

THIRD EPISTLE OF JOHN

Approximate date: 70-90 C.E.

Time period: period of transition in the *ekklēsia* from Apostolic to post-Apostolic

Author: the Apostle John

Location of author: Ephesus or Asia Minor (conservative), Syria (liberal)

Target audience and location: Gaius, a Believer in Asia Minor

People:

John the Apostle, Gaius, Diotrephes, Demetrius

People mentioned:

Yeshua the Messiah, “the Name” (v. 7)

Key Themes:

faithfulness for leading the assembly (commendation to Gaius) / concern for disruptions in the assembly / imitation of good things

Key Scriptures: 3 John 5, 11 / **Greeting** (v. 1); **Commentation of Gaius** (vs. 2-8);

Criticism of Diotrephes (vs. 9-10); **Commendation of Demetrius** (vs. 11-12);

Conclusion (vs. 13-15)¹

Theological Summary: The authorship and date issues surrounding the letter of 3 John are generally tied to that of 1 John (authorship issues of the **Epistles of John** are summarized at the beginning of the entry for **1 John**). Conservative examiners widely believe in genuine Johannine authorship of 3 John, just like 2 John, unlike liberals who deny that the Apostle John wrote it. The author of 3 John says that he is “The elder” (v. 1), and so there are many liberals, and even a few conservatives, who think that a separate John the Elder composed 3 John. Both conservatives and liberals are in wide agreement that the author of 3 John was the same author as 2 John. But, is it necessary that a certain John the Elder, a different person from the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, is the author of 3 John? The conclusion of Gundry is, “In both letters John identifies himself as ‘the elder,’ not in the sense of an officer in a local church, but in the sense of an elder statesman of the church at large, that is, an apostle.”² Given that the authorship issues of 3 John are connected to those of 2 John, which also employs the

¹ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 899-900.

² Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 451.

terminology “elder” (2 John 1), we should see no reason to deny genuine Johannine authorship of this letter (see the entry for **2 John** for more details).

Due to the rather “personal” nature of its contents, the letter of 3 John was not widely circulated in Second Century Christianity.³ However, in spite of this, the major advantage that 3 John has over 2 John is that a specific recipient, Gaius, is named in the text (v. 1).⁴ 3 John was a private letter written to a specific individual, that largely addresses “ecclesiastical problems” (Marshall, *ISBE*).⁵ Gaius is described as being a dear friend of the author, who is commended for his fidelity to the truth (vs. 4-7). There is a Gaius mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:14 and Romans 16:23 from Corinth, whom some believe is the recipient of this letter, even though this cannot be known with absolute certainty.

It is generally agreed that 3 John was written immediately after 2 John, placing an estimated composition date at around 85-90 C.E. It is very possible that 3 John is the last of the canonized New Testament writings to be composed.⁶ 3 John was most likely written around the vicinity of Ephesus,⁷ per extant Johannine traditions seen in Christian history, although some liberals who deny that the Apostle John wrote this letter place it being written closer to Syria.⁸ No Hebrew or Aramaic origin for 3 John has ever been proposed by academics, and 3 John was actually excluded from the canon of the Fourth-Fifth Century Syriac Peshitta.⁹ A Hebrew or Aramaic origin for 3 John is very unlikely, as “it may be supposed that Gaius’ church was one of the circuit of Asiatic churches under the general supervision of the apostle John” (Guthrie).¹⁰ As 3 John would have been written to Gaius in Asia Minor, a Greek composition seems definite. However, there are distinctly Jewish touches to 3 John, notably how God is referred to as “the name” (*tou onomatos*, τοῦ ὀνόματος equiv. for *HaShem*, הַשֵּׁם) in v. 7.

The letter of 3 John was written to address congregational problems. At this stage in the late First Century, there were many traveling teachers going throughout the assemblies of Asia Minor, some, as 2 John indicates, bringing in error, and others, who were genuinely commissioned and approved by Apostles like John and other leaders. Diotrephes was a congregational figure who rejected the legitimate teachers sent by John, whereas Gaius supported the teachers sent by John. One of these teachers was presumably Demetrius, mentioned in the letter (v. 12).¹¹ Diotrephes threatened excommunication for those who rejected his course, and refused to acknowledge John’s authority (vs. 9-10). There is no uniform agreement among examiners whether or not Gaius and Diotrephes were a part of the same congregation or faith community, or were leaders of different assemblies in a larger

³ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 891.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 892.

⁵ Marshall, “John, Epistles of,” in *ISBE*, 2:1095.

⁶ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 896.

⁷ Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 452.

⁸ Kysar, “John, Epistles of,” in *ABD*, 3:908.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:901.

¹⁰ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 892.

¹¹ Marshall, “John, Epistles of,” in *ISBE*, 2:1095.

area that had some relationship with one another.¹² It is interesting that nothing is specifically said about the doctrinal problems associated with Diotrephes. While an association with the false teachings addressed in 1 John seems likely, it could be more. Guthrie directs us on how, “it is not necessary to appeal to heretical views to account for a failing,”¹³ as Diotrephes could have simply been someone who was domineering and unloving.

Gaius is commended by John for the testimony of those evangelists coming forth from his assembly, even those whom he does not personally know that well (v. 5). John encourages Gaius that they should support them financially, as they have taken nothing for their journey (vs. 7-8). He warns Gaius of Diotrephes, who only works to serve his own interests and who disparages others. John intends to have some words with him in person if he comes (vs. 9-10). Diotrephes is mentioned in contrast to Demetrius, who has a positive testimony and is well spoken of (v. 12).

Many commentators are agreed that the focus of 3 John is to be aware of traveling teachers and those who do not submit to the spiritual authority of a local congregation or local spiritual leaders. All teachers and congregational leaders are to serve the Body of Messiah and help others grow spiritually. Loyalty among fellow brethren in the Lord is to be honored, and those who work together are to demonstrate their loyalty to each other.

3 John is important to understand historically regarding the place of Diotrephes, and how with the Apostles’ passing, the emerging Second Century Christian Church would formally organize itself, with this letter serving as some First Century background. Diotrephes is sometimes observed as being a type of the “Ignatian bishop” (*IDB*).¹⁴ Marshall observes, “The apostles died, leaving no defined system of succession, and local churches tended to develop more powerful leadership of their own” (*ISBE*).¹⁵ The emerging Messianic community today needs to understand 3 John in the context of us all working together as congregations and individuals, and heed the warnings of acting like Diotrephes, who issued summary excommunications simply because he felt he could.

Bibliography

Barabas, Steven. “John, Letters of,” in *NIDB*, pp 536-537.

Barker, Glenn W. “2 John,” in *EXP*, 12:371-377.

Burge, G.M. “John, Letters of,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, pp 587-598.

Caird, G.B. “John, Letters of,” in *IDB*, 2:946-952.

Carson, D.A., and Douglas J. Moo. “1, 2, 3 John,” in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp 669-687.

Gundry, Robert H. “The Catholic, or General, Epistles,” in *A Survey of the New Testament*, pp 431-453.

Guthrie, Donald. “The Johannine Epistles,” in *New Testament Introduction*, pp 858-900.

Kysar, Robert. “John, Epistles of,” in *ABD*, 3:900-912.

Marshall, I.H. “John, Epistles of,” in *ISBE*, 2:1091-1098.

Morris, Leon. “2 and 3 John,” in *NBCR*, pp 1270-1273.

¹² Kysar, “John, Epistles of,” in *ABD*, 3:906.

¹³ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 895.

¹⁴ Caird, “John, Letters of,” in *IDB*, 2:950.

¹⁵ Marshall, “John, Epistles of,” in *ISBE*, 2:1095.

Painter, John. "1, 2, and 3 John," in *ECB*, pp 1512-1528.
Rensberger, David. "John Letters of," in *EDB*, pp 725-726.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 3 JOHN:

1. In comparison to 2 John, why do you think specific names of disruptive individuals are mentioned in 3 John? Do you think John has more to say that he does not want to write (v. 13)? Feel free to speculate.

2. Do you see any present applications of John's admonitions today in the emerging Messianic movement?

REFLECTION ON 3 JOHN'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Epistle of 3 John: