

TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 19

TNTC

THE LETTERS OF JOHN

Dedicated
to
another 'chosen lady and her children,
whom I love in the truth',
the congregation of
All Saints Church, Langham Place,
London

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VOLUME 19

GENERAL EDITOR: LEON MORRIS

THE LETTERS OF JOHN

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

JOHN R. W. STOTT



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CONTENTS

General preface	7
Author's preface to the first edition	9
Author's preface to the second edition	11
Chief abbreviations	13
Introduction	17
Authorship	17
Occasion	43
Message	54
1 John: Analysis	59
1 John: Commentary	61
Additional notes	
'The Word of life' (1:1)	70
The symbolism of light in Scripture (1:5)	75
The biblical concept of propitiation (2:2)	89
The meaning of 'the world' (2:15–17)	105
'The last hour' (2:18)	111
The meaning of ' <i>chrisma</i> ' (2:20)	113
The meaning of 'God's seed' (3:9)	131

The interpretation of 1 John 3:4–9	133
John’s teaching about the devil (3:8, 10)	139
The meaning of 1 John 3:19–20	148
The interpretation of 1 John 4:2	156
2 John: Analysis	197
2 John: Commentary	199
3 John: Analysis	221
3 John: Commentary	223

GENERAL PREFACE

The original Tyndale Commentaries aimed at providing help for the general reader of the Bible. They concentrated on the meaning of the text without going into scholarly technicalities. They sought to avoid 'the extremes of being unduly technical or unhelpfully brief'. Most who have used the books agree that there has been a fair measure of success in reaching that aim.

Times, however, change. A series that has served so well for so long is perhaps not quite as relevant as when it was first launched. New knowledge has come to light. The discussion of critical questions has moved on. Bible-reading habits have changed. When the original series was commenced it could be presumed that most readers used the Authorized Version and one could make one's comments accordingly, but this situation no longer obtains.

The decision to revise and update the whole series was not reached lightly, but in the end it was thought that this is what is required in the present situation. There are new needs, and they will be better served by new books or by a thorough updating of the old books. The aims of the original series remain. The new commentaries are neither minuscule nor unduly long. They are exegetical rather than homiletic. They do not discuss all the critical questions, but none is written without an awareness of the problems that engage the attention of New Testament scholars. Where it is felt that formal consideration should be given to such questions, they are discussed in the Introduction and sometimes in Additional notes.

But the main thrust of these commentaries is not critical. These

books are written to help the non-technical reader to understand the Bible better. They do not presume a knowledge of Greek, and all Greek words discussed are transliterated; but the authors have the Greek text before them and their comments are made on the basis of the originals. The authors are free to choose their own modern translation, but are asked to bear in mind the variety of translations in current use.

The new series of Tyndale Commentaries goes forth, as the former series did, in the hope that God will graciously use these books to help the general reader to understand as fully and clearly as possible the meaning of the New Testament.

Leon Morris

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

If it be said (as it quite reasonably may) that one who is in no sense a New Testament scholar should not presume to write a commentary on New Testament Epistles, I would reply in respectful self-defence that I have written as a pastor and not as a theologian. Nor is this entirely a disadvantage, since insight into the New Testament literature demands some acquaintance, not only with Greek usage, but also with a local church situation such as lies behind the Johanne Epistles. Certainly John writes as a pastor to his people in language which every modern pastor will understand. He loves them. He is deeply concerned to protect them from the enticements of the world and the errors of false teachers, and to see them established in faith, love and holiness. So he appeals to what they are and what they know. He warns them, exhorts them, argues with them, instructs them. All this will find an echo in the experience of every pastor who has been entrusted by the Chief Shepherd with the care of a flock. I am hopeful that the readers of this commentary, though not neglecting academic questions raised by the Epistles, will not forget the practical purposes for which they were written.

A fuller consideration of some of the chief exegetical problems of the First Epistle has been reserved for the Additional notes. Even so the commentary is longer than it should have been, and I am grateful to the publishers for their indulgent acceptance of it as it now stands. My indebtedness to other commentators will be apparent in the exposition of the text, although I have tried to resist the

temptation to be a merely slavish copyist of abler and better men.

I pray that we may be given grace to do more than study these Epistles, namely submit to them in mind and life. The church needs their message. To borrow John's own phraseology, we must abide in it, and let it abide in us (2 John 9; 1 John 2:24, AV).

JRWS

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Nearly twenty-five years have passed since the publication of the first edition of this commentary. They have been eventful years of social and theological upheaval. Yet, as I have meditated afresh on John's three letters, they have struck me as being still extraordinarily relevant to the current scene in the world and the church. Moreover, as I have re-read the commentary I wrote in 1964, I have wanted to leave its substance and emphases unchanged. Nevertheless, this second edition incorporates a thorough revision. The English text on which I now comment is no longer the Authorized Version but the New International Version. I have also tried to clarify the obscurities, modernize the phraseology, eliminate what seemed repetitious, expand what was too compressed, and add more contemporary application.

I have also consulted several more commentaries which have appeared since 1964, in particular those by F. F. Bruce (1970), James L. Houlden in Black's New Testament Commentary series (1973), I. Howard Marshall in the New International Commentary series (1978), the monumental tome by Raymond E. Brown in the Anchor Bible series (1982), following his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (1979), and the commentaries by Kenneth Grayston in the New Century Bible Commentary series and by Stephen S. Smalley in the Word Biblical Commentary series (both 1984). I have quoted from them, as from their predecessors, while endeavouring to preserve a measure of independence. As with the former edition, so

with this one, the chief exegetical problems raised by John's first letter have been discussed in eleven Additional notes.

Those students of John's letters who are likely to profit from them most, are those who share with the author his own combination of theological and ethical concerns. For John is above all else a pastor, entrusted with the care of a group of local churches, and anxious to help their members to learn how to think and live Christianly. At the foundation of their Christian thinking must be a right grasp of the unique divine-human person of Jesus, and at the foundation of their Christian living a transparent integrity of righteousness and love. The false teachers have disturbed them. But John shows them how to develop a healthy assurance about Christ and about their relationship to him.

John evidently loves the people committed to his care. They are his 'dear children', his 'dear friends' (1 John 2:1, 7). He longs to protect them from both error and evil, and to see them firmly established in faith, love and holiness. He has no new doctrine for them. On the contrary, he appeals to them to remember what they already know, have and are. He warns them against deviating from this and urges them to remain loyal to it. Whenever innovators trouble the church, and ridicule whatever is old or traditional, we need to hear and heed John's exhortation, to continue in what we have learnt and received, and to let it continue in us (e.g. 1 John 2:24, 27; 2 John 9).

I am very grateful to Steve Andrews, who undertook, with his customary meticulousness, the laborious task of converting the biblical text from the AV to the NIV; to Frances Whitehead, who then reduced many pages which looked like a game of 'Snakes and Ladders' into beautiful typescript; to Toby Howarth, who checked the script, in addition to compiling the bibliography; and to Leon Morris, friend and editor, for his very helpful suggestions.

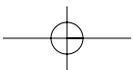
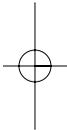
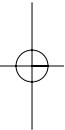
John R. W. Stott

CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

- Alexander Neil Alexander, *The Epistles of John*, Torch Bible Commentaries (SCM Press, 1962).
- Alford Henry Alford, *Commentary on the Epistles of John in Alford's Greek Testament* (Rivingtons & Deighton & Bell, ³1866).
- AV Authorized (King James) Version, 1611.
- BAGD *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated and adapted by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich; second edition revised and augmented by F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker (University of Chicago Press, 1979).
- Barclay William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, The Daily Study Bible (St Andrew Press, 1976).
- Blaiklock E. M. Blaiklock, *Faith is the Victory: Devotional Studies in the First Epistle of John* (The Paternoster Press, 1959).
- Brooke A. E. Brooke, *Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, The International Critical Commentary (T. & T. Clark, 1912).
- Brown Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved (Community) Disciple* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1979).
- Brown Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday, 1982; Geoffrey Chapman, 1983).
- Bruce F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (1970; Pickering & Inglis, ²1978).

