

‘THAT YOUR JOY MAY BE FULL’

A STUDY OF THE EPISTLES OF ST. JOHN

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‘No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth.’
III JOHN 4

OBJECTIVE:

In this study over the coming weeks, we will examine *I, II & III John*. These are three rich yet often overlooked New Testament books. These “hidden” gems reveal fascinating insights about life in the early Church and impart apostolic wisdom on topics such as prayer, holiness, the sacraments and the nature of love. Above all, the Johannine epistles call us to place Jesus Christ at the center of our lives, and to live in the joy of the Risen Lord. This is our objective.

STRATEGY:

Our approach will be twofold:

- i. Tonight, in **PART ONE**, we will introduce the Johannine epistles and take an up close look at a key passage in *I John—the prologue* (*I John* 1:1-4).) We will then turn our attention to the two shorter epistles (*II John, III John*), seeking to understand their main message—then and now.
- ii. Next week, in **PART TWO**, we will return to the body *I John*. As we move chapter-to-chapter, we pay close attention to a “crisis” in St. John’s community that threatened its unity and the faith of many individual believers. We will also come to understand better what St. John means in the famous “God is love” passage—and what he desires for us today.

PART ONE:

INTRODUCTION / PROLOGUE OF I JOHN / II JOHN / III JOHN

I. INTRODUCTION

a. AUTHORSHIP

i. Attestation:

1. *I John* – unnamed author
2. *II, III John* – ‘The elder’ (Gk: πρεσβύτερος / *presbyteros*)¹

ii. Traditional view—John, son of Zebedee (i.e. Saint John)

¹ See: *II John* 1; *III John* 1.

- iii. **Modern view**—“Another John,” known as the *Presbyter / Elder*, a disciple of St. John. Some believe this “second John” was responsible for the content of all three epistles, as well as the “compiler / editor” of *John’s Gospel* and specifically, *John 21*.
- iv. **Analysis**
 - 1. On one hand, apostolic authorship of the Johannine epistles was accepted by many patristic figures from the early 2nd century; this is important testimony. St. Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue* and St. Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* cite quotations of *I-III John*, which supports their apostolic credentials.
 - 2. On the other hand, modern scholarship is not without cause in raising such questions, given the above. This theory finds support from, among others, Pope Benedict XVI.²
 - 3. Yet, studies suggest that there are numerous literary parallels, speech patterns, etc. between the *Gospel of John* and the Johannine epistles, such that the plausibility of a “common” author by no means should be ruled out.
- v. **Our view / Conclusion**
 - 1. Based upon all of the evidence, as well as the witness of Sacred Tradition, we confidently accept apostolic authorship for all of the Johannine writings to the NT (*Gospel, Epistles & Revelation*).
 - 2. To be clear, though—provided one holds to a *robust view* of the inspiration of Sacred Scripture (*Dei Verbum* 12), under the direction of the Holy Spirit, there is some flexibility with regard to the identity of the human author.³
- b. **DATE**—Sometime after the composition of the *Gospel of John* (@ 90-110 A.D.)
- c. **OCCASION OF LETTERS**—To encourage the faithful believers with whom the author has an authoritative relationship as “teacher” (i.e. Apostle).
- d. **KEY THEMES**—All three epistles share a number of themes, including: faithfulness to Jesus / Jesus’s commandments, confession of sin, “love,” etc. A recurrent theme is *knowing and living in the ‘truth’* and persevering / abiding in this same truth, especially in light of schismatic beliefs, under the influence of a false teacher (“antichrist”).

II. PROLOGUE OF I JOHN

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ² the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— ³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.

a. v 1

- i. *FROM THE BEGINNING* (Greek: *ap archés*) Possibly a reference to the “beginning” of Jesus’ earthly ministry, i.e. His baptism. More likely, as we will show, it is a reference to Jesus’ eternal Sonship, i.e. who was “*in the beginning* with God” (*John* 1:1)⁴
- ii. *WE* Numerous first-person references (*we, our, us*) underscore the “eyewitness testimony” of these letters.⁵

² Pope Benedict, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. I, ch. 8.

