

Course Outline

The Tests of Life, Part 2

II and III John

Introduction to II John

I. Destination

- a. At first glance this letter seems to be written to an otherwise anonymous Christian woman and her family who are warned not to give hospitality to false teachers in their home. On closer inspection, good reasons can be given for taking this as a house-church: (1) Israel and the church are regularly personified in the feminine gender throughout Scripture. (2) That this “lady” is loved by “all who know the truth” fits better if she is a church than if she is just a private individual. (3) The greetings from “the children of her chosen sister” (v. 13) are more natural as a reference to a “sister” church. (4) The alternation from singular to plural “you’s” throughout the letter makes little sense if John is addressing first the woman and then her children but fits well if the “lady” stands for the church as a whole, with the “children” as individual members (John’s characteristic form of address to fellow Christians). Two other alternatives occasionally suggested for which there is no positive evidence are that (a) Electa or Kyria (“the elect,” “lady,”) is a proper noun; and (b) the woman is a pastor.

II. Relation to I John

- a. The similarities of content and problems addressed in I John suggest it was written at roughly the same time as I John and to the same area. Perhaps I John was an encyclical that made the rounds of all the house-churches in Ephesus, while II John was addressed just to one particular home-congregation. Some have suggested that II John preceded I John, because in II John, it seems the false teachers still have access to the church (v. 10) whereas in I John they had clearly seceded (I John 2:18-19).¹⁸⁷ On the other hand, II John 7 also seems to imply secession. It is perhaps somewhat more likely that II John follows I John, because the original problem leading to

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the secession had emerged from within the church, whereas in II John 10, the false teachers are now attacking from outside the church, trying to come back and do further damage to it.

Analysis 188

- I. Greetings (vv. 1-3)
 - a. In addition to the comments made in the introduction above, it is worth highlighting the repetition of John's characteristic themes of truth and love.
- II. Body (vv. 4-11)
 - a. "Some" in v. 4 may imply others have gone astray
 - i. Verses 4-6 offer a word of praise for the general obedience of this house-church (although "some" in v. 4 may be a deliberate choice to contrast with "all").
 - b. Two tests of life reappear in vv. 5-6
 - i. Two of the three tests of life reappear in these verses—love and obedience to the commandments.
 - c. Warning against true Christians losing full reward (v. 8)
 - i. Verses 7-11 proceed to a word of warning. Here the third test of life comes into play—correct Christology. John urges this congregation to beware of the secessionists (v. 7). True Christians who are led astray by these false teachers risk losing the reward of seeing their work in building up the church not come to full fruition (v. 8). Those who actually join up with the secessionists demonstrate that they are not true Christians (v. 9). The verb "runs ahead" in this verse was used by some Gnostics as a reference to maturity. John, in essence, says such "running" runs away from the gospel altogether.
 - d. A call not to give teaching platform and finances to heretics in the house-church (vv. 10-11)
 - i. Verses 10-11, if written to a house-church, imply that the Christians

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must not allow their worship services to be used as a platform for the false teachers. “Welcoming” often implied financial help for itinerant missionaries, and this too is to be withheld from the secessionists. There is no justification therefore for using this text to tell Christians to close the door on witnessing cult members. How would they ever hear the gospel from us and see the love of Christ in us if we acted that way?

III. Closing (vv. 12-13)

- a. The length of this letter, as with III John, approximates what would have fitted on one normal sheet of papyrus. John limits himself to this much, planning to supplement his conversation in person.

Introduction to III John

I. Destination and Circumstances

- a. This final Johannine epistle is written to one otherwise unknown early Christian named Gaius, again presumably in and around Ephesus near the end of the first century. He apparently gave hospitality to true Christians in their itinerant ministries. “Inns” in the ancient world were notorious for their incivility, so this was an important early Christian ministry.

II. Relationship to I and II John

- a. Again, the order of the letters is uncertain. There is no unambiguous reference to the false teaching behind I and II John anywhere in this brief letter. That could argue for a date before either or both of the other Johannine epistles.¹⁸⁹

III. A Possible History of Deteriorating Relationships in the Ephesian Church

- a. On the other hand, Diotrephes has often been linked with the false teaching in some way, in which case this could reflect a stage of deteriorating relations in which some of the schismatics had returned to at least one

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house-church and now gained the upper hand.¹⁹⁰

Analysis¹⁹¹

I. Greetings (vv. 1-2)

- a. These verses include a formal salutation and a brief prayer. The latter is striking because John prays that Gaius' physical health might be as good as his spiritual health. Most of us are healthy enough spiritually to make that a desirable prayer!