- Calvin John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Epistle of John*, Calvin's Commentaries, ET by T. H. L. Parker (Oliver & Boyd, 1961).
- Candlish Robert S. Candlish, *The First Epistle of St John Expounded in a Series of Lectures* (1877; Banner of Truth, 1973).
- Dodd C. H. Dodd, *Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (Hodder & Stoughton, 1946).
- Ebrard John H. A. Ebrard, *Commentary on St John's Epistles* (T. & T. Clark, 1860).
- Ellis E. Earle Ellis, *The World of St John* (Eerdmans, 1984).
- Eusebius Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, circa 260–340, ET, with introduction and notes, by H. J. Lawler and J. E. L. Oulton (SPCK, 1927–28; two vols.).
- Findlay George G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal: An Exposition of the Epistles of John* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1909).
- Grayston Kenneth Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles*, New Century Bible Commentary (Eerdmans/Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984).
- Grimm-Thayer C. L. W. Grimm, *Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, translated, revised and enlarged by J. H. Thayer (T. & T. Clark, 1901).
- Houlden James L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, Black's New Testament Commentary (A. & C. Black, 1973).
- Law Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St John* (1909; Baker, 1968).
- Lewis G. P. Lewis, *The Johannine Epistles*, Epworth Preacher's Commentaries (Epworth Press, 1961).
- Lightfoot J. B. Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays* (Macmillan, 1893).
- LSJ *A Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, new edition revised by H. S. Jones and R. Mackenzie (Oxford University Press, 1940).
- Marshall I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1978).

Metzger	Bruce M. Metzger, <i>A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament</i> (United Bible Societies, ³ 1975)
mg.	margin.
Moffatt	James Moffatt, <i>The Moffatt Translation of the Bible</i> (Hodder & Stoughton, ² 1935).
MS(S)	manuscript(s).
NEB	The New English Bible: Old Testament, 1970; New Testament, ² 1970.
NIV	New International Version: Old Testament, 1978; New Testament, ² 1978.
Plummer	Alfred Plummer, <i>Commentary on the Epistles of St John</i> , Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge University Press, 1894).
RSV	Revised Standard Version: Old Testament, 1952; New Testament, ² 1971.
RV	Revised Version, 1884.
Smalley	Stephen S. Smalley, <i>1, 2, 3 John</i> , Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 51 (Word Books, 1984).
Smith	David Smith, <i>Commentary on the Epistles of John</i> , The Expositor's Greek Testament (Hodder & Stoughton, 1910).
Tyndale	William Tyndale, <i>The Exposition of the Fyrst Epistle of Seynt Jhon</i> (1531), reprinted in <i>English Reformers</i> , vol. 26 of the Library of Christian Classics, edited by T. H. L. Parker (SCM/Westminster, 1966).
Westcott	B. F. Westcott, <i>Commentary on the Epistles of St John</i> (1883; Eerdmans, 1966).



INTRODUCTION

1. Authorship

The natural place in which to look for information about the authorship of any ancient letter is in the letter itself. It was customary in antiquity for a correspondent to begin by announcing his identity. This was Paul's invariable rule, and the same holds good of the letters of Peter, James and Jude. The author of 2 and 3 John styles himself 'the elder' without disclosing his name. Only the letter to the Hebrews and the first letter of John begin without any announcement of the author's name or title, and indeed without any introductory greeting. The anonymity of 1 John is not to be explained by the suggestion that the author is writing a theological treatise, or even a general or 'catholic' letter, as Origen first called it. Although it has a considerable theological content, it contains a genuinely personal message addressed to a particular congregation, or group of them, in a particular situation (cf. 2:19). The 'I – you – we' form of address is maintained throughout; the recipients of the letter are the author's 'dear children' or 'dear friends', whose spiritual history and present

circumstances he knows. Moreover, 'the writing is ... instinct from first to last with intense personal feeling' (Westcott). It is a truly pastoral letter, sent by a pastor to his flock, or a part of it, as are also (and even more clearly) the two shorter letters.

Who, then, was the author of these letters? Since they are anonymous, there is no *a priori* need to ascribe them to the apostle John or to any other John. Nevertheless, the external evidence is strongly in favour of this ascription, particularly in the case of the first letter.

a. External evidence for the first letter

All three letters are found in the oldest Greek codices. The first letter is also included in the most ancient versions of the church of the East and the West, namely the Syriac and Latin, although the second and third letters are not found in the Syriac.

Commentators have found possible allusions to the letters of John in a number of early patristic writings. Thus, Clement of Rome twice described God's elect people as being 'perfected in love', and there is a similar expression in the *Didache*. *The Epistle to Diognetus* includes such phrases as 'from the beginning', 'God loved men' and 'sent his only begotten Son', so that we love 'him who thus first loved' us. But none of these is more than an echo of Johannine language, derived as well from the Gospel or current Johannine theology as from the first letter. There is no formal or exact quotation, nor any mention of John or the letters by name.

The earliest definite reference to these letters in the Fathers comes from Polycarp of Smyrna (d. c. AD 155), who in the seventh chapter of his letter to the Philippians, written perhaps thirty or forty years before his martyrdom, asserts that whoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist. He goes on to urge a return to the message handed down from the beginning. Here are quotations from 1 John 4:2–3 (with a possible reminiscence of 1 John 2:22 and 2 John 7) and 1 John 2:24. Polycarp does not, however, attribute his quotations to John.

The first to refer specifically to a Johannine letter was Papias of Hierapolis in the middle of the second century, who, according to Eusebius (3:39. 17), 'used testimonies drawn from the former Epistle of John'.

It is not until we reach Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–200) that at least the first and second letters are clearly attributed to the John who was both the ‘disciple of the Lord’ and the author of the Fourth Gospel. In his *Adversus Haereses* (3. 16. 18) he quotes fully from 1 John 2:18–22; 4:1–3; 5:1, and 2 John 7, 8.

Clement of Alexandria, who survived Irenaeus by a few years, evidently knew more than one Johannine letter, since he uses the expression ‘the greater Epistle’, which he ascribes to ‘the apostle John’. His quotations are even more numerous than those of Irenaeus. In chapters 2–5 of *Stromateis* he quotes 1:6–7; 2:4, 18–19; 3:3, 18–19; 4:16, 18 and 5:3, 16–17, while in *Quis Dives Salvetur?* chapters 37 and 38, he quotes 3:15 and again 4:18.

Tertullian, his Latin contemporary (d. c. 220), made considerable use of the first letter, quoting it about fifty times (especially 1:1, 3; 2:22; 4:1–2; 5:1) in his polemical writings against Marcion, Praxeas and the Gnostics. Origen of Alexandria, a little later (d. c. 255), also relied much on the first letter, ascribing it to John, although like Tertullian he does not quote from the two shorter letters.

The Muratorian Canon, which was probably compiled in Rome between AD 170 and 215, perhaps by Hippolytus, contains two relevant passages, though of somewhat uncertain meaning. In one the author describes how he believed John had come to write his Gospel, and immediately adds a reference to ‘his Epistles’ in which he claimed to write ‘what we have seen with our eyes, heard with our ears and touched with our hands’ (quoting 1 John 1:1, 4). In the other, ‘two’ letters of John are mentioned (it is not clear which are meant); they are then described by the phrase *in catholica habentur*, which has been understood by scholars as meaning that they were recognized either ‘in the Catholic Church’ or ‘among the Catholic Epistles’.

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in the middle of the third century, quoted from 1:8 and 2:3–4, 6, 15–17, and it is interesting to note that the passages he used are concerned rather with ethical conduct than with theological controversy.