³ One caveat: that the presumed author had *direct contact* with an Apostle, e.g., this “Second John” was a disciple of St. John. A Catholic approach could not and should not support any approach that rules out either apostolic authorship—OR—direct apostolic influence upon the author (i.e. disciple of).

⁴ *John* 1:1-2 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. *He was in the beginning with God.*

iii. HEARD / SEEN / TOUCHED

1. Why do we place all of our confidence in the Four Gospels [and these epistles]? One key reason: we trust the *sources*. Above all, the Source is the Holy Spirit. Additionally, we affirm the human sources, and their *eye-witness* testimony.
2. These verbs (*heard, see, looked upon, touched*) indicate the “tactile, hands-on” nature of this apostolic testimony. He and the other apostles were “with” Jesus, heard Him, saw Him with their own eyes, touched Him with their own hands, in the flesh.

iv. WORD OF LIFE The Good News of the Gospel

b. v 2

i. THE LIFE WAS MADE MANIFEST / WE SAW IT ... Jesus Christ came in the flesh (*John 1:14*) and was revealed / made clear” (Greek: *phaneroō* - See right).

ii. The incarnation of Jesus was publically witnessed, particularly to His apostles.

iii. THE ETERNAL LIFE ... WITH THE FATHER ... MADE MANIFEST TO US [See Excursus below.]

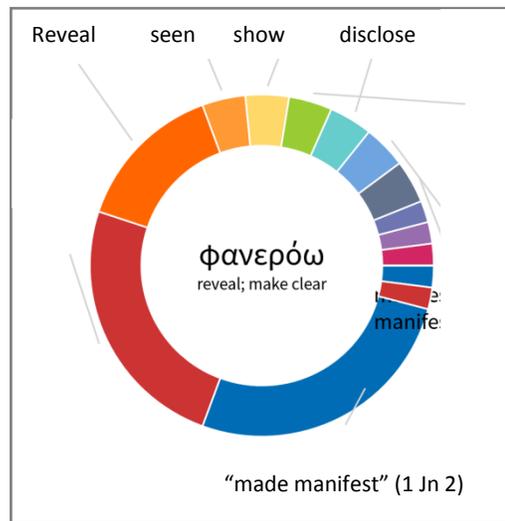
iv. WE PROCLAIM ALSO TO YOU ... FELLOWSHIP WITH US ... OUR FELLOWSHIP IS WITH ...

v. CCC # 425 The transmission of the Christian faith consists *primarily in proclaiming Jesus Christ in order to lead others to faith in him*. From the beginning, the first disciples burned with the desire to proclaim Christ: “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (*Acts 4:20*). And they invite people of every era to enter into the joy of their communion with Christ.

c. v 4 OUR JOY MAY BE COMPLETE.

- i. John’s ultimate purpose is *chara* “joy.” It is unclear in the text whether it should read ‘*our joy*’ (i.e. the apostles) or ‘*your joy*’ (the church / believers) Both are possible.
- ii. *John 15:11* persuades us that ‘*your joy*’ is likelier: “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, *and that your joy may be full.*”
- iii. In some respects, the ambiguity is fitting: as the “joy” of the believer(s) increases, so does the “apostolic joy:”
- iv. *III John 4*: “No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth.”
- v. **Did You Know ...** When the angel greets the BVM in *Luke’s Gospel*, the term “Hail” (i.e. *Hail, full of grace*) comes from the same root as *chara* in *I John*—“joy.”⁶
 1. The term in *Luke* is *chaire* and while some English translations have “Hail,” a more precise translation is ‘*Rejoice!*’ (i.e., ‘*Rejoice, full of grace.*’)
 2. Other versions that translate *chaire* as “greetings,” etc. completely miss the mark. *Chaire* is found in the Greek OT (LXX) on three occasions. In each occurrence, it refers to ‘joy’—specifically, the ‘joy’ of the Coming One, the Messiah. See: *Zech. 9:9*.⁷
 3. In other words, St. Luke is drawing upon the OT expectations of the coming Messianic joy—as it relates to Mary as the true ‘Daughter of Zion.’”

WORD STUDY: “REVEALED”



⁵ See: *John 21:24* This is the disciple *who is bearing witness* to these things, and *who has written these things*; and we know that *his testimony is true*.

