

THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

1 John

Background and setting

The First Epistle of John does not immediately read like other epistles written during this time period, especially when compared to other epistles found within the New Testament. Indeed, as one scholar has noted, “all elements of epistolary format” found in these other New Testament epistles “are lacking in 1 John.”¹ Despite the lack of an epistolary introduction and conclusion, however, John makes several references to his writing to a specific audience, likely to different churches he had helped establish as he refers to them as his children throughout the epistle.² Because of this, it is possible that 1 John is a sermon or homily written in the form of a letter.³

While it is uncertain where John’s audience congregations were in the ancient world, some ancient manuscripts expand the title of this epistle, labeling it as “The Epistle of John to the Parthians” or “The Epistle of John to the Virgins.”⁴ Regarding the second title, it is possibly a copyist’s error rendering the Greek *Parthous* (“Parthians”) to *parthenou* (“virgins”). Parthia was an area on the easternmost part of the Roman Empire at this time and was part of Babylon.⁵ While the audience is not clear in the text itself and these titles are a later tradition, we can still only guess where John’s audience may have lived.

1 John 1:1–4. Prologue

The prologue to 1 John mirrors many themes found in the prologue of the Gospel of John—namely, “the Word” was from “the beginning,” witnessed by the Apostles and other early Christians, and proclaimed by them to spread the message of Jesus Christ. When John refers to multiple writers in verse 4, it is possible that he is referring generally to other witnesses of the resurrected Savior or to some companions who

helped compose some of the letter. Given how John generally writes in the first-person singular throughout this epistle, the former is likely true.

In verses 1 and 3, John references how he and other early witnesses had seen, heard, and handled the resurrected Savior. By maintaining early on that all of these were true, John is preemptively responding to one of the main heresies his audience is facing that he will address more completely in 1 John 2:18–27. By believing John and his companions regarding the reality of Jesus’s life and Atonement, they are invited to have fellowship with God the Father and His Son. There is no other way for the Saints’ joy to be full without this testimony.

Joseph Smith Translation variant. The opening of this epistle is slightly changed in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible to read as follows (additions in bold):

Brethren, this is the testimony which we give of that which **was** from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life.

1 John 1:5–10. God is light

Two main aspects for discipleship are listed by John in these verses. First, we must walk in the light, just as God is in the light. This will allow us to be cleansed from our sins as we gain fellowship with Jesus Christ and God the Father. Second, we must be willing to repent and acknowledge that we all sin. If we do not confess our sins, we cannot be forgiven; furthermore, those who refuse to acknowledge that they have sinned “make [God] a liar.” After all, as expressed elsewhere by Paul, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Both Paul and John testify that we are all in need of the same Savior and same Atonement in order to become like Him and enjoy His fellowship. We cannot do so on our own.

What is to be understood from the phrase “God is light” in verse 5? This is a phrase not unlike those employed elsewhere by John, such as “God is spirit” or “God is love” in John 4:24 and 1 John 4:8, respectively. John is not saying that God is literally light but is rather utilizing an ancient mode of expression to describe God’s character or nature. This is especially evident as John further declares that God is “*in the light*” in 1 John 1:7 (emphasis added), further clarifying that God is not an enigmatic or amorphous light somewhere in the universe.

The image of God’s light is further contrasted with works of darkness, or sin. If we sin, or walk in dark paths, we cannot have fellowship with God. Rather, a higher and holier life is asked of disciples of Christ. We are to walk in God’s light, do what God would do, and say what He would say; in short, we are to be as He is.

1 John 2:1–6. How we know Christ

John begins this section of his epistle by calling his audience his little children, likely implying that they were his converts from an earlier mission.⁶ He will maintain this and similar terms of endearment to address his audience elsewhere throughout this epistle.

After describing in 1 John 1:8–10 how we are all sinners, John immediately offers a message of hope: if (and when) we sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ. John testifies of Jesus’s role as our atoning sacrifice (translated as “propitiation” in the King James Version). Jesus’s Atonement is spoken of in high terms, as John states that it reaches not only the Christian community but also the “whole world” (1 John 2:2). As Amulek described the Atonement, it is “an infinite and eternal sacrifice” (Alma 34:10).

John also gives the Christian community a simple way to be sure that they know Christ and are taking advantage of His Atonement—namely, keeping His commandments (1 John 2:3). While we are saved through Christ’s Atonement, we are still asked to follow the Lord and “walk, even as he walked” (1 John 2:6). This is not unlike the injunction expressed by Nephi that “it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23).