When we reach Eusebius (c. AD 325), we find that he numbers the first letter among the *homologoumena* or ‘acknowledged books’, while he puts the second and third letters among the *antilegomena* or ‘disputed books’ (3.25. 2–3).

b. External evidence for the second and third letters

The external evidence for the second and third letters is not so clear or strong as that for the first. The first definite quotation occurs in Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses* 3. 16. 3, 8), who mentions two letters, ascribing them to 'John the disciple of the Lord', and quotes 2 John 7–8, 10 and 11. Clement of Alexandria implies by his reference to John's 'greater letter' (*Stromateis* 2. 15. 66) that he also wrote one or more lesser works, and elsewhere, according to Eusebius, he mentions 'the second Epistle of John', which he said was written to a certain lady who signifies 'the holy church'. It is in Origen that we come across the first explicit mention of any doubt about the authorship of these two letters. He knew of both, but no quotation of either has survived from his pen, and according to Eusebius he knew that they were not universally acknowledged as 'genuine' (6. 25. 10).

Eusebius himself, as has already been mentioned, placed the second and third letters among the *antilegomena* (3. 25. 3), although 'well known and acknowledged by most'. He adds the interesting explanation of the uncertainty surrounding them, namely 'whether they belong to the Evangelist, or to another of the same name'. In another place he states his own conviction that they were written by the apostle John (6. 25. 10). The reference in the Muratorian Canon to 'two Epistles' of John might as easily be an allusion to the first and second as to the second and third. Jerome said that the two shorter letters were ascribed to John the presbyter, and, although throughout the Middle Ages the letters seem to have been accepted as the work of John the apostle, Erasmus reverted to the theory mentioned by Jerome. It is not surprising that this attestation of the second and third letters is scantier than in the case of the first, for they are both slight and contain little distinctive matter which would be suitable for quotation.

c. Common authorship of the Gospel and the first letter

Such evidence for the authorship of the letters as can be gathered from the letters themselves is indirect rather than direct. It is a complex problem, concerning the mutual relations between the Gospel and each of the three letters. If it can be shown that any or all of the letters were written by the author of the Fourth Gospel, then clearly arguments for the authorship of the Gospel will be

equally applicable to the letters. More simply, if the Gospel is the apostle John's, then the letters will be also. This is not the place to attempt even an introduction to the complicated question of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel. The reader must be referred to competent commentaries on that Gospel for this subject. What must be done here, however, is an examination of the relation between the Gospel and the letters. The best way to proceed is to consider the evidence of common authorship first between Gospel and first letter, then between the second and third letters themselves, and finally between them and the first letter.

Even a superficial reading of the Gospel and the first letter reveals a striking similarity between the two in both subject-matter and syntax. The general subjects treated are much the same. It has often been pointed out that the author of each has the same love of opposites set in stark contrast to one another – light and darkness, life and death, love and hate, truth and falsehood – while people are said to belong to one or other of two categories, with no third alternative. They are children of God or children of the devil; they belong to the world or do not belong to the world. They have life or do not have life. They know God or do not know him. In style one is aware of what Westcott called 'the same monotonous simplicity of construction', and the same Hebraic love of parallelism. The author uses few particles, and does not like subordinate clauses introduced by the relative pronoun. On the other hand, he has a great fondness for sentences beginning with certain emphatic formulae like 'This is ... that ...', 'By this ... that ...', 'For this ... that' and 'Everyone who ...'¹

When we compare the occurrence of precise phrases in both Gospel and first letter, we find that in fact the same divine purpose or scheme of salvation is set forth in almost identical terms. It might be summarized as follows, the reference in the letter being printed first in each parenthesis: In our natural and unredeemed state we are both 'of the devil', who has sinned and lied and murdered 'from the beginning' (3:8/8:44), and 'of the world' (2:16; 4:5/8:23;

1. For a detailed examination of linguistic similarities and dissimilarities, see Brooke, pp. i–xix, 235–242, and Law, pp. 341–363.

15:19). We therefore 'sin' (3:4/8:34) and 'have' it (1:8/9:41), 'walk in the darkness' (1:6; 2:11/8:12; 12:35) and are spiritually 'blinded' (2:11/12:40) and 'dead' (3:14/5:25). But God loved us and sent his Son to be 'the Saviour of the world' (4:14/4:42) and that 'we might live' (4:9/3:16). This was his 'one and only' (*monogenēs*, 4:9/1:14, 18; 3:16, 18), who, though in or from 'the beginning' (1:1/1:1), yet became, or came in, 'flesh' (4:2/1:14) and then 'laid down his life' for us (3:16/10:11–18), in order to 'take away' sin (3:5/1:29). To him 'testimony' has been borne, partly by those who have 'seen' and therefore 'proclaimed' (1:2–3; 4:14/1:34; 19:35), but especially by God himself (5:9/3:33; 5:32, 34, 36, 37) and by the Spirit (5:6/15:26). We should 'accept' this divine testimony (5:9/3:11, 32, 33; 5:34), 'believe' in the One thus adequately attested (5:10/5:37–40) and 'acknowledge' him (4:2, 3/9:22). Believing in him or his 'name' (5:13/1:12, etc.), we pass from death to life (3:14/5:24). We 'have life' (5:11, 12/3:15, 36; 20:31), for life is in the Son of God (5:11, 12/1:4; 14:6). This is to be 'born of God' (2:29; 3:9; 5:4, 18/1:13).

Those who have been born of God, God's 'children' (3:1, 2, 10; 5:2/1:12; 11:52), are variously described, in relation to God, to Christ, to the truth, to each other, and to the world. They are 'of God' (3:10/8:47) and have come to 'know' God, the true God, through Jesus Christ (5:20/17:3). It may even be said that they have 'seen' God (3:6; cf. 3 John 11/14:9), although in the literal sense no-one has ever seen God (4:12, 20/1:18; 6:46). Christians are not only of God but of the truth as well (2:21; 3:19/18:37). The truth is also 'in' them (1:18; 2:4/8:44) and they 'do' it (AV) or 'live by' it (NIV; 1:6/3:21), for the Spirit given to them is 'the Spirit of truth' (4:6; 5:6/14:17; 15:26; 16:13). The relation of Christians to God and to the truth is through Jesus Christ, in whom and in whose love they 'abide' (AV), which the NIV a little unfortunately renders either 'live' or 'remain' (2:6, 27, 28; 3:6, 24; 4:13, 15, 16/15:4–10), and who himself lives in them (2:24; 3:24; 4:12–16/6:56; 15:4, 5). His word lives in them too (1:10; 2:14, 24/5:38; 15:7) and they in it (2:27/8:31). Thus they 'obey his word' (2:5/8:51–55; 14:23, 15:20; 17:6) or 'his commands' (2:3, 4; 3:22, 24; 5:2, 3/14:15, 21; 15:10), his 'new command' being that they love one another (2:8–10; 3:11, 23; cf. 2 John 5, 6/13:34). 'The world', however, will 'hate' them (3:13/15:18). They

must not be surprised by this. The reason for it is that they no longer belong to the world (4:5, 6/15:19; 17:16), and while remaining in it must not love the things that are in it (2:15, 16/17:15). Christ has 'overcome the world', and so also through faith in him have they (5:4, 5/16:33). The end result of all that Christ has done for, and given to, his people is fullness of joy (1:4/15:11; 16:24; 7:13).

In view of these remarkably close parallels, Alford does not seem to be expressing himself too strongly when he attributes an obstinate 'perverseness' to those who maintain a different authorship. Yet during the last hundred or so years a small but persistent minority of scholars have held that the evident similarity between letter and Gospel is due rather to conscious or unconscious imitation than to identity of authorship. Thus, Dodd, who argues that the three letters (but not the Gospel) were written by the same author, supposes that he was 'not a mere imitator' of the evangelist but his 'disciple' or 'student', who reflected and yet modified his master's thought, much as modern Barthians accept and yet adapt the theology of Karl Barth. These scholars point mainly to three phenomena: first to words and concepts in the letter which do not appear in the Gospel, secondly to peculiarities in the Gospel without parallel in the letter, and thirdly to subtle but significant differences in doctrines which are common to both Gospel and letter.

