

Dr. Robert Yarbrough, Johannine Epistles, Session 1, Author, Date, and Setting of John's Letters Audio Overview Podcast from NotebookLM

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Welcome to the Deep Dive. Great to be here. Today, we're diving into a source from Dr. Robert Yarbrough.

It's the first session of his lecture series called Balancing Life in Christ, and our focus is laser-sharp: the historical context behind the Johannine epistles. We're talking one, two, and three John. Right.

We're sifting through this material to really zero in on the essential background. Who wrote these letters? Yeah. Roughly, when were they written? And maybe most importantly, what was the actual situation, the real-life context in the churches getting them? Because understanding that foundational layer feels absolutely key, doesn't it? Before we even start exploring the content of the letters themselves.

Oh, definitely. It sets the state. It really does.

It gives everything, John says, its weight. Specific gravity and urgency. Yeah.

Okay. Let's unpack this. We'll start with the big question.

Who wrote these epistles? The source presents a strong, longstanding view right away. It does. It points directly to John, the son of Zebedee.

And look, this has been the dominant traditional view throughout church history. We're talking reaching back to the first and second centuries. And this is the John we know as one of Jesus's closest disciples.

Yeah. Right? Part of that inner circle, often called the beloved disciple. That's the one.

Dr. Yarbrough touches on his background too, mentions his brother James. Ah, the sons of thunder. Exactly.

Quite the duo, apparently. Jesus gave them that nickname. It suggests, you know, spirited individuals, maybe intensely passionate.

There's that story where they wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village. Right. And Jesus quickly corrected them on that one.

Yeah. But it shows their temperament. Of course, James faced martyrdom much earlier.

John, though, had this remarkably long ministry. And for centuries, the consensus was that John wrote the gospel, these three letters, and Revelation. That was the strong consensus.

Yes. But, as often happens, that view wasn't universally held forever. The source mentions a shift around the 1800s.

That's right. That's when some scholarly circles really began questioning whether one person, John, the son of Zebedee, could have written all these different works. Why the questions?

Style differences. Mostly that. Yeah.

Different writing styles. Maybe perceived theological nuances across the books. It led some to propose other authors, or maybe even schools of thought, like a Johannine school.

Okay. So, after looking at all that, where does Dr. Yarbrough land in this source material? Well, his conclusion, weighing the internal evidence- what the letters say- compared to the gospel and Revelation, and also looking at early church history, is that there's really no compelling reason to doubt the traditional view. So John, son of Zebedee.

That's his takeaway. And he notes this view is well-supported by some pretty robust scholarship. He mentions people like Donald Guthrie, Carson, and Moo, and that big work, *The Cradle, The Cross, and The Crown*.

Right. So, okay, let's pause here for a second. For you, the listener, why is this historical grounding about the author so important? What's the key takeaway if these letters really were written by a direct, long-serving disciple? I think it means you're reading words that are just deeply grounded in personal experience with Jesus Christ.

It gives them a unique authority, a unique perspective. It's not secondhand. Exactly.

It's coming from someone who literally walked with Christ, saw his ministry unfold, and then carried that legacy for decades. That context shapes everything. His focus on love, his sharp words against false teaching.

It all makes sense. That direct link feels incredibly significant. Okay, let's move on to the date.

Can we nail down exactly when John wrote these epistles? The source says we can't place the writing with absolute certainty- no precise year- but it firmly situates them later in John's very long life. We have ancient reports mentioned in the material that place John ministering in the region of Ephesus after the fall of Jerusalem. Which was the late 60s AD, so we're talking later decades of the first century.

Precisely. Pushing his ministry in Asia Minor into maybe the 70s, 80s, possibly even the 90s. And that fits with the tradition of disciples scattering from Jerusalem after the destruction of the temple.

It does. And it connects directly, interestingly, to the book of Revelation. We know John was exiled on the island of Patmos.

Which is right off the coast there, near Ephesus. Exactly. Right off the coast of Asia Minor, the Roman province where Ephesus was the capital.

And Revelation itself, remember, is addressed to the seven churches in that province. So it seems very likely the letters were written while John was active in, or at least closely connected to, that whole Ephesus region, ministering to those churches. That's the strong suggestion.

And the source offers a couple of, let's call them scenarios, for the timing relative to his exile on Patmos. Okay. What are they? Well, scenario one is that he wrote these letters in the period leading up to his banishment.

While he was still based in Ephesus, actively involved pastorally with these scattered congregations. Makes sense. And the second scenario, the one Dr. Yarbrough kind of imagined.

Yeah. He finds himself often imagining this one, he says. It's the possibility that John might have actually penned these letters during his exile on Patmos.

Why would he think that? Because John expresses this hope, this desire to visit the recipients. You see it in 2 John 12 and 3 John 14. That could imply he's currently unable to travel.

Because he's stuck on Patmos. Exactly. But he anticipates a future release or reunion.

Wow. Picturing him writing from exile adds this layer of isolation, maybe longing to those lines. It does.

So look, the precise year isn't certain, but the key takeaway about the date and location is this. We're placing these letters firmly in the late first century, probably coming out of or deeply connected to the Ephesus area. A time of mature apostolic ministry, but also maybe hardship, like exile.

Yes. And that time frame positions them as this mature reflection on faith and community life, especially dealing with new challenges, all written by the last surviving pillar of the original apostles. Which brings us perfectly to the setting of what was actually happening in these churches.

The source makes it clear John wasn't just writing, you know, general theology. He was hitting specific pressing issues. Oh, absolutely.

John's writing is that of a pastoral leader. He's talking to these communities, probably meeting in house churches. And the most significant reality he confronts, especially clear in First John, is a major church split, a schism.

A schism, wow. The source points to First John 2.1 time as the sort of smoking gun for this. That's the verse.

They went out from us, but they were not of us. It's pretty stark. Yeah.

People who were inside the fellowship had intentionally left. That indicates a really deep division. It does.

And the material suggests potential reasons for this break. It could have been different theological understandings, maybe. Arguing about doctrine.

Could be. Or maybe the influence of local non-Christian beliefs sort of creeping in and mixing with Christian faith, what scholars sometimes call syncretism. Ah, blending things together.

Right. Or, you know, it could have even been personal conflicts, jealousy, leadership squabbles, maybe disagreements about other traveling teachers. So First John is John's direct response to this crisis.

It seems to be. The source really emphasizes its purpose. To stabilize the congregations who knew about this group leaving.

Because they might have been confused. Or tempted to follow. Exactly.

Confused, tempted to follow, maybe even thinking about changing their own beliefs or practices because of the whole thing. John is writing to anchor them. Anchor them in truth and love.

Okay. And this leads into an interesting idea about how these three letters might actually fit together. The source mentions this possibility that they circulated as a kind of packet.

Yes. Some scholars, like Luke Timothy Johnson, suggest this. Like one mailing, basically.

Why suggest that? What's the thinking? Well, it helps explain why the much shorter letters, two and three John, which seem maybe less substantial on their own, were preserved right alongside the big one, First John. If they traveled together, they'd likely be kept together. Precisely.

If they were part of a single communication strategy, it just makes sense they were kept together through history. And the characters mentioned in Three John, they seem to play into this packet idea, too. They really do.

So in Three John, you meet Gaius. He's presented as John's ally, and he's the one receiving Three John. Then you hear about Diotrephes.

He's described as someone who opposed John and his message, even refusing to welcome traveling Christians sent by John. Sounds like a troublemaker. Maybe connected to the group that left.

That's a possibility. The source notes. Yeah.

And then there's Demetrius. He's spoken of very favorably, and it's quite possible he was the one who actually carried these letters. Okay.

So let's try to imagine this packet scenario. John sends it maybe from Patmos, maybe from somewhere near Ephesus. Right.

So Gaius receives the packet. It contains Three John, Two John, and First John. Got it.

He reads Three John first because it's addressed directly to him. It's like the cover letter. Okay.

Then maybe Second John, which is addressed to the elect lady and her children. Most scholars think that means a specific congregation, a house church, maybe that's read aloud in John's own church. Preparing them.

Yeah. Encouraging them to welcome and strengthen those loyal to John, and sort of implicitly preparing them for the main letter. Which is First John.

Which is First John. The core doctrinal and pastoral message that one intended for wider circulation. So perhaps it's first read in Gaius' prominent church.

Maybe that church was in Ephesus, the capital, and then distributed more broadly across the other churches in the province of Asia. Possibly carried by Gaius himself or Demetrius. Could be.

Either or both. That distribution model really gives you a feel for how these, you know, fragile early communities tried to communicate and support each other across distances. It does.

It makes it very concrete. And it brings us to this fascinating parallel Dr. Yarbrough uses from Revelation to help us picture the setting even more clearly: Christ's message to the church back in Ephesus. Yeah.

This is a brilliant connection he makes. Revelation chapter 2, verses 1 to 7, gives us this snapshot of one specific church right there in the region John was ministering to: the church in Ephesus itself, the capital city. And what we see there really resonates with the issues in John's letters.

Oh, powerfully. Christ starts by commending them highly for their works, their toil, their patient endurance. And significantly, listen to this: they're praised for their discernment.

He says, you cannot bear with those who are evil, and you have tested those who call themselves apostles and found them to be false. Testing false apostles. That sounds exactly like the backdrop for the schism in 1 John.

It absolutely does. It lines up perfectly. So this church, Ephesus, it's strong.

It's resilient. It's discerning truth from error, potentially the strongest of all seven churches mentioned in Revelation. There's always a but in those letters, isn't there? There usually is.

And here, despite all this strength and doctrinal integrity, Christ has a critical issue with them. A major one, he says. They have abandoned the love you had at first.

Abandoned agape love. So they got the doctrine right. They're working hard, enduring, but lost touch with God's radical love for them and maybe lost that vibrant love within the community.

That seems to be exactly it. It sounds like this real danger of formalism or maybe traditionalism, where the correct beliefs and outward actions are there, but the heart, the passion, the core relational aspect has cooled. That's a sobering thought.

It is. It's a tension the source highlights. And it's frankly a common struggle for mature churches or even longtime believers.

So what's the call to action for Ephesus? It's stark. Remember from where you have fallen, repent, and do the works you did at first. It's this urgent callback.

And notice, it connects works and love. Genuine faith involves both. They aren't separate boxes you tick.

Right. And there's one more commendation for Ephesus in there, isn't there? Something about hating the works of the Nicolaitans. Yes.

Which I also hate, Christ says. Now, the source explains that while their exact identity is debated, the Nicolaitans seem to represent this kind of rebellious impulse, a failure, maybe even a refusal to obey God's commandments, antinomianism perhaps. So rebellion against God's ways.

And Christ's detestation for that is really strong. The Ephesians' stand against it is commendable. And Dr. Yarbrough even suggests, speculatively, a possible link between this Nicolaitan impulse and the schismatic group John was dealing with in his letters.

Ah, so maybe the ones who left were also marked by disobedience or some distorted view of freedom in Christ? It's possible. It fits the pattern of rejecting apostolic teaching and authority. And that promise at the end of the Ephesus message in Revelation 2.7 about the one who conquers- that word echoes through 1 John too, doesn't it? It absolutely does.

Conquering is a major theme in 1 John. It connects the struggle against false teaching, against sin, against apathy to the ultimate victory promised in Christ. So the picture we get of Ephesus, which probably reflects the situation in other churches John wrote to, is, well, it's complex.

Very complex. Yeah. Strong in many ways: discernment, endurance against threats, identifying false teaching.

But facing this profound internal challenge of keeping love vibrant and active, their church is with immense promise, but definitely needing renewal. Okay. So let's pull all of this together now.

For you listening right now, what is the central takeaway? Why is understanding this historical context- the author being John the Apostle, the late first-century date, the reality of these church splits, and opponents like Diatrophies, and the specific struggles seen in churches like Ephesus? Why is all that so essential when you sit down to read 1, 2, and 3 John today? Well, I think it transforms them. It takes them from being maybe abstract theological statements and turns them into intensely practical, deeply pastoral responses to real-life crises in the early church. They weren't written in a vacuum.

Not at all. Knowing what was happening, what prompted John to write, helps us understand why he emphasizes truth versus error, love versus hate, genuine fellowship versus false claims, and obedient action with such passion and clarity. It shows these letters were hammered out in the messy reality of struggling congregations.

Exactly. It grounds the timeless truths in very specific human situations. It really makes John's words hit differently, makes them incredibly relevant.

And maybe here's the thought to leave you with, something drawn straight from this material we've discussed. Yeah. Consider that tension again in the Ephesian church.

Remember, they were doctrinal powerhouses, sharp discerners of truth, resilient against evil, and yet they had abandoned their first love. What does that specific imbalance tell us about this balancing life in Christ that Dr. Yarbrough titles his lectures after? And maybe more pointedly, how might that same challenge resonate with churches or perhaps even with individuals navigating faith today? It really highlights that perennial difficulty, doesn't it? Holding truth and love together in dynamic tension, it's not easy. And it's a challenge that just leaps off the page when you see the historical setting John was writing into.

It really does. Well, this has been fascinating. Thank you for bringing the source material for our deep dive today.