably within that material-temporal nexus through divinely appointed spokespersons and ultimately writers who bequeathed the Scriptures to God's people and thereby to the world (cf. Grant and Tracy 1984: 3–4). First John speaks much of just such faith. It is inconceivable that the author would assent to the proposition that the historical basis of 1 John 1:1–3 is irrelevant to his subsequent expressions of and calls for faith in the crucified and risen Jesus.

Today, after over two centuries of development of what has by now become a fairly predictable, traditional, and professionally obligatory outlook¹² in many centers of learning, it has become customary for scholars to disconnect the author John from the apostle John son of Zebedee (Schnelle 1998: 456; Ehrman 2004: 174; Witherington 2006: 395). Moreover, “1 John was not composed by the evangelist” who wrote the Fourth Gospel (Perkins 2004: 21). Further, the Letters of John (which themselves may come from different hands, so Holladay 2005: 521) were produced by a community rather than an individual (Schnelle 1998: 436–38; Rensberger 2001: 3). For that matter, even the Fourth Gospel does not go back to a follower of Jesus; it was rather produced by “a theologian of the later period who, on the basis of comprehensive traditions, rethought the meaning of Jesus' life, and interpreted and presented it in his own way” (Schnelle 1998: 474; cf. Lincoln 2002). This view tends to be presented as some daring and avant-garde find of cutting-edge scholarship, but a century ago Wrede (1907: 230) stated this outlook with admirable frankness:

If one views [John's] chief intention as the transmission of actual history, many features of the narrative become practically grotesque and ridiculous. Historically speaking, the following features, and many others, are simply pure impossibilities: that Jesus interacted with the Jews regarding his execution or the Last Supper; that he discussed Johannine theology with the Roman procurator;

11. For details on this process in the field of NT theology, along with literature from other areas, see Yarbrough 2004b.

12. Cf. Grant and Tracy 1984: 5: “The historical method still lives. . . . By its most ardent defenders its methods are set forth with a rigidity unequalled by scholastic theologians.”

that his simplest words met with the most massive misunderstanding; that in prayers to God he used dogmatic formulations or reflections on the working of prayer on those who listened to him. However, whoever recognizes that the author is led by intentions entirely different than historical ones, that it is his ideas and biases which reshape and idealize [*beseelen*] the received material [i.e., the oral tradition] and add numerous traditions to it—that person learns to understand why so much must strike us as strange and odd, so delusional and removed from reality.

As for the epistles, the verdict on 1 John is held as true for all three: “Unquestionably 1 John, like the Qumrân literature and even [the Gospel of John], is a community document” (Sloyan 1995: 44; cf. Callahan 2005: 1–5).

The upshot of this conviction is that between the earthly Jesus and the God he somehow embodied—whom the Johannine Letters call readers to trust, love, and heed—and the claims of the Johannine writings lies an impermeable barrier. We need to be “delivered” from supposing that the Johannine tradition (including John’s Gospel) tells us anything about Christianity (much less Jesus himself) in the first half of the first century (Callahan 2005: ix). Even though recent decades have witnessed a renewed quest for the historical Jesus, this has done little to rehabilitate the reputation of these writings as conveying the convictions of a personal acquaintance of Jesus and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 19:26; 21:7, 20). All of “John’s” writings are viewed as late, reflective at best of historical conditions several generations after Jesus’s death.

It is even possible to represent John’s writings as originating in the mid- or late second century. In the interest of such a thesis, Strecker (1996: xli–xlii n79) casts doubt on our knowledge of the textual tradition. Along this same line, Schmithals (1992: 290–91) explains how, in the wake of Marcion and his canon, various Christian subgroups responded with their own canons. These subgroups favored three-document collections due to Philo’s influence,¹³ for whom three was the number of perfection. And so were born, it is theorized, various mini-*proto-Bibles* in the form of (1) Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon; (2) 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus; (3) the short recensions of Ignatius to the Ephesians and the Romans along with Polycarp’s epistle; and (4) the Johannine Letters. Klauck (1998: 261) extends this charge of a sort of Christian gematria: for a while the writings of 1 Peter, 1 John, and James were widely accepted on their own. Then 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude were added, and the result was “not accidentally the number seven.” Added to a fourteen-letter Pauline corpus (with Hebrews being regarded as Pauline), the mysterious plotters of the NT canon “arrived at 3 x 7 letters in the New Testament.” Having attributed this transparent contrivance to second-century Christians, Klauck then condemns them for it: “This only underscores the artificiality of the whole construction.”

Works advancing anonymous, pseudonymous, or community authorship of John’s Letters, or some variation thereof, dominate the discussion today

13. Philo does not seem to be alluded to, much less quoted, in any NT writing.

(e.g., R. Brown 1982: 30n71 [four authors at work in composition, though his views fluctuated over the years]; Schnackenburg 1992: 41; Sloyan 1995: 3; Strecker 1996: xxxv–xliv; Culpepper 1998: 29–37; C. Black 2000: 386n3; Ehrman 2004: 164–65). Witherington (2006: 403) thinks that the author may have been the Beloved Disciple and possibly Lazarus. Or the authorship question may be largely skirted (Griffith 2002; T. Brown 2003). Reflecting a postmodern hermeneutic in its prime, Callahan states, “The ‘relationship among texts’ that we now call the Johannine Epistles . . . is not and cannot be a property of ‘Johannine authorship’” (2005: 2). There are only texts, and therefore at some point and in some manner writers. But there were no authors.

The doctrine of a nonapostolic, noneyewitness authorship of the Johannine writings and therefore letters may be regarded as firmly established. Ancient tradition and in fact Scripture itself (Rev. 1:9) says that John was banished from the mainland to the island of Patmos. Today he is banished from connection with all the writings that people once thought he composed.

His exile is of little concern if the gospel he upheld is not true and binding on today’s world and readers. If exegesis of 1–3 John is literally an academic exercise, then we can leave these authorless lines to whatever fate befalls them. Life goes on, however ir/religiously an interpreter cares to construe it. The paychecks, pensions, and (if one is lucky) royalties of tenured professors setting forth startling new ideas about discredited old traditions will continue.

The Vantage Point of This Commentary

Johannine studies has arrived at the place it is through the labors of generations of dedicated scholars. Even where the approach has been largely negative from the standpoint of John’s claims as I would understand them, there is typically much to learn from the exegesis of any trained and thoughtful reader of the NT text. For that reason, this commentary will interact freely with a full range of interpreters who have assayed to interpret the Johannine Letters. Having said that, I also feel it legitimate to invite John back off his island and welcome him into the apostolic circle, where historical sources place him.

It is likely that first-century Christians, taught by both Judaism and Jesus (Wenham 1994) to acknowledge in the Hebrew Scripture and its Greek counterpart (the LXX) “oracles of God” of priceless worth (cf. Rom. 3:1–2), quickly treasured the writings of their own spiritual leaders as God inspired (cf. Holladay 2005: 575). The magisterial tone of NT epistles assumes this; if we were to write thus to one another today, it would strike us as parody. The writers wrote and were evidently read as possessing a certain authority (challenged by many, as the writings make clear, as was the Jesus they served). Why would they not be so regarded when they cast out demons and healed the sick (John and other disciples in Mark 6:13), caused the lame to walk (John and Peter in Acts 3:1–10), and raised the dead (Peter in Acts 9:36–43)? There is formal indication of their authority from before the end of the first century (1 Tim. 5:18b [if Paul is citing a written source]; 2 Pet. 3:15–17; 1 Clem. 47.1–3; 53.1). The phenomenon of inspiration of both OT and NT writings is a primitive Christian belief

(Westcott 1888: 417–56), rooted in Jewish belief preceding it: “Jewish exegetes believed that every word of Scripture had been spoken by God. There could be no question of its inspiration or authenticity” (Grant and Tracy 1984: 8). It would not be surprising if the writings of John son of Zebedee were regarded highly. And this is not merely the result of a theological conviction regarding inspired Scripture: it is also a historical conviction visible in the canonical Gospels, which “explicitly acknowledged their sources in the eyewitnesses and the authority of the eyewitnesses for their reliability” (Bauckham 2006: 292).

Moreover, Papias is said to have made use of 1 John (as well as 1 Peter; Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.17), and Papias can be regarded as active in the 95–110 era along with Ignatius and Polycarp (Yarbrough 1983). I am unaware of good reason to doubt the claim that Eusebius, as he perused Papias’s *Expositions of the Oracles of the Lord*, saw 1 John quoted or at least alluded to recognizably.¹⁴

It is worth noting that no ancient manuscripts of John’s Epistles do not bear his name. True, it is commonly stated that early manuscripts circulated without indication of their author (R. Brown 1982: 5; Heckel 2004: 433), but in the absence of proof and perhaps even compelling evidence, this is a theory to be treated with caution regarding John’s Letters. (For a similar argument regarding the four Gospels, see Bauckham 2006: 111, 302–4.) If for some considerable period of time no one knew, really, who wrote these letters as they circulated, and John represents a later guess, how likely is it that the hundreds of copies, or at least the numerous lines of manuscript transmission that are reflected in extant copies, all guessed the same person for just these three particular documents? Here the work of the Institute for New Testament Textual Research again deserves notice (B. Aland et al. 2003a: 263, 368), which lists (in Greek without accents or breathing marks) about fifty different titles given for 1 John (whether at the beginning as superscriptions or at the end as subscriptions). The following selection (from uncials, whose titles are picked up by minuscules) gives the flavor of ancient scribal convention:¹⁵

Uncials	Superscription or Subscription	Translation
01C2, 044	ιωαννου επιστολη πρωτη	John’s First Epistle
01, 02, 03	ιωαννου πρωτη (03 has ιωανου)	John’s First [Epistle]

14. See also Hill’s conclusion (2004: 444–45), though he tends to date Papias ten to twenty years later than I would. The year 100 is exactly where Papias is placed in Eusebius’s chronicle, which forms the backbone of his history (we have the chronicle courtesy of Jerome’s translation of it; see Helm 1913: 193–94). Papias, Polycarp, and Ignatius are said to be “hearers of the apostle John” in the early years of Trajan, specifically at the year 100. This may seem to be very late for John to have been lucid. Yet John could have been born in 10–15, begun following Jesus at age fifteen to twenty, written 1–3 John anytime after 70 at the age of sixty or so, and even by 100, aged eighty-five or ninety, still have had plenty of life left.

15. The papyrus witnesses are fragmentary: \mathfrak{P}^9 contains only 1 John 4:11–12, 14–17, so what it contained fore and aft cannot be determined; \mathfrak{P}^{74} is fragmentary in the first chapter and breaks off after 1 John 5:17.

Uncials	Superscription or Subscription	Translation
049 (superscription)	του αγιου αποστολου ιωαννου επιστολη πρωτη	First Epistle of the Holy Apostle John
0142	του αγιου ιωαννου του αποστολου επιστολη πρωτη	Saint John the Apostle's First Epistle
020	επιστολη καθολικη του αγιου αποστολου ιωαννου	Catholic Epistle of the Holy Apostle John
025V	ιωαννου του ευαγγελιστου και αποστολου επιστολη πρωτη	First Epistle of the Evangelist and Apostle John
025	επιστολη ιωαννου πρωτη	First Epistle of John
049 (subscription)	του αγιου ιωαννου επιστολη πρωτη	Saint John's First Epistle
018	επληρωθη συν θεω αδελφοι η πρωτη επιστολη ιωαννου του θεολογου	Completed with God, Brothers: The First Epistle of John the Theologian ¹⁶

Of the 143 witnesses cited in B. Aland et al. 2003a (representing 180 total manuscripts), only two lack the name “John” in either the superscription or subscription. Minuscule 1751 contains the subscription *τελος της πρωτης επιστολης ητις εγραφη απο εφεσου* (End of the First Epistle, Which Was Written from Ephesus). Minuscules 607 and 1838 have the subscription *εγραφη απο εφεσου* (Written from Ephesus). These subscriptional clues, even without John’s name, were surely adequate to imply it for Byzantine copyists and users of the manuscripts they produced. (Since 1838 is from the eleventh century and contained all the Catholic Letters, the placement of 1 John after 2 Peter would have betrayed its identity to any Byzantine scribe.) The textual witness for John’s authorship of 1 John is uniform and pervasive. This does not prove that the name “John” was affixed to the very earliest copies (at which time it would perhaps not have needed to be: at the outset of the tradition process, it would be self-evident). But it is consonant with the theory that it may have been and the supposition that in any case these writings never circulated without being closely associated with John.