⁶ *Luke 1:28* “And he came to her and said, ‘Hail [*Greek chaire*] full of grace, the Lord is with you!”

⁷ *Zech. 9:9* “Rejoice greatly [*Greek: chaire*] O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!”

d. **Excursus: ‘We Beheld Him’ (I John 1:2)**

- i. A key portion of this prologue is v. 2: “*The life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us ...*”
- ii. The impact of what was explained above is deepened when we study the passage in light of John’s *other prologue*, i.e. *John* 1:1-18.
- iii. The *Gospel of John* begins unlike any of the Gospels, with a deeply theological overture to the ‘Logos’, i.e. Jesus. Let us turn to it...
- iv. In *John* 1:1-3, the Evangelist declares the *eternality* of Jesus, the Divine Son:
“*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.*”
- v. This truth— Jesus’ eternal, divine life with God the Father is the first great mystery of the Gospel.
- vi. Along with this is the second great mystery—the Incarnation of the Logos, is announced in *John* 1:14a—
“*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...*”
- vii. Yet, this is only the first half of v. 14. The remainder is as important, for similar but different reasons:
John 14:b, c “... we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.”
- viii. Compare *John* 1:14b, c with *I John* 1:2—“*The life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us ...*”
- ix. Clearly, both prologues are giving us vital information about why we must heed their message; namely, the Divine life of the Son of God was “hidden” from all of eternity, until the Incarnation.
 - x. And while His Incarnation was revealed “to the world” in some sense (e.g. Infancy Narratives), the full manifestation of the Son in the flesh was “made manifest” of the Apostles.
 - xi. It was the Apostles who “beheld Him”—they are the “we” of 1:14, and the “we” who saw and testify on His behalf.
 - xii. Similar to *I John*, the prologue of *John* explains the relationship between: (a) the Father and the Son; (b) The Son and the Apostles; and (c) the Apostles and the Church:
John 1:16 *And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.*
- xiii. The “we all” of v. 16 is *different from* the “we” of v. 14. The “we” of v. 14 is the Apostles, and the “we all” of v. 16 is the Church.
- xiv. Compare this with *I John* 1:3, “*that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you [i.e. ‘we all’]”*
- xv. Finally, in *John* 1:17, the Evangelist seems to take a “theological detour” from this eternal-Logos Christology and the explanation of his own apostolic witness, to talk about Moses:
“*For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*”
- xvi. But is this a “detour?” Hardly. The conclusion of the prologue is directly related to everything that the Evangelist has been saying about his “beholding” the Divine Son, Jesus:
“*No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.*”
- xvii. Here, the mention of Moses takes on its deeper meaning. In the OT, no figure surpassed Moses, who God knew “face to face”—

Deut. 34:10 “And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew *face to face*.”

- xviii. Earlier in his life, Moses prayed that God would “*reveal His glory*”:
Exod. 33:18-19 “Moses said, ‘*I pray thee, show me thy glory.*’ And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.’”
 - xix. Yet, God insists that Moses will not see God’s face, “‘But,’ he said, ‘*you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.*’”
 - xx. What is the meaning of this—and how does this help us interpret both the prologue of *John’s Gospel* and the prologue of *I John*?
 - xxi. The meaning is clear: Moses was God’s great Lawgiver, and in some sense, came “closer” to God than any other in Israel.
 - xxii. For that reason, Moses was rightly revered as the one who, so to speak, “revealed God” to Israel. And yet, this “revelation” of God by Moses (or any other figure), was *ultimately limited*.
 - xxiii. In *John 1:18*, the Evangelist is reminding his hearers—and us—that indeed *no one*, absolutely no one has “seen God.” Not Moses, not Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, or any other person.
 - xxiv. It is God the Son, Jesus, the Divine Son, Jesus the Logos, who “gazed at God” from all of eternity ... and now, in His Incarnation, *gazes at John*, at St. Peter, at Andrew, Bartholomew, at Thomas, at Phillip – and all the Twelve.
 - xxv. In this sense, John humbly, yet boldly proclaims the truth, the mystery, that while Moses himself did not “see God,” he and the Twelve *did* – in Jesus Christ.
 - xxvi. For this reason, this glorious reason, John “surpasses” Moses, in that he truly “beheld God in the flesh!” And his message is this: “*Listen to me ... listen to my Gospel, as I have had God revealed to me in the flesh. Jesus the Divine Son was ‘made manifest’ to me and the Twelve ... and we proclaim to you what was revealed to us ... that your joy would be complete.*”
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More briefly, let us now turn to and consider the content of the two shorter epistles, II and III John ...