Brooke analyses the fifty peculiarities of the letter which Holtzmann listed, and they do not amount to much in the end. The most important words of the letter which do not occur in the Gospel are *angelia* (message), *koinōnia* (fellowship), *hilasmos* (propitiation), *chrisma* (unction, or anointing), *antichristos*, *anomia* (lawlessness) and *sperma* (seed). But, even though these words are missing from the Gospel, it would be rash to assert that the ideas about human sin or Christ's death or the Holy Spirit's work which are conveyed by them are absent also. To Dodd these linguistic differences are largely due to the fact that the Gospel reflects the language, thought and customs of Palestinian Judaism, whereas the letter is coloured by Hellenistic mysticism with its characteristic vocabulary of 'light', 'seed', 'chrism' and its abstract ideas (e.g. 'God is love'). But apart from the fact that one would naturally expect the Gospel with its Palestinian setting to be more Aramaic than Hellenistic, Alexander is surely right that in the letter 'these Hellenistic terms often carry invisible quotation

marks'. John is deliberately borrowing from the vocabulary of the false teachers he is opposing.

Peculiarities of the Gospel are fully listed in eight pages by Brooke. He gives a catalogue of 813 words which occur in the Gospel but not in the letter. This may seem impressive, but not when it is examined. The great majority of these words are unimportant and are used only once or twice. More notable words are cross and crucify (fourteen times between them), disciple (seventy-eight times), glory and glorify (thirty-nine times between them), heaven (twenty times), law (thirteen times), Lord (fifty-two times), seek (thirty-four times) and sign (seventeen times). But of these only 'glory' and 'glorify' can be said to have any distinctive doctrinal meaning, for the *ideas* of the cross, discipleship, heaven, etc. are present in the letter even if the words are absent.

Turning from the words which are peculiar to either Gospel or letter, we must now consider those words and themes which are handled in both but with a difference, indeed, according to Dodd, 'a formidable difference'. There are seven major ones, which have been advanced as reasons for accepting a diversity of authorship.

1. In the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel the *Logos* is personal, referring to the 'one and only' Son, whereas the preface to the letter 'the *logos* of life' is impersonal and refers to the life-bringing gospel. This is probably true, as is accepted in the notes *ad loc.* (although it is still maintained by some that the 'Logos of life' is personal), but the similarities between Prologue and preface far outweigh this difference and are summarized in the Additional note, 'The Word of life', on pp. 70-73.

2. The Paraclete in the Gospel is the Holy Spirit, 'the Comforter', whereas in the letter this title, which is found nowhere else in the New Testament, is applied to Jesus Christ the righteous, who is our advocate in heaven, not on earth. But neither concept contradicts or excludes the other. Why should it be thought impossible that both the second and the third persons of the Trinity should exercise a ministry of aid and advocacy, the Spirit on earth and the Son in heaven? Besides, if Jesus called the Spirit 'another Paraclete' (John 14:16), who is the first?

3. In the Fourth Gospel it is Jesus Christ who is 'the true light', 'the light of men' and 'the light of the world' (1:9, 4 and 8:12),

whereas the message of the letter is that 'God is light' (1:5). Again, both are true; they cannot be said in any way to be irreconcilable in the mind of the same author who has such a high view of the relation between Father and Son. Nor is it altogether correct to say that 'the Gospel is Christocentric, the Epistle Theocentric',² since in the latter the author many times uses the pronoun 'he' (*autos, ekeinos*), without specifying to whom he is referring. His allusion is normally to the Son, but he does not always consider it necessary to say so.

4. The Gospel contains the affirmation that 'God is spirit' (4:24), while the letter declares once that 'God is light' (1:5) and twice that 'God is love' (4:8, 16). It is extraordinary that anybody could seriously consider these statements as being in any way inconsistent in the same author.

5. The death of Christ, it is rightly said, is presented in the Gospel as his 'uplifting' and his 'glorification'. Neither word occurs in the letter, where the purpose of his death is propitiatory (2:2; 4:10) and brings cleansing and life (1:7; 4:9). But the references to the death of Christ in the letter are in largely polemical passages, where the author's purpose is to emphasize its benefits for us in salvation rather than its significance for him in glorification. Moreover, teaching about the achievement of the Saviour's death cannot be said to be absent from a Gospel which declares that the wrath of God remains on the unbeliever (3:36) and includes verses like 1:29; 3:14–16; 6:51; 10:11, 15; 11:49–52; 12:24, etc.

6. The word *parrësia*, bold outspokenness, occurs in both Gospel and letter; but in the former it denotes plainness of speech to human beings (e.g. 10:24; 11:14; 16:29; 18:20), and in the latter confidence before God in prayer and on the day of judgment (2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14). All that needs to be said here is that boldness should characterize Christians in their approach to both God and others, and that there is no reason why the same author should not believe in both and write about both.

7. Lastly, the eschatological teaching is said to be different. In the Gospel, we are told, the eschatology is 'realized'. Eternal life and judgment are both experienced now, since lifegiving and judging are

2. Law, who himself very much modifies his own aphorism.

the present activities of God through Christ (3:14–19; 5:19–27), and Jesus Christ promises to come again not in glory on the clouds of heaven but spiritually through the Holy Spirit (14:15–24, etc.). In the letter, on the other hand, the older and more popular expectations are preserved, namely Christ's personal 'coming' (*parousia*, 2:28) and visible 'appearing' (*phanerōsis*, 2:28; 3:2), and a final 'day of judgment' (4:17). This, we are told, takes no account of the profound reinterpretation of eschatology which is given in the Fourth Gospel; it is rather the 'naïve thinking of the primitive Church' (Dodd). But this reconstruction is much too categorical, as if there were no 'popular' eschatology in the Gospel and no 'realized' eschatology in the letter. The truth is that the Gospel includes sayings of Jesus about his coming to take his people to himself and about 'the last day' of resurrection and judgment (e.g. 14:3; 5:28–29; 6:39–40, 44, 54; 11:24–26; 12:48), while eternal life is clearly regarded in the letter as a present possession, received and enjoyed in Christ now (5:11–13). The present, personal activity of the Holy Spirit in witnessing is also taught in the letter; it is just not accurate to say that it contains 'no trace of the high "Johannine" doctrine which is found in the Gospel' (Dodd).

These differences of emphasis constitute no solid ground on which to base a theory of different authorship. They are sufficiently accounted for by the different purpose which the author had in writing each (which many commentators do not seem adequately to have noted) and by the interval of time which may have elapsed between the composition of each. The author's purpose in writing is known from his own definition of it. He wrote the Gospel for unbelievers in order to arouse their faith (20:30–31), and the letter for believers in order to deepen their assurance (5:13). His desire for the readers of the Gospel was that through faith they might receive life; for the readers of the letter that they might know they already had it. Consequently, the Gospel contains 'signs' to evoke faith (20:30–31), and the letter tests by which to judge it. Further, the enemies of the truth in the Gospel are unbelieving Jews, who doubt, not the historicity of Jesus (whom they could see and hear), but whether he is the Christ, the Son of God. The enemies of the truth in the letter, however, are professing Christians (although John's tests show that their profession is a lie), and their problem concerns not the

divinity of the Christ but his relation to the historical Jesus. Westcott provides a neat summary of this distinction: 'the theme of the Epistle is "the Christ is Jesus"; the theme of the Gospel is "Jesus is the Christ"'.