Finally, it is alleged that many NT writings owe their titles not to anonymity but to pseudonymity: the putative authorship was assigned by perhaps a community that knew full well that the named author was not the actual one. This theory has received recent careful scrutiny and can with good reason be viewed with skepticism (Wilder 2004; cf. Baum 2001; more broadly Carson and Moo 2005: 337–50). There is no compelling reason to doubt that the only known prominent John associated with the first-century church wrote John.¹⁷ This is attested too early to be otherwise; as Heckel (2005: 1323) in

16. Evidently this scribe rejoiced to have his arduous copying work behind him. As for John being termed “the theologian,” Turretin (1992–97: 1.2 §1.1.8) points out that the church “fathers designate particularly that part of the Christian science which treats of the divinity of Christ by the word ‘theology.’ In this sense, John is with emphasis styled ‘Theologian’ because he boldly asserted the deity of the Word.”

17. Cf. L. Johnson 1999: 525: “Since nothing is ever said in this Gospel about a John, and the Synoptic Sons of Zebedee are mentioned only incidentally (21:2), it is not unreasonable to

reviewing Hill states: “The extant sources from Ignatius, Papias, Polycarp, and Justin to Irenaeus either explicitly presuppose John’s Gospel or show absolutely no inclination to shy away from related ideas that were with considerable probability drawn from John’s Gospel.” If this has validity, it has implications for viewing the NT letters attributed to John as coming from his own hand.

What about John the Elder? No patristic writer prior to Eusebius (writing ca. 300) proposed the existence of such a person (for arguments that some second-century sources may support the theory of this person’s existence, see Bauckham 2006: 438–71). I argue elsewhere (1983) that Eusebius interpreted Papias tendentiously to tease out an Elder John who was separate from the apostle (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.2–9). He needed someone named John to whom he could attribute the book of Revelation, since Eusebius under Origen’s influence had embraced amillenarianism, whereas the ante-Nicene church generally and Eusebius in his younger years understood Revelation in millenarian terms (Grant 1980: 131). For polemical purposes,¹⁸ then, Eusebius saw fit to invent the nonapostolic Elder John and then impute Revelation to him. Chapman (1911: 33) noted long ago: “It is certain that Eusebius was the first to discover two Johns in Papias, and he is proud of his discovery.” It is telling that Eusebius elsewhere rejoins the consensus of his era, speaking of but one John and even linking him to the writing of the Apocalypse (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.18.1; 3.20.9; 3.23.1, 6). It is also significant that in his *Chronicon* (the framework for his history) Eusebius lists Papias, along with Ignatius and Polycarp, as hearers of “the apostle John” (Helm 1913: 193–94). To my mind this is a nagging weakness in Bauckham’s impressive arguments for the existence of an Elder John separate from the apostle (2006: 412–37): they force a highly contestable reading on Papias’s fragments, fragments carefully selected by Eusebius to furnish a basis for his unprecedented claim that there were two Johns.

But even these fragments can be understood to speak of only one John, the apostle and the son of Zebedee. It is significant that Eusebius himself admits that the word “elder” can for Papias designate an apostle: “Papias . . . confesses that he had received the words of the *Apostles* from their followers” (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.7 [Loeb translation, emphasis added]). In the quotation given by Eusebius from Papias’s writings, Papias never uses the word “apostle.” He speaks only of “elders” who were Jesus’s “disciples”: Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John, Matthew, “or any other of the disciples of the Lord” (3.39.4). Papias says that he had access to these elders as well as to others who had been their followers (such as Polycarp and Ignatius?). But Eusebius identifies those whom Papias terms “elders” as “apostles” (3.39.7). “Thus on his own showing this passage contradicts the thesis of Eusebius . . . that Papias was not a hearer of

identify the beloved disciple with John son of Zebedee (cf. Matt. 10:2; Mark 3:17; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13), who was a ‘pillar’ of the first Jerusalem church (Acts 3:1; 4:13; 8:14; Gal. 2:9).”

18. Cf. Cross 1960: 61: “Eusebius was prejudiced against Papias on account of his Chiliasm.”

the apostles” (Lawlor and Oulten 1954: 2.112; so also Lawlor 1922: 212). It seems that Eusebius exploits a linguistic ambiguity that had arisen between the respective apostolic and Nicene eras: Papias reflecting first-century usage could use “elder” to be inclusive of “apostle,” as is occasionally the case in the NT (Acts 11:30; 21:18; 1 Pet. 5:1; possibly 2 John 1; 3 John 1). For Eusebius, however, it is feasible through selective quotation and tendentious exegesis to force on the word “elder” the connotation of a *follower* of an apostle or some other later Christian leader. Many are not convinced that Papias himself ever intended to refer to two different Johns (Lawlor and Oulten 1954: 2.114; R. Brown 1966: lxxxviii–xcii; Morris 1969: 278–79; Smalley 1978: 73–78). “The quotation from Papias *can* be understood to mean that Papias was a hearer of the apostle John” (Grant 1974: 210, emphasis original)—as Eusebius himself states in his *Chronicon*.

Yet even if there was an Elder John separate from the apostle, it seems that their views were so inseparable that we can interpret them as from a single body of recollection and conviction. Dodd’s view is not atypical: “I conceive the First Epistle of John, then, to have been written by an author who was quite possibly a disciple of the Fourth Evangelist, and certainly a diligent student of his work. He has soaked himself in the Gospel, assimilating its ideas and forming his style upon its model” (1937: 156). Many agree that 2 John and 3 John resemble 1 John in language and style (e.g., L. Johnson 1999: 559–71).

When one combines these insights with the widely conceded fact that the vocabulary of John’s Gospel and at least his first letter appear to point in the direction of common authorship (noted long ago and at length by Dionysius of Alexandria; see Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 7.25.17–21), it is not unreasonable to adopt the interpretive assumption that the John of the Gospel also stands behind the Johannine Epistles. Neufeld (1994: 1–36) demonstrates that theories rejecting John’s authorship have arrived at little *positive* consensus regarding the historical, social, and cultural settings or occasions that gave rise to 1 John (to say nothing of 2 John and 3 John). Neufeld concludes that “the almost complete lack of clues about [1 John’s] historical genesis suggests that the historical critical method,” which tends to interpret John’s Letters as if an eyewitness of Jesus *cannot* have been the author, “can at best have a secondary claim only” (1994: 2). For that reason he opts for ahistorical speech-act theory as the hermeneutical key to 1 John’s interpretation.¹⁹ But since I do not understand John to be an anonymous document completely lacking in historical location, I have found it plausible to interpret his letters within the general time and setting ascribed to him by biblical and patristic sources. Further possible justification for this, and interaction with objections to it, will emerge in the course of exegesis below.

19. For similar reasons Schmid (2002: 291) opts for a reader-response approach, with most historical questions and particularly the views of the opponents in 1 John left up to the discernment of each successive set of new readers.

Genre

While 2 John and 3 John bear the earmarks of Hellenistic letters, modified to be sure by Christian sentiments and language, 1 John lacks classic epistolary elements in its opening and closing. Yet ancient writers much closer to literary forms of their time than we are felt it to be epistolary. Irenaeus (*Ag. Her.* 3.16.8), Dionysius of Alexandria (in Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 7.25.8), and Eusebius (3.39.17) all call 1 John a letter without any expressed second thought about the matter. In the exegesis of 2:12–14 I point out that John does have direct address, as befits an epistle; he just defers it and omits mention of personal names, including his own. This could be because it is a circular letter (Kruse 2000: 28). But that it should be understood as a letter of some kind can hardly be doubted (*contra* Witherington 2006: 424, 436n25). Klauck (1998: 258–59) notes three possible indices for 1 John’s epistolary identity: (1) the expressed motive of shared joy (1:4), (2) repeated mention of the act and purpose of writing to his recipients (thirteen uses of *γράφω* [*graphō*, to write] scattered throughout the letter), and (3) repeated instances of direct address of his readers.

Even the somewhat precipitous ending fails to erase this impression, for it does contain personal address (5:21: *τεκνία*, *teknia*, dear children; Ellis 2000: 220 thinks there could be indication here of the author’s own hand) and a prescription for well-being for the recipients, just not in a conventional form. The most important interpretive questions pertain to 1 John’s content, not its genre (Culy 2004: xiii).

Setting and Date

It is probably not possible to mount a convincing case for the order in which the Johannine Epistles were written. They reflect a milieu in which the writer presumes to exercise ecclesial, indeed apostolic, oversight, for he speaks as an eyewitness to Jesus’s life and import (1 John 1:1–3). And even in the very brief letters of 2–3 John, he writes with a magisterial tone that comports with, though it does not in itself establish, apostolic self-consciousness.

The readers are regarded by the author as having believed on Jesus Christ for the salvation of their souls and the transformation of their lives (on the importance of “the genuinely past history” and “the really past story of Jesus” to the early Christian movement, see Bauckham 2006: 277). By all indications this is a Jesus conceived very much along the lines of the individual presented in the canonical Gospels. He was a human being (1 John 4:2) but also somehow deserving of the appellation “God” (5:20) despite God’s indubitable transcendence (1:5; 4:12). By connection with him, people can receive the Holy Spirit (3:24). Jesus was preexistent, with the Father in the beginning (1:1–2). He lived a life worthy of emulation (2:6). He died as a sacrifice for sins (2:2; 4:10). He must have been raised, for he is the source of eternal life (5:11), and he is going to return (2:28). In the meantime he is at the Father’s right hand in a mediatorial role (2:1). At the end of all things, Jesus will bring

his followers to eternal life (5:11, 20), which is already inaugurated but has yet to be consummated in the current age.

The readers of the epistles are apparently living in fellowship with each other, albeit not a perfect fellowship, for there has been schism in 1 John 2:19, there is talk of deceivers in 2 John 7, and there is discord behind the scenes of 3 John 9. Most treatments of the epistles seek to reconstruct the respective settings based on a “mirror reading” of internal evidence regarding these problems. But there are severe limits to our knowledge here. “Almost all we know specifically” about the setting(s) “is drawn from the Johannine writings” (Painter 2002: 79; similarly L. Johnson 1999: 559: “The best one can hope for is to find traces of an internal development within the group,” this group being the church or churches to whom the letters are addressed). I will comment on these matters as they pertain to 2 John and 3 John at appropriate junctures in the exegesis below.

As for 1 John, no explicit geographical or temporal indicators are given. Uebele (2001: 163) concludes, however, that the opponents whom 1 John addresses are very possibly the direct forerunners of the adversaries denounced by Ignatius in the following generation. Patristic sources plausibly affirm that in roughly 70–100 John was resident in Ephesus and ministered there. Reports to this effect come from Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, as Eusebius (*Ecc. Hist.* 3.23.1–2) observes:

At this time [i.e., the beginning of Trajan’s reign, ca. 98] that very disciple whom Jesus loved, John, at once Apostle and Evangelist, still remained alive in Asia and administered the churches there, for after the death of Domitian, he had returned from his banishment on the island. And that he remained alive until this time may fully be confirmed by two witnesses, and these ought to be trustworthy for they represent the orthodoxy of the church, no less persons than Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. (Loeb Classical Library)

Eusebius then cites supporting passages from Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies* (2.22.5; 3.3.4) and Clement’s *Salvation of the Rich* (42), the latter of which notes activity by John not only in Ephesus but also in its sister city Smyrna to the north.

Given this information, if we care to assign John’s Letters to a particular historical milieu at all, it seems warranted to think of them as reflecting conditions in the region of Ephesus in the closing decades of the first century (Witherington 2006: 427 suggests the 80s). Information of some historical significance can be inferred from Rev. 2–3 regarding this era and locale in the form of short letters from the exalted Jesus to the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia, of which Ephesus was the leading city.