While John does not use the word *grace* in this statement, it is worth a brief discussion how this sentiment—namely, that we are saved by Jesus’s Atonement yet still asked to keep His commandments and walk as He walked in order to be saved—would fit into ancient notions of grace. While modern notions view grace as a free gift that requires little or nothing in return, such was not the case of ancient Greco-Roman uses of this word. As has been noted by Brent J. Schmidt, grace typically represented a covenantal patron-client relationship that included “the need for benefactors and recipients of benefactions mutually to show thanks and appreciation” and “share the gifts in a way that would honor the patron.”⁷

In short, even though we are given a great gift of salvation through Jesus, the only way we can fully accept this gift is by showing our thanks to the Lord by keeping His commandments and entering into covenants with Him. We access the grace and gifts of Jesus Christ as we make and keep covenants with God and thus reap the blessings of grace through living correct principles in a manner that pleases God.⁸

Joseph Smith Translation variant. The first verse of this chapter is slightly changed in the Joseph Smith Translation, clarifying that repentance is a crucial aspect of being able to take full advantage of the Savior’s Atonement:

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. **But** if any man sin **and repent**, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

1 John 2:7–11. A new commandment

Here, John remarks that he is reiterating an old commandment yet a commandment that has become new by nature of how it has been revealed again to the Christians. John will refer to this old yet new commandment multiple times throughout his epistle.

That commandment could be simply expressed, “Love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Ultimately, those who love one another are welcomed into the light of God, as has been expressed earlier (see 1 John 1:5–10). Those who hate others cannot be a part of the light but are blinded by darkness and led into forbidden paths.

Joseph Smith Translation variant. Verses 7–8 are slightly changed in the Joseph Smith Translation. They read as follows:

Brethren, I write **a** new commandment unto you, **but it is the same** commandment which ye had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning. Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing **was of old ordained of God and** is true in him and in you: because the darkness is past **in you** and the true light now shineth.

1 John 2:12–17. Do not love the world

In verses 12–14, John expressly identifies many of those who make up his audience, as he addresses little children, fathers, and young people individually. Regarding each group of people, John expresses how they have been faithful, have come to know God and Jesus, and have conquered the evil one. As John mentions how he is writing and has already written to his audience, it is possible that additional letters of John have been lost before they could be added to the New Testament.

In verses 15–17, John warns his audience that they should continue to remain faithful and not love the world. In the world there are lust and pride; these are not things of God. Ultimately, the world and the corruption therein will pass away, but the things of God will remain forever. We should therefore seek the things of God and gain a treasure that will last for eternity.

Joseph Smith Translation variant. Verses 15–16 have been slightly altered in the Joseph Smith Translation, clarifying what is of the world and should therefore be avoided:

Love not the world, neither the things **of** the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all in the world that is **of** the **lusts** of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

1 John 2:18–21. Many antichrists have appeared

One of the main concerns that John had is now addressed: “As ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists” (1 John 2:18). In Greek, the word *antichrist* is a combination of the words *khristos* (“Christ” or “anointed one”) and *anti*, which could mean “against” or even “in place of.” As such, an antichrist could be those who set themselves up to fight against Christ or those who set themselves up in place of Jesus Christ.

Despite modern tendencies to see the antichrist as a being spoken of in Revelation who will oppose Jesus before the Second Coming, such a being is never actually spoken of in the New Testament. In fact, the title *antichrist* only appears in the New Testament in 1 John and 2 John. Rather than referring to a person who sets themselves up as some false prophet or false savior, this title is used exclusively to refer to a collective group of people who were causing doctrinal disputes and errors in John’s own time.⁹ These antichrists had for a time been a part of the Church but had never actually been converted to the gospel, as is made clear in verse 19.

When John addresses his audience directly in verses 20–21, it appears he is addressing the anti-christ problem to support the Christians he was addressing. It appears that they had largely remained faithful, as John mentions their anointing and states that they are aware of the problems that these antichrists are causing.

John will address what false doctrine these antichrists were spreading in verses 22–27 as well as in 1 John 4:2–3 and 2 John 7–11.

1 John 2:22–27. Identifying the antichrists

Having alerted his Christian audience to the problem of antichrists, John now discusses how the faithful Saints can identify them—namely, they are those who “denieth that Jesus is the Christ,” or the Anointed One. In denying the Son’s messiahship, these apostates likewise deny the Father by nature of their beliefs (1 John 2:22–23).

Just as denying the Father and Son may take different forms today, it took different forms anciently. One of these methods of denying Them is specifically addressed by John in both 1 John 4:2–3 as well as 2 John 7–11—namely, many in John’s time claimed that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh. This doctrine has come to be known as Docetism, from the Greek word *dokeo*, meaning “to appear.”

This heresy maintained a type of syncretism between some Greek philosophies and Christian doctrine. According to many philosophers, the gods were pure, whereas the material world was impure. As such, it was unthinkable to allow the gods to have a bodily form in fear of matter corrupting the divine. As those influenced by this train of thought learned of Christianity, they then tried to reconcile their previous understanding with a belief in an embodied Jesus. Many strands of Docetism maintained that Jesus never actually was a human and therefore was never born, never had a material form, and never suffered and died. He only maintained the appearance that He had done all of these.

Other strands of Docetism may be understood as dividing Christ’s nature; that is, Christ was God, and as such He never came down to earth but selected a human (Jesus) to do what He would do.¹⁰ In this worldview, Jesus was only a human and Christ was an immaterial God. John may have both of these heretical theories in mind as he addresses both (1) those who deny that Jesus is the same as the Christ and (2) and those who denied that Jesus had come in the flesh (1 John 2:22; 4:2–3). Both versions of this heresy were rightly condemned by John and should not be viewed as true by any Christian who seeks to maintain true, lasting faith in the Son of God. Jesus truthfully was the Christ, the Messiah, and He truthfully did condescend to us in the flesh, as has been testified of throughout the scriptures.