This double difference of purpose implies a difference of time and would seem also to establish, not that the letter was written to accompany the Gospel (Ebrard, Lightfoot), still less that it preceded the Gospel, but that it was 'a kind of sequel to the gospel' (Ellis, p. 84). For John's readers must be brought to faith through testimony and to life through faith before they could be brought to an assurance of life. Those commentators who think that the letter was prior to the Gospel, have argued that they detect in it embryonic ideas (about the Logos, the atonement and the last things) which only come to birth in the Gospel. Kenneth Grayston goes further. He considers the theology of the first letter to be 'well below the level of the Gospel' (p. 9), especially in its doctrines of Christ and of the Spirit, so that these look like 'first attempts at material which later appears in the Gospel' (p. 14) and so 'contributed to its composition' (p. 16). But this is surely topsy-turvy. The letter is written to people who already know the truth and do not need anyone to teach them (2:20-21, 27), provided that they allow what they have heard from the beginning to remain in them (2:24). The NEB rightly entitles the letter a 'Recall to Fundamentals'. John is not teaching new truths or issuing new commands; it is the heretics who are the innovators. John's task is to recall them to what they already know and have. All this seems to presuppose on the part of the readers a knowledge of the Gospel, or at the very least of the body of doctrine contained in the Gospel. We may then agree that the letter is 'a comment on the Gospel, "a sermon with the Gospel for its text"' (Plummer).

So far, then, we have suggested that the similarities of subject-matter, style and vocabulary in the Gospel and the first letter supply very strong evidence for identity of authorship, which is not materially weakened by the peculiarities of each or the differences of emphasis in the treatment of common themes. These are explained by the distinctive purpose behind each writing and by the lapse of time which can therefore be assumed between them. The similarity between Gospel and letter is considerably greater than that between the third Gospel and the Acts, which are known to have come from

the same pen; between the Pastoral Epistles to Timothy and Titus; and even, it could be argued, between the two Thessalonian letters written during the apostle's second missionary journey, and between the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians written during his first Roman imprisonment. 'The usage suggests a writer who varies his own phrases, rather than a mere copyist' (Brooke). 'The same mind deals with the same ideas in different connections ... The Epistles give later growths of common and characteristic ideas. No imitator of the Gospel could have combined elements of likeness and unlikeness in such a manner ...' (Westcott).

d. The relation of the second and third letters to each other and to the first letter

It is not necessary to marshal lengthy arguments for the common authorship of 2 and 3 John; it is almost self-evident. It is true that the third letter has one or two words peculiar to itself (e.g. *philoprōteuein* in v. 9 and *phlyarein* in v. 10). Nevertheless, in spite of the different circumstances which evoked them and the fact that the male recipient of the third letter was a person and the female recipient of the second letter probably a personification, there is a striking similarity of address (from 'the elder' to one 'whom I love in the truth'), the same background situation of itinerant missionaries, the same length, pattern, style, language and conclusion. They are 'like twin sisters' (Alford). 'The similarity between them is too close to admit of any explanation except common authorship or conscious imitation' (Brooke); and the latter is hardly credible in view of the brevity and comparatively unimportant content of the letters.

If we consider the relation between the two shorter letters and what Clement of Alexandria called 'the greater', the divergences are seen to be insignificant. When it has been pointed out that the author of the first letter nowhere identifies himself, while the author of the second and third letters announces himself as 'the elder', that the tense of the verb in the expression 'Jesus Christ ... come in the flesh' is perfect in the first (4:2) but present in the second (v. 7), and that 'antichrists' are plural in the first (2:18), while only singular in the second (v. 7, though he is there plainly representative of the class called 'many deceivers'), this seems to be the sum total of differences which can be discovered.

In contrast to these trivial points, the similarities between the greater and the two lesser letters are striking. There is the same emphasis on 'truth' (eleven times in the second and third letters, nine times in the first), which consists pre-eminently of the doctrine that 'Jesus Christ has come in the flesh' (2 John 7/4:2). Loyalty to this truth is to have 'both the Father and the Son' (2 John 9/2:23); disloyalty to it is to be a 'deceiver' and 'antichrist' (2 John 7/2:22, 26). This doctrine is not new, but old. They must 'continue' in it (2 John 9/2:27) and let it 'live' or 'remain' in them (2 John 2/2:14, 24). Christian ethics like Christian doctrine are not new; John is writing to them not 'a new command' but 'one we have had from the beginning', namely that we 'love one another' (2 John 5-6/2:7; 3:11). It is in such fellowship that fullness of joy may be found (2 John 12; cf. 3 John 4/1:4). Those who love and who do good give evidence that they are 'from God' (3 John 11/3:10; 4:4, 7); those who sin and do evil show that they have 'not seen God' (3 John 11/3:6).

We conclude that both shorter letters were written by the same person, and that this person was also the author of the first letter, who, we have already argued, had previously composed the Fourth Gospel. If this reasoning is sound, it means that whatever may be learnt of the author of the Fourth Gospel from internal evidence will apply to the author of the letters, and vice versa; it is impossible to study the Johannine problem if any one of these four writings is isolated, not to mention also the Apocalypse. What concerns us now, however, is to enquire if any further evidence can be discovered from within the three letters themselves, which may throw light on their authorship. Such additional internal evidence is both the writer's apparent claim to have been an eyewitness of the historical Jesus, and the authoritative tone with which he addresses his readers, calling himself 'the elder'. If it can be shown that he wrote as a personal eyewitness and with self-conscious authority, we have gone a considerable way towards asserting that the author was an apostle, since one of the qualifications of the apostolate was to have been an eyewitness (e.g. Mark 3:14; Luke 24:48; John 15:27; Acts 1:21-26; 22:12-15; 26:16; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8-9), while the uniqueness of the apostolate was the special authority with which they were invested by Jesus Christ himself (e.g. Mark 3:14-15; 6:7; Luke 6:13; Gal. 1:1).

e. The author as an eyewitness

The clearest and most definite claim of the author of the first letter to be an eyewitness is found in its opening words (1:1, 3). He is announcing his particular emphasis. What he proclaims concerning the word of life, the gospel, he says is 'that which was from the beginning, which we have heard ... seen ... touched ...' His message is supremely concerned with the historical, audible, visible, tangible manifestation of the eternal. He could hardly have conveyed his meaning more forcefully. He is vouching for his message from his own personal experience. It consists not of 'cleverly invented stories' (2 Pet. 1:16), but of a historical revelation verified by the three highest of the five human senses: hearing, sight and touch.

This claim to empirical experience he repeats, in the parenthesis of verse 2 ('we have seen it and testify to it ...'), and again when he resumes his theme after the parenthesis: 'We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard' (v. 3). His declaration is a testimony, and his testimony depends on the personal experience granted to his ears, eyes and hands. A similar claim seems to be made in 4:14, 'we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world'. He is able to testify in the present because of what he has seen in the past. It is this objective testimony which the Spirit's inward and subjective witness confirms (4:13). Perhaps a third, though indirect, allusion to the author's eyewitness experience may be found in the reference to the water and the blood in 5:6–7 (cf. John 19:34–35).

Some commentators, however, regard this claim to have 'seen' as relating only to a vicarious eyewitness experience. Brown and Grayston, who both relate John's letters to the development of a 'Johannine Community', think the 'we' was a particular group of leaders in that community who were 'the tradition-bearers and interpreters' (Brown).³

Certainly in 1:1–3 and 4:14 the claim to have been an eyewitness is couched in the first person plural. It is in each case 'we' who 'have seen' and 'testify'. The question is: Whom does the author include in his 'we'? Is it merely an editorial or epistolary 'we' by which (like

3. Brown, *Epistles*, p. 95; cf. pp. 158–161, 175 and Grayston, p. 3.

the royal 'we') he is in reality referring to himself alone? So Ebrard: 'St John is speaking of *himself* and *his* announcement and writing.' His 'we' is 'full of dignity and prerogative'. That this is John's meaning at least sometimes is clear from 3 John 9, where he slips from the singular, 'I wrote to the church' into the plural, 'but Diotrephes ... will have nothing to do with us', which the RSV significantly expresses in the singular: 'Diotrephes ... does not acknowledge my authority.' Similarly, in verse 12 the NIV literal rendering, 'We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true,' becomes in the RSV the singular, 'I testify to him too, and you know my testimony is true.' Alternatively, is John, as Dodd believes, identifying himself with the whole church? Or again, is he, as has been traditionally accepted, distinguishing himself from the church at large and associating himself with the other apostles, as if to say that, although they were dead and he alone survived, yet he was declaring the one, common apostolic message based upon the one, common apostolic eyewitness experience? 'St John ... uses the plural ... as speaking in the name of the apostolic body of which he was the last surviving representative' (Westcott). True, he sometimes abandons the 'we' and uses the more direct first person singular, but there does not seem to be any change of subject between the 'We write this...' of 1:4 and the 'I write this...' of 2:1.