III. II JOHN

- a. **v. 1**
 - i. *THE ELDER* (Or “Presbyter”.) A title of dignity / authority, with “priestly” connotations.
 - ii. *THE ELECT LADY AND HER CHILDREN* a local church community under the author’s care, along with its members. The Church is the “bride” of Christ, so the feminine title is fittingly Christological.
 - iii. *WHOM I LOVE IN THE TRUTH* The term “truth” (Greek: *aletheia*) is a dominant theme in all three epistles. It stands in the place of “the gospel” and all that it implies. “Truth” is contrasted with various deceptions, false teachings that John is confronting.
- b. **v. 2** *GRACE AND PEACE* Standard form of apostolic greeting (See: *Rom. 1:7, Rev. 1:4*)
- c. **v. 4** *SOME OF YOUR CHILDREN* May be a reference to the “crisis” of belief, which John’s churches were experiencing. See also v. 7, which makes mention of “deceivers” in the world. (More details on the crisis will be explained in Part II next week.)
- d. **v. 5-6**

- i. *NOT ... A NEW COMMANDMENT* John's message is rooted in the ministry of Jesus Christ and His teaching. There is not a development here, as much as a reminder to remain anchored in Jesus and His words.
- ii. *FOLLOW LOVE* John reinforces the need to "love one another"—
John 13:34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."
- e. v. 7 *MANY DECEIVERS ... JESUS CHRIST IN THE FLESH* There were heretical teachers who were threatening John's community with a false teaching—that one could be "saved" without reliance on Jesus, but on the Spirit which Jesus "delivered." They were diminishing Jesus' Incarnation, or denying it all together. John confronts "dualistic" theology this head-on:
CCC #465 The first heresies denied not so much Christ's divinity *as his true humanity* (Gnostic Docetism). From apostolic times the Christian faith has insisted on the true incarnation of God's Son "come in the flesh" (*I John 4:2-3; II John 7*).
- f. v. 8 *NOT LOSE WHAT YOU WORKED FOR* We need not "fear" losing our salvation; can and should have confidence in Jesus Christ, who saved us, and *is saving* us. Yet, neither should we be presumptuous or prideful about a false "assurance" of our *future* salvation, if we neglect our faith altogether.
I Cor. 3:14-15 "If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, *he will receive a reward*. If any man's work is burned up, *he will suffer loss*, though he himself will be saved, *but only as through fire*."
- g. v. 9-10 *GOES AHEAD ... DOES NOT HAVE GOD* John wants the Church to understand that "sound doctrine" is not our own "creation." Rather, it "creates" us and protects us, provided we stay within it.

IV. III JOHN

SUMMARY: *III John* is the shortest "book" in the NT. In the letter, it appears that there is some sort of conflict between a local church leader, named "Gaius," whom the "Elder" says he loves "in the truth" (v. 1), and a self-styled leader, named "Diotrophes," (v. 9) who "loves to be first." When ambassadors of John or other Christian visitors arrive in the church, Diotrophes does not welcome them as he ought, but shuts them out. Moreover, he gossips about the Apostle behind his back (v. 10). Moreover, those who "defend John" are excommunicated from the assembly. John's solution is twofold: first, to encourage Gaius to "fight the good fight" on the ground, persevering in truth and charity (vv. 5-6). Second, John warns that he may come and confront Diotrophes in person. John's statement in v. 11 ("*Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. He who does good is of God; he who does evil has not seen God.*") is sound pastoral advice that grows right out of this context. Gaius and all the "children" are called to imitate John, who in turns is imitating Jesus—and not the false leaders, who seek only to divide.