This heresy and John’s response to it can serve as a warning for us to not allow our own worldviews attempt to shape or control revealed doctrine. As we are converted to the gospel, it will require us to align ourselves and our beliefs with Christ and His doctrine. This can take many forms, whether it be our views on marriage, the family, or the nature of God and the Atonement. We are not called to force doctrine to fit our preconceived worldviews; we are called to be disciples of Christ by following the doctrines He has

revealed. True, lasting conversion is found only when we align ourselves completely and fully with God and the doctrines He has revealed through prophets.

Great blessings are promised to those who are able to fully align themselves with Jesus Christ. They are able to abide in Him and ultimately receive eternal life (1 John 2:24–25). Similarly, John’s audience was promised that the anointing they had received would continue to be a source of light and truth as they encountered true and false teachers (1 John 2:27). So, too, might we understand the covenants and ordinances of the gospel we receive today.

1 John 2:28–29. Being begotten by God

At the close of 1 John 2, John again reiterates that those who do righteous actions are begotten by God in a covenantal relationship. This theme will be discussed in even more depth throughout the next chapter. Those who maintain this relationship and abide in Him will have confidence before God, being assured that they will be able to endure His presence at the last day.

1 John 3:1–3. Becoming like the Son of God

John continues the theme of being begotten as children of God. Verse 1 could alternatively be translated, “See what great love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we may be called ‘children of God’—and that is what we are!” Being called God’s children is a great sign of love that separates us from the world: “The reason the world does not know us is because it did not know Him” (1 John 3:1).

As children of God, we are by nature heirs of some of the greatest blessings that the Father has prepared. This includes becoming like Him, fully and completely. John states that while “what we shall be has not yet been revealed,” one thing is certain: those who stay true and faithful to the covenants they have made will be like Him, being purified even as he is pure (1 John 3:2–3).

This same doctrine is expressed nearly verbatim in the Book of Mormon in an epistle of Mormon to his son Moroni, and it has clear echoes in revelations found within the Doctrine and Covenants (see Moroni 7:48; Doctrine and Covenants 35:21).

1 John 3:4–6. Christ takes away our sins

According to John, sin is a transgression of law; in other words, sin is lawlessness itself. As there is no sin to be found in the life and person of Jesus, we are therefore called to likewise live a life apart from sinfulness and live according to His divinely revealed laws. As we come to Him in this manner, He will take away our sins through His atoning sacrifice.

In verse 6, John emphasizes that those who do not abide in Jesus fall back into sin. That is not to say that those who seek to maintain their covenants with Jesus will never sin; rather, those who do will repent. Those who cut themselves off from the Lord through their own disobedience to Him will therefore never be able to see God or fully know Him.

Joseph Smith Translation variant. In verse 6, the Joseph Smith Translation clarifies that those who continue to sin are those who have neither seen God nor known Him:

Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not. Whosoever **continueth in sin** hath not seen him, neither known him.

1 John 3:7–10. Children of God and children of the devil

Here, John contrasts the children of God with those called the children of the devil. There are two important ways to tell whether someone is spiritually begotten as a child of God in the covenant:

First, those who are children of God will act righteously, whereas those who are children of the devil will continue to sin. Because Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (sin and death, we are commanded to repent and do the works that Jesus would do.

Second, those who do not love their brother or sister are not of God. Here, John emphasizes the commandment to “love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12). True disciples will follow this commandment to its fullest.

Joseph Smith Translation variant. Verses 8–9 contain changes similar to those found in verse 6 clarifying that John is describing those who continue in sin and do not repent.

He that **continueth in sin** is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not **continue in sin**, for **the Spirit of God** remaineth in him. And he cannot **continue in sin**, because he is born of God, **having received the Holy Spirit of promise.**

1 John 3:11–12. Do not follow Cain’s example

A contrast is given between true disciples who follow this new commandment that was had “from the beginning” and those who would rather identify themselves with the children of the devil. Referring back to the case of Cain, John shows what happens when no love for our brother or sister is to be found. Cain murdered his brother simply because Abel did what was right and Cain loved evil more than the good. Such is not to be had among God’s people.

1 John 3:13–18. Love your brothers and sisters

John tells his audience that they should not be surprised if the world hates them for following this commandment. After all, by keeping this commandment we are able to move from death to eternal life and are no longer a part of the world that we live in.

John also references further teachings about love in Jesus’s sermon at the Last Supper found only in John’s Gospel. In verse 16, we are told that we know God’s love through Jesus’s willingness to lay down His life for us, and we ought to therefore do likewise. This is closely reflected in Jesus’s statement,

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). This can be done through even sacrificing a part of our livelihood for those who stand in need when we are in a position where we are able to donate to those who struggle (see 1 John 3:17).