Certainly the use of the first person plural as an indication that his message was not his alone but the apostolic faith has parallels in Paul's letters (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:11 and Gal. 2:14-16). Dodd, however, after a lengthy excursus on the identity of the 'we' in 1:1-4 (pp. 9-16), concludes that the author speaks 'not exclusively for himself or for a restricted group, but for the whole Church, to which the apostolic witness belongs by virtue of its *koinōnia* ...' The corollary is that 'this kind of language ... is not in itself sufficient to prove authorship by an eyewitness'. His argument is persuasive and deserves careful consideration. He points out that elsewhere in the letter 'the first person plural ... is very frequently used in a way which includes author and readers in one class. It is what we might call the preacher's "we".' But, he continues, its use is occasioned by more than tact and humility. 'It belongs to the language of the Church as a fellowship.' So far we must agree. The author does clearly identify himself with his readers in many parts of the letter, much as the preacher does

with his congregation in a sermon, whether in confession (e.g. 1:6–2:2), in affirmation (e.g. 2:3; 3:2, 14, 19–24; 4:19 and 5:18–20) or in exhortation (e.g. 3:11; 4:7, 11). In these (and other) ‘we’ sentences the author is neither speaking editorially nor associating himself with the other apostles but identifying himself with the whole Christian community, or at least with his readers. In each case ‘we’ introduces a general statement of appeal applicable to all Christian people alike. In such passages the antithesis to ‘we’ is not ‘you’ but ‘they’, meaning ‘the world’ of non-Christians, to which group the heretics properly belong, e.g. 2:19 (‘They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us’) and 5:19 (‘We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one’).

The problem is more difficult, however, in three passages which Dodd goes on to discuss, and in which the antithesis is not between ‘we’ and ‘they’ but between ‘we’ and ‘you’: 4:4–6, 14 and 1:1–5. In the first passage the crucial question is whether there is any difference of subject in the expressions ‘You ... are from God’ (v. 4) and ‘We are from God’ (v. 6). Dodd says there is not and concludes that the test of knowing God or being of God, *viz.*, whether people listen to ‘us’, means whether they listen to ‘the Church ... proclaiming the Gospel’. Certainly the sequence of thought in these verses is complicated, since at least five persons or groups are mentioned, and possibly six, namely ‘you’ (the church), God, ‘they’ (the false teachers), ‘the one who is in the world’ (the devil), ‘the world’, and the controversial ‘we’. As the argument unfolds, it seems more natural that the statements ‘You ... are from God’ (v. 4) and ‘We are from God’ (v. 6) refer to different groups (‘you’ to the Christian community, ‘we’ to the apostolic body), since they lead to different conclusions. ‘You ... are from God and have overcome them’ (v. 4). That is, your divine birth has enabled you to resist the false teaching. ‘We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us’ (v. 6). That is, just as the world listens to the message of the false teachers who themselves belong to the world (v. 5), so those who know God and belong to God will listen to the apostolic faith because the apostles’ message and commission were themselves from God. The contrast in verse 4 is between the false teacher and the Christian *bearer*; in verse 6 between the false teacher and the Christian *teacher*. ‘The hearer discerns the true message. The teacher discovers the true disciple’ (Westcott on

v. 6). This is an application of Christ's word to the twelve apostles, 'He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me' (Matt. 10:40).

The next verse Dodd examines is 4:14: 'we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world'. He again refers the 'we' to the Christian community, particularly because the verse is embedded in a paragraph (vv. 7–19) in which 'we' does plainly refer to Christians in general. He claims this as 'an example of a type of argument which recurs all through the Epistle, in which the validity of certain propositions is tested by reference to the common Christian faith and experience'. He continues, 'it is difficult to accept a sudden shift of meaning so radical that whereas all through the passage "we" has meant Christians in general, it now means a group of eyewitnesses sharply distinguished from Christians in general'. The solution he proposes is derived from the New Testament, and not least Johannine, view of *koinōnia*, 'which connotes a sharing of life and experience so deep and thoroughgoing that what is predicated of the whole community can in some real sense be predicated of each member, and vice versa'. He cites as Old Testament parallels the 'I' of the Psalms, which sometimes 'expresses the solidarity of the Psalmist with the Israel of God' – a solidarity extending to 'the successive generations of Israel' as is plain from Amos 2:10 and Joshua 24:7, where the redemption from Egypt is said to have been experienced and seen by a generation who had themselves personally neither seen nor experienced it. Similarly, Dodd suggests, the author of the first letter could write of the whole Christian community 'seeing' and therefore testifying to 'the mighty acts of the Lord' by which they had been redeemed, even if they had not individually been eyewitnesses of them.

This is an impressive argument, containing undoubtedly much truth, and comment on it will be reserved until we have considered the conclusion which Dodd reaches as he now returns to the preface (1:1–4). He agrees that 'here certainly a distinction is made ... between the author and his readers', which is expressed by 'we – you' at least in verses 3 and 4, although even here he refers the 'our' of 'our fellowship' (v. 3) and 'our joy' (v. 4, RSV) to the whole church. As for the 'we' of verses 1 and 2, although conceding that 'this kind of language would be very natural from the Apostle John or the

Presbyter John ... or some other eyewitness ... it is not in itself sufficient to prove authorship by an eyewitness'. The emphasis, he argues, is on the literal hearing, seeing and touching, and not on the identity of those who heard, saw and touched, nor on 'the direct knowledge of some Christians over against the secondhand knowledge of others'.

All this is plausibly argued, but leaves the critical reader of Dodd's commentary uneasy, particularly with regard to the letter's preface. Approaching this paragraph *de novo*, there are some points to which insufficient weight has been given. First, the author more clearly distinguishes himself from those he is addressing than Dodd allows, not only as writer to readers, but as eyewitness and authoritative teacher to taught. The preface contains seven verbs in the first person plural, describing both the empirical experience and the announcement, before the writer adds the 'you' to whom the announcement is made. Who is this 'you' to whom 'we proclaim' the gospel, if the 'we' who proclaim it includes the whole Christian community? It is certainly not 'the world'. But how can it be the church? Alexander's note hardly makes sense: 'the *you* in verses 2, 3 and 4 (John's readers) are not over against, but included in the *we*. *You* and *we* alike are the church.' Are we then to understand that preaching the gospel is a kind of self-proclamation, the church talking to itself? No. The sequence of thought in the parenthesis of verse 2 is that the life which was with *the Father* was made manifest to *us*, that *we* might proclaim it to *you*. And the purpose of the proclamation is that *you* (of a subsequent generation) may have fellowship with *us* (the original eyewitnesses of the Word made flesh). We desire this for *you* because *our* fellowship is so privileged and precious; it is with *the Father* and with *his Son Jesus Christ* (v. 3).

Nor does it seem fair to say that the emphasis of the first verse is on the empirical experience itself as a fact rather than on the identity of those who had it. On the contrary, the author seems to stress not only the material reality of what was heard, seen and felt, but the persons who had the experience also, because he mentions that it was 'our eyes' which saw and 'our hands' which handled. Moreover, the first person plural is used not only of the verbs describing the historical experience, but also of the verbs denoting the proclamation of it. The persons who make the announcement

are the persons who had the experience. The natural interpretation of these verses is, therefore, not merely of an empirical experience in general, nor of the original eyewitnesses with whom the Christian community is identified in the *koinōnia*, but of the personal experience of the very ones who are now making the proclamation. It is they whose eyes have seen, ears heard and hands handled, whose mouths are opened to speak.

