

1 John

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January 13, 2021



1 John Introduction Part 2

Last week when we looked at part 1 of our introduction to 1 John, we touched on three major themes in the little book:

- 1) Who is Jesus Christ?
- 2) How following Jesus informs our ethics and morals.
- 3) How following Jesus shapes and directs out relationships with others.

Here, we are going to take a closer look at the letter itself, starting with how unletter-like 1 John is.

With Peter and Paul they begin their letters with the common form of the first century. “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus, who is our hope. To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord” is how Paul begins the letter we call 1 Timothy. This is who’s writing and who the letter is to. You get none of that in 1 John. More than a letter, it almost sounds like a sermon that has been written out.

Time, Authorship and Setting

Almost all Bible scholars place the three letters of John and the Revelation very late, toward the end of the first century, even into the early second century. Because of this some scholars cast doubt on John himself being the author, suggesting instead that that the works were authored by some of John’s disciples after John had died. Indeed, if the dating of the three letters and the Revelation is correct, then yes, John would have been very old by first century standards when he wrote this. If this was written say around 100 AD, then John would have been in his 80’s at least. Quite old in a time where the average lifespan was about 35. Still, living into your 80’s was not unheard of in those days. For example, the

Roman historian Lucius Cassius Dio is known to have lived to be 80. Further, if you just read the opening verses of 1 John and take them at face value, there is no doubt that the author is an eye witness of the ministry of Jesus and taken as a whole, the letter can only then be the work of the Beloved Disciple, John.

If the dating of around 100 AD is correct (and this is mostly due to much of what is implied in the letter – a sophisticated and developed church structure, no sign of persecution, no emphasis on the immanent return of Jesus, etc.) then there are certain things which we may rightly assume. First, the time of the first imperial persecution had ended. The persecution had begun under Nero following the Great Fire of Rome (July 18-30, 64 AD). The persecution of the church by Nero was intense, taking the lives of Peter and Paul and thousands more for almost 4 years until Nero died in 68 AD. Things were not much better afterward. The Jewish rebellion led to a full Roman invasion of Israel and the total destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by 70 AD which led to further discrimination and persecution of anything from Israel. Then in 81 AD Domitian became emperor and announced that he would be known as “Lord and God”. To pay your taxes a citizen was required to declare that Domitian was both Lord and God, something Christians simply would not do. It is believed that it was during these persecutions that John was arrested in Ephesus and sentenced to the penal colony on the island of Patmos. But all of this ended in 96 AD with the death of Domitian and the beginning of an era known as “The 5 Good Emperors.”

Given that the previous 40 years had been very hard on the whole empire, everyone now took a breath and relaxed. For the church, especially here for John’s church, this was both good and bad. Good, because finally the church could meet without fear of the Romans kicking in the door and carrying everyone off to be executed. Bad, because of the edge the church loses when persecution ends and how easy it is to become “lukewarm” once the heat is turned off.

It is this inner problem that John is addressing here. A quick reading of the Seven Letters to the Seven Churches of Revelation 3-4 will show just how many struggles the church was having at the close of the first century. Heresies abounded (see last weeks notes on the problem with balancing the divine and human sides of

Christ) but two are particularly telling. One is the “lukewarm” church of Laodicea and the other is John’s own church of Ephesus who have “left their first love” (Rev. 2:4). Once the heat is off, the persecutions over, everyone just wants to relax. It may have been too risky to openly work to evangelize during times of persecution and almost two full generations had passed since Nero and so had lost their first love of reaching people for Christ. Perhaps the community of Christ had been in survival mode and had worked hard for decades just to get along and fit in with their pagan neighbors, no longer seeing their neighbors as those who desperately needed Jesus. Perhaps it was the common story of the culture changing the church rather than the church changing the culture and the church was becoming more Greco-Roman than Christ-like (and there is plenty of evidence for this). Leave it to say that 40 years of intense persecution had a very strong negative effect on the inner life of the church, and as a man in his 80’s knowing his time on earth was getting short, John was compelled to address these issues so he could die believing the church was back on the right path.

John’s audience

Because unlike Peter and Paul, John does not specifically say who exactly he is writing to, understanding who his audience was originally takes a bit of work. Through the centuries there have been several suggestions. One of the early church Fathers suggested it was written to the Parthians, the people of an eastern empire that stretched from what is now west central Turkey to the southernmost parts of Iran. While its true that there were churches spread all across that region there is little evidence to support Parthian churches as the audience. Next, the opening of 2 John is “The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth...” (2 John 1:1). This sounds a little like the closing of 1 Peter: “She who is Babylon, chosen with you, sends you greetings...” (1 Peter 5:13). This is partly where the Parthian idea came from as the site of ancient Babylon was within Parthia’s borders. But no one disputes that Peter was in Rome at the time and that Babylon was a New Testament euphemism for Rome. But John was never really connected to Rome and the intimacy of the letter strongly suggests that he is writing to people he knew and knew well. Tradition has always held that John was firmly attached to Ephesus, there on Turkey’s central Mediterranean

coastline and to the surrounding areas. This is the home of the Seven Churches of Revelation and it is here that tradition says the letters of John were addressed as well, and nothing in 2000 years has seriously brought that into question.