John’s Epistles and the Seven Churches of Asia

The church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:1–7; for detailed treatment see Trebilco 2004: 293–350; Schnabel 2004: 1.819–20) receives praise for its works, toil, and

perseverance, as well as its unwillingness to abide evildoers. These are individuals who make false apostolic claims. The Ephesians have exposed them as bogus. This is all praiseworthy. Yet their love is flagging. So they must repent and be renewed in good works²⁰ lest they be put to shame at Jesus's return. They receive a last word of approval for their rejection of the works of the Nicolaitans (about whom there are several theories but little definite knowledge beyond what John writes here; Trebilco 2004: 335). Greek words in this section that are reminiscent of John's Letters are the following:

Rev. 2	Greek Text	Translation	Johannine Parallels
2:1	ὁ περιπατῶν (<i>ho peripatōn</i>)	the one who walks	1 John 1:6, 7; 2:6 (2x), 11; 2 John 4, 6 (2x); 3 John 3, 4
2:2	οἶδα (<i>oida</i>)	I know	1 John (15x); 3 John 12
2:2, 5	ἔργα (<i>erga</i>)	works	1 John 3:8, 12, 18; 2 John 11; 3 John 10
2:2	ψευδεῖς (<i>pseudeis</i>)	liars	1 John 1:10; 2:4, 22; 4:20; 5:10 ²¹
2:3	τὸ ὄνομά μου (<i>to onoma mou</i>)	my name	1 John 2:12; 3:23; 5:13; 3 John 7
2:4	ἀγάπη (<i>agapē</i>)	love	1 John (18x); 2 John 3, 6; 3 John 6
2:5	ποιέω (<i>poieō</i>)	do (i.e., perform)	1 John 1:6, 10; 2:17, 29; 3:4 (2x), 7, 8, 9, 10, 22; 5:2, 10; 3 John 5, 6, 10
2:5	ἔρχομαι (<i>erchomai</i>)	I [Christ] come	1 John 4:2; 5:6; 2 John 7
2:6	μισεῖς/μισῶ (<i>miseis/misō</i>)	you/I hate [evil works]	1 John 2:9, 11; 3:13, 15; 4:20
2:7	ὁ νικῶν (<i>ho nikōn</i>)	the one who conquers	1 John 2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4 (2x), 5

The situation presupposed by Rev. 2:1–7 conceivably resonates with John's Letters in several ways. Jesus praises the church for the diligence of its members (2:2–3); John commends his readers for their expressions of loyalty and faith (1 John 2:12–14; cf. 2 John 4; 3 John 3, 5–6). Jesus chides the Ephesians for lovelessness (Rev. 2:4); 1 John camps on this theme repeatedly from several angles, as do 2 John and 3 John (2 John 3, 6; 3 John 6). Both Rev. 2:5 and 1 John 2:28 use Christ's return as a spur to moral urgency. There are deceivers and spiritual

20. Throughout this section of Revelation, Schnabel's comment bears notice: "The 'works' (τὰ ἔργα, *ta erga*) do not describe 'services' generally but seem to stand particularly for missionary activity in the pagan world. When John uses the terms 'love,' 'faith' and 'patience,' particularly 'faith' and 'patience,' he nearly always describes continuous witness for Jesus Christ" (2004: 1.832).

21. The root of ψευδεῖς in Rev. 2:2 is ψευδῆς (*pseudēs*, lying); the word in the 1 John passages is ψεύστης (*pseustēs*, liar).

knives at work in Ephesus (Rev. 2:2, 6); a subtheme of each of John's Letters is analogous individuals or groups. Through it all, Christ will reward those who prevail with the resources he provides (Rev. 2:7; cf. 1 John 5:4–5; 2 John 8).

The church in Smyrna (Rev. 2:8–11; cf. Schnabel 2004: 1.820–23) faces tribulation, poverty, and slander from people called false Jews and a synagogue of the devil. More suffering lies ahead, but believers should not fear despite imprisonment and persecution. After death they will receive “the crown of life”; the “second death” will not touch them.

Parallels between this counsel and John's Letters are less abundant than with Ephesus. Verbally, we find in Rev. 2:9 the expression οἶδα (*oida*, to know) and in 2:11 ὁ νικῶν (*ho nikōn*, the one who conquers), terms with Johannine parallels (see table above). At Smyrna, “Satan” and “the devil” are a factor; in 1 John it is not only “the devil” (3:8, 10) but also “the evil one” (2:13, 14; 3:12; 5:18, 19) and “antichrist” (2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). In general we may say that opposition from the world presupposed at Smyrna is very much a concern in John's Letters (e.g., 1 John 2:15–17; 5:19; 2 John 7–11; 3 John 9–11). So is the ultimate promise of eternal life (Rev. 2:11; 1 John 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20) from the conquering Jesus.

The church in Pergamum (Rev. 2:12–17; cf. Schnabel 2004: 1.823–31) faces dangers more dire and imminent than the settings addressed by 1–3 John. But there are false teachers who aid and abet behavior that is inexpedient and even immoral. There are points of contact here with ubiquitous calls for moral reform and forsaking of sin in John's Letters. As John adduces Cain as a role model to eschew (1 John 3:12), Jesus holds up Balaam as a negative example (Rev. 2:14). The Jesus who addresses Pergamum projects his coming in judgment (2:16), a feature of 1 John as well (2:28; 3:2–3). Jesus extols his name (see table above) and faith in him (Rev. 2:13), just as John makes much of faith (1 John 5:5) and the act of exercising it (πιστεύω [*pisteuō*, to believe] in 1 John 3:23; 4:1, 16; 5:1, 5, 10 [3x], 13). Idolatry is a concern in both Rev. 2:14 and 1 John 5:21.

The church in Thyatira (Rev. 2:18–29; cf. Schnabel 2004: 1.831–32) hears the words of “the Son of God,” as John's Letters make him a major theme (cf. ca. two dozen occurrences in 1 John; 2 John 3, 9). The Thyatiran church is commended for its works (Rev. 2:19), as John commends his readers in all three epistles. But as Cain's example threatened to characterize the behavior of the readers of 1 John, Jezebel's misdeeds are to be avoided at Thyatira (Rev. 2:20). She heads up a wing of rebels guilty of false teaching, immorality, and idolatrous acts. Their sins “probably are connected with membership in or the activities of the trade guilds of Thyatira at their banquets” (Schnabel 2004: 1.832). They delight in “the deep things of Satan” (Rev. 2:24). John's Letters, in contrast, call readers to true teaching, moral probity, and a break with all that is less or other than God. The deepest thing people can entertain is the “understanding” that makes it possible “to know the one who is true” (1 John 5:20), not satanic esoterica or the lure of the antichrist (2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). John's readers have resources to circumvent deceptive teaching (1 John 2:26–27). As with previous Asian cities, so to Thyatira the Son of

God promises his return in judgment and reward (Rev. 2:25–28), themes we have already seen in John’s Letters. The Son will also strike the “children” of Jezebel dead, as John warns his “children” (cf. “children of God” in 1 John 3:1, 2, 10; 5:2; “children” in the sense of “Christian believers” in 2 John 1, 4, 13; 3 John 4) against sin resulting in death (1 John 5:16). There is victory over sin, deception, and death for those who keep Jesus’s commands to the Thyatirans (Rev. 2:26), just as eternal life (1 John 2:25) and communion in prayer (3:22; 5:14) should inspire the readers of 1 John to do likewise (2:3–6).

The Jesus who addresses Sardis (Rev. 3:1–6; cf. Schnabel 2004: 1.833–36) knows the works of his followers, as God knows all things (1 John 3:20). The Sardis believers are deficient in works, a concern of all three Johannine Letters (see table above). They should “remember what they received” (Rev. 3:3) as John’s readers are told to actualize their anointing and their knowledge (1 John 2:20), to dwell on the nature of God (1:5), and to recall the eternal life that was made manifest in the incarnation (1:1–3). “The one who conquers” will never lose eternal life—themes and a promise that figure prominently in 1 John.

The church at Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7–13; cf. Schnabel 2004: 1.836–38) is addressed by “the Holy One” (ὁ ἅγιος, *ho hagios*) and “the True One” (ὁ ἀληθινός, *ho alēthinos*), expressions with parallels in 1 John 2:20 (“the Holy One”) and 2:8 (Jesus is the “true” light) and 5:20 (his followers know and are in “the True One,” who is also “the true God”). Jesus has “the key of David” (Rev. 3:7); he is the (Davidic) Christ in John’s Letters (1 John 1:3; 2:1, 22; 3:23; 4:2, 15; 5:1, 6, 20; 2 John 3, 7, 9).²² He knows their works, as he did the works of those at Sardis and Ephesus. They have not “denied” (from ἀρνέομαι, *arneomai*, to deny) his name (Rev. 3:8), an urgent concern in 1 John (2:22, 23) because it is vital to confess Christ aright (4:2–3; 2 John 7). They have rather kept (τηρέω, *tēreō*, to keep) Jesus’s words (Rev. 3:8, 10), as John’s readers are urged to keep them (1 John 2:5) along with his commandments (2:3, 4; 3:22, 24; 5:3).

The Philadelphians join other Asian churches addressed by Jesus in either being called to steadfastness or commended for it: Ephesus (Rev. 2:2–3), Smyrna (2:10: “faithful unto death”), Thyatira (2:19, 25–26), Sardis (3:3), Philadelphia (3:10–11). All these references beg to be compared with the Johannine teaching regarding “abiding” in Christ, a notion that carries with it all the rich associations of the Revelation passages, almost like musical refrains, that speak of “patient endurance,” faithfulness, holding fast, bearing up, and remaining steadfast. Philadelphia in particular seems to have taken the message to heart: Schnabel (2004: 1.838, quoting Olshausen) notes that it was “‘the last bridgehead of Christianity in Asia Minor,’ which was overpowered not before AD 1391, when Sultan Bajesid I conquered the city.”

The church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14–22) is addressed by Jesus, who is a witness “faithful and true,” words applied to divinity in 1 John (1:9; 2:8; 5:20). Concern for the tepid zeal and lackluster “works” (ἔργα, *erga*) of the Laodiceans

22. Cf. John’s Gospel, in which “the Davidic Messiah, the King of Israel, is none other than the eternal Son of God” (Pryor 1992: 135).

is prominent because of their apparent smugness. They are a picture of people without a sense of sin or any need to repent—the very self-delusion that 1 John (1:6, 8, 10) condemns. The Laodicean Christ is full of love for the readers (Rev. 3:19) but will settle for nothing less than their victory in the spiritual and moral battles they face: he grants benefit to “the one who conquers” (3:21), a theme already noted repeatedly in 1 John.

In sum, there may be a need to rethink the consensus that there is no historical setting for John’s Letters, that all we can do is infer a community of internecine strife from words in the letters themselves. Of course strife is reflected in the letters; but there is a known world around the Christian community of John’s place and time, attested by sources of some historical credibility, and it is not a world on all counts friendly to Christian presence and witness. Seen in this light, John’s Letters are not obscure brittle condemnations of personal enemies; Rusam’s conclusion (1993: 232) seems overstated that the Johannine congregations “fought for their convictions and their entire existence in polemical demarcation against their hostile surroundings.” These letters are not defensive expedients to salvage a few followers in the wake of John’s previous failed leadership; in fact, “the remarkable thing about 1 John is that it does not consist of a bitter polemic against those who departed or a sustained refutation of their claims. The focus . . . is not on the outsiders but on those who remain” (L. Johnson 1999: 566). The same could be said of the other two letters. All three are frank, realistic, but positive pastoral missives (not congregational creations) seeking to affirm and reinvigorate doctrinal direction, ethical urgency, relational integrity, and a forward-looking faith in God, generally in a geographical setting and temporal era in which relatively young churches were facing the challenges of longer term existence.

Literary Structure of 1 John

There is no agreement on the organization of 1 John (for helpful discussion of various recent proposals, see Culy 2004: xiii–xvi).²³ Twofold, threefold (Witherington 2006: 436), fourfold, fivefold, sixfold, sevenfold, and tenfold divisions have been proposed (Klauck 1991: 62–63; 1998: 259; cf. R. Brown 1982: 764). Schmid (2002: 305) proposes an elevenfold organization. The table below (adapted from Yarbrough 2002: 182) simply follows the inner marginal numbers of NA²⁷, which in turn reflect the divisions that came to be standard among scribal copyists through the centuries, particularly in Byzantium, which reproduced and preserved the greatest share of the extant Greek manuscript tradition:

1 John	Opening Words	Theme
1:1–2:6	“that which was from the beginning”	Central burden: God is light
2:7–17	“my dear children”	Primary commandment: Embody the age-old message

Continued

23. Outlines of 2 John and 3 John will be provided in the introductions to these books.

1 John	Opening Words	Theme
2:18–3:8	“dear children”	Key counsel: Abide in his anointing and receive eternal life
3:9–4:6	“no one who is born of God will continue to sin”	Core teaching: Beware Cain’s error and false prophets
4:7–14	“dear friends”	Foundational imperative: God’s love
4:15–5:15	“if anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God”	Illustrative appeal: Believing in Jesus the Christ, the Son of God
5:16–21	“if anyone sees a brother commit a sin”	Concluding admonition: The true God and the threat of imposters

Detailed Outline of 1 John

- I. Central burden: God is light (1:1–2:6)
 - A. Announcement of authority and purpose (1:1–4)
 1. Eyewitness privilege and proclamation (1:1–3)
 - a. The fact of the incarnation (1:1)
 - b. The validity of eyewitness testimony (1:1–3)
 - c. What the incarnation manifested (1:1–2)
 - d. The truth and import of the incarnation (1:1–3)
 - e. The goal of the proclamation (1:3)
 2. Pastoral desire: Shared joy (1:4)
 - B. Main burden of the epistle: The character of God (1:5)
 - C. Implications of God’s character for the Christian life (1:6–10)
 1. Implications for fellowship (1:6–7)
 - a. In the case of transgression (1:6)
 - b. In the case of obedience (1:7)
 2. Implications for integrity (1:8–10)
 - a. In the case of denial of sinfulness: Misrepresentation of the self (1:8)
 - b. In the case of consciousness of sin (1:9)
 - c. In the case of denial of sinful acts: Misrepresentation of God (1:10)
 - D. Appeal to readers in the light of God’s character (2:1–6)
 1. Author’s hope: Readers’ deliverance from sin via knowing God (2:1a)
 2. Author’s promise: Christ’s twofold ministry (2:1b–2)
 - a. Intercessor (2:1b)
 - b. Expiatory propitiation (2:2)
 3. Author’s assurance: Chastened Christian confidence (2:3–6)
 - a. Basis for assurance: Compliance with Christ’s commandments (2:3)
 - b. Disqualification from assurance (2:4)
 - c. Expansion of the basis for assurance: The perfection of Christian love (2:5)
 - d. Ethical obligation of the professing Christian (2:6)