This is particularly clear from the author's use, in addition to 'we proclaim' (*apangellomen*), of the verb 'we bear witness' or 'testify' (*martyroumen*) preceded by 'we have seen' (*heōrakamen*). Although it is true that *martyreisthai* is commonly employed in the Acts for preaching, which is a public testimony to the facts of the gospel, yet the compound expression 'see and testify' is used exclusively of eyewitnesses, especially by John. The two form 'a compacted pair of ideas' (Ebrard). Thus John the Baptist 'bore witness', saying, 'I saw the Spirit come down ... on him ... I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God' (John 1:32, 34). The same combination is used of the teaching of Jesus himself (John 3:11, 32), and of the evangelist's own testimony in the Gospel, in connection with the spear thrust, 'The man who saw it has given testimony' (19:35). Cf. Acts 22:14–16. In all these occurrences of the linked 'see and bear testimony', it is plain that the seeing qualified the witness. He could testify only to what, and because of what, he had seen.

In view of this consistent New Testament (and especially Johanne) usage, we must respectfully dissent from Dodd's interpretation of the 'we' both in the preface and, with a little less conviction, in 4:14. To interpret these words of 'a spiritual vision', writes Brooke, would be 'forced and unnatural in the extreme'. A kind of second-hand vision by the Christian community is unconvincing also. Alford is nearer the truth when he writes of the emphatic 'we' of 4:14, 'this *hēmeis* brings up in sharp relief the apostolic body whom Christ appointed His witnesses, John xv. 27, Acts i. 8. The assertion is of the same kind as that in chapter i. 1.' The whole difficulty arises because the writer (if an apostle) was a man holding two positions. In one sense, associated with his fellow-apostles, he was unique; in another sense, associated with his readers, he was just a common Christian. We see this same tension in the apostle Paul, who could style himself at the beginning of a letter both 'a servant of Christ

Jesus', a title shared by all Christians, and 'called to be an apostle' or 'an apostle of Jesus Christ', which set him apart from his readers (Rom. 1:1; Titus 1:1). So too can John call those to whom he writes both his *teknia*, 'little children' (AV, RSV) or 'dear children' (NIV), which indicates his authority as well as his affection and age, and his 'brothers and sisters', on an equal footing with them. He can begin by writing, 'we have seen ... and testify ... and proclaim to you' (1:1–5), distinguishing himself from them, and immediately continue, 'If we claim to have fellowship with him' (v. 6), including himself with them. Similarly, 'My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin' (which is an 'I – you' situation), is followed at once by, 'if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence' (2:1).

Only the context can guide us as to whether his 'we' is uniquely apostolic or commonly Christian. It appears that when doctrine is at stake, he retains the 'we – you' mode of address. This is so in 4:1–6. The change comes abruptly with verse 7, 'Dear friends, let us love one another ...' Although he and they were distinct in the teaching-learning relationship, they were one in ethical responsibility. Certainly when he is teaching them, or referring to the apostolic faith which they have received from him 'from the beginning', he slips into direct 'I (or we) – you' speech (e.g. 2:7, 18, 21, 24). 3:11 is a particularly interesting example, because it begins, 'This is the message you heard from the beginning' and continues, 'We should love one another.' It is 'I – you' in the issuing of the message, but 'we' in the receiving and obeying of it. It is for this reason, no doubt, that the only exception to the rule mentioned above is 2 John 5, where he at first describes the command as one 'we have had from the beginning ... that *we* love one another', since the command applies to him as much as to them and he does not exempt himself from it. But in the next verse he is back to direct speech, 'As *you* have heard from the beginning, his command is that *you* walk in love.' All these examples of the author's use of 'we' may enable us to agree with Calvin: 'As the words are in the plural and the matter applies equally to all the apostles, I interpret it of them; especially as it deals with the authority of witness.'

f. The author's self-conscious authority

The author's authoritative tone is particularly evident in the 'I – you'

passages and appears the more striking when viewed in contrast to the humble way in which he associates himself with his readers in some 'we' passages. There is nothing tentative or apologetic about what he writes. He does not hesitate to call certain classes of people 'liars', 'deceivers' or 'antichrists'. He supplies tests by which everybody can be sorted into one or other of two categories. According to their relation to his tests, they either have God or have not, know God or do not, have been born of God or have not, have life or abide in death, walk in the darkness or in the light, are children of God or children of the devil. This dogmatic authority of the writer is seen particularly in his statements and in his commands. For some of his pronouncements, see 1:5; 2:1-2, 8, 17, 23; 3:6, 9; 4:8, 16, 18; 5:12. For positive commands see 2:15, 28; 4:1; 5:21. More striking than the general ethical commands of the first letter are the personal and particular directions of the second and third: 'If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him' (2 John 10); and in the third letter the instruction to entertain itinerant Christian missionaries, an instruction which Diotrephes had disobeyed in defiance of the elder's authority (3 John 5-10).

But who is this who presumes to make such dogmatic affirmations and to issue commands which are reminiscent of what James Denney called the 'sovereign legislative authority' of Jesus himself? True, in statement and command, the author is sometimes quoting or echoing the teaching of Jesus, which he has himself recorded in the Gospel (e.g. 1 John 2:25; 3:13), but he goes much further than this. He dares to instruct and to direct in matters beyond the boundaries of the Lord's teaching. Moreover, in doing so he gives no hint that he regards one kind of teaching as less authoritative than the other. Some of the commands of which he writes are God's (e.g. 3:23-24; 5:3), some are Christ's (e.g. 2:7; 2 John 5), and some are his own (e.g. 2 John 10-11; 3 John 9). But he does not distinguish between them; he expects them all to be obeyed. Compare Paul's commands and requirements of obedience in 2 Thessalonians 3:4, 6, 10, 12, 14.

All this 'would have been impossible for any lesser personage than an Apostle' (Smith). It is entirely consistent with the unique position occupied by the apostles of Jesus in view of the promises and commission which he gave them. They were to teach others to observe

whatever he had commanded them (Matt. 28:20), but he would by his Spirit continue to teach and command through them (John 14:26; 16:12–13; cf. Acts 1:1). It is the bestowal of this authoritative commission and message, together with their eyewitness experience, which constituted the uniqueness of the apostles; and John lays claim to both in the first chapter of his first letter. It was what he had ‘seen’ of Christ which qualified him to ‘testify’, and what he had ‘heard’ from Christ which qualified him to ‘proclaim’ an authoritative message to others. If John’s claim to this twofold qualification is a true claim, then his identity is John the apostle.

g. The title ‘elder’

But in his second and third letters the title which the writer gives himself is not ‘apostle’ but ‘elder’. Why is this? Many recent commentators have answered this question by arguing that there were in fact two Johns (who may or may not both have lived in Ephesus), John the apostle and John the presbyter (or ‘elder’), and that it is the latter who wrote the three letters. Some add that he wrote the Fourth Gospel also. What is the evidence that such a person existed? It is to be found in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, at the end of Book 3, in which he has been describing some of the outstanding personalities of the sub-apostolic period. His last chapter (39) is concerned with Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, whom he quotes as saying that ‘if anyone chanced to come who had actually been a follower of the elders’, he (Papias) would enquire about (or into) ‘the discourses of the elders, what Andrew or what Peter said, or what Philip, or what Thomas or James, or what John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples; and the things which Aristion and John the elder, disciples of the Lord, say’ (3.39. 4). Eusebius goes on immediately to draw attention to the double mention of John, once with the apostles and once with Aristion. He concludes that Papias was referring to two separate Johns, the apostle and the presbyter. On the strength of this, and in spite of his quotation from Irenaeus that Papias was ‘a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp, a man of primitive times’ (3.39. 1), he goes on to assert categorically that Papias ‘was in no sense a hearer and eyewitness of the holy Apostles’, but only learnt from ‘their pupils’ (3.39. 2).