II. Body (vv. 3-12)

a. Commendation of Gaius (vv. 3-8)

- i. First, John commends Gaius for his ministry of hospitality for traveling Christians, even though he did not know them personally (vv. 3-8). Probably that ministry included financial support. Stott comments, "Christians should finance Christian enterprises which the world will not, or should not be asked to, support. . . ." There are many good causes which Christians may support; but they must support their brethren to whom the world should not be asked to contribute."¹⁹²

b. The negative example of Diotrephes (vv. 9-10)

- i. Second, John warns against the negative example of Diotrephes (vv. 9-10). Probably he had some connection with the false teachers. Many commentators have tried to be more specific, linking him with the growing institutionalization of the church (and so, e.g., involved in a power play with the last of the "charismatic" apostles). Some have even argued that he was the defender of orthodoxy against a heterodox Johannine community! The most we can know for sure is that "he loved to be first." Personal ambition alone causes enough church divisions.

c. The positive example of Demetrius

- i. Third, John commends the positive example of Demetrius (vv. 11-12).

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We know even less about him, save that he is “well spoken of.” Gaius knew more, and it is always good to balance warnings against bad models with good models we can follow.

III. Closing (vv. 13-14)

- a. As in 2 John, the elder will save most of his remarks for a face-to-face meeting. John’s conclusion twice uses a unique name for fellow-Christians, merely “the friends” (a term which has played a prominent role in the history of the Quaker movement).

Application of Johannine Epistles

I. The Tests of Life, as a Full Definition of Christianity, Challenge Nominalism

- a. John’s tests of life are an important safeguard against a truncated view of Christianity. It is easy to imagine that correct belief about Jesus is all that is necessary for salvation. James, of course, reminded us that faith inevitably led to good works (his equivalent to John’s emphasis on obeying the commandments). Paul stressed that faith worked itself out through love (Galatians 5:6), and love reappears as a test of life here, too.

II. The Tests of Life Reassure Christians who are Discouraged in a Particular Area of Life

- a. When professing Christians aren’t sure if they “believe” enough, looking at a lifestyle of love and obedience can often reassure them. Conversely, when “belief” is not accompanied by a transformed life, however slow or fitful in its growth, then we have reason to doubt the presence of true Christianity altogether.
- b. If the historical sequence of the letters of John corresponds to their chronological sequence, we can reconstruct a somewhat depressing deterioration of the Johannine church--from Gnostics seceding (1 John) to attacks from outside by those same individuals (2 John) to successful inroads in the church as a result of those attacks (3 John). Revelation 2:1-7 confirms

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that the church was hard hit as a result of all of this, and by the end of the second-century Christian influence had seriously waned in and around Ephesus. And this from the church that had received more apostolic ministry during the first century than any other! There is actually an encouraging, albeit backhanded, application from all of this, though. If a ministry can die out with all that positive input, we can take heart when we give it our best shot in ministry, and the results, outwardly at least, seem to be a failure. It is not necessarily our fault! We do all we can in the power of the Holy Spirit and leave the results to God.

Introduction to Revelation

I. Authorship

- a. Critical scholarship commonly rejects Johannine authorship for the Book of Revelation. Stylistic and theological differences from the other Johannine writings are usually viewed as most decisive. Nevertheless, John is not usually seen as pseudonymous. In fact this is the only New Testament book attributed to John in which his name actually appears (1:9). Those who reject apostolic authorship usually assume this is an otherwise unknown prophet or “seer” whose real name is John. Many believe him to have been Jewish-Christian and even Palestinian in origin or outlook.¹⁹³ The resurgence of interest in Jewish backgrounds leaves the door open for a re-examination of John the apostle as possible author. Strong, early tradition supports him. The major ancient dissenter, Dionysus, based his objections on his dislike of the apocalyptic contents of the book, not on any competing traditions that someone else had written it. Differences in theology are real (the Gospel uses “believe” 98 times; Revelation, never) but there are parallels, too (only the Gospel of John and Revelation ever call Jesus “Lamb of God”). Some differences are related to the differences in content--in Revelation we come to the triumphant end of history, filled with language of judgment and tribulation. Differences in style could be related to the indescribability of the visions, the ecstasy of the prophet, or merely the lack of a redactor or Johannine “school” involved with this work, as it seems to have been with the Gospel and/or epistles. Additional, telling parallels among the various

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books attributed to John include shared emphases on testimony, life vs. death, spiritual thirst and hunger, the theme of conquest and the use of Zechariah 12:10 (cf. John 19:37 with Revelation 1:7).