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- II. Primary commandment: Embody the age-old message (2:7–17)
 - A. The nature and implications of the message (2:7–11)
 - 1. The message old yet current (2:7)
 - 2. The message new yet true (2:8)
 - 3. Implications for the misanthrope (2:9, 11)
 - a. The futility of mere confession (2:9)
 - b. The darkness of lovelessness (2:11)
 - 4. Implications for the philanthrope (2:10)
 - B. Pastoral appeal in view of the message (2:12–17)
 - 1. De facto greeting: Reflexive appeal (2:12–13)
 - 2. De facto greeting continued: Reflective appeal (2:14)
 - 3. Imperative appeal in view of the message (2:15–17)
 - a. Heart of the imperative: Warning against world-love (2:15a)
 - b. Warning regarding absence of love for God (2:15b)
 - c. Explication of warning (2:16–17)
 - i. The origin of world-love (2:16)
 - ii. The bane of world-love and the promise of doing the will of God (2:17)
 - III. Key counsel: Abide in his anointing (truth) and receive eternal life (2:18–3:8)
 - A. Three considerations informing the counsel to abide (2:18–21)
 - 1. Eschatological consideration in view of antichrist (2:18)
 - 2. Ecclesiastical consideration in view of schism (2:19)
 - 3. Charismatic consideration in view of anointing (2:20–21)
 - B. The truth that abides (2:22–26)
 - 1. Who the liar is (2:22)
 - 2. Who is on the side of the truth (2:23)
 - 3. Who will abide in the truth and their reward (2:24–25)
 - 4. Who imperils those seeking to abide (2:26)
 - C. The imperative to abide (2:27–29)
 - 1. The basis for the imperative: Anointing and instruction (2:27)
 - 2. The imperative and its incentive: The parousia (2:28)
 - 3. The basis for heeding the imperative: Christ the Righteous One (2:29)
 - D. The glory of abiding (3:1–8)
 - 1. The marvel of the Father's love (3:1)
 - 2. The promise of divine transformation (3:2–3)
 - a. Future transformation (3:2)
 - b. Present ethical urgency (3:3)
 - 3. The ethics of Christ's presence (3:4–8)
 - a. Defiance of Christ's presence (3:4, 6)
 - b. Purpose of Christ's presence (3:5)
 - c. Victory of Christ's presence (3:7–8)
 - IV. Core teaching: Love, works, trust (3:9–4:6)
 - A. Summons to love (3:9–18)
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1. Two paternities: Divine versus devilish origins (3:9–10)
2. Two options: Love or hate (3:11–12)
3. Two paths: Life or death (3:13–18)
 - a. The world's hostility and believers' charity (3:13–14)
 - b. Cain's progeny and Christ's precedent (3:15–16)
 - c. Love's practicality (3:17–18)
- B. Confirmation of love (3:19–24)
 1. Assurance of the heart (3:19)
 2. God's sway over the heart (3:20)
 3. Assurance of confidence (3:21–22)
 4. Assurance of valid faith (3:23)
 5. Assurance of abiding (3:24)
- C. Summons to choose (4:1–3)
 1. Admonition and basis (4:1)
 2. Identification of the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of antichrist (4:2–3)
- D. Confirmation of choice (4:4–6)
 1. God's victory in his people (4:4)
 2. The world's self-fixation (4:5)
 3. The apostolic testimony (4:6)
- V. Foundational imperative: God's love (4:7–14)
 - A. First exhortation to love (4:7–10)
 1. Origin and effect of God's love (4:7)
 2. Status of the one who does not love (4:8)
 3. God's goal in revealing his love (4:9)
 4. God's means of revealing his love (4:10)
 - B. Second exhortation to love (4:11–14)
 1. Effect of God's love (4:11)
 2. Importance of expressing God's love (4:12)
 3. Assurance of God's love (4:13)
 4. Apostolic confirmation that the Father sent the Son (4:14)
- VI. Illustrative appeal: Renewed and expanded invitation to love (4:15–5:15)
 - A. Declarative invitation with supporting warrant (4:15–16)
 - B. Commendation of love (4:17–21)
 1. Triumph of divine love (4:17–19)
 2. Necessity of human love (4:20–21)
 - C. Commendation of faith as *fides qua creditur* (5:1–5)
 1. Believing as entrée into free love of God (5:1–3)
 2. Personal faith victorious over (the lovelessness of) the world (5:4–5)
 - D. Commendation of faith as *fides quae creditur* (5:6–12)
 1. God's testimony to Jesus Christ, the object of saving faith (5:6–9)
 2. Human reception of God's testimony (5:10–12)

- E. Commendation of the full assurance of eternal life: Confident prayer (5:13–15)
- VII. Concluding admonition: Pastoral counsel, assurance, and warning (5:16–21)
 - A. Counsel regarding sinners and sin (5:16–17)
 - B. The tie that binds: Shared certainties (5:18–20)
 - C. Final pastoral appeal (5:21)

The Significance of John's Letters

A commentary introduction cannot compete with, say, the synthetic exposition of biblical books found in proper NT theologies. Three recent studies explore the wealth of teaching in the Johannine letter corpus and the interrelationships among the books in a complete and formal way (Marshall 2004: 529–47, 567–74; Thielman 2005: 536–68; Matera 2007: 318–34). It is my intention here merely to preview selected highlights of John's Letters. More detailed discussion and numerous additional important insights will emerge in the exegesis.

Bray (2000: xxi–xxv) comments helpfully on the importance of the Catholic Epistles generally (“Catholic” in his usage referring to the NT letters from James to Jude). First, they present a non-Pauline depiction of early Christian belief. Even if we welcome every line of Paul's writings, we can be grateful for alternate ways of construing the gospel message and for additional examples of how apostolic leaders (or their close associates) responded to the challenges of their day. Both the historical and the doctrinal contributions of this corpus of writings are vital.

Therein lies a second realm of their importance. John's Letters document the existence of aberrant Christian belief and behavior systems within or in close proximity to the church from early times. Christians in subsequent periods need not be demoralized when deception, corruption, or falsehood arise. There are resources for offsetting these ills, because they are precisely the things that Christ came to challenge and vanquish and then to give his followers victory over as they respond to him in faith. Many become disillusioned at wrongdoing in the church. First John reminds readers that the first problem to confront is the person in the mirror. The daily lot of every Christian is to confess his or her sins (1 John 1:9). From that point, but only from that point, John's Letters go on to commend a God of light, truth, love, hope, and life who through his Son and Spirit works renewal where darkness once lay deep and constantly threatens to reemerge.

A third area of the epistles' importance lies in their implicit trisection of authentic Christian experience. Life in the Son grows out of right belief, but not right belief alone. It extends to obedient behavior too. But correct behavior, even combined with high orthodoxy, can be overrated. Who has not encountered the doctrinaire, morally scrupulous, but hate-filled self-confessed follower of Jesus? Something is missing. First John in particular puts a finger

on it (see also 2 John 1, 5–6; 3 John 1, 6). True godliness in John’s conception consists of a third integral element: deep-rooted devotion of the heart to God. This is love. It changes not only our regard for God but also for people. Recent research shows this to be rooted in doctrine and directed toward action, but still a richly and deeply felt conviction and emotion: “When believers are to feel joy, hope and love, . . . these are not cold and dry exhortations to be analyzed and broken down into theological constructs. Instead, they are meant to foster a healthy and vibrant emotional life in what were often difficult situations” (Elliott 2005: 260).

The understanding, experience, and expression of love, so much an emphasis for John, are perhaps the major disconnect between what he writes and what many of his readers grasp, feel, and live. This is possibly due to true love being so close to the essence of the true God—“God is love” (1 John 4:8). Sinful persons will naturally be foreign to the purity, beauty, and transformative force of what is most essential to the God from whom our souls are by nature estranged (a signature Johannine conviction; John 3:19). There are also impediments from the human side due to any number of conditioning factors. To take but one example, if the findings of Baron-Cohen (2003) are valid, many men tend to excel at abstract understanding and building systems, but they struggle with interpersonal relations. Sinful males often cannot relate very well with the emotional needs and lives of others. It can be easy for them to suppress, deny, and in the end never discover the reality of love worthy of the name. For their part, most women, according to Baron-Cohen, are superior to most men when it comes to communicating and empathizing. But there are pitfalls and downsides here when love is defined, as it is for John, not merely as sinful woman’s natural feeling and reflexive action but as doctrinally driven and ethically regulated in very rigorous ways. Heartfelt empathy, whether in a woman or a man, can blur the unwelcome rough edges of truth. Women and men alike face a lifetime of challenge in coming to grips with the implications of John’s deceptively simple, but in reality sophisticated and elegant, religious psychology with its tripartite interplay of sublime elements (doctrine, ethics, relationality), for each in itself is, finally, beyond full human grasp. Yet John enjoins all three on Christ’s followers, just as he vests the gospel message with the capacity to produce them.

A fourth area of these epistles’ importance lies in their reminder of the nature of pastoral ministry: it is inherently and irreducibly microcosmic in focus, though it may well be macrocosmic in vision and effect. If Jesus Christ is the cosmic deliverer, the divinely anointed Christ presupposed by John’s language, then surely the proper place for one of his handpicked followers and historic witnesses would be a high office from which to multiply his gifts through the mobilization of innumerable underlings. And no doubt John did mobilize many coworkers (hinted at, e.g., in 3 John 4). But the “co” is the point: John remained primary (because he was an apostle) among equals (because he too was a sinner and a servant of the gospel). This may help explain why he styled himself “elder” in 2–3 John, not insisting on the honorific “apostle”

or “original disciple” that were his historical and ecclesial due (cf. Bauckham 2006: 172 on Peter’s reserved personal reminiscences).

The default first-person tone of 1 John (note the numerous “we” passages) shows John often addressing his readers as one of them (some “we” statements could connote apostolic authority). Rusam (1993: 227–28) could be correct in his view that the congregation or congregations involved here are house churches, though their size and exact constitution are not vital for interpretation of the letters. Second John depicts a wizened spiritual leader delighting over a (probably small) congregation and every single one of its members (cf. 2 John 4: “your children”). He expresses concern for what comes through the front door of every family’s house (2 John 10). He passes on greetings from every single “child” of his congregation to the children of the congregation he addresses (2 John 13). This is not the remote vantage point of a detached intellectual or political policy maker; it is rather the self-involved language of a player-coach. Third John is almost painfully intimate; if it were an e-mail on the screen of someone else’s laptop, we would feel embarrassed to be reading it without the owner’s permission. John does not write with clinical detachment but with unabashed interpersonal engagement: “The elder to Gaius whom I truly love” (3 John 1). Three times John uses the singular vocative “beloved” (ἀγαπητέ, *agapēte*; 3 John 2, 5, 11). He concludes by asking Gaius to greet his congregation by name (3 John 15 [14b NIV]), or one by one like a shepherd would account for sheep.

To the extent that John’s Letters contribute to a template for Christian ministry and, in particular, leadership as part of that ministry, they model an influence that is simultaneously top-down and side-by-side. It is not as if ecclesiastical oversight were unimportant; various markers in 2–3 John indicate “that matters of authority and church order were growing concerns” (Hultgren 1994: 77). Yet in military terms, John is an officer alongside other grunts in the trenches or on patrol, not a smooth-shaven colonel warm and safe in some command post miles away. The ministry of Christ that John’s Letters commends is truly a ministry, a service, down to the personal level of where each individual lives. In its macrocosmic implications and effects, if God should so grant, this ministry is constantly informed, steered, and infused with integrity through the minister’s (in this case John’s) constant full engagement in the truth, commands, and love he ardently commends in face-to-face interchange with fellow believers. This kind of hands-on personal service is also precisely what John commends in Gaius (3 John 3, 5).

Finally, if 1–3 John leave the disciple who studies them with any single lasting impression, it is the grandeur and centrality of God (here linking John’s thought with Paul’s, if Schreiner 2001 is correct). Part of this is the sheer volume of references to him. There is hardly a verse or even clause anywhere that does not name a person of the Godhead (Trinity), a divine attribute, or a divine work (like a command that has come from God). These letters are not simply theological, as one might say ale is alcoholic: they are rather theology distillate, analogous to highest-proof grain alcohol that is highly flammable

and intoxicating in even small amounts. God—mainly Father and Son, but occasionally also Holy Spirit—suffuses every situation John envisions, each piece of counsel he issues, every sentiment he conveys, each affirmation he sets forth. No OT psalmist is any more God saturated in awareness than the writer of these letters.