Finally, John tells us that we are not to only love others in word but to express that love through our actions. Just as James taught that we must be “doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves,” loving others without expressing that love through actions is empty and meaningless (James 1:22).

Joseph Smith Translation variant. In verse 16, the Joseph Smith Translation clarifies that John is referring to Jesus Christ (the second member of the Godhead):

Hereby perceive we the love of **Christ**, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

Another variant is found in verse 18, which clarifies that John is intending the Saints to love each other in ways in addition to what they say:

My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue **only**, but in deed and in truth.

1 John 3:19–22. Assuring our hearts before God

Those who follow the commandment to love one another will be able to assure their hearts before God whenever their own heart condemns them. Even if we cannot forgive ourselves for past transgressions, we are assured that God is yet more powerful than our hearts and knows everything. Having thus been assured of our standing before the Lord, we can stand confidently before Him as we keep His commandments, and He will hear and answer our prayers.

Joseph Smith Translation variant. In verse 21, it appears that Joseph Smith changed the word order in an effort to modernize archaic language:

Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then **we have** confidence toward God.

1 John 3:23–24. The two commandments

Here, John states that we are given two commandments: (1) believe in Jesus Christ and (2) love one another. These two commandments have been and yet will be at the heart of much of John’s epistle. Those who follow these commandments will be able to know not only that they abide in God but that He will abide in them through the ministration of the Holy Spirit.

1 John 4:1–3. Test the spirits

John returns to the theme of identifying true and false prophets that he had discussed in 1 John 2:22–27. Here, John instructs his audience not to believe everyone professing to be a prophet, for many false spirits have gone out into the world, inspiring false prophets to attempt to lead the Saints astray.

According to John, those who confess that Jesus had come in the flesh are from God, a clear reference to the heresy known as Docetism as discussed in the commentary for 1 John 2:22–27. Those spirits who preached the Docetic heresy were not from God and were the “spirit of antichrist”—that is, the spirit spreading the heresy that antichrists taught.

The instruction to test spirits to know whether they were from God or the devil has been discussed by latter-day prophets as well. For example, an editorial likely authored by Joseph Smith appeared in the *Times and Seasons*. In this editorial, simply called “Try the Spirits,” Joseph posed the question, “Who can describe an angel of light, if Satan should appear as one in glory? Who can tell his color, his signs, his appearance, his glory? or what is the manner of his manifestation? . . . We answer that no man can do this without the Priesthood, and having a knowledge of the laws by which spirits are governed.”¹¹

One of the ways that would be revealed to Joseph Smith regarding how to test the spirits would be later canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants as section 129. According to this revelation, “when a messenger comes saying he has a message from God, offer him your hand and request him to shake hands with you.” By doing so, “three grand keys whereby you may know whether any administration is from God” would be revealed: righteous angels who had been resurrected would shake your hand, righteous spirits who have not yet been embodied in a perfect body would not move, and “if it be the devil as an angel of light, when you ask him to shake hands he will offer you his hand, and you will not feel anything; you may therefore detect him” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:4–9).

These keys will allow the righteous Saints to detect true from false spirits because, as Joseph Smith taught, “the spirits of men are eternal, that they are governed by the same priesthood that Abraham, Melchizedec, and the apostles were; that they are organized according to that priesthood which is everlasting. . . . It would seem also that wicked spirits have their bounds, limits, and laws by which they are governed or controlled, and know their future destiny.”¹²

Furthermore, a month after this editorial was published, Joseph Smith taught that “the keys are certain signs & words by which false spirits & personages may be detected from true—which cannot be revealed to the Elders till the Temple is completed.”¹³ As such, the keys discussed in section 129 and other sermons of Joseph Smith “can only be understood by people with temple knowledge.”¹⁴

While the false spirits abroad in the world today may not be sharing the same heresies as they did in the first century AD, it is still critical that we are able to identify true from false spirits so that we can stay true to the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

Joseph Smith Translation variant. In verse 3, it appears that Joseph Smith changed some word order in an effort to modernize archaic language:

And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now **it is already** in the world.

1 John 4:4–6. Knowing the spirit of truth

Continuing his discussion of false prophets, John declares that the righteous Saints have conquered the devil and his false prophets because God, who is in us, is greater than they are. Here John gives a key to identifying the spirit of truth and the spirit of error as well: those who are of the world will seek the things that are of the world. They will ignore those who speak according to the spirit of truth, which is from God. Those who are of God, however, will seek for the things pleasing to God. The spirit we listen to—whether it is the spirit of truth or error—is manifest in our actions.

1 John 4:7–10. God is love

The commandment to love one another is again reiterated as John states that those who do not love cannot know God, “for God is love” (1 John 4:8). The love of God is manifest fully within His Son, Jesus Christ.

