

UNIT 2B: NEW TESTAMENT

45: The Johannine Writings

The Epistles of St John

In Tradition, 1, 2 and 3 John have historically been ascribed to the same author, commonly also confessed to be the author of St John's Gospel, namely St John the Theologian. Today the consensus is that all three letters share a provenance in the Johannine community or communities of Asia Minor; and although the authorship of St John seems likely, particularly in relation to the first letter, the second and third may be less certain. Whereas the Gospel and the first Epistle are anonymously written, the second and third letter declared themselves to be from 'the Elder'. We have seen (lecture 44) how St Irenaeus sometimes confused the Apostle John with the Elder John, the latter appearing to be a distinct and different person, (cf. the two tombs of Ephesus).

The problem of authorship also arises in respect of the rather late acceptance of the first two Johannine Epistles into the New Testament canon toward the end of the second century with the third not being cited until the middle of the third century. If the apostolic authorship of these letters had been clear by the beginning of the second century, shortly after their writing, then their acceptance into the canon would have arguably been much earlier. It is possible of course that these documents had a more restricted circulation in the early Church, and for that reason alone they took longer to be accepted. Some evidence for this is to be found in the first Epistle which has theological references that could predate the final edited form of St John's Gospel.

These matters will now be considered further as we examine the relationship between the first Epistle and the Gospel of St John.

1 John and St John's Gospel—a Comparison

The similarity of content between the Gospel St John and the first Epistle is clear, even though the Letter has a much narrower purpose in its composition, namely to strengthen the believers in their resistance to Gnostic heresies, such as those perhaps proposed by Cerinthus who was teaching in Asia Minor at the time. According to St. Irenaeus, St. Polycarp told the story that St. John is said to have so detested Cerinthus that he once fled a bathhouse when he found out Cerinthus was inside, yelling "Let us flee, lest the building fall down; for Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is inside!" The challenge of Gnosticism which opposed spirit and flesh could have indeed provoked St John to write his first letter. Clearly some were leaving the community on account of false teaching (1:18-19). The believers must test the spirits as discerning truth from falsehood (4:1). In this regard, and as with the Gospel, oppositions are starkly drawn in dualist terms between light and darkness, truth and error, love and hatred. On the other hand echoes of a much older, perhaps pre-Johannine theology linger, notably the reference to the expiatory sacrifice of Christ (1:7; 2:2; 3:16; 4:10). In connection with this, uncharacteristically, the Epistle makes no reference to the glorification of Jesus Christ on the cross. However, the two works have differing functions, so the overwhelming similarity between them, evident from a point by point comparison (below) *is* significant. From this analysis we may see just how dependent the First Epistle is upon the Gospel, indicating a common author.

TOPIC	EPISTLE	GOSPEL
The Father loves the believer	4:16	14:21
The Son abides in the faithful	3:24	15:4
The gift of the Spirit	4:13	14:16-17
Mutual indwelling of the believer and God	3:24	14:20
Loving God is doing the commandments	2:3; 5:2-3	14:15
Belief overcomes the world	2:13-14	17:8-9

Rejection of Christ leads to rejection of the believer	3:1	1:10-13; 15:18-19
The centrality of the Incarnation	2:22; 4:1-3, 15	1:14
Dying for one's friends	3:16	15:30
The water and the blood from Christ's side	5:6	19:34
God's gift is eternal life in the Son	5:11	3:16

One matter certainly gains more prominence in the First Letter and that is St John's emphasis on loving the brethren as both the expression and proof of loving God. Of course, this is a teaching developed from John 15:9-14 but more extensively and with application to the issue of heresy. Those who do not keep the Apostolic Tradition care more for their eccentric doctrines than the unity of the Church in love. Schism follows hard on the heels of false doctrine. St. John brings this round to his doctrine of God, most gloriously summarised as "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7-8).

This challenge to love one another and love God confronts all living persons with a responsibility to discern for ourselves the extent of our personal capacity to love others and to love God. St Isaac the Syrian reflected:

By the truthful testimony of the mind we possess confidence in God. The testimony of the mind consists in the fact that a man's conscience does not accuse him of negligence in anything within his powers that it is his duty to do. [As St John writes in 1 John 3:21] "If our heart be not condemning us, we have boldness toward God." Thus boldness comes from the achievements of virtue and a good conscience. It is a bitter thing to be enslaved to the body. He who is aware of his hope in God, even to a small extent, will never more be compelled to serve this austere master, the earthly, perishable body.¹

¹ St Isaac the Syrian, Homily 40, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 203.