It would be misguided to try to mimic John's consciousness by our own language, talking only of God or Jesus or the Spirit at every turn, as if the heart were transformed and the world redeemed by adopting hyperspiritual verbal affectation. Rather, the point here is to discern where John projects himself and his readers to be headed. Jesus's vision in the prayer of John's Gospel was for all his followers to "be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us" (17:21). Paul envisioned a juncture where all things (this includes humans) will be subjected to God, and "then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). God is the grand *telos*, the goal and outcome, of the fallen creation that Christ came to restore. John's Letters foreshadow this by modeling awareness of God's pervasive goodness and of his people's mandate and privilege to progress in it even and especially as the Lord's return approaches.

One reason that determining the authorship of these letters is such a sticky question is that the writer's visceral urge is to witness to God, into whose truth and love he has ventured far, not to present a profile of his personal identity and petty human expectations. His own personality is obscured by the divine person to whom he has so thoroughly subordinated his thoughts, actions, and affection. He writes like someone well might whom perhaps sixty years earlier Jesus taught to pray, "Your will be done," and in composing these letters as a very old man has become an instrument of answer to his own daily petition.

- I. Central Burden: God Is Light (1:1–2:6)
- II. Primary Commandment: Embody the Age-Old Message (2:7–17)
- III. Key Counsel: Abide in His Anointing (Truth) and Receive Eternal Life (2:18–3:8)
- IV. Core Teaching: Love, Works, Trust (3:9–4:6)
- V. Foundational Imperative: God’s Love (4:7–14)
- VI. Illustrative Appeal: Renewed and Expanded Invitation to Love (4:15–5:15)
- VII. Concluding Admonition: Pastoral Counsel, Assurance, and Warning (5:16–21)

I. Central Burden: God Is Light (1:1–2:6)

First John opens with a calculated flourish (cf. Rensberger 1997: 45: “quite deliberate”) that bristles with words, concepts, and doctrinal allusions. Most if not all of these will gradually emerge as central themes of the letter (Schnackenburg 1992: 48). Not until later does it become clear that the epistle has a polemical edge:¹ it is written to a believing community that is dealing with fallout from the departure (2:19) of persons with beliefs and practices the author cannot endorse. But for now, the opening verses angle toward addressing a bedrock truth that for John rules out the legitimacy of these persons and their ways: the character of God (1:5). In that sense the epistle has a point of contact with a celebrated Pauline epistolary trait: establish a doctrinal foundation and framework (e.g., Rom. 1–11; cf. Eph. 1–3), then based on this make inferences yielding ethical imperatives (Rom. 12–16; Eph. 4–6). John’s approach is, finally, more complex than that, but that is the essential starting point.

The truths for which John stands, though simple to affirm, are easy to dispute, as allusions to the implied adversaries of the faith will keep reminding the reader throughout the epistle. First John accordingly begins by affirming the author’s credentials to speak with that calm authority that marks the entire discourse (1:1–4). Like certain others specially chosen by Jesus (Mark 1:16–20; 3:13–19), John heard and saw and touched the deceptively mundane stuff of eternal redemption. He saw life—eternal life—embodied like no other human had embodied it before (despite the unquestioned greatness of towering figures like Abraham and Moses for John’s teacher Jesus; cf. John 5:46; 8:56) or would ever embody it again. No wonder John’s rhetoric, elsewhere so choppy that a flow of argument can be difficult to detect, here rings poetic and even borders on epic. He wants to assert the transcendent excellence, the purity, the perfection of the one whom Jesus Christ revealed. He wants God’s people who hear or read his letter to be reminded of who God is and what it means to rest in the sure knowledge that he bestows. And he probably seeks to plant warning flags lest readers violate the ethical ways that are appropriate to God’s sanctifying presence.

Yet despite the grandeur of the opening verses (Schnackenburg 1992: 52 speaks of “massive” phrases) and the searing brightness of transforming divine light (1:5), John writes not as a man of letters (like, say, Seneca) or a philosopher (like Epictetus) or an ideologue (like Juvenal). He writes rather as a pastoral counselor and practical theologian. “This is not an exercise in

1. But R. Brown 1982: 175 risks overreading when he concludes, “The crescendo of references to sensory experience in 1:1 reflects defiant exasperation provoked by opposition over the thrust of the Johannine Gospel.”

abstract speculation; it is engaged pastoral care” (Loader 1992: 3). Griffiths’s comprehensive study (2002: 1) serves to “demonstrate that 1 John has primarily pastoral, rather than polemical, aims.”

John wastes no time with rhetoric² or even with dogmatics per se. As the outline above shows, he rather moves quickly to the import of God and his character for daily Christian living (1:6–10). Nor is he content merely to air practical truths as thoughts to treasure: he just as quickly urges them on the believing community as edicts to heed (2:1–6). And he does so, not from a learned or lofty distance, but with repeated avowal of his deep feelings for fellow believers (e.g., 2:1: “my children”). A threefold emphasis emerges from the start: historico-theological truth (or doctrine), ethical integrity, and relational warmth. In the exegesis of 2:1, I will explore the three corresponding dimensions of saving knowledge of God in Christ that John seems concerned to set forth. These three emphases, it will be seen, comprise rubrics under which many of the epistle’s various sections and discussions take on their full contextual meaning.

2. Cf. Edwards 1996: 38, who is responding to Watson 1989: “Classical rhetoric hardly seems to be the key to 1 John’s style.” But see Painter 2002: 87 and Witherington 2006: 409–12.

- I. Central Burden: God Is Light (1:1–2:6)
 - ▶ A. Announcement of Authority and Purpose (1:1–4)
 - B. Main Burden of the Epistle: The Character of God (1:5)
 - C. Implications of God’s Character for the Christian Life (1:6–10)
 - D. Appeal to Readers in the Light of God’s Character (2:1–6)

A. Announcement of Authority and Purpose (1:1–4)

The discourse in the first section is syntactically convoluted¹ but fairly clear in referring to three temporal junctures. The earliest juncture is “the beginning” (1:1)—the time of Christ’s incarnate existence (so Sloyan 1995: 10) or perhaps even preexistence—leading up to a second juncture: the era when witnesses, like the writer of 1 John, came into physical contact with him. The third temporal juncture is the time of John’s composing this letter. One could even speak of a fourth moment: the time when the letter is read and responded to (1:4).

John lays out this scenario, however, not in neat linear sequential fashion but in a halting style that is more allusive than declarative and that interrupts itself, backtracks, then leaps ahead again. For the sake of clarity, my translation below seeks to follow a less labyrinthine logical course. Superscript numbers show that verses have been reordered, the only time this will occur in this commentary. What is lost is the meandering unfolding of John’s meaning that the original somewhat laboriously conveys. What is gained is a more directly stated understanding of what John seeks to communicate.

Jesus Christ is the slightly veiled primary subject of this section. The first word *ὁ* (*ho*) is neuter, not masculine, and includes Jesus in its scope² but extends beyond him to encompass a more expansive horizon (cf. Loader 1992: 5; Caragounis 2006: 236–37). John begins on a solid christological³ and by implication theological note. This is important, because the epistle’s abundance of practical asides and its seemingly pedestrian and repetitious focus on elementary Christian graces like love and faith can lull the reader into

1. As observed by commentators across the centuries: Calvin 1988: 233 calls the passage “abrupt and confused.” Haupt 1879: 2 writes that the opening words are sufficiently complex to furnish “some difficulties to the grammatical interpretation.” Holtzmann 1908: 327 speaks of “thoughts that become opaque due to their complicated interweaving.” R. Brown 1982: x (cf. 24) refers to sentences that are “infuriatingly obscure.” And Rensberger 1997: 45 mentions “nearly impossible grammar.” See also Thompson 1992: 35. Strecker 1996: 7 posits “the interweaving of the results” of discussions in a Johannine school; so also R. Brown 1982: 152.

2. Cf. BDF §138.1: “The neuter is sometimes used with reference to persons if it is not the individuals but a general quality that is to be emphasized.” Akin 2001: 51n13 suggests “a neuter of abstraction, conceiving of the pre-incarnate Christ as ‘abstract deity.’” Witherington’s suggestion (2006: 440) that *ὁ* refers to God’s wisdom is unconvincing.

3. Cf. Haupt 1879: 1: “No author in the New Testament canon has to the same extent as the Apostle John impressed upon the very introductory words of his writings a Christological stamp.”

forgetting that the epistle's counsel flows, not from a simplistic religiosity,⁴ but out of an epoch-making and life-transforming encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

The exposure to Christ that John sets forth, while it no doubt had its individual dimensions for John, was of a corporate nature (note the repeated "we"). John is not alone in the claims he advances. He is one member of a larger group whose combined testimony is far stronger than it could have been if it were isolated and solitary.⁵ John's "we" makes it clear that the ground he occupies, while distinct from the location of his readers because he is an apostle and they are not (on John's "we of authoritative testimony," see Bauckham 2006: 370–83), is no desert island. The spirituality of this epistle is ecclesial.

Renowned for having written a "spiritual gospel,"⁶ John in this epistle is nonetheless hardheadedly historical (cf. Alexander 1901: 88–98) in his foundational starting point. Christ came, and he somehow brought eternity ("eternal life") more clearly into view⁷ within earth's historical vicissitudes. Precisely what Christ did was vouchsafed to witnesses to be passed along, and just what confessing Christians ought to do about it is the focus of the opening three sentences. They form the necessary prelude to the central claim of the section regarding God's character and its implications (1:5–2:6).

The section can be outlined as follows:

1. Eyewitness privilege and proclamation (1:1–3)
 - a. The fact of the incarnation (1:1)
 - b. The validity of eyewitness testimony (1:1–3)
 - c. What the incarnation manifested (1:1–2)
 - d. The truth and import of the incarnation (1:1–3)
 - e. The goal of the proclamation (1:3)
2. Pastoral desire: Shared joy (1:4)

Exegesis and Exposition

³[With this letter] we report to you, "too", what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us—"and" indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ¹[We report] what was from the beginning—something we

4. Hofmann 1886: 317 (cf. 327–28) flirts with conveying this misconception in repeatedly stressing that 1 John is "the apostolic teaching brought down to its most elementary expression." See also Witherington 2006: 424, who subordinates John's doctrine to ethical behavior.

5. On the unified nature of the apostolic understanding of Jesus, see Bauckham 1998.

6. This phrase is from Clement of Alexandria, quoted in Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 6.14.7. Schlatter 1999: 124 calls attention to the "spiritual" (and not merely moral) ethic that the letter contains.

7. Here and later when John speaks of Christ's destruction of the devil's work (e.g., 3:8), he sounds notes reminiscent of Paul's description of Christ's ministry to Timothy at Ephesus: "Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10).

heard and saw with our eyes, something we beheld and our hands felt concerning the word that bestows life. ²This life was revealed, and ³we have seen and testify and report to you the eternal life that was with the Father and revealed to us. ⁴These things we write ⁵to you⁶ so that ⁷your⁸ joy may be complete.

1. Eyewitness Privilege and Proclamation (1:1–3)

In 1:1–3 the focus is on what the author, together with others of a group that comprise a “we” (in these three verses as translated above, the words “we,” “our,” or “us” occur eleven times), has personally encountered and even physically contacted. This encounter has mediated an assurance of “eternal life” (1:2) to the author that he now seeks to share with his readers. The immediate goal is clear: to facilitate fellowship between the writer and the group he represents, on the one hand, and the readers, on the other. But this fellowship is not merely person to person; it also extends heavenward to God the Father and the Son (D. Smith 1991: 37). The grandeur of the claim may help account for the rhetorical complexity with which the author makes it; Candlish (1866: 9) exclaims, “It is a great [i.e., lofty] idea. Who can grasp it?”

The epistle lacks the mention of its author’s name that is typical in a Hellenistic letter (R. Brown 1982: 788–89; Stowers 1986). But he must have been known to his readers by reputation. There is ample reason to suppose that he was John son of Zebedee (see introduction).

The writer speaks in the first-person plural (see additional note on 1:1–3). The most obvious possible reference here is to those members of Jesus’s inner circle during his earthly days who were eyewitnesses of his remarkable life, death, and resurrection (Marshall 1978: 106).⁸ The four Gospels and Acts present them as the church’s foundation, Christ being the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).⁹ John was among their number. According to his Gospel, they received explicit commissioning on the night Jesus was betrayed (John 13–17; see Ridderbos 1988). When John speaks of “we,” “our,” or “us,” he most likely has in mind particularly those who, along with him, were eyewitnesses of Jesus’s earthly ministry.¹⁰ This is perhaps not so much a regal plural of

8. The Johannine Epistles do not explicitly mention Jesus’s resurrection (noted by Smalley 1984: 8), but they presuppose it with the ubiquitous assumption that Jesus Christ is still alive and offers those who believe in him eternal hope. The resurrection looms large in the Gospel of John, which prefers the verb ἀνίστημι (*anistēmi*) to the noun (ἀνάστασις, *anastasis*): the verb occurs eight times, the noun four times.