In verse 9, the King James Version translates the Greek word *monogenēs* as “only begotten”; hence, Jesus is the Only Begotten Son of God. This is a rendering largely influenced by the Latin Vulgate, however, and most translations of the Bible maintain this tradition. However, the word *monogenēs* is better rendered as “one of a kind” or “unique,” as it is understood in other texts within and without the Bible (see, for example, Hebrews 11:17–19; 1 Clement 25:2). Jesus is one of a kind as the only child of God born of an immortal Father and mortal mother through a virgin birth. By His unique nature, Jesus was able to act as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John 4:11–16. How we abide in God

Through love, we are able to abide in God and receive His presence. Although verse 12 states that “no man hath seen God,” the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible clarifies that “no man hath seen God at any time except them who believe.”

Ultimately, those who love God and confess that Jesus is His Son are promised that they can abide in God and God can abide in them. This refers to the close relationship we can have with God as we live in a manner that welcomes His presence in our lives. Although we may not necessarily see His face on any given day, that is a blessing we can all receive in the Resurrection as we are welcomed back into His presence. Furthermore, we can have His Spirit to be with us as a constant companion, teaching us all things that we need to know and do to continue to abide in God’s love.

Joseph Smith Translation variant. In verse 12, the Joseph Smith Translation clarifies that only those who believe in God can see Him:

No man hath seen God at any time **except them who believe**. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.

1 John 4:17–21. Perfect love casts out fear

“There is no fear in love,” John taught, because those who have abided in God’s love throughout their lives can stand confident before the judgment seat at the last day (1 John 4:17–18). Fear deals with punishment and therefore is to be found when we have not fully repented of our sins. Those who have repented, however, become perfected in God’s love and are ready to enter into His presence.

In order to reach perfection, we must love others just as we love God. It is impossible to divide the first two great commandments: those who love God must also express that love to those around them. Conversely, those who love others cannot think to excuse their actions in the name of love when they run counter to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perfect love, manifest through our works, will show a desire to help others repent and reach their full potential. God wants every one of His children to have an opportunity to do so.

1 John 5:1–4. How we know we are begotten by God

John gives his readers a sign whereby they may know that they are truly loving God’s children, as expressed in 1 John 4:20–21—namely, we must first love God and keep His commandments. If we attempt to excuse anyone’s actions, whether they be ours or another’s, and say we do so only to express our love for that individual, we are not living up to the standards established by Jesus Christ and we are therefore not being perfected in love.

John further maintains that the love of God is manifest expressly through our obedience to His commandments, and they are not burdensome. Similarly, we are promised that having been begotten by God, we are able to conquer the world through our faith in Him.

1 John 5:5–12. Three witnesses of Christ

In these verses, John identifies three witnesses of Jesus Christ. This discussion is best understood in his refutation of the Docetic heresy he has previously spoken about in 1 John 2:22–27 and 1 John 4:1–3. (This heresy was discussed in the commentary for 1 John 2:22–27.)

In verse 6, John mentions that Jesus came both by water and blood and that the Spirit testifies of this reality. In the following two verses, John states that “there are three who testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three are in agreement” (1 John 5:7–8). While calling upon water, blood, and the Spirit as witnesses of Jesus Christ may seem strange, it is worth remembering that John is the only Gospel author who refers to water and blood being manifest at the Crucifixion of the Savior: “But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe” (John 19:34–35).

The witnesses of blood and water would be especially powerful rebukes of the Docetic heresy that Jesus Christ only *appeared* to have a body but was in actuality a spirit throughout His ministry. If Jesus was in actuality a spirit, there could have been neither blood nor water present at His Crucifixion. But, John declared, Jesus did actually live, He did actually have a tangible body, and He did actually suffer and die

for our sins. We can be sure of this not only by the witness given to us by the Spirit but by the physical reality of His Crucifixion as well.

One may also note that the above citation of 1 John 5:7–8 was drastically different from the verses as rendered in the King James Version of the Bible. These verses, commonly called the Johannine Comma, are worth a discussion on their own in order to explain the translational differences. As such, for a further discussion of verses 7–8, see the commentary for 1 John 5:7–8.

In addition to the three witnesses of Jesus Christ, God Himself has testified concerning His Son and the eternal life that is given to us through Him. Those who are righteous can share this testimony and likewise gain eternal life through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

1 John 5:7–8. The Johannine Comma

These verses contain one of the clearest examples of a late addition to the text of the New Testament, typically referred to as the Johannine Comma.¹⁵ In the King James Version, the Johannine Comma is identified below in italics:

For there are three that bear record *in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood:* and these three agree in one.

The words marked in italics are not attested in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament, but rather appear to be a much later addition to strengthen scriptural support for Trinitarian doctrines. In fact, the first time period when strong attestation for this phrase can be identified is the ninth century AD in some Latin translations, having appeared in only a handful of Latin manuscripts before this time. The phrase is furthermore absent from all Greek manuscripts and Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopian, and Arabic translations of 1 John until the sixteenth century AD.¹⁶

So, if this phrase is not authentic to the New Testament and was a later addition, why does it appear in the King James Version of the Bible?