This linking of “heart” and conscience and virtue offers a firm practical foundation upon which each person can steadily build up “his hope in God” no matter how small the seed from which that hope begins to grow. St John offers firm guidance on how this hope in God can grow: “If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit” (1 John 4:12b-13).

In the second Johannine Epistle the crisis with regard to heresy and schism has clearly worsened. Whereas in the first Epistle it is sufficient for the community to discern truth from error to be protected, by the time the second Epistle is written even contact with heretics is to be avoided (8-11). In the third Epistle an overbearing elder, maybe a Bishop, named Diotrephe will not receive the Elder himself and this probably indicates a growing intolerance for travelling missionaries generally. Putting the testimony of these Epistles together we get a strong picture of Johannine communities in Asia Minor struggling to maintain apostolic faith and unity in the face of various internal and external threats. The brevity of both the second and third epistles is probably linked to fitting each epistle onto singles sheets of papyrus.²

The Revelation of St John the Divine - Genre, Authorship and Date

The Book of Revelation is the only exclusively apocalyptic book in the New Testament. Although stylistically much of its content is framed in an epistolary format, the teaching conforms to the usual characteristics of apocalyptic literature. So, visions are granted to a seer concerning great and terrible things which will happen in the last days when God and his saints finally overcome a resurgent evil. The book is populated with mythical beasts, scrolls, thunders, seals, portents in the heavens and numerological references. St Justin Martyr was the first witness we know of to ascribe this work to St John the Theologian and in this he was followed

² Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 395.

by many afterwards: Tertullian, St Hippolytus, St Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St Irenaeus amongst others. However, many in the Christian East did not include it in the canon of the New Testament and it was omitted originally also from the Peshitta (Syriac) and Armenian collections. So St Cyril of Jerusalem and St John Chrysostom seem not to have accepted apostolic authorship. Little surprise then that doubts about it lingered in the Christian East, in some places even until the 11th century! At this time, it is never recited in the public worship of the Orthodox Church.

Others accepted it as a canonical book but argued against St. John being its author. Notable amongst these was St Dionysius the Great of Alexandria, second only perhaps to St Cyprian of Carthage as a theologian in the third century. Presaging much modern scholarship, St Dionysius (and Eusebius with him) denied common authorship by St John arguing that the use of very poor Greek and the employment of styles and themes quite different to that of the Gospel militated against it. Others since have remarked that the writer refers to the Twelve in such a reverential and detached manner (21:14) that it hardly seems credible that he could have been one of them. However, the ancient view prevailed and the East eventually accepted the book including its Johannine authorship. The arguments in its favour concern the use of the title “Word of God / Logos” (19:13, cf. John 1:1) and “Lamb of God” ... these only occurring in the Gospel and the Johannine Epistles (5:6, cf. John 1:29) ... albeit that different Greek words are used for “Lamb.” We do seem to be on the same theological territory as the Gospel so it could be that St. John sourced the material from his visions but others wrote about them from his testimony.

In the Apocalypse, pagan Rome is always the enemy. This dates the book after the persecutions of Nero in 64 A.D. but probably not in that period for Asia Minor was not affected as far as we know. This supports the traditional view of the date of writing during the reign of the persecuting Emperor Domitian (81-96). In this case Domitian would be a second Nero returned from the dead as the prevailing

superstition held. This dating makes much more sense in terms of the revelations to St John being made toward the end of his life in exile on Patmos as both Scripture (1:9) and Tradition attest.

The Theology of the Apocalypse

“Revelation or Apocalypse (Greek, *apokalipsis*) means literally to unconceal, unveil or reveal.”³ Despite the hesitations in some parts of the Early Church about the authenticity of the Book of the Revelation, like most books of the New Testament, readings from this book were part of the liturgy of the Church;⁴ and such use is proposed in Revelation 1:3: “Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein. . . .” The emphasis upon eschatology—the branch of theology dealing with final things—is beautifully captured by the English poet Alfred Noyes (1880-1958) in the opening lines of “The Paradox: ‘I Am that I Am’” repeated to close the poem: “All that is broken shall be mended;/ All that is lost shall be found;/ I will bind up every wound/ When that which is begun shall be ended.”⁵

The pastoral concerns of the book are immediately clear with the letters to the seven churches of Asia—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea—in chapters 2 and three. In his *Explanation of the Apocalypse 1.1*, St Bede reflects that:

When the [C]hurch had been established by the apostles, it was proper that it be revealed by what course [the Church] was to be extended and was to be

³ Note on Revelation 1:1 in *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 1712.

⁴ Father Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective. Volume One: Scripture, Tradition Hermeneutics* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997), p. 62.