9. Cf. the understanding reflected in Heb. 2:3–4: the saving message was “first spoken through the Lord,” then “confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them” (NASB).

10. For full discussion of whether the author of 1 John was a historical witness, see Schnackenburg 1992: 51–56; cf. Bauckham 2006: 358–411. Schnackenburg’s claim (1992: 52) that John’s interest was not historical but religious projects a Kantian dichotomy back onto John that is foreign to his thought. R. Brown 1982: 158 dismisses the view offered above in favor of reference to a Johannine school; against this may be urged the apparent uniformity of the epistle’s style, the univocal ring of the implied author’s voice, and the uniform patristic testimony that John son of Zebedee was the author. Kruse 2000: 53–56 decisively refutes Brown’s appeal to

apostolic privilege as a plural of “*modesty*, when we share our privilege and dignity with others” (Grotius, cited in Alexander 1901: 98). John as member of this at least informal apostolate makes some five points in the opening three verses.

a. The Fact of the Incarnation (1:1)

The first point is that in Jesus Christ what is eternal and transcendent has become palpably immanent. In other words, John affirms the incarnation. Transcendence or eternity is implied by the words “what was from the beginning” (1:1).¹¹ Ἄπ’ ἀρχῆς (*ap’ archēs*) occurs frequently in the LXX to refer to what extends back to the dawn or even predawn of time (Wis. 6:22; 9:8; Sir. 16:26; Isa. 43:13). Habakkuk 1:12 LXX asks, “O Lord, are you not from everlasting [ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς]?” Regarding idols, Wis. 14:13 says, “Neither have they existed from the beginning [ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς] nor will they exist forever.” In contrast, God *has* existed ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς; his existence transcends creation’s temporal boundaries. Old Testament messianic prophecy says that the origins of the Promised One will be “from the beginning [ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς], from days of eternity” (Mic. 5:2 [5:1 LXX]). Without minimizing the historicity of Jesus’s existence,¹² John evokes the horizon of eternity past as he opens his epistle (Akin 2001: 52n16; Witherington 2006: 442). “The fulness of the divine essence, leading back to the Eternal Source in the invisible God himself, and the human manifestation,—all this he contemplated inseparably and as one” (Neander 1852: 21).

But the eternal has somehow materialized in the carnal, for John limns the transcendent with overtly sensory language. It is clear that he is not speaking metaphorically or spiritually (contra Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.48) but literally as he enlarges on “what was from the beginning” with verbs of hearing, seeing, and touching.¹³ He underscores the material reality of the eternal-made-flesh by noting that the seeing was “with our eyes,” the touching performed with “our hands” (1 John 1:1). In every way possible, John stresses that the eternal and heavenly, in a word the divine, has made himself corporeal and historical

various ancient texts alleged to support the “Johannine school” theory. Painter 2002: 129–30 (cf. Rensberger 1997: 47) states that “neither the Fourth Gospel nor 1 John shows any real interest in establishing the facts based on eyewitnesses,” but this is an argument from silence and does not account adequately either for the plain claims of 1 John’s prologue or for Fourth Gospel verses like 1:14; 19:35; 21:24.

11. Calvin’s view (1988: 233) that John refers to Christ’s divinity is too restrictive. Mian 1988 explains “what was from the beginning” with respect to the whole of 1:1–5.

12. R. Brown 1982: 158 (cf. 167) thinks that “what was from the beginning” must mean Jesus’s “person, words, and deeds” as these reflect “his self-revelation . . . to his disciples after his baptism.” In arriving at this conclusion, however, he gives short shrift to OT convictions that likely informed both Jesus’s and John’s theological consciousness. Many commentators take “from the beginning” as referring to the incarnation but not the time before the world’s creation; it is not easy to see why John should not be allowed to evoke thoughts of both.

13. Tertullian (*On the Soul* 17) points out that the Platonists disparage sense perception. In contrast, he argues against Plato’s irrationality on this point and cites numerous NT passages that testify to sense cognition of Jesus Christ. He climaxes his citations with 1 John 1:1.

in a definitive way in the proximity of John and others with him. Whatever John's message in this epistle, his basis for writing clearly lies in the same conviction that he voiced in his gospel: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14).¹⁴

Only later in the epistle does the reader learn that John's addressees were facing blatant challenges to the doctrine of the incarnation. Those who denied that "Jesus is the Christ" (1 John 2:22) were denying that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (4:2). Second John 7 broaches a similar theme: "Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world." Second-century church leader Irenaeus (*Ag. Her.* 1.26.1) spoke of a teacher named Cerinthus, whose views answer to those John rejected. We cannot say for sure that John's epistle takes on Cerinthus explicitly. But his opening stress on the eternal being essentially present in humanity and corporeality points to a misrepresentation of Jesus Christ's identity that Cerinthus and others embraced.

b. The Validity of Eyewitness Testimony (1:1–3)

While 1 John's opening verses point, first, to the incarnation, a second emphasis is closely related: people, John among them, can bear and are bearing eyewitness testimony to the incarnation. Schnackenburg (1992: 53–54) rightly notes that the wording of the verses backs the claim that the viewpoint is one of "people who have had a historical experience of the great event of salvation." The importance of this claim is easily lost on modern readers accustomed to truth in public and empirical matters being established, as it commonly is in the popular mind, by science. While in many ways science's achievements are obviously impressive and welcome, they have unfortunately enthroned a metaphysic of naturalism in influential circles.¹⁵ For naturalism, eyewitness testimony, especially of former times and of non-Western cultures, means little if it runs counter to the convictions of reigning naturalistic certainties.¹⁶

14. For further points of comparison between 1:1–3 and the prologue to John's Gospel, see, e.g., Grylewicz 1958 (not accessible to me). More comprehensively see R. Brown 1982: 176–80; more succinct is Westcott 1883: 3, who notes that parallels between the prologues of 1 John and the Gospel of John were already discussed by Dionysius of Alexandria.

15. P. Johnson 1995: 7–8 notes, "In our greatest universities, naturalism—the doctrine that nature is 'all there is'—is the virtually unquestioned assumption that underlies not only natural science but intellectual work of all kinds." He continues: "If naturalism is true, then humankind created God—not the other way around. In that case rationality requires that we recognize the Creator as the imaginary being he has always been, and that we rely on things that are real, such as ourselves and the material world of nature. Reliance on the guidance of an imaginary supernatural being is called superstition." For trenchant observations on science's limits (often not acknowledged by scientists), see Maki 1999 and Collins 2006.

16. In mainstream views of science, it seems that "naturalistic certainties" are actually an oxymoron: even on the basis of scientific method, "everything we 'know' is taken to be, as it were, a temporary acquisition based on information at present available and a useful basis for speculation and analysis, but by no means absolute truth" (McLeish 1995: 663).

Though from John's point of view truth would by no means be antithetical to much of what naturalistic science affirms today, it would be markedly less reductionist. Truth is as much a matter of what God, by word or deed, in creation or redemption, has revealed as it is of what humans observe and infer. Ideally, divine revelation and humble human inference work together, and when they do, truth in a full sense can emerge. Precisely this concurrence of divine self-disclosure and human reception is what John writes about here as he "testifies" or "bears witness."

Solemn testimony following an event witnessed by two or more persons was the mechanism God ordained in OT times for the establishment of facts (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15). Jesus (quoting Deut. 19:15) counseled observance of this protocol among his followers: "But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses'" (Matt. 18:16). Jesus commissioned his handpicked followers to serve as his "witnesses" (Luke 21:13; Acts 1:8; 2:32; 3:15). A jurisprudence of multiple witnesses was maintained in the early decades of the fledgling church, whether at Corinth (2 Cor. 13:1) or at Ephesus in times prior to John's residence there: "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses" (1 Tim. 5:19).

As a result, when John writes "we have seen and testify" (1 John 1:2), he is not making conversation but virtually swearing a deposition (Thompson 1992: 34). While in the modern setting matters of faith like the incarnation and matters of fact or truth cannot be equated (see the classic statement by Pfeiffer 1951; also Gilkey 1961), and while in postmodern thought even the knowable existence of truth of any stripe is disputed (Vanhoozer 1998), for John the multiple attestation of witnesses grounds the reality of admittedly surprising human perception and gives it binding force, as seen in the following list of verbs of perception in 1:1–3:¹⁷

Verb (1 John)	Translation	NT and LXX Parallels
ἀκηκόαμεν (<i>akēkoamen</i> ; 1:1, 3)	we heard/have heard	John 4:42; Josh. 2:10; 9:9; Zech. 8:23
ἑώρακάμεν (<i>heōrakamen</i> ; 1:1, 2, 3)	we saw/have seen	John 3:11; 20:25; Gen. 26:28; Num. 13:28, 32, 33; Deut. 1:28; Judg. 13:22; Sir. 43:32
ἑθεασάμεθα (<i>etheasametha</i> ; 1:1)	we beheld	John 1:14, 32; 1 John 4:14; 2 Macc. 3:36; 3 Macc. 5:47
ἐψηλάφησαν (<i>epsēlaphēsan</i> ; 1:1)	[our hands] felt	Luke 24:39; Acts 17:27

Hearing (ἀκηκόαμεν) is the most easily discounted perception that John cites, even from the standpoint of ancient sensibilities. Philo writes that some throw out evidence based on hearing alone "on the ground that what is believed through the eyes is true but through hearing is false" (*QE* 2, fragment;

17. Louw 1975, followed by R. Brown 1982: 161, argues that all the perfects and aorists in the following list have the semantic value of the perfect tense.

see Yonge 1993: 884). Seneca calls for something more than hearsay, since “credulity is a source of very great mischief. . . . We should believe only what is thrust under our eyes and becomes unmistakable, . . . and develop the habit of being slow to believe” (*On Anger* 2.24). Yet hearing, while disputable, is apparently sufficient to mediate redeeming awareness of God, as the parallels in the table above variously show.¹⁸ John 4:42, for example, has the Samaritans stating after hearing the testimony of the woman at the well, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world” (NIV). The LXX parallels are instructive, in that each depicts people hearing reports about God that compel acknowledgment of him. Hearing by itself may not be decisive, but in conjunction with other indicators, it may prove convincing. Paul’s affirmation comes to mind: “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

John also speaks of seeing (ἑώρακαμεν). The first-person plural form that appears here occurs only five times in the NT: three times in this context and twice more in the Gospel of John. In the Gospel occurrences, what has been seen is the core of God’s messianic ministry through Christ (John 3:11) or his resurrection (20:25). Septuagint usage is similarly restricted and suggestive: of seven occurrences, four relate to what the spies saw in Canaan, while Gen. 26:28 is Abimelech’s testimony that he and those with him “have seen that the Lord was with” Isaac. Judges 13:22 has Samson’s parents shrieking in terror because, as they exclaim, “We have seen God [θεὸν ἑώρακαμεν].” It can be concluded that a possible function of this expression in biblical usage is to testify solemnly, particularly regarding God’s presence or work. Porter (1989: 249; cf. Painter 2002: 121–22) suggests that the “firsthand witness” implied by ἑώρακαμεν in 1 John 1:2 forms “the basis for subsequent attestation” by the present-tense verbs μαρτυροῦμεν (*martyroumen*, we testify) and ἀπαγγέλλομεν (*apangellomen*, we report). John’s “with our eyes” in 1:1 underscores “the personal nature of the witness,” and what was seen was literal and historical, not merely a vision “of the soul within” (Westcott 1883: 6).

The verb ἑθεασάμεθα is rendered weakly in NIV/TNIV as “looked at.” But “looked at” in vernacular American English narrative often¹⁹ connotes an act that is incidental, subsidiary, or prefatory to a subsequent act or occurrence (“We looked at cars for days before we finally bought one”). But the meaning of ἑθεασάμεθα often appears to be something like fully seeing, contemplating, and drawing a particular inference from, witnessing, beholding. The two NT references in the table above certainly carry this more intensive sense. While the LXX references are not first-person plural, they show that the verbal root

18. BDF §342.2 suggests that the perfect tense of both “hearing” and “seeing” in the context underscores “the effect on the subject.” What happened formerly constitutes John’s witness now.