This can be traced back to a man named Desiderius Erasmus, who compiled one of the first printed editions of the Greek New Testament in 1516 known today as the *Textus Receptus*.¹⁷ Erasmus's work showed the Greek text in one column and the received Latin text in a second. For his first two editions (printed in 1516 and 1519, respectively) Erasmus did not include the Johannine Comma because he could not find a Greek manuscript that included it.¹⁸

Many were quick to notice that the received Latin text was longer than the Greek, and he quickly was met with criticism for not including the Johannine Comma. So, after someone had produced a manuscript close to the year 1520 that contained a version of the Johannine Comma (having itself been translated from the Latin Vulgate), Erasmus consented to have the Comma printed in his third edition of the *Textus Receptus*.¹⁹

The King James translators based their work on this edition of Erasmus's work. Thus, the Johannine Comma was included in the Greek edition from which their translation was based, and so it was translated and published as it now stands in the King James Version.

Modern translations of the Bible, which base their translations on older manuscripts than those available to the King James translators, recognize that the Johannine Comma was not an authentic part of the New Testament and was a later addition. As such, most will either not translate the Comma or delegate it to a footnote.

Ultimately, once removed, the verses as originally written by John could be translated faithfully to read:

For there are three who testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three are in agreement.

1 John 5:13–15. God hears our requests

Those who have faith in Jesus Christ and act according to His will are assured that whatever they ask, if it is according to God's will, will be granted to them. God will hear their prayers, and He will answer His children as they come to Him. Prayer is a powerful tool whereby we can commune with our Heavenly Father and receive the blessings He earnestly desires to bestow upon us.

Joseph Smith Translation variant. In verse 13, the Joseph Smith Translation clarifies that John wants his already believing audience to continue to believe in Jesus Christ after they receive his letter:

These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may **continue to** believe on the name of the Son of God

1 John 5:16–17. Pray for those who sin

Having been assured that God will hear and answer our prayers, John encourages the Saints to pray for those who sin so that God can give them life. Such earnest prayers for loved ones can likewise be answered, and God can work with those children who struggle so that they, too, can repent and partake of eternal life.

John also makes a distinction between two types of sins. There are sins that do not result in death, and one sin that will result in death. The sin that will result in death is a reference to the unpardonable sin—that is, denying the Holy Ghost (see Luke 12:10). While all sins are lawlessness, they do not compare in severity to the unpardonable sin.

1 John 5:18–21. Guard yourselves from the devil

John ends his epistle by stating that the children of God should guard themselves against the devil and idols. By maintaining our status as children of God, we are promised that the wicked one will not be able to take hold of us, as God is greater than the world. Furthermore, John reemphasizes that we know that the

Son of God came to us (again emphasizing the reality of Jesus’s mortal ministry) to teach us how we can know God and gain eternal life.

Joseph Smith Translation variant. Verse 18 contains changes similar to those found in 1 John 3:6, 8–9—namely, those born of God do not continue in sin but rather repent:

We know that whosoever is born of God **continueth not in sin**. But he that is begotten of God *and* keepeth himself, that wicked one **overcometh** him not.

2 John

2 John 1:1–3. John’s salutation to the elect lady

Unlike the First Epistle of John, both 2 John and 3 John clearly follow a typical layout for a letter from the Hellenistic period and therefore read closer to other epistles found in the New Testament. Furthermore, while they are labeled “Catholic” or “General” epistles, each is clearly written to an individual and contains personal communications between John and the recipient.

In 2 John, the author only identifies himself as the “elder” or “presbyter,” yet enough thematic and grammatical similarities are present to link this elder with the author of 1 John, or John the Apostle. Indeed, John will focus on two significant themes that were prevalent in his former epistle: the commandment to love one another and a warning against antichrists.

Second John 1:1 identifies the recipient as “the elect lady.” This phrase is especially meaningful in Latter-day Saint scriptures and history because it is used there as a title for Emma Smith since the Lord told her, “Thou art an elect lady, whom I have called” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:3). Further, when the Relief Society was organized on March 17, 1842, Emma Smith was elected to be the president of the new organization. As a part of her calling, Emma was set apart as an elect lady by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

During this meeting, Joseph explained this title by referring back to Doctrine and Covenants 25 as well as 2 John 1:1. According to the Prophet, Emma “was ordained at the time the Revelation was given to expound the scriptures to all; and to teach the female part of community; and that not she alone, but others, may attain to the same blessings.” Furthermore, by referring to 2 John 1:1, Joseph Smith demonstrated “that respect was then had to the same thing; and that why she was called an Elect lady is because, elected to preside.”²⁰

Others would similarly be called to be an elect lady in the early days of the Church, and for a time it was a title synonymous with Relief Society General President. Eliza R. Snow and other Relief Society General Presidents following her were likewise known as elect ladies in their ministries.²¹

Furthermore, the Relief Society served as a restoration of an ancient auxiliary found within the early Christian church. Joseph Smith said, “I have desired to organize the Sisters in the order of the Priesthood” and “The organization of the Church of Christ was never perfect until the women were organized.”²² Similarly, Eliza R. Snow taught, “Although the name may be of modern date, the institution is of ancient origin. We were told by our martyred prophet that the same organization existed in the church anciently.”²³

These statements are supported by certain statements found in Paul's epistles, showing how important women were in the early Christian church. Early Christians often met in houses for worship, and the woman of the house served in a prominent position in that congregation. Paul mentions Lydia, Prisca, Nympha, Apphia, and Chloe as women who used their homes for worship.²⁴ It is possible that these women could be seen as Relief Society presidents as far as the organization existed in the ancient Church.