But was Eusebius right in his interpretation? He was writing a

century later, and he had a poor opinion of Papias, who, he said, judging from his writings, 'was a man of exceedingly small intelligence' (3.39. 13). Papias was not only unintelligent, but 'an uncommonly clumsy writer' (Dodd). Certainly his statement about 'John the elder' is ambiguous. Brooke refers to 'the Elder John whom Papias so carefully distinguishes from the Apostle', while other commentators have doubted whether it was Papias' intention to distinguish between two Johns at all. They rightly point out that the seven apostles who are named in the quotation are themselves called 'elders' just like 'John the elder' (3.39. 4; cf. 3.39. 7), and maintain 'it is impossible that the term should bear different meanings within the compass of a single sentence' (Smith). Not only are the seven apostles and 'John the elder' alike 'elders', but they are both termed 'disciples of the Lord' as well. In this case, it may be asked, if the two Johns are the same person, why is he mentioned twice?

The ambiguity seems to be due to the fact that Papias has three categories in mind, according to whether they were 'disciples' in general or 'apostles' ('elders') in particular, and whether they were dead or still alive. What was common to the three categories is that they were all 'disciples of the Lord', who had known him in the days of his flesh. The seven were apostles or 'elders' as well as disciples, but were mostly dead. Aristion was alive as well as a disciple, but not an apostle. John was in a category of his own because only he possessed the three qualifications, being a disciple and an apostle/elder and alive. This is why he is mentioned twice: first with Andrew, Peter, Philip and the others who, though not alive, were like him apostles or elders, and secondly with Aristion who, though not an apostle/elder, was like him still alive.

This interpretation is suggested by the change of tense, to which Plummer, Smith and others have drawn attention, from what the apostles/elders 'said' (*eipen*) to what Aristion and the elder John 'say' (*legousin*). They argue cogently that Papias was claiming to draw his materials from two sources; one was second-hand, namely the 'followers' of the apostles/elders who had heard them during their lifetime, and the other first-hand, namely living eyewitnesses, whether disciples like Aristion or the only surviving apostle/elder, John. Since Papias had heard the teaching of John in both ways, from others by report and from his own lips, he mentions him twice. If

it cannot be proved that this, and not Eusebius' interpretation, is the correct one, it must at least be conceded with Dodd (who believes that the author of the three letters was a 'presbyter John' distinct from the apostle) that Papias 'expresses himself so loosely in the crucial passage that it would be possible to hold that he intended to include apostles in the wider class of presbyters'.

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, is also quoted in support of the theory of two Johns. He himself had come from Asia and was familiar with the writings of Papias. In his famous *Adversus Haereses* (5.33, 36) he refers several times to a group of people whom he names 'the presbyters, disciples of the Apostles'. He seems to be referring to 'those who had companied with Apostles, and had perhaps been placed in office by them' (Brooke), who thus 'formed a link between the apostles and the next generation' and 'transmitted ... the apostolic traditions' (Dodd). He also sometimes mentions such a presbyter in the singular (4.47, 49; 1.8, 7 and *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.8. 8 'a certain apostolic elder, whose name he bequeaths to silence'), but there is no indication that he means the presbyter John, whom in fact he does not mention. He does, however, refer to the apostle John, and calls him a 'disciple of the Lord', which is the same title used by Papias for the seven apostles/elders, Aristion and 'John the elder'.

Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century was quoted by Eusebius (3.39. 6; 7.25. 16) in confirmation of his theory that there were two Johns: 'since it is said both that there were two tombs at Ephesus, and that each of the two is said to be John's'. This statement needs to be treated with considerable caution. To begin with, Eusebius does not appear to have any personal knowledge of these two tombs; he is merely quoting Dionysius. Dionysius claims no personal knowledge of them either, but only that 'it is said' there were two tombs and it 'is said' that both were John's. Further, Dionysius had a reason for wanting to distinguish two Johns: he was determined to find a John other than the apostle to whom he could attribute the book of Revelation, which he did not like. Finally, even if at one time there were two tombs at Ephesus bearing John's name, it is more likely that they were rival claimants for the tomb of the same John than separate tombs of two distinct Johns. Certainly Polycrates, who was Bishop of Ephesus at the end of the second century, and who sent to Bishop Victor of Rome a list of earlier Christian

celebrities who had been buried in Asian cities, does not mention 'John the elder'; he does, however, mention the apostle John and Polycarp as having their graves in Ephesus. It is not until Jerome (d. 420) that a second tomb was said to be either an alternative site for the same John's grave, or the grave of another John 'the elder', who according to the opinion of many was the author of the shorter letters (*De Viris Illustribus* 9).

It is probable that Eusebius adopted the theory of two Johns for the same reason as Dionysius, namely that he disapproved of the Revelation for its supposed millenarian views and wanted to ascribe it to an author other than the apostle John. He therefore proposed 'John the elder' and quoted Papias and Dionysius in support of such a person.

It must be admitted that grounds for believing in a second John, 'the presbyter', are extremely scanty. Plummer does not hesitate to write: 'there is no independent evidence of the existence of a second John. Papias, as interpreted or misinterpreted by Eusebius, is our sole witness ... We, therefore, give up the second John as unhistorical.'

Turning now from the vexed question of the historicity of a distinct 'presbyter John', let us suppose for a moment that such a person existed, and ask: Could he have been the author of these letters? Scholars find themselves in difficulties here because some want him as the author of the letters, while others want him as the author of the Gospel, and yet others as the author of the Apocalypse. Leaving aside this rather unseemly scramble for the patronage of the shadowy presbyter John, in order to attribute to him writings for which it is desired to relieve the apostle John of responsibility, is there any evidence that this presbyter wrote the letters? Westcott describes such a view as 'purely conjectural' and adds that 'there is not the least direct evidence external or internal in its favour'.

We agree, of course, that the author of the two short letters called himself 'the elder'. He must have done so, without adding his name, only because his identity was so well known and his authority so well recognized that he could use the title without needing to qualify or amplify it. Moreover, since the two letters were written to different churches, he was evidently known and acknowledged in a wide area

of the province of Asia. It is plain, as we read his letters, that he is intimately acquainted with their affairs, and accepts responsibility for their spiritual oversight. He loves them, exhorts them, teaches them, warns them, commands them. Is it possible that a man of such prominence, who exercised such authority and wrote three letters which are included in the New Testament canon, should have left no more trace of himself in history than one dubious reference by Papias? It seems far more probable that this widespread authority was that of the apostle John, who, according to well-attested tradition, lived to a ripe old age in Ephesus. Eusebius says (3.23. 1, 3, 4) that 'he whom Jesus loved, apostle alike and evangelist, even John' lived on in Asia, 'directing the churches there', according to Irenaeus 'until the time of Trajan' (reigned AD 98–117). Such was his far-flung 'diocese' that, in the words of Clement of Alexandria also quoted by Eusebius, 'he used to go off, when requested, to the neighbouring districts of the Gentiles also, to appoint bishops in some places, to organize whole churches in others...' (3.23. 6).

If the author was the apostle John, we still have to ask why he styled himself 'the elder'. To begin with, there is nothing strange about an apostle calling himself an 'elder'. The title had been taken over from the Jewish eldership, and elders were appointed in Christian churches at least from the time of Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 14:23). The apostle Peter used the title of himself, calling himself a 'fellow-elder' of those he was addressing in his letter (1 Pet. 5:1). And we have seen that the Papias quotation, whichever way it is interpreted, calls the apostles 'elders' also. But why did John use the absolute title '*the* elder'? Of course the word literally means an 'old man', 'senior' or 