⁵ D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee, *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1917), pp. 538-543. The extent to which Noyes intended the poem to apply to war itself or to the Last Judgement can be debated, but the opening line in Stanza 5, “I am the End to which the whole world strives,” strongly suggests an eschatological dimension.

perfected at the end, so that the preachers of the faith might be strengthened against the adversaries of the world.”⁶

The ‘Angels’ to whom these letters are addressed are probably their respective bishops (as St Epiphanius of Salamis and St. Augustine of Hippo taught). Clearly, the writer has pastoral oversight, notwithstanding local leadership, of an apostolic sort, over quite a large area. We have already seen in 3 John how this was resented by some local bishops. At the end of the first century, we see a transition from itinerant prophetic ministries to more settled pastoral ones.

After this introduction (in which only Smyrna and Philadelphia pass with flying colours), the various visions are narrated. The scene is worship in heaven around the throne of the Lamb, which of course, is Christ. The Lamb alone is worthy to open the seals of seven scrolls which when read announce various tribulations, conflicts and trials that will beset the earth. Then Angels visit the earth (chapter 7) and the faithful gathered in together with the martyrs who have '*washed their robes made them white in the blood of the Lamb*' (7:14). Here we have the early belief that martyrdom is not only a form of baptism (particularly for those who have died as catechumens) but also confers an immediate admission into heaven. There then follows in parallel fashion to the seven seals, seven trumpets announcing yet more tribulations (chapters 8 to 11) and in the midst of these seven thunders of which the seer must not speak (10:4) and two witnesses, (11:3) probably referring to Elias and Enoch (or sometimes Moses) all of whom have at some time been declared to have ascended into heaven.

Next there is a section in the middle of the book of Revelation (12:1-14:20), dealing with the conflict between the Church and the powers of evil. The vivid prophecy of the “woman clothed with the sun” (12:1), clearly refers to the Theotokos and her child, the Christ, who is the only one who can subdue the beast. There is a war

⁶ Quoted by William C. Weinrich (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XII Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 2.

in heaven in which the servants of God, St Michael and the Angels, fight; and there is a war on Earth where the Church (“her offspring”) are also victorious in keeping the commandments of God and bearing testimony to Christ (12:17). However, the Beast continues to make war against the saints, deceiving some and even controlling the economy through the use of his mark (13:17-18). Once again there is a gathering of the faithful with the martyrs and the harvest of wrath upon the earth (chapter 14). The previous heavenly vision resumes in chapter 15 with seven plagues indicated by seven bowls, as God's wrath poured forth upon the earth (16:1f), reminiscent of the judgement executed on Egypt before the Exodus.

The third section of the book of Revelation concerns Babylon and God's judgement meted out upon it (chapters 17-20). These are the prophecies against the pagan and persecuting Rome, the great harlot. The ascription in 17:5 identifies Babylon/Rome publically as a harlot, because in Roman law such women had to wear a headband indicating their profession. Babylon/Rome is clearly implicated in the exploitation of the rich and powerful (18:9f), but notwithstanding her investments in this world, her fall is swift (18:21-24). There follows a litany of triumph in heaven as the Army of God marches victoriously against the beast and the false prophet (cf 13:11-15—the Antichrist) with the devil then being bound for a millennium (19:11-20:3)—that is, one thousand years. After this millennium, Satan is released, but this is a ruse for the fire of God soon devours him and he is thrown into the lake of fire where the beast and the false prophet already languish in torment for all eternity (20:7-10).

The Great and Last Judgement then begins for all resurrected flesh with the lake of fire consuming death, hell and the damned (20:11-15). Since the devil and all his works have been destroyed, the scene is now set for the New Creation in chapters 21 and 22 that gives a glorious vision of the new Jerusalem with the river of God proceeding forth from the Temple in the prophecy of Ezekiel for the healing of the nations (cf. Ezekiel 47:1-12). The material from 22:6 to the end of the book returns

to an epistolary format, emphasising the seriousness to the churches of the testimony contained within the visions and the importance of not tampering with these. A formal invocation of the Second Coming of Christ in the familiar form (“even so, come, Lord Jesus”) and a benediction close the book (22:20-21).