It is also possible that the elect lady of 2 John was such a woman. Her children, then, could be understood as the Christians who met in her house for worship. John greets both, wishing them grace, mercy, and peace from God and Jesus.

2 John 1:4–6. The commandment had from the beginning

John mentions how he had found some of the elect lady's children walking in the truth; in other words, these children were living righteously and keeping the commandments of God. John uses this to briefly discuss the commandment to love one another, which is a commandment that Christians have been given since the beginning. We should likewise keep the commandments of God and walk according to them in our daily lives, just as the lady's children have been doing.

2 John 1:7–11. Guard against antichrists

John warns the lady and her children against antichrists. John maintains the identification here of those who preached the Docetic heresy in 1 John 2:22–27 and 4:1–3. Those who believe that Jesus had never actually been mortal and only appeared to suffer and die for us are antichrists and should be avoided at all costs. (This heresy was discussed in depth in the commentary for 1 John 2:22–27.)

John also warns the elect lady and her children not to go beyond what has been revealed at the risk of losing their fellowship with God and Jesus. Those who focus on things that have not been revealed could be described as looking beyond the mark, which leads to stumbling along in darkness as plain truths of the gospel are overlooked or forgotten (Jacob 4:14). Furthermore, John warns the elect lady and her children not to allow those who are antichrists and false teachers into their homes.

2 John 1:12–13. John's epistolary conclusion

John states that he has many things he would like to write to the elect lady but that he is waiting to share everything until he can see her face to face again. He sends greetings from an elect sister as well, possibly another woman who held Church services in her home.

3 John

3 John 1:1–2. John's salutation to Gaius

Unlike the First Epistle of John, both 2 John and 3 John clearly follow a typical layout for a letter from the Hellenistic period and therefore read closer to other epistles found in the New Testament. Furthermore,

while they are labeled “Catholic” or “General” epistles, each is clearly written to an individual and contains personal communications between John and the recipient.

In 3 John, the author identifies himself only as the “elder” or “presbyter,” as he does in 2 John. A number of shared phrases between the two epistles helps demonstrate that they were written by the same “elder”—namely, John the Apostle.

John writes this epistle to a man named Gaius who is a faithful member of a congregation that is apparently plagued by an apostate leader. Gaius or others close to him had sent word of the distressing situation to John, who wrote this letter in response. The situation described in 3 John is evidence that as the Church grew and the Apostles were killed, heretical teachings and wicked leaders began to lead the rebellion against God in greater detail than had been done before.

3 John 1:3–8. Help those in the ministry

John refers to a time when he met members of Gaius’s congregation who testified of Gaius’s righteous living. This was a source of great joy for John, who likely had heard of the apostasy that was taking place in Gaius’s congregation (John will discuss this apostasy in 3 John 1:9–12). When John refers to Gaius and the other members as his children, he is likely using this term to signify that he had baptized them, similar to how Paul and Peter described Timothy or Mark as his children.²⁵

Gaius and other members like him had been a great support to traveling missionaries and nonmembers alike. Thus John thanked them for their faithful service, which was becoming known in other congregations as well. John furthermore encourages them to continue acting in such a way that others could become a coworker in the truth with John, Gaius, and the other converted Christians.

3 John 1:9–12. Diotrephes’s apostasy

Here, John informs Gaius that he had sent a letter to Gaius’s congregation earlier but that a wicked man named Diotrephes had rejected it. Diotrephes is described by John as loving preeminence, or placing himself above others, and of having recently begun slandering the Apostles with malicious words. Furthermore, Diotrephes, apparently in a position of authority, was expelling people who supported the Apostles and their authority from the Church.

This was a problem that apparently continued into the second century AD. In an early Christian text known as the First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, a similar event appears to have occurred in Corinth. Clement writes that some Corinthian bishops “who have ministered to the flock of Christ blamelessly, humbly, peaceably, and unselfishly, and for a long time have been well-spoken of by all—these we consider to be unjustly removed from their ministry. . . . For we see that you have removed certain people, their good conduct notwithstanding, from the ministry that had been held in honor by them blamelessly.”²⁶

Furthermore, in a rebuke to those who had caused the divisions in the Corinthian church, Clement says that they must “learn how to subordinate yourselves, laying aside the arrogant and proud stubbornness of

your tongue. For it is better to be found small but included in the flock of Christ than to have a preeminent reputation and yet be excluded from his hope.”²⁷

A similar sentiment has been expressed by Latter-day Saints, often drawing their remarks from Psalm 84:10: “I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.” Hugh Nibley, for example, famously remarked, “I have always been furiously active in the Church, but I have also been a nonconformist and have never held any office of rank in anything. . . . I would rather be a doorkeeper in the House of the Lord than mingle with the top brass in the tents of the wicked.”²⁸

Diotrephes, who loved to be preeminent, had found himself in the tents of the wicked. Thus, John intended to call attention to his actions and be sure that the Saints in Gaius’s congregation knew that Diotrephes was no longer a priesthood leader, having sought for his own gain rather than for the things of God.