19. Doubtless there are exceptions. Moisés Silva (private correspondence) points out that in an imperative setting this might not hold true, as when a parent corrects a child by saying, “Look at me when I speak to you!” But that is not the semantic situation of this passage.

may incline more toward the connotation of solemn witness than casual observation (the same can be said of at least two NT references: Matt. 28:1; John 4:35). In 2 Macc. 3:36 the pagan ruler Heliodorus “bore testimony to all men of the deeds of the supreme God, which he had seen [τεθεαμένος] with his own eyes” (RSV). In 3 Macc. 5:47 Ptolemy IV “rushed out, . . . wishing to witness [βουλόμενος . . . θεάσασθαι] . . . with his own eyes” (RSV). Ample lexical evidence exists to support the *prima facie* contextual claim that John is talking about something more than perfunctory “looking at” the circumstances and evidences surrounding Jesus Christ’s first coming.²⁰

As for what John says his and others’ hands “felt” (ἐψηλάφησαν),²¹ the word connotes physical contact, especially tactile (Judg. 16:26; Ps. 115:7 [113:14 LXX]), sometimes of great significance: “Touch me [ψηλαφήσατέ με, *psēlaphēsate me*] and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Luke 24:39). This may be the most telling illuminatory reference to what John wished to express in 1 John 1:1: he was among those who had physical contact with Jesus Christ both before and after his resurrection—and in both modes, John insists, Christ combined the divine and human presence.²² This would be an overt preemptive refutation of those who wanted to separate the earthly Jesus from the heavenly Christ, which, according to Cerinthus, animated Jesus but was not essential to his human identity. The word can also mean to grope for (Acts 17:27; Deut. 28:29) or touch awkwardly (Isa. 59:10), not fully cognizant of the thing touched. It is not impossible that John is expressing this nuance here: he and others rubbed shoulders with Jesus Christ, but not until later did they realize the glory of God’s presence in and with him.²³

c. What the Incarnation Manifested (1:1–2)

John’s third point in this passage is that via the incarnation “life” was manifest (1:2), borne witness to by “the word that bestows life” (1:1).²⁴ The word “life” (ζωή, *zōē*) occurs three times in this brief section and is a signature Johannine term: of its 135 NT occurrences, a total of 66 (49 percent of total occurrences) are found in writings traditionally ascribed to John: 36 in John’s Gospel, 13 in

20. R. Brown 1982: 162 attributes the word choice to imitation of John 1:14 and to the Johannine school’s decision to use an aorist, which limited the usable range of verbs of seeing.

21. Greek verbs of touching usually take genitive direct objects, but ψηλαφάω is followed by an accusative (Turner 1963: 232).

22. The attempt of Schnackenburg 1992: 52 to drive a wedge between the touching of Luke 24:39 and that of 1 John 1:1 seems arbitrary.

23. Tertullian (*On Patience* 3) may allude to 1 John 1:1 in speaking of Christ who “has been grasped by hand among men openly on earth.” His point would be to link Jesus’s palpable corporeality with the patience of the divine condescension.

24. This translation takes “life” in τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς as a “genitive of product”; cf. Wallace 1996: 106. In this genitive construction it makes sense to replace “of” with “which produces.” Whether “word” is to be taken as announcement or as the incarnate “Word” of the early verses of John’s Gospel may be left open. Double entendre cannot be ruled out. Edwards 1996: 70 suggests the rendering “life-giving message.”

John’s Epistles, 17 in Revelation. The word can refer to life as opposed to death (Phil. 1:20) or to our present mode of earthly human existence in general (1 Cor. 15:19; 1 Tim. 4:8). But more commonly it denotes not only the fact but also a particular quality of vital existence (R. Brown 1982: 168). To underscore this the adjective “eternal” often precedes it (and may be implied when it does not).

Jesus frequently used the terminology of “eternal life” (esp. as John’s Gospel presents him), and given his use of the OT (Wenham 1994), it is hard to avoid the impression that there is a close connection between what he had in mind by the expression and what key sections of the OT express (on 1 John’s ties with the OT generally, see Lieu 1993). Deuteronomy is particularly suggestive. The words “live” and “life” there reverberate with the promise of “eternal life” sounded in 1 John (suggestive passages include Deut. 4:1, 9, 10, 40; 5:16, 33; 8:1, 3; 11:9; 12:1, 10; 16:20; 17:19; 25:15; 30:15, 16, 19, 20; 32:39, 47). Most telling perhaps is Deut. 30:6: “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and *live*” (NIV, emphasis added). Talk of circumcised hearts and of loving God with all one’s heart and soul is certainly language familiar to NT believers. It is the language not merely of biological life in an enhanced or extended sense but also of eternal life, the enjoyment of God’s covenant blessing, in the here and now, with a view (at least for NT writers) to the age to come as well.²⁵

The significance of life here could be twofold.²⁶ First, it was an emphasis of Jesus himself, a rubric under which he instructed his disciples to understand his identity (John 11:25) and his mission (3:16). As a faithful witness, John is voicing and applying what he learned in Jesus’s earthly days. Second, it is a preoccupation of all reflective humans, for they and their loved ones face death. Is there any alternative? Is there any deliverance? Early Christian preaching, with its eschatological stress on coming judgment (implying earthly death and destruction) and its conviction of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead, took the bull of death by the horns and wrestled it to submission with the doctrine of eternal life in Christ. First John opens with a focus on the life, in a very full sense, that in Christ was made known. Calvin (1988: 233) does not go astray in imputing doxological overtones to life in this context: “But if we consider how miserable and horrible is the state of death and also what is the kingdom and immortal glory of God, we shall see that there is something here more magnificent than can be expressed in words.”

d. The Truth and Import of the Incarnation (1:1–3)

The epistle’s fourth opening point is that with the incarnation there is something both true and momentous to report:

25. For a summary of biblical data, see Yarbrough 1996: 209–12. Still provocative in identifying awareness of eternity in OT writings is Calvin 1960: §2.10.7–23.

26. Tertullian (*On the Flesh of Christ* 12) finds another significance: an application against gnostics who argue that Jesus came to reveal the soul. Tertullian counters that when Jesus manifested life, he did so to save the soul, not reveal or explain it.

1. As for the truth of what John writes, he is obviously concerned to affirm that the things he writes grow inexorably out of the way that Jesus actually lived, taught, died, and rose. John shares the concern of other ancient writers that his claims be taken seriously as factual statements (cf. Philo, *Moses* 1.4). The Letter of Aristeas is emphatic: “To tell lies concerning matters which are being chronicled would be inappropriate: If I were to make a single error, it would be impious in these matters. On the contrary, we narrate things as they happened, eschewing any error” (297). Social stability was threatened when people no longer told the truth (Josephus, *Ant.* 16.376). Those claiming to relate historical matters must adhere to the facts upon which knowledge of history is based (Josephus, *Life* 336–39; cf. Josephus’s concern for fact in *Life* 363–66). The historian Plutarch (ca. AD 100) distinguished between “conjecture” and “definite historical evidence” (*Parallel Lives*, Marius 11.7; translations from Warner 1972). What John reported was no less informed by concern faithfully to represent the facts.
2. The momentousness of what John relates is implicit in his claim that he testifies and reports “the eternal life that²⁷ was with the Father” (1:2). In the religious tradition of both OT and NT peoples, a key assertion is the transcendence of God (affirmed, e.g., in John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). But with God’s loftiness, separateness, and uniqueness, the problem arises as to how sinful humans may connect with him. Schnackenburg (1992: 64–65) notes, “Jewish piety was . . . inclined to emphasize the majesty and transcendence of God. . . . It therefore hardly offers any point of contact” with him. This is largely the case, for example, at Qumran (1992: 66). But 1 John’s opening verses declare that the “life”—Jesus Christ—who is the substance of his discourse has an origin “with the Father.” Given the historical appearance of Christ, John sees the transcendence problem as overcome and Jesus set off as unique among humans. John thereby also sets the stage for subsequent lofty claims about Christ throughout his epistle. These claims to mediate the transcendent God grow out of affirmations made by Jesus, as affirmed in John’s Gospel, all of which furnish background for John’s counsel in this epistle:

John 6:46	“only he [Jesus] has seen the Father”
John 7:17	Jesus’s “teaching comes from God”
John 8:40	Jesus tells “the truth that [he] heard from God”
John 8:42 (cf. 16:27, 30)	Jesus “came from God”
John 13:3	Jesus is “returning to God”

e. The Goal of the Proclamation (1:3)

A fifth and final point of the opening verses of John’s epistle is that what he reports is intended to nurture fellowship: he writes so that his readers “may

27. R. Brown 1982: 168–69 calls attention to the pronoun ἥτις (*hētis*, which, that) as referring to the “specific quality” of life as it exists in the Father’s presence.

have fellowship with us”—that is, the apostolic “we” who testify of Jesus’s earthly and heavenly life.²⁸ And, John continues, this is not just any fellowship at all, but that fellowship shared peculiarly²⁹ by those who know God the Father in his Son Jesus Christ.³⁰ The word “fellowship” (κοινωνία, *koinōnia*) is not particularly common in the NT (nineteen times total) and never occurs in the Gospels (for thorough discussion, see Panikulam 1994). The LXX contains only three occurrences, none very informative for NT usage. In Johannine literature it is found in only 1 John 1:3 (2x), 6, 7. But the thing denoted by the word³¹—sharing, the experience of a common yet transcendent bond and especially the bond of trust in the crucified and resurrected Christ—is ubiquitous in the NT, whether as a state of relationship between human(s) and God or a state of relationship between or among humans. Among the numerous possible intents, functions, and applications of John’s letter, a central one is the relational commonality that Jesus established among his first followers, like John, and that John now seeks to pass along to his readers.³² Lyonnet (1957) makes the important point that this is the means whereby sinners become children of God; otherwise they are children of the devil, a state of affairs that Christ has come to undo.

John writes, then, to promote unity and harmony, what the Apostles’ Creed calls “the communion of saints,” both with God and with one another. He writes in order to stabilize and enhance the existence of “church” in the locale he addresses: “The term ‘church’ is not used, but *koinōnia* meaningfully interprets the reality of the believing community” (Painter 2002: 128).³³ This will be worth keeping in mind in later passages where it is easy to lose sight of John’s ecclesial focus because of the intensity of his analysis of individual matters. It is also a fitting prelude to John’s concluding statement of this opening paragraph in the next verse.

28. So Calvin 1988: 236: “In short, John says that, as the apostles were adopted by Christ as brethren who were gathered into one body to cleave to God, so he does the same with the other disciples (*collegis*). The many are made partakers of this holy and blessed unity.” On the first-person plural by apostolic writers, see Turner 1963: 28.

29. The use of the less common possessive adjective ἡμέτερος (*hēmēteros*, our; see BDF §285.1), when the prosaic ἡμῶν (*hēmōn*, our) would have sufficed semantically, could have been encouraged by the sonorous audial effect of ἡμετέρα μετὰ τοῦ (*hēmētera meta tou*). Culy 2004: 8 views it as stylistic.

30. Tertullian (*Against Praxeas* 28) uses this verse to argue that the Father and Son are distinct. On Jesus as God’s Son, see exegesis of 3:7–8.

31. The definition of R. Brown 1982: 170 seems limited to what humans bring to their relationships and share. Gehring 2004: 80–81 affirms that “it includes spiritual as well as material considerations.”

32. Calvin 1988: 237 lays the stress too exclusively on the individual’s communion with God. The social dimension is of comparable importance.

33. This does not, however, justify a dichotomized understanding that would have John asserting that “fellowship with God can really only be gained, not by an independent and individual religious life, but by joining this tradition and its adherents” (Rensberger 1997: 49). John calls for a full measure of both personal pursuit of God and corporate involvement with God’s people.

2. Pastoral Desire: Shared Joy (1:4)

John has already expressed one reason for his letter: to promote fellowship (1:3). Now he adds a further consideration: that the readers' joy may increase and be sustained. John's purpose goes beyond religious instruction in a purely cognitive or even "spiritual" sense. He does not write as an austere pedagogue or mystical counselor. Nor does he indulge in political maneuvering or demagoguery. Rather, he seeks his readers' elevation as followers of Jesus. "He has the heart of a pastor which cannot be completely happy so long as some of those for whom he feels responsible are not experiencing the full blessings of the gospel" (Marshall 1978: 105; cf. Kruse 2000: 59). Human life, a dour and dreary thing when dissension and confusion wrack a community of faith, can be transformed by Christ. Jesus spoke to his disciples about this on the black night he was betrayed (John 16:20–24; cf. Yarid 2003: 66). In 1 John 1:4 John treads a similar path.

One could always read NT epistles a little deconstructively and construe such earnest, artless relational appeal as cant. And it cannot be denied that "joy in Jesus" might in fact be pure affectation for readers in a post-Christian age where cynicism is chic.³⁴ But granting John and his readers the close ties and quaint (in the eyes of some) convictions they appear to have harbored and that John wants his epistle to enhance, John merely confirms the same pastoral solicitude toward them that is amply attested in Paul (1 Thess. 3:9; 2 Cor. 2:3; Phil. 1:4). For that matter, joy was a prominent feature of the relationship that Jesus and his disciples shared if the Gospels are to be trusted (Matt. 13:20, 44; 28:8; Luke 10:17; 24:52). Jesus himself expressed "joy through the Holy Spirit" in response to God's wisdom and largesse (10:21). Perhaps in this same vein, John now writes to those whose lives have been redeemed by the gospel: "All the redeemed are brought into a close union with Christ, where they experience great joy" (C. E. Arnold, *ABD* 3:1023).