II. Setting

- a. The most widely adopted setting for Revelation is the short-lived but intense Domitianic persecution in the mid-90s. But pressure was being exerted on the seven churches of Asia minor by local as well as imperial authorities, not all of them Roman. By this time Christianity had largely broken with Judaism, and many synagogues had expelled Christian Jews. The harsh language of 2:9 and 3:9 probably reflects these hostilities. A key purpose of this apocalypse, therefore, is to reassure suffering Christians that God is still in control, that all this is part of His plan, indeed that it foreshadows even greater tribulation yet to come upon the world, but that in the end Jesus wins! Thus, they should remain faithful, even to the point of martyrdom, if it comes to that.

III. Genre

- a. Apocalyptic
 - i. The first word of the book is a tipoff as to its genre: apokalypsis (“apocalypse”). Apocalyptic literature was well-known from numerous other Jewish and Christian sources, including parts of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah, 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, Jesus’ “Olivet Discourse,” and parts of 1 and 2 Thessalonians.¹⁹⁴ Apocalyptic varied widely in form, but frequent features included (a) extensive use of symbolism, often with outlandish or grotesque creatures and cosmology, much like our modern political cartoons; (b) depicting past, present or future events of world history leading up to a decisive intervention on the part of God to right the injustice of society; (c) written in times of crisis or perceived crisis to reassure God’s people that evil would not triumph.¹⁹⁵ Thus there is no way of predicting in advance how literal or figurative such a work will be. Each potential symbol will have to be interpreted in light of its historical background. In the case of John’s

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apocalypse this includes (a) the Old Testament; (b) intertestamental literature; and (c) current events in the cities of Asia Minor in John's day. Numbers, though, are almost always symbolic, especially sevens and their multiples (standing for completeness, based on the seven days of creation) and twelves and their multiples (standing for the twelve tribes of Israel and/or the twelve apostles, to designate God's people as a whole). On the other hand, Revelation differs from conventional apocalyptic by not being: (a) pseudonymous; (b) retrospectively historical (prophecy ex eventu), and (c) dualistic and unrelentingly pessimistic in world view.¹⁹⁶

b. Prophetic/epistolary

- i. Revelation also combines elements of two other genres which make its apocalyptic form distinctive: (1) prophecy--John refers to real future events, even if he often describes them in highly symbolic form; and (2) epistle--not just chapters 2-3 but the whole book is written to identifiable churches in letter form to give them hope in specific historical circumstances. This means that the most fundamental hermeneutical principle to follow in interpreting Revelation is to look for meanings which could have been intelligible to first-century Christians in Asia minor, not hidden meanings decipherable only by people purportedly living in the days just before Christ's return.¹⁹⁷

IV. Structure

- a. Chronological, recapitulative or a combination of the two?
- b. The role of 1:19
- c. A futurist interpretation with preterist overtones

Preliminary Comments on Approach (Three Debates)

- a. The number of different approaches to Revelation makes it impossible to treat all of the options as we progress through the book.¹⁹⁸ All we can do is highlight the perspective we endorse and point the reader to other literature

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that explains the options in detail.

I. The Role of the Millenium

- a. One debate is over the role of the millennium: premillennialism sees Christ returning before the golden age of human history depicted in Revelation 20; postmillennialism reverses that sequence; and amillennialism sees the millennium either as spiritual and coincident with the present reign of Christ in believers' hearts (and in heaven) or with the future new heavens and earth (Revelation 21-22).¹⁹⁹ These notes reflect a premillennial perspective.

II. Relationship of the Rapture and the Tribulation

- a. A second debate is over the relationship of the rapture to the tribulation; is it pre-, mid-, or post-tribulational in timing? This writer is convinced that post-tribulationism is correct.²⁰⁰

III. Interpretation of the Revelation

- a. A third is whether the bulk of Revelation describes strictly future events (futurist), strictly past events (preterist), the unfolding of church history from John's day to the return of Christ (historicist), a symbolic depiction of the struggle between good and evil in any age (idealist), or some combination of two or more of these. These comments will follow a preterist-futurist approach--everything in Revelation is intelligible as visions that would have had points of contact with events in first-century Rome, but seldom is their meaning exhausted by these events. There is much to come in the future that has not yet been fulfilled.²⁰¹

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