

THIRD JOHN CLASS NOTES¹

Authorship

Third John 1:1 identifies the author as simply “the elder” (πρεσβύτερος). Because of the close similarities to 2 John in content and structure many have concluded that they are from the same author.² Since we have already noted that John the Apostle is the likely author of 1 John and 2 John³ he then would also be the author of 3 John. This would be consistent with the otherwise ambiguous designation “the elder” since it would make sense if the epistle came from a well-known apostle (cf. 1 Pet 5:1).

Externally, the evidence for Johannine authorship is relatively weak for 3 John (even weaker than 2 John). But this is not wholly unexpected given the fact that it is the shortest epistle in the New Testament. The Muratorian Canon (ca. A.D.200) only mentions two letters by John. Eusebius placed 2 and 3 John among the antilegomena (disputed books).⁴ Indeed D. Guthrie suggests, “It is not certain that any evidence for it can be cited before the third century.”⁵

Nonetheless, the common links between all three Johannine Epistles is so strong that there does not appear to be sufficient warrant for rejecting Johannine authorship.

Date

The similarities of 3 John to 1 and 2 John suggest that these epistles were written at about the same time. Since 1 John was probably written around A.D. 85–90,⁶ then 3 John should also be dated in that general period as well.

Original Recipients

Third John is addressed to a man named Gaius. Unfortunately, Gaius was a common name in the Roman world and the name is used several times in the New Testament, most often associated with Paul’s ministry (Acts 19:29, 20:4; Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 1:14). Whether any of these references can be linked to the addressee of 3 John is uncertain. About all that can be said is that based on internal clues is that Gaius appears to be a Christian leader whom John loved. The close association between the three Johannine Epistles might suggest that Gaius lived somewhere in Asia Minor, but there really is no way to know for sure.

¹ The materials here are taken from the introductory materials in, Charles H. Savelle, “Third John Argument,” (Unpublished paper), 466–70.

² See Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, New American Commentary, vol. 38 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 235-37.

³ See the discussion on 1, 2 John.

⁴ *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.

⁵ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 891.

⁶ See the discussion on dating in the section on 1 John.

Historical Setting

There is little solid evidence within the epistle to establish a historical background for the epistle. What can be seen is that the epistle is concerned with issues related to showing hospitality to itinerant preachers and teachers. John apparently commends Gaius for showing the appropriate hospitality whereas a man named Diotrephes is condemned for not showing the appropriate hospitality.

Relationship to 1 and 2 John

Authorship is the primary issue in discussing the relationship between 1 John and 2–3 John. As early as Eusebius there have been genuine questions as to whether a single author was responsible for all three writings.⁷ J. Moffatt also raised this issue and concluded that they were not written by the same author.⁸ But we have already suggested that the same author is involved. As far as content is concerned there appears to be a closer affinity between 1 John and 2 John both of which address false teaching. But, 2 John shares some similarities with 3 John, including vocabulary (i.e., love/beloved, truth), epistolary form, similarity in size. Painter concludes, “2 John stands in a close relationship to each of the other Johannine Epistles but that 3 John seems to be more independent of the language and subject matter of 1 John.”⁹

Canonicity

The brevity of 3 John almost certainly contributed to at least some of the neglect and uncertainty of the early church fathers and canonical lists. For example, although Polycarp identifies around sixteen books as canonical he does not include any of the Johannine epistles. Similarly, neither Justin Martyr nor Marcion make reference to 1, 2, 3 John. Eusebius notes that some Christians questioned the acceptability of 2, 3 John (Ecclesiastical History 3.25). Ultimately all three Johannine epistles were recognized as canonical by Athanasius (A.D. 367), and the Councils of Hippo (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397).

Purpose

The main purpose of 3 John is to address the issue of showing proper hospitality. To this end, John will present both affirmation and rebuke. Absent is the idea of false teachers/teachings so prevalent in 1 and 2 John. Nonetheless, such issues could be lurking in the background.

Contribution

Third John provides important insight into how the early churches functioned. In particular the epistle sheds light on the practice of hospitality.

⁷ *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.

⁸ James Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, ed. Charles A. Briggs and Stewart D. F. Salmond, 3d ed., International Theological Library (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), 479-81.

⁹ John Painter, *1, 2, 3 John*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 51.

Literary Features and Structure

At least three significant literary features characterize all the Johannine Epistles including 3 John. First, it has been noted that the Greek of the Johannine Epistles give evidence of some Hebraisms.¹⁰ Second, like 1 John, 2 John contains antithetical or dualistic language in the book. Third, the epistle is built around several key words including, “truth/true” (seven times), “witness” (five times), and “beloved” (four times).

Like 2 John, 3 John is clearly epistolary in form. It contains an introduction (1–4), the main body (5–12), and a conclusion (13–14). This standard form makes identifying the basic structure easier.

Message

The message of 3 John is, “Proper treatment of Christian ministers is an expression of walking in the truth.”

Basic Outline¹¹

- I. The introduction (1–2).
- II. The proper treatment of Christian ministers is commended in Gaius’ response to Christian ministers (3–8).
- III. The improper treatment of Christian ministers is condemned in Diotrephes’ rejection of Christian ministers (9–10).
- IV. The proper treatment of Christian ministers is commended in Demetrius’ reputation among Christian ministers (11–12).
- V. The conclusion (13–15).

Select Bibliography

See the bibliography for 1 John.

¹⁰ Painter, *1, 2, 3 John*, 77.

¹¹ Adapted from Charles Savelle, but some changes in wording have been made by Joshua Bramer.