John ends these remarks by testifying favorably about a man named Demetrius, presumably the man delivering this epistle to Gaius. Through the testimonies regarding Demetrius (who was apparently well known and beloved by many), Gaius could be assured that he and his congregation were in the thoughts and prayers of John because Demetrius was sent to help them.

3 John 1:13–15. John’s epistolary conclusion

John ends his epistle by stating that he has many more things he would like to say, but he is hopeful that he can soon talk to Gaius face to face. His ending is typical of other letters from this time period, wishing peace and blessings upon his beloved friend.

Notes

1 Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 86. Contrast the opening of 1 John with the opening of 3 John, for example, which is likewise described as “the most perfect example of epistolary format in the [New Testament].”

2 Compare 1 Timothy 1:2, where Paul refers to Timothy as his son in the faith. Similarly, 1 Peter 5:13 refers to Mark as Peter’s son even though the two were probably not related. Rather, this designation appears to have been used by New Testament authors to indicate a close relationship largely based on how one came into the Church.

3 This view is held, for example, by Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 3.

4 For a discussion on these titles, see Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 772–774.

5 Parthians are mentioned as being present at the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:9, which could support the possibility that early Christians lived in this area at the time 1 John was written.

6 Compare 1 Timothy 1:2 and 1 Peter 5:13, as discussed in note 2 under the background commentary for 1 John.

7 Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 40.

8 For a further discussion on grace in the New Testament, see generally Schmidt, *Relational Grace*; Book of Mormon Central, “What Did Grace Mean to Paul? (Romans 3:23–24),” *KnowWhy* 683 (August 8, 2023), <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/what-did-grace-mean-to-paul>.

9 This is not unlike how the term is used in the Book of Mormon, as it is a title referring exclusively to false prophets causing doctrinal disputes in the immediate context of the Nephite church.

10 See Strecker, *Johannine Letters*, 69–76, for a detailed discussion of this strand of Docetism as well as other forms Docetism took through the early centuries AD.

11 “Times and Seasons, 1 April 1842,” p. 744, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-april-1842/10>.

12 “Times and Seasons, 1 April 1842,” p. 745, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-april-1842/11>.

13 “Discourse, 1 May 1842, as Reported by Willard Richards,” p. 94, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-1-may-1842-as-reported-by-willard-richards/1>.

14 Steven C. Harper, *Doctrine and Covenants Contexts* (Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central, 2021), 341, <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/section-129>.

15 In Latin, the word *comma* refers to a phrase or clause of a sentence. This should not be confused with a punctuation mark by the same name in English.

16 For a brief discussion on the history of the Johannine Comma, see Strecker, *Johannine Letters*, 188–191; Brown, *Epistles of John*, 775–787.

17 *Textus Receptus* is a Latin phrase meaning “Received Text.”

18 For context, another Greek edition of the New Testament known as the *Complutensis Polyglot*, compiled by the Spanish cardinal Primate Ximenes, was printed in 1514 but not published until 1522. This edition contained the Johannine Comma, but it had to be translated from the Latin Vulgate for the same reason Erasmus initially omitted the Comma: there was simply no manuscript evidence for its inclusion. Strecker, *Johannine Letters*, 191.

19 This manuscript is named the Codex Montfortianus.

20 “Minutes and Discourses, 17 March 1842,” p. 8–9, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-and-discourses-17-march-1842/3>; spelling and punctuation silently modernized.

21 *Woman’s Exponent*, August 1, 1880, 36. Eliza R. Snow had been called to organize the Relief Society in Utah beginning in 1866; however, it is interesting that she only took the title of elect lady after Emma Smith’s death. The title is used, for example, in Emmeline B. Wells, Letter to Zina D. H. Young, April 24, 1888; five pages; Zina Card Brown Family Collection, 1806–1972, CHL (MS 4780): “I feel it is only a very simple tribute to say, that I congratulate you my beloved sister on being called, to be, according to the words of Joseph the Prophet, ‘The Elect Lady.’” Also available in Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow, eds., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 536.

22 Sarah M. Kimball, “Early Relief Society Reminiscence,” March 17, 1882; Relief Society Record, 1880–1892, pp. 29–30, CHL (CR 11 175). Also available in Derr et al., *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 495.

23 Eliza R. Snow, “Female Relief Society,” *Deseret News*, April 22, 1868, 1; punctuation standardized.

24 See Acts 16:40; Romans 16:3, 5; 1 Corinthians 1:11; 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:1–2.

25 See 1 Timothy 1:2 and 1 Peter 5:13, as discussed in note 2 under the background commentary for 1 John.

26 1 Clement 44:4, 6.

27 1 Clement 57:2.

28 Hugh W. Nibley, “The Best Possible Test,” in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond this Ignorant Present* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1992), 535, 537.

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