A False Trail: The Millennium: Chiliasm

The material concerning the millennium, also known as “chiliasm” (from the Greek chiliasmos, a thousand years) in chapter 20:1-6 has caused many pastoral problems within the Church and in heterodoxy over many centuries once the Church had declared on the matter. Briefly, the problem concerns the tendency amongst literalists (starting perhaps with the oft-encountered heretic Cerinthus!) to interpret the millennium as a period of unbridled sensuality, a sort of privilege for the saints to be enjoyed in a very earthly paradise. This even influenced the development of Islam and later the doctrine of the Jehovah's Witnesses which in differing ways prophesy similar earthly paradisal delights. So although many early Orthodox writers subscribed to the millennium, including Papias, St Justin Martyr, St Irenaeus and St Hippolytus (doing so in a sane and Orthodox manner), the rapid subsequent degradation of this doctrine led the Church, starting with Origen and then definitively with St Augustine, to repudiate a literal millennium (except that Augustine re-historicised it as a millennium of the Church - which caused no end of problems in 1000 AD!). This, incidentally is why the Church at the second ecumenical Council in 381 inserted the phrase “whose kingdom shall have no end” in the final form of the Creed. The fevered expectations of the literalists remained largely dormant until the Reformation when the book of the Revelation, particularly chapter 20, became a happy hunting ground again for all sorts of heretical sects who based (and still base) their appeal on the earthly delights of the 1,000 year reign, with or without the ornamentation of the Rapture (so-called) and other fancies. Sadly, the heresy of chiliasm is still alive and well in the “Christian” world.

An Orthodox Path through the Book of Revelation

T. L. Frazier offers a profoundly Orthodox interpretation of the book of Revelation in *A Second Look at the Second Coming: Sorting through Speculations*:

Our prayers are coming to the very throne of God (Revelation 6:10); we are reigning even now on earth (Revelation 5:10) as well as in heaven (Revelation 20:4) and, in the end, forever in the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation 22:5); and we learn that ultimately it is evil itself that will be conquered and thrown into the lake of fire. Obviously, if Christianity were truly defeated and our Faith [were in] vain there would be no point in the forces of darkness attacking us in the first place.⁷

In the midst of the many levels of interpretation possible for the book of Revelation, Frazier's calm reassurance about the power of the love of Christ for humanity as a whole and for each human being is paramount:

Revelation strips away the illusion of defeat and *reveals* the truth: we have already won through Him who loved us. . . . Our Lord who was, and who is, and who is come, has already overcome, is now overcoming, and will come again to fully overcome an unrepentant world. . . . The book gives us the strength to go on when all seems lost precisely because we have seen the end of all things, and we know that ultimately Christ is victorious.⁸

For those listening to these lectures, it is important to look at the written text of the template for the Orthodox interpretation of Biblical texts, as recommended by

⁷ Frazier, *A Second Look at the Second Coming* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1999), p. 325. [This is now Ancient Faith Publishing in Chesterton IN]. Frazier sets forth a sound interpretation of the whole book in an appendix, pp. 308-325.

⁸ Frazier, p. 325. For other valuable Orthodox commentaries on Revelation, see Archbishop Averky Taushev, *The Apocalypse in the Teachings of Ancient Christianity* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1995, Second Ed.), Trans. Father Seraphim Rose, esp. pp.53-54: "As the ancient commentators and Fathers of the Church clearly taught, the content of the Apocalypse in its sum is indeed directed to *the last part of the history of the world.*" p. 54 [emphasis in original], quoted by Frazier, p. 315. See also Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Explanation* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005, Third ed.), Trans. Father Seraphim Rose, esp. Chapter 10, "Christian Eschatology: The Future Fate of the World and Mankind," pp. 332-354.

Father Theodore G. Stylianopoulos in *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective*. The template that concludes this lecture is especially helpful, because it sets out from St Andrew of Caesarea how Christ “became man, so that He might acquire even His elect as participants in His own rule.” Thus Christ guides us not only by His Incarnation, His ministry on earth, His Crucifixion and His Resurrection, but also through His Ascension and His Second Coming. To experience the fullness of Christ’s guidance for us, we become “His elect as participants in His own rule.”

A Template for the Orthodox Interpretation of Biblical Texts

In accordance with the proposal of Fr. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos that Orthodox biblical interpretation ought to have a three-level approach, the following template is offered for preachers, teachers, bible study leaders, catechists and students of the Scriptures generally:¹

Revelation 17:14: “They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with Him are called and chosen and faithful.”

Level	Process	In Tradition / Fathers (Theoria)	Applicable Now (Praxis)
Exegetical	Historical / Contextual <i>(using the full range of critical tools)</i>	Both William Hendriksen in 1939 and T. L. Frazer in 1999 have viewed Rev 17:14 as “best expressing the theme of Reve-lation” (Frazier, <i>A Second Look at the Second Coming</i> , p. 325). That theme, as summarized by Father Michael Pomazansky in <i>Orthodox Dogmatic Theology</i> is “the events at the end of time: the Second Coming of the Lord, the resurrection of the dead, and the end of the world; and then about the beginning of the Kingdom of Glory and eternal life” (p.332).	Frazier challenges us: “The Lamb has chosen us, let us therefore remain faithful to the end.” Because we are called and chosen, we have a responsibility to remain faithful to Christ. To “remain faithful to the end” we each need to learn NOW how to confront evil in our own lives and in the world.
	Allegorical / Typological <i>(as derived from Tradition)</i>	Reflecting on St Paul’s description of the future in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-11, St Athanasius wrote in the fourth century: “Not to know when the end is . . . is actually a good thing. If people knew the time of the end, they might begin to ignore the present time as they waited for the end of days. . . . When things remain uncertain and always in prospect, we advance day by day as if summoned reaching forward to the things before us and forgetting the things behind” (cf. Philippians 3:13-14).	Apriugius of Beja wrote in the sixth century that only when Christ Himself reveals His secrets to us do we gain “the strength to understand what” we see. Our senses do not reveal the secrets of Christ. As Pomazansky states: “Death . . . is not an annihilation, but only the separation of the soul from the body” ³³²
Interpretative	Spiritual / Ethical	In the book of Revelation, the Greek word <i>Arnion</i> used for Lamb is at times translated as “Passover,” because Christ is the Passover Lamb who is the judge and Lord of the universe. As the Nicene Creed states, Christ “will come again with glory to judge the living the dead; and His Kingdom will have no end.”	It is not possible to know precisely when Christ will come again (Matt 24:36; Acts 1:7). Our responsibility is to be ready for His return—to “take heed, watch and pray” (Mark 13:33, 37).

	Personal / Social	We are often confronted with the fact that we are “called and chosen.” However, Revelation 17:14 adds the long-term perspective that we are also “faithful.” As the sixth century philosopher Oecumenius states, to be faithful is to be “a servant of Christ.”	To be a servant of Christ today requires prayer and discernment on how to be a servant leader. (See Matt 23:11-12; 20:25-28; Rom 12:2; Ps 46:10; & 1 Peter 5:2-4).
Transformative	The Call to Holiness	In his Sermon on Judgment, St Ephrem preached powerfully in the fourth century of how at the end of time, each Christian would be “examined [about] whether he has the seal of holy baptism and the treasure of the faith; each Christian will be asked whether he has lived according to his renunciation of Satan and his works, not only one or two of his works, but all in general” (www.mirmedjugorje.org/testimony_details.php?tid=443). St Gregory of Nyssa stresses that “the King of kings will descend from heaven, from the throne of glory, to take His seat as Judge, and will call all the inhabitants of earth before His judgment-seat.”	St Ephrem stresses that at the end of time the judgment will take “place which parts men forever from one another: bishops from bishops, priests from priests, deacons and lectors from their companions in orders; children from their parents, brothers from their sisters, friends from their friends.” Thus the call to holiness is also a call to each of us to confront and reject evil throughout life, both in fear of God and in hope of eternal life.
	The Call to Witness	In the earliest surviving Greek commentary on the book of Revelation, Oecumenius stressed that the Lamb won a double victory—first over the 10 evil kings and then because “His servants struggle unto death for their faith in Him.” Thus the challenge posed by T. L. Frazier to be faithful to Christ is turned into a “struggle unto death” in which we are indeed faithful to Christ.	St Andrew of Caesarea stated in the 6 th century that Christ “became man, so that He might acquire even His elect as participants in His own rule.” Thus we are engaged with Christ in the battle against evil, now and until the End.

¹ In “*The New Testament, An Orthodox Perspective, Volume 1: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics,*” (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997, Ch. 7), Fr. Theodore sets out three levels serving a sound Orthodox hermeneutical process. These are:

1. Exegetical - using all critical, contextual, textual and literary methods to determine “the level of understanding of the biblical text in its historical context of literary form and conceptuality ...” (p. 190). **2. Interpretative** – evaluating means derived from the exegetical stage as applicable contextually to the reader’s contemporary issues and concerns (p. 197).

3. Transformative – experiencing life changing practical applications of insights derived from the previous two stages. In ALL of these three levels, the Orthodox context must be the Church as the locus of divine revelation and inspiration. Here the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth as manifested in the biblical text, the teachings of the Fathers and the liturgical context. In Ch. 4, p. 115 f., Fr. Theodore explains the historical and spiritual exegetical approaches which, following the Fathers, must be applied throughout. Classically these have concerned the Antiochian emphasis on the “literal” or historical approach and the Alexandrian emphasis on the allegorical and typological interpretations that reveal the inter-connectedness of all Scripture in Tradition at deeper levels of understanding.