Joy is mentioned somewhat programmatically in all three of John's Epistles (see also 2 John 12 and 3 John 4; for full discussion, see Ferraro 1988). The Greek word *χαρά* (*chara*) is found fifty-nine times in the NT, nine of them in John's Gospel. In the Fourth Gospel it always bears an eschatological ring (noted also by R. Brown 1982: 173–74): John the Baptist expresses joy akin to that of the bridegroom's friend on his wedding day (John 3:29); Jesus promises a time when the disciples' joy will be unshakable (16:22) and prays for "the full measure" of his own joy to be within his followers (17:13); and his resurrection (not only a historical but also an eschatological event) will change the sadness and confusion prominent in John 13–17 to joy.

More broadly, joy is often associated with Jesus in NT writings. There was joy at his birth (Luke 1:14; 2:10); there was joy among his disciples as they ministered (10:17); there was joy in the presence of the Lord after his resurrection (24:41). "Joy" in American parlance can connote carefree celebration,

34. For sometimes sarcastic debunking of faith in a crucified and risen Jesus, see Funk 1996.

but in biblical annals there is a caution: “Even in laughter the heart may ache, and joy may end in grief” (Prov. 14:13 NIV). True joy comes from participation in the kingdom of God, and that is not a matter of partying (see third additional note on 1:4), “of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17 NIV). There is no reason to think that John would quarrel with this Pauline assertion.

The joy that John expresses is probably to be linked with the love he has for his readers (so Augustine, *Hom. 1 John* 1.3, who relates joy to both love and unity). After all, the word underlying John’s “so that your joy may be complete” is πληρόω (*plēroō*, to fill or complete; see additional note). It occurs elsewhere in his epistles only once (2 John 12), but its meaning can be close to that of τελειόω (*teleioō*, to complete, perfect)—a word frequently associated with love in 1 John (2:5; 4:12, 17, 18; Smalley 1984: 14–15 brings out an eschatological dimension as well). The fellowship of 1:3 grows out of and ought to translate into a certain buoyant affection for others and praise for the Lord because of the community participation in forgiveness of sins, transformed lives, and ennobling labor to bring about kingdom ends.³⁵ This is a description of joy, a profound, heartening, and infectious³⁶ sense of how great the message of the cross is and what a privilege it is to share in gospel benefits, ministry, and challenges. Further, hard to quantify and difficult to speak of, but no less real, is the joy of the presence of Christ himself through his Spirit within believers’ religious awareness; the joy found in prayer and worship, whether private or corporate; the joy of conviction of God’s goodness and love through his gift of eternal life in his Son.³⁷

John’s mention of joy as a goal of writing, then, is eminently appropriate in the context of the shared Christian commitment that his epistle calls for. It is a reminder that John writes (not just these opening verses but also the whole of his epistle; cf. Smalley 1984: 14) with a personal and pastoral intent, one seeking the highest happiness of his readers, comparable perhaps to the pure hopes for bright, cheerful, and productive lives that parents bear for their children.

Stress on joy also constitutes a certain sober foreshadowing, like sunshine bathing a picnic while thunderheads boil up on the horizon. John speaks of joy. But he speaks to a community on the verge of losing it, if in fact joy has not already been put to flight, because of threats to the integrity of their Christian confession and praxis.

35. For a twentieth-century delineation of fellowship in such terms, see Bonhoeffer 1954.

36. CCC §425 notes in connection with 1:1–4 that the first disciples “invite people of every era to enter into the joy of their communion with Christ.”

37. Nineteenth-century Scottish minister Alexander Moody Stuart tells of weekly meetings with a parishioner for prayer. One week the prayer time was cut short as the parishioner left abruptly in apparent distress. Later Stuart asked the man why he was so shaken. The response: “When we were on our knees I was so filled with a sense of the love of God, that the joy was too much for me; it was all that I was able to bear, and it was with a struggle that I did not sink under it” (Murray 1998: 97). More discursively, see Candlish 1866: 18–36.

Additional Notes

1:1–3. BDF §280 suggests that the first-person plural in these verses is equivalent to the first-person singular, which the author uses of himself a total of twelve times in this epistle (also 2:1, 7, 8, 12 [2x], 14 [3x], 21, 26; 5:13, 16). But there is no reason to force a uniform referent on plural and singular verbs. In the opening verses John uses the plural to include himself among a wider circle. On the basis of what membership in this group confers on him, he writes thereafter with personal authority in the singular. For a possible similar alternation, see John 21:24 (first-person plural) and 21:25 (first-person singular). Taking a different tack is Lillie 1967; see also Curtis 1992.

1:2. Codex B and a few other witnesses repeat the initial δ of 1:1 before $\epsilon\omega\rho\acute{\alpha}\kappa\alpha\mu\epsilon\nu$ in 1:2. This appears to be an isolated attempt to conform the diction of 1:2 to δ $\epsilon\omega\rho\acute{\alpha}\kappa\alpha\mu\epsilon\nu$, found in 1:1 and 1:3.

1:3. καί has superior external attestation. Also, it is the harder reading (since there is no obvious reason for scribes to have added it, and since καὶ ὑμεῖς in the next clause renders it somewhat superfluous). It may be a small historical indicator that John at the time was composing or dispatching other similar appeals.

1:3. External support for $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ is weighty. Scribal omission is understandable due to its slight semantic value and its unusual placement—but the analogous Johannine locutions listed below render $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ stylistically plausible in this verse (it is therefore hardly “odd” in 2:2, as claimed by Marshall 1978: 119n30). $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ occurs 11 times in 11 verses in 1 John and 213 times in 204 verses in the Gospel of John (the consistency of occurrence is notable). Of these 224 Johannine occurrences, $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ (which usually occurs as the second word in its clause) occurs 8 times as the third, fourth, or fifth word. If $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ in 1 John 1:3 is genuine, it becomes the ninth occurrence in the Johannine literature of $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ in a position other than second (cf. 3 John 12 and 4 Macc. 2:15). Note how often καί occurs among the words preceding $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$:

John 5:7	$\epsilon\nu \omega\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \epsilon\rho\chi\omicron\mu\alpha\iota\ \epsilon\gamma\omega\ \alpha\lambda\lambda\omicron\varsigma\ \pi\rho\delta\ \epsilon\mu\omicron\upsilon\ \kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\beta\alpha\iota\nu\epsilon\iota$
John 6:51	$\kappa\alpha\iota\ \omicron\ \alpha\rho\tau\omicron\varsigma\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \delta\nu\ \epsilon\gamma\omega\ \delta\omega\sigma\omega\ \eta\ \sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi\ \mu\omicron\upsilon\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\nu\ \upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho\ \tau\eta\varsigma\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \kappa\omicron\sigma\mu\omicron\upsilon\ \zeta\omega\eta\varsigma$
John 7:31	$\epsilon\kappa\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \delta\chi\lambda\omicron\upsilon\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \pi\omicron\lambda\lambda\omicron\iota\ \epsilon\pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\alpha\nu\ \epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \epsilon\lambda\epsilon\gamma\omicron\nu$
John 8:16	$\kappa\alpha\iota\ \epsilon\grave{\alpha}\nu\ \kappa\rho\acute{\iota}\nu\omega\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \epsilon\gamma\omega\ \eta\ \kappa\rho\acute{\iota}\sigma\iota\varsigma\ \eta\ \epsilon\mu\eta\ \alpha\lambda\eta\theta\iota\nu\eta\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\nu$
John 8:17	$\kappa\alpha\iota\ \epsilon\nu\ \tau\omega\ \nu\omicron\mu\omega\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \tau\omega\ \upsilon\mu\epsilon\tau\acute{\epsilon}\rho\omega\ \gamma\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\rho\alpha\pi\tau\alpha\iota\ \delta\tau\iota\ \delta\upsilon\omicron\ \alpha\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\omega\nu\ \eta\ \mu\alpha\rho\tau\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha\ \alpha\lambda\eta\theta\eta\varsigma\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\nu$
John 15:27	$\kappa\alpha\iota\ \upsilon\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \mu\alpha\rho\tau\upsilon\rho\epsilon\acute{\iota}\tau\epsilon\ \delta\tau\iota\ \alpha\pi\prime\ \alpha\rho\chi\eta\varsigma\ \mu\epsilon\tau\prime\ \epsilon\mu\omicron\upsilon\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\epsilon$
John 17:20	$\omicron\upsilon\ \pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\tau\omega\nu\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \epsilon\rho\omega\tau\omega\ \mu\omicron\nu\omicron\nu\ \alpha\lambda\lambda\acute{\alpha}\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \tau\omega\nu\ \pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\omicron\nu\tau\omega\nu\ \delta\iota\alpha\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\upsilon\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omega\nu\ \epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \epsilon\mu\acute{\epsilon}$
1 John 2:2	$\kappa\alpha\iota\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\varsigma\ \iota\lambda\alpha\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\nu\ \pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \tau\omega\nu\ \alpha\mu\alpha\rrho\tau\iota\omega\nu\ \eta\mu\omega\nu\ \omicron\upsilon\ \pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \tau\omega\nu\ \eta\mu\epsilon\tau\acute{\epsilon}\rho\omega\nu\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \mu\omicron\nu\omicron\nu\ \alpha\lambda\lambda\acute{\alpha}\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \delta\lambda\omicron\upsilon\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \kappa\omicron\sigma\mu\omicron\upsilon$

1:4. Did John furnish the personal pronoun $\eta\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ after the verb $\gamma\rho\acute{\alpha}\phi\omicron\mu\epsilon\nu$? \aleph , B, and A^{*vid} are among manuscripts that include $\eta\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$. C, 1739, \aleph , and early versions read $\upsilon\mu\acute{\iota}\nu$ instead: “We write to you.” Caragounis 2006: 530–32 argues convincingly that the latter reading is to be preferred. Hence my translation above. To Caragounis’s comments these may be added: since the verb form implies the personal pronoun $\eta\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ and since it is clear that John writes to the recipients of the letter whether he uses $\upsilon\mu\acute{\iota}\nu$ or not, the net effect for interpretation is the same. It is, however, worth noting that in the nine other times $\eta\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ occurs in 1 John, it never follows but always precedes the main verb. Of the eighteen times that $\eta\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ is used in John’s Gospel, only at 8:48 does it follow the verb (11:16 and 21:3 may not be true parallels due to desired emphasis). In terms of usage, this tips the scales

away from ἡμεῖς being original. In the only other occurrence of γράφομεν in the NT (1 Cor. 1:13), Paul writes γράφομεν ὑμῖν.

1:4. Did John write ἡ χαρὰ ἡμῶν (our joy) or ἡ χαρὰ ὑμῶν (your joy)? The problem here involves itacism, a scribal error arising from seven different vowels or diphthongs that might have been pronounced the same in Greek, resulting in mistakes when scribes copied by dictation (Metzger 1992: 191). Once again, the difference is not great for interpretive purposes. External evidence is somewhat in favor of ἡμῶν (our). Within the Johannine corpus, John 16:24 has Jesus urging his disciples to make petition so that ἡ χαρὰ ὑμῶν ἦ πεπληρωμένη. But in 2 John 12 we find the phrase ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἡμῶν πεπληρωμένη ἦ (where, however, there is also textual divergence; see additional note on 2 John 12). So on internal grounds, too, no definite Johannine trend can be discerned. The writer identifies so fully with his readers and shares what he has come to know with them so completely that he could clearly have wished his apostolic joy to be theirs (and thus write ἡμῶν; cf. Metzger 1994: 639). But he sees his addressees as being sufficiently separate from the apostolic circle and sufficiently beset by the distinctive challenges they face that it is also not hard to imagine that he might have written ὑμῶν (so Dobson 1971, arguing on the basis of John's use of emphatic personal pronouns).

1:4. On the meaning of χαρά (joy), the word ἡδονή (*hēdonē*, pleasure) should also be mentioned. Strecker 1996: 21 notes that the word is sometimes used synonymously with χαρά, but this is never the case in the NT, where ἡδονή always carries a pejorative sense (Luke 8:14; Titus 3:3; James 4:1, 3; 2 Pet. 2:13). Christian joy has points of contact but should not be confused with pleasure in the sense of rollicking good times or self-indulgent gratification.

1:4. The verbal construction πεπληρωμένη (may be complete) should be understood as a periphrastic perfect with no force beyond the normal perfect (Turner 1963: 88–89).