

THE THIRD GENERAL EPISTLE OF JOHN

INTRODUCTION

Third John is the shortest book in the New Testament, 299 words and four paragraphs. However, do not let the size of the letter detour you from doing a deep study of the epistle. For it has much to say to believers in the latter half of the first century as well as to us in the twenty-first century.

Like the Second General Epistle of John, this letter is written to someone that John knew personally, “*well beloved Gaius*.” In this letter, we are introduced to three men, Gaius, Demetrius, and Diotrephes. Two of these men, Gaius, and Demetrius, remained faithful to John and the church. The problem that John addresses in this epistle is the third man, Diotrephes, who was trying to manipulate the church into rejecting the Apostle John and his colleagues.

A major concern of 3 John, like 2 John, is hospitality. This time, instead of discouraging hospitality to false teachers (2 John 10), John wants to encourage hospitality for traveling missionaries who speak the truth (3 John 8). John contrasts one man’s inhospitable actions with another’s faithfulness—and in the process, John demonstrates the need for godly leadership like his own.¹

AUTHOR

The author of this epistle calls himself “the elder” (see v 1), a position of authority because of his age and especially because he was a disciple of Christ. Most think that this is John the apostle, an elderly man and an elder of the churches in Asia Minor during the last decades of the first century (see 1 John and 2 John Introductions, pp. 2138, 2148).²

For this study, we will assume that the Apostle John is the author.

DATE

The date of this epistle is uncertain. However, as we have previously discussed (NTS-1 John, NTS – 2 John), most consider that these epistles were written after the Gospel of John and before John was tasked with writing the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the apostle John wrote this letter about the same time as First and Second John.

There are two schools of opposing thought concerning the date: early or late. Some believe John’s epistles were written between 60-65 AD, while others believe a much later, latter part of the century, 80-90 AD. After reading exhausting research, I lean towards the latter dates as I believe the Revelation was written in the late 90’s AD. Therefore, for this study I will place the dates between 85 AD – 100 AD.

AUDIENCE

Written to a man named Gaius (Latin *Gaius*). He must have been well known to the apostle John due to its familiarity. However, I believe this letter was also intended to be read at the house church where Gaius

¹ John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016).

² *New Living Translation Study Bible* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2008), 3 Jn.

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attended. There are several instances where the name “Gaius” is found in the New Testament (Ac 19:29; 20:4; Ro 16:23; 1Co 1:14; 3Jn 1).

WRITTEN FROM

Ephesus

THEME

The central theme is woven around three elements. 1st, love, and hospitality. John identifies, in the first century church, that love, and hospitality were expressed to and by Gaius and Demetrius. Gaius entertained traveling teachers and followers of John. 2nd, Leadership in the local churches. John’s comments concerning the lack of or errant leadership in the local churches. The example given is the negative leadership of Diotrephes. 3rd, a correct, intimate relationship with God should bring right actions. The fruit of fellowship with God is found in a right relationship with the Father.

PURPOSE AND CONTENT

Once again, John must confront false teaching: “*Beloved, follow not that which is evil*” (v. 11). A leader/elder in one of the churches under John’s “watch care,” by the name of Diotrephes, refused to receive the apostle and his followers. Therefore, these false teachers claimed to be spiritual, teaching a different doctrine concerning Christ. They were lax concerning some demands upon the members of their churches (see NTS - 1 John Introduction). They elevated themselves above John’s authority. They denied and refused to accept the teachers that John sent to the church. Diotrephes was one of those who had broken away from the apostolic fellowship (cp. 1 Jn 2:18–19). He went so far as to excommunicate any who received John or the teacher’s he sent.

With a broken heart, John wrote this letter to Gaius, a faithful member of that church, encouraging him to continue welcoming and hosting John’s emissaries and to remain faithful to John’s teaching and fellowship.

KEY THOUGHT/CENTRAL MESSAGE

Abiding in God’s commands through faith, love, and fellowship. Deny love and fellowship to the enemies of Christ.

PARALLEL PASSAGES

Old Testament Quotes

- Numbers 12:8

3 John

3Jn 13

THE KEY VERSE/PASSAGE

Key Verse/s

3 John 11 (KJV) Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God.

Key Word/s & Phrases

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- Jesus Christ
- God 3Jn 11
- Lord
- Faith
- Grace
- Word
- Righteousness
- Mercy
- Love 3Jn 1
- Works
- Perfect
- Trial
- Salvation
- Promise
- Heavens
- False prophets
- Last days/time
- Knowledge
- Destroyed/destruction.
- Judgment
- Life
- Beginning
- Light
- Children 3Jn 4
- Deceiver/s
- Commandment/s
- Doctrine
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OUTLINE

- I. Salutation (v 1)
- II. Upholding the Truth by Supporting Its Representatives (vv 2–12)
- III. Farewell (vv 13–14)³

³ Zane C. Hodges, “*The Third Epistle of John*,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 1235.