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October 18th: 2 John & Luke 1:1-4

October 17, 2020



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John's letter to the elect lady. The writer of the third gospel.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 John. The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, are not only I, but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us, and will be with us forever. Grace, mercy, and peace be with us, from God the Father, and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.

I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. And now I ask you, dear lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments.

This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.

Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching, has both the Father and the Son.

If anyone comes to you, and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, or give him any greeting. For whoever greets him, takes part in his wicked works. Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink.

Instead, I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete. The children of your elect sister greet you. Second John covers much of the same ground as the first epistle of John, and clearly comes from the same hand, as Second John and Third John are the two shortest books in the scriptures, and don't address much that isn't already addressed in the book of First John.

Some might wonder why they were included in the New Testament at all. Luke Timothy Johnson advances the intriguing possibility that all three letters were sent at the same time by the hand of Demetrius. Third John recommends Demetrius to Gaius, and Second John was intended to be publicly read in Gaius' church.

First John is less of a letter than a homily, exhorting the members of the church. In contrast to his first epistle, something possibly explained by the fact that First John was not intended to be a letter, Second John begins with his self-identification and his addressees. John here speaks of himself as the Elder.

Elders were overseers of congregations, and as a shepherd of the flock, even though an apostle, it was appropriate for John to term himself an Elder. Peter does the same in 1 Peter 5, verses 1-3, where he gives us a sense of what being an Elder meant. So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow Elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you, not for shameful gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

The letter is addressed to the elect lady and her children. Some have suggested that the elect lady is a female individual of status. More recently, others have suggested that the figure might have been a woman who pastored a particular congregation.

These readings are weak ones, however. As we go through the letter, we will see an alternation between a singular addressee and multiple addressees that suggests that the woman is a way of referring to a particular congregation. In 1 Peter 5, verse 13, we see another example of a particular congregation being personified as a woman, once again being referred to as chosen.

She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings. This brief letter also

ends by speaking of the elect lady's sister's children, who send greetings. The fact that the children of the elect sister send greetings, but nothing is mentioned about the elect sister herself sending greetings, supports the idea that the elect sister is a personification of the congregation.

The personification of the church as a woman is something that we find elsewhere in the New Testament, with the description of the church as the bride of Christ. Christ is the divine husband who takes his chosen people to himself. John's use of the term elect, or chosen to refer to the woman here, might make us think of the way that we have been set apart for Christ as his bride.

We might also identify the application of bridal imagery and the personification of a single church as a woman in 2 Corinthians 11, verse 2. For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. The image of the church as the bride of Christ underlines its continual and necessary relationship to Christ as its divine husband, from whose loving choice it derives its life and identity. Perhaps a less likely, but nonetheless intriguing possibility is that the term lady here doesn't actually mean lady at all, but means congregation.

Robert Yarborough notes that the same Greek word is used elsewhere in ancient sources to refer to a civic organisation comprised of multiple assemblies. If this is the case, it would be the only place where we see the word so used in the New Testament. In 1 John, John has addressed the hearers of the epistle as children on several occasions.

He speaks of his children again in 3 John, verse 4. Now he does so, expressing his love for them, a love shared by all who know the truth. The reference to children, as the reference to the lady, should not be taken as a literal reference to natural children, but rather to children in the Lord, to those brought to a new birth and raised in the faith through John's personal ministry and the ministry of the congregation of the elect lady. In 1 John, John had maintained that love for the brothers was a hallmark of those who loved God and the truth.

The way that he describes believers' relationship with the truth here gives weight to the idea that he regards truth as situated in the person of Jesus Christ. It isn't a lifeless truth, it's a living one that abides with us and will endure forever. This truth is personally known in Jesus Christ.

He doesn't just wish them grace, mercy and peace, as we might see in one of Paul's letters, but claims that grace, mercy and peace will be with us. These things come to us from God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son, in truth and in love. Yarborough writes, In truth and love reflects John's conviction that there is a theological norm, truth, grounded in God's wisdom suffused with an agapic quality, love, innate to God's being.

The truth and love of Father and Son establish a framework within which, John is certain,

God's grace, mercy and peace will be at work among Christ's followers. In a manner that might remind us of Paul's responses to seeing the progress of the churches to which he had ministered, John greatly rejoices to hear about the progress of the members of the churches to whom he is writing in the faith. Perhaps he had met these members of the congregation in the course of his travels, or perhaps they had visited the church of which he was an overseer.

Now he addresses their congregation, just as he does throughout the first epistle, which might well have accompanied this letter, he asks them to love each other. This is not some new teaching or instruction that he is giving them, but the fundamental teaching that has been given to the congregation and to the church more broadly from the beginning. The statement here is similar to that found in 1 John 2, verses 7-8.

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

The commandment to love is the unity of the white light that is refracted in the prism of the law to reveal the full spectrum of the commandments. Once again John helps us to recognise both the singularity and the plurality of the law of God. The commandment to love does not involve the reduction of the commandments of God, as if removing all the excess to reveal a simple, streamlined and more feasible version.

