

Dr. Robert Yarbrough, The Johannine Epistles, Session 1 – Author, Date, and Setting of John's Letters

1) Abstract, 2) Briefing Document, 3) Study Guide Questions, 4) FAQs

Abstract:

This material originates from **Dr. Robert Yarbrough's introductory lecture on the Johannine Epistles**, titled "Author, Date, and Setting of John's Letters," which is part of a larger series called "Balancing Life in Christ." The lecture focuses on traditional understanding of **John, the disciple of Jesus**, as the **author of the three epistles**, acknowledging historical challenges to this view while affirming the long-held consensus. Yarbrough places the writing of the letters **later in John's life**, likely while he was ministering in the **Ephesus region**, possibly even during exile on Patmos. He explores the **setting of the letters**, particularly the church at Ephesus as described in Revelation, suggesting that **1 John addresses a church split** and the potential for **2 and 3 John to be a cover letter and a letter to an individual within that context**, emphasizing the need for the church to return to its initial love and combat false teachings.

BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Here is a detailed briefing document reviewing the main themes and most important ideas or facts from the provided source, "Yarbrough_JohannineEp01_English.pdf":

Briefing Document: The Johannine Epistles - Author, Date, and Setting

Source: Excerpts from "Yarbrough_JohannineEp01_English.pdf" (Dr. Robert Yarbrough, The Johannine Epistles, Session 1 – Author, Date, and Setting of John's Letters)

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Overview:

This document summarizes Session 1 of Dr. Robert Yarbrough's teaching on the Johannine Epistles, focusing on the author, potential date of writing, and the historical and ecclesiological setting of 1, 2, and 3 John. Dr. Yarbrough argues for traditional Johannine

authorship and proposes a potential interconnectedness between the three letters, possibly addressing issues within the churches of Asia Minor, particularly Ephesus.

Key Themes and Ideas:

1. Authorship:

- The historical consensus of the church attributes the authorship of the Gospel of John, the three Epistles, and the book of Revelation to **John, the son of Zebedee**, one of Jesus' hand-picked disciples and part of the inner circle (Peter, James, and John).
- John and his brother James were known as the "Sons of Thunder," suggesting a passionate temperament.
- While scholarly doubt regarding Johannine authorship arose around the 1800s, Dr. Yarbrough, supported by authors like Donald Guthrie, Carson and Mu, and Kostenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, asserts there is **no compelling reason to doubt** that John the son of Zebedee authored these letters.
- This conclusion is based on comparing the content of the letters to the Gospel and Revelation, along with examining first and second-century church history.

1. Date of Writing:

- The precise time of writing for the letters is **uncertain**.
- There is reason to believe John wrote these letters **later in life**.
- Ancient reports place John in the **region of Ephesus** after the fall of Jerusalem (late 80s and 60s).
- The context of Revelation, where John is in exile on Patmos (an island off the coast of Ephesus) and writing to the seven churches of Asia, suggests the letters were written **in that general time frame and context**.
- A possible scenario is that the letters were written while John was **in exile** or in hiding, unable to travel, explaining his stated hope to visit the recipients (2 John 12, 3 John 14).

1. Setting and Context:

- The setting for 1 John is specifically characterized by a **church split or schism**.
- **1 John 2:19** is a key verse describing this event: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with

us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us." (ESV quote used by Yarbrough)

- This split highlights that those who left were **not truly "of"** the apostolic community and its message.
- The split likely arose from **rival understandings** of the truth, possibly influenced by local religious/social convictions (syncretism) or personal disagreements with apostolic leadership.
- 1 John is seen as the **dominant epistle**, intended to **stabilize congregations** aware of the split and potentially tempted to follow the schismatic group.
- The three letters can be viewed as a **unified apostolic statement**.
- **3 John** is written to an individual named **Gaius**, an ally of John. It is theorized to be a **cover letter** accompanying 1 and 2 John, potentially instructing Gaius to distribute them. Diotrephes is mentioned in 3 John 9 as opposing John and his message.
- **2 John** is addressed to "the elect lady and her children" (2 John 1), interpreted as an **individual church** and its members. It may have been intended for Gaius' church, encouraging them to receive 1 John and assist in its distribution.
- **1 John** is likely addressed to **all the churches** who received it, potentially starting with the church at Ephesus and spreading to the other churches in the Roman province of Asia (the same churches addressed in Revelation).
- This interconnectedness of the letters, though imaginary as a historical reconstruction, makes sense of the preservation of the seemingly "inconsequential" 2 and 3 John when viewed in isolation.

1. **Issues Facing the Churches (Illustrated by the Church at Ephesus):**

- Drawing on Revelation 2:1-7 (addressed to the church at Ephesus), Dr. Yarbrough highlights issues potentially relevant to the setting of John's letters.
- The Ephesian church is commended for its **commitment and discernment**: "I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles, and are not, and you found them to be false." (Revelation 2:2 ESV) This aligns with the situation described in 1 John 2:19 regarding the schism.
- They are also praised for their **stamina and patient endurance**.

- However, they are facing a significant issue: "But I have this against you, that you've abandoned the love you had at first." (Revelation 2:4 ESV) This suggests a decline in **agape love**, a core tenet of Johannine theology.
- They are urged to **remember, repent, and "do the works you did at first"** (Revelation 2:5), implying a need for renewal in faith, love, and action.
- The Ephesians are commended for hating the works of the **Nicolaitans** (Revelation 2:6), who seem to have been a group characterized by rebellion against Christian commandments and likely a manifestation of hostility towards the gospel.
- The message to Ephesus emphasizes the importance of **hearing what the Spirit says** and the promise of communion with God "to the one who conquers." This concept of "conquering" is also found in 1 John.

Conclusion:

Dr. Yarbrough's initial session establishes a framework for understanding the Johannine Epistles. He firmly supports the traditional view of John, the son of Zebedee, as the author, writing in the later part of his life from the region of Ephesus. The letters are seen as addressing a specific historical context marked by internal division and the need for churches to maintain their grounding in apostolic truth, love, and practice amidst challenges from dissenting groups and the general tendency towards spiritual apathy. The potential interconnectedness of the three letters as a "packet" intended for distribution to address these issues provides a plausible scenario for their reception and preservation.

Study Guide Questions: Review Guide: Author, Date, and Setting of the Johannine Epistles

Quiz

1. Who is traditionally considered the author of the Johannine Epistles, and what is one piece of historical evidence supporting this tradition?
2. What is the general timeframe suggested for the writing of the Johannine Epistles, and where does ancient tradition place John during this period?
3. According to 1 John 2:19, what event provides insight into the setting of the first epistle?
4. What does the author of the lecture suggest about the potential relationship between the three Johannine Epistles?

5. Who is Gaius, as mentioned in 3 John, and what role might he have played in the distribution of the letters?
6. Who is Diotrephes, according to 3 John, and how does he relate to John?
7. In the letter to the church in Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7), what is one positive characteristic commended by Christ?
8. What is the primary issue Christ has against the church in Ephesus, as stated in Revelation 2:4?
9. What group does the church in Ephesus "hate the works of," according to Revelation 2:6, and what does this reveal about the church?
10. What does Christ urge the church in Ephesus to do in order to address the issue mentioned in Revelation 2:4?

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the historical arguments for and against Johannine authorship of the epistles, drawing on the information provided in the lecture and your broader understanding of New Testament scholarship.
2. Analyze the significance of the church split described in 1 John 2:19 for understanding the purpose and themes of the First Epistle of John.
3. Evaluate the proposed scenario that views 3 John as a cover letter for the distribution of the other epistles, considering the evidence from the texts themselves and the suggested historical context.
4. Compare and contrast the descriptions of the church in Ephesus found in Revelation 2:1-7 and the potential setting of the Johannine Epistles, discussing how these texts inform our understanding of the challenges faced by the early church in that region.
5. Explore the concept of "Balancing Life in Christ" as a theme potentially connecting the various issues addressed in the Johannine Epistles and the letter to the Ephesian church.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Johannine Epistles:** Refers to the three New Testament books traditionally attributed to the Apostle John: 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John.

- **Author:** The person traditionally believed to have written the Johannine Epistles, identified in the lecture as John, the son of Zebedee, the disciple of Jesus.
- **Date:** The approximate time period when the Johannine Epistles were written, suggested in the lecture to be later in John's life, potentially after the fall of Jerusalem and while he was in the region of Ephesus or in exile on Patmos.
- **Setting:** The historical and social context surrounding the writing of the Johannine Epistles, including potential location, the communities addressed, and challenges faced (e.g., schism, false teachers).
- **Balancing Life in Christ:** The overarching theme or title given to the lecture series, suggesting the importance of maintaining spiritual equilibrium in one's Christian walk, encompassing truth, love, and obedience.
- **Schism:** A division or split within a religious body, specifically mentioned in 1 John 2:19 as having occurred in the congregations addressed by John.
- **Syncretism:** The blending of different religious or cultural beliefs and practices, mentioned as a potential way local forces could impact early churches.
- **Apostolic Message:** The teachings and traditions passed down from the apostles of Jesus, considered in the lecture to be represented by John and those aligned with him.
- **Gaius:** A person addressed directly in 3 John, described as an ally of John and a potential recipient and distributor of the epistles.
- **Demetrius:** A person mentioned favorably in 3 John 12, potentially the one who delivered John's letters to Gaius.
- **Diotrephes:** A person mentioned in 3 John 9 who opposed John and his message.
- **Elect Lady and Her Children:** The recipients of 2 John, interpreted in the lecture as representing an individual church congregation and its members.
- **Asia:** The Roman province where Ephesus and the other seven churches addressed in Revelation were located.
- **Ephesus:** A major city and the capital of the Roman province of Asia, home to one of the churches addressed in Revelation 2:1-7, and potentially a central location for the churches receiving the Johannine Epistles.
- **Nicolaitans:** A group mentioned in Revelation 2:6 whose works the church in Ephesus hated; described as not obeying Christian commandments.

- **Agape:** Greek word often translated as "love," particularly referring to the self-giving love characteristic of God and Christ, highlighted as an area where the Ephesian church was struggling.
- **Repent:** To turn away from sin and toward God; an action urged upon the church in Ephesus.
- **Works:** Actions or deeds, emphasized as intertwined with faith and love in the Christian life.
- **Conquers:** A term used in Revelation 2:7 for those who overcome challenges and remain faithful, promised rewards such as eating from the tree of life.

Quiz Answer Key

1. John, the hand-picked disciple of Jesus, son of Zebedee, is traditionally considered the author. One piece of historical evidence is that there was never any doubt about his authorship throughout the history of the church until around 1800.
2. The general timeframe is suggested to be later in John's life. Ancient reports place John in the region of Ephesus after the fall of Jerusalem (late 60s-80s AD) and possibly in exile on Patmos.
3. 1 John 2:19 describes a church split or schism, where some people left the congregation or congregations.
4. The author suggests that the three letters can be viewed as a unified apostolic statement, potentially meant to be read and distributed together as a packet.
5. Gaius is an individual addressed in 3 John. He is described as an ally of John and may have received and helped distribute the three letters.
6. Diotrephes is a person mentioned in 3 John who opposed John and the gospel message that John stood for.
7. One positive characteristic commended is their works, toil, patient endurance, and their ability to test those who call themselves apostles and find them to be false.
8. The primary issue is that they have abandoned the love they had at first.
9. The church in Ephesus hates the works of the Nicolaitans. This reveals that they are retaining zeal for God's redemptive commands and are not going along with groups who rebel against these commands.

10. Christ urges them to remember from where they have fallen, repent, and do the works they did at first, implying a renewal of faith and love.

FAQS: FAQ on the Johannine Epistles: Author, Date, and Setting

Who is traditionally considered the author of the Johannine Epistles (1, 2, and 3 John)?

Throughout most of church history, the consensus has been that John, the son of Zebedee and one of Jesus' hand-picked disciples (part of the inner circle with Peter and James), is the author. He is often referred to as the "beloved disciple." While doubts about Johannine authorship emerged around the 1800s, based on evidence within the letters, comparison to the Gospel of John and Revelation, and early church history, it is considered reasonable to continue attributing these letters to John the son of Zebedee.

What is the likely time frame for the writing of these letters?

The exact date is difficult to pinpoint with precision, but there is reason to believe John wrote these letters later in his life. Ancient reports place John in the region of Ephesus after the fall of Jerusalem (which occurred in the late 80s and 60s AD). The letters are understood to have arisen in the time leading up to or during John's banishment to the island of Patmos, where he wrote the book of Revelation. This places the writing generally in the late 1st century AD.

What is the geographical setting for the recipients of these letters?

The setting is likely the churches in the Roman province of Asia, with Ephesus being a major center. John is believed to have ministered from Ephesus to the churches in the surrounding areas. The letters are addressed to individuals and congregations within this region.

What significant event in the life of the church is indicated in 1 John?

1 John clearly indicates a church split or schism. In 1 John 2:19, it states, "they went out from us, but they were not of us." This indicates that some individuals or groups who had been part of the congregation(s) separated themselves, likely due to differing doctrines or practices.

How might the three letters (1, 2, and 3 John) be related to each other?

While each letter is distinct, they can be viewed as a unified apostolic statement. A plausible scenario suggests that 3 John, addressed to an individual named Gaius (an ally of

John), might have served as a cover letter for 1 John. 2 John, addressed to an "elect lady and her children" (likely representing a specific congregation), could have encouraged that church to receive 1 John and potentially assist in its distribution to other churches. This suggests a packet of letters intended to strengthen various parts of the Christian community in the face of challenges.

What is the purpose of 1 John in the context of the church setting?

1 John is considered the dominant epistle among the three and is likely intended to stabilize congregations who were aware of the church split mentioned in 1 John 2:19. It aimed to prevent believers from being tempted to break away from John's teachings or to adopt the doctrines and practices of those who had left.

What insights into the challenges faced by the church in Ephesus are provided by the passage in Revelation 2:1-7?

The letter to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7, written by John (through Christ's message), highlights both strengths and weaknesses. The Ephesians are commended for their hard work, patient endurance, and discernment in testing those who falsely claimed to be apostles. However, a significant issue is raised: they have "abandoned the love they had at first." This suggests a decline in their initial fervent love for God and one another, despite their doctrinal integrity and perseverance.

What does the mention of the Nicolaitans in Revelation 2:6 suggest about the challenges faced by the churches in Asia?

The hatred of the Nicolaitans' works is commended in the letter to the Ephesians. While little is definitively known about the Nicolaitans, the context suggests they were a group whose actions were in rebellion against the commandments of Christianity and the typical manifestation of the gospel in the apostolic era. Their practices were detested by Christ and were in opposition to God's redemptive commands regarding belief, actions, and the exercise of love. This indicates the churches faced challenges from groups promoting behaviors contrary to Christian teaching.