No, the commandment to love is the commandment that gathers in itself all of the other commandments, holding them in unity. The heart of the epistle of 2 John is the warning concerning the deceivers. John had previously described these persons in 1 John 2, verses 18-23.

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that Antichrist is coming, so now many Antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.

But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth.

Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.

He had called his hearers to test the spirits, in 1 John 4, verses 1-3. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false

prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God.

Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard was coming, and now is in the world already. All of this is according to the warning that Jesus had given in the Olivet Discourse concerning false teachers that would come.

The mark of these false teachers is their failure to confess a central claim of the faith, that Christ came in the flesh. Speaking of his coming implies his divine origin, the fact that he comes from heaven. The confession of his coming in the flesh insists upon the truth of his humanity.

The danger is that, having struggled and laboured for the faith, people adopting this error might be in danger of losing out, holding to some lesser Jesus and not the true one. They must be vigilant, watching themselves, lest anyone fall short as their faith is shaken. This teaching concerning Christ is a touchstone of truth.

John warns about innovators, those who go on ahead, rather than abiding in the truth of Christ. Such false teachers are developing new theological frameworks, systems, and syntheses that, rather than upholding the faith once for all delivered to the people of God, lop off elements of it that are not philosophically or theologically convenient to them. Their concern must be to abide in the teaching of Christ, because in the truth of that teaching they will enjoy fellowship with the Father and with the Son.

In a situation of error spreading through the Church, and in a situation of such high spiritual stakes, it is absolutely imperative that the lines are kept very clear. The habits of politeness and the customs of hospitality must be resisted in the case of these false teachers, lest they be supported in the deadly teaching that they are spreading, and lest the impression be given that, in showing hospitality to them, their teaching is being judged to be within the pale. It most definitely is not.

For the sake of people's spiritual well-being, no signs of friendship or support should be given to them. The endings of 2 John and 3 John are very similar. In both of them, the desire for face-to-face meeting over written correspondence is expressed.

The result of this will be the fulfilment of the joy of both parties. As Christians we find joy in God, but also in our fellowship with each other. If joy is an expression of love that achieves its end of communion, there should, according to the logic of John's theology, be a joy characteristic not only of our relationship with God, but also of our relationship to our brothers and sisters.

The final words of the Epistle communicate the greetings of John's congregation to the congregation to whom he is writing, likely the congregation of which Gaius is the elder. If

a particular congregation is like a chosen woman, that congregation relates to other congregations as to sisters. As in his first epistle, John's employment of familial language here is important.

It fits neatly with his emphasis upon being born of God and loving each other as brothers and sisters. A question to consider. What are some ways in which we should guard ourselves against giving aid to false teachers, following John's warnings in his second epistle? Luke's Gospel, Chapter 1, verses 1-4.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. The identification of the author of the third gospel and of the book of Acts is not something given to us by the scripture itself, but the claim that it was Luke is strongly supported by the early Christian tradition. The historical veracity of the claim that Luke was the author of the third gospel is strengthened by the consideration that, had he not been the author, there would have been very little motivation to identify him as such.

Luke is a very minor figure in the New Testament, mentioned on only a few occasions, in the concluding greetings of Colossians, in 2nd Timothy, and in Philemon. From these few short references, we learn little beyond the fact that Luke was likely a physician, a fellow worker of Paul, and he was with him in the last period of his life. If the author of the third gospel is the same Luke as the physician mentioned in Colossians 4, verse 14, we might think it most likely that he was a Gentile, on the basis of verses 10 to 11 of that chapter.

Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions, if he comes to you welcome him, and Jesus, who is called Justice. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. The absence of Luke in this list suggests to many that he was not a Jew, not someone of the circumcision.

We can likely say with more certainty that he was not a Palestinian Jew. If he were a Jew, it would have been most likely that he had belonged to the dispersion. This claim that Luke was not a Jew could be put in question by Romans chapter 16, verse 21, if the Lucius referred to there is the same person as Luke, as Paul refers to him as his kinsman.

The Lucius of Cyrene, mentioned in Acts chapter 13, verse 1, has also been identified with Luke by a number of people over the course of church history, such as Origen. It is quite likely, however, that both Romans chapter 16 and Acts 13 refer to a different person entirely. Luke seems to have a familiarity with Judaism that gives weight to the idea that he was likely a Gentile God-fearer associated with the synagogue even before

becoming a Christian.

Craig Keener writes that he probably traced his spiritual heritage to the Hellenistic Jewish Christian movement of Acts chapter 6. The identification of the author of the third gospel with the author of the book of Acts is a strong one held by almost all scholars. The books have pronounced similarities of structures and themes and narrative unity. The book of Acts also begins with a reference back to a former account, the account of the gospel.

It refers to the same addressee as at the beginning of the gospel, Theophilus. If the author of the epistle is the same person, then we can learn further things about Luke from the we passages in the book of Acts, places where, although not mentioning himself by name, the author's use of first-person plural pronouns makes clear that he was a member of Paul's missionary company. In Acts chapter 16, we witness a shift in pronouns between verses 7 and 10.

And when they had come to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas, and a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, come over to Macedonia and help us.

And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. Such we sections are also found in chapter 20 verses 5 to 15, chapter 21 verses 1 to 18, chapter 27 verses 1 to 37, and chapter 28 verses 1 to 16. From these passages, it seems that Luke joined Paul for part of his second missionary journey, with Paul and Silas and Luke going in different directions after the imprisonment in Philippi.

Luke seems to join Paul again in Macedonia. Perhaps Luke remained in Philippi, a Roman colony in the intervening period. They then travel together to Jerusalem, before Paul was arrested in the temple.

Luke later accompanies Paul on his journey to Rome. In the course of his travels with Paul, he would have had extensive access to him. He seems to have worked with Paul at the same time as Mark, who was likely the author of the second gospel.

He stayed with Philip, the evangelist. He spent some time in Jerusalem, where they were welcomed by the leaders of the church there. It is quite likely that he spent time with eyewitnesses during this period, among them possibly Mary, the mother of Jesus, using that time to gather and assemble written and oral testimony and bring it together into a unified account.

Luke likely spent time in Caesarea before travelling on with Paul to Rome. As someone who travelled so widely and met so many apostles and leading early Christians, he was perfectly suited to collect their testimonies and fashion them into the histories of Luke

and Acts. If he was, as the tradition suggests, a physician, he was likely educated and of higher status.

As someone who was likely a Gentile God-fearer, a physician, a missionary, and well-travelled, Luke would have had extensive exposure to the Jewish, Greek, Roman and Christian worlds of his day, albeit from the unique perspective of one who lived and moved between them. Perhaps this might be one reason why Luke is particularly attentive to issues of inclusion. It also means that he was eminently suited to write the Book of Acts, which narrates the movement of the Gospel through the ancient worlds of Palestinian Judaism, Hellenistic Judaism, and the Judaism of the Dispersion, along with the societies of Greece and Rome.

The Jesus of Luke's Gospel is a traveller too. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in the Gospel of Luke takes 35% of the Gospel narrative, in contrast to Matthew, where it's only 6%, and Mark, where it's only 8%. Luke, as an educated God-fearer who was familiar with Judaism, was in a perfect position to write a historical account.

He addresses his Gospel and the Book of Acts to Theophilus, who was likely a man of some status. Some have suggested that Theophilus, meaning dear to God or lover of God, is just a symbolic name for Luke's general reader. But this is quite unlikely, even though it does seem clear that Luke wrote envisaging a much more general readership.

Luke presumes a greater measure of cultural literacy of his readership than some of the other books of the New Testament, so it is possible that his primary intended readers would have been artisans. In the opening of Luke chapter 1, the Gospel writer introduces himself as the latest in a line of several to write a narrative of the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke not only had access to eyewitnesses, but also seems to have had access to prior writings, quite possibly some version of Mark for instance.

Luke doesn't present himself as being in competition with these other Gospel works, but as someone endeavouring to produce another work for their company. Beyond the fact that Luke had much to commend him as the writer of such a Gospel work and its sequel, given his access to the eyewitnesses and a variety of sources, it is important to remember that the Gospels, like the rest of Biblical history, are not just bare accounts. Luke makes this clear when he declares that the purpose of his work is to give Theophilus certainty concerning the things that he has been taught.

John makes a similar claim at the end of his Gospel, in John chapter 20 verses 30-31. Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. A Gospel account then is not merely a blow by blow record of what happened, it's a theological portrayal that invites the reader to perceive the events from a specific angle.

This angle is established by the structure of the text, by the narratives and details that are included or excluded, by the sequence of events, by the attention and focus given to certain events over others, by the typological parallels and contrasts established, by the use of Old Testament scripture and all sorts of other such things. Luke declares his intention to produce a detailed and orderly account for Theophilus. In order need not refer to strict chronological order.

There is chronological reordering of material in the Gospels for thematic and other purposes, as we find elsewhere in the scriptures. A similar expression is found in Acts chapter 11 verse 4, but Peter began and explained to them in order. The term refers to a well-structured narrative which achieves its purpose of informing and persuading people, most immediately Theophilus, in the truth of the faith.

The content of the narrative is the things that have been accomplished among us. By this statement Luke leads with his theological perspective. He is relating the acts of God in fulfillment of his promises, not merely a story of human affairs.

Luke is telling the story of God's work, not merely in its beginning in the ministry of Christ, but also in its continuing effects in the community formed by Christ and his apostles. The apostolic eyewitnesses and the ministers of the word in the early church delivered their testimony concerning the work of Christ to the wider church of which Luke is a member. The reference to those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses might relate the importance of John the Baptist's ministry as the starting point of the story.

In guarding and preserving this deposit, Luke wishes to compile a narrative that is faithful to and clarifying of this tradition, suitable to pass it on in turn to others. Luke, like the other gospel writers, likely has an eye to generations long after they have gone. A movement that expected the end of the world in just a few years time would probably not write such books.

In writing his epistle, Luke is putting together a great many sources and eyewitness testimonies into a single narrative with a strong theological message, the goal of which is both to assure people in their faith and to lead new converts to the faith. A question to consider, can you think of some of the ways in which Luke's theological emphases as an evangelist differ from those of the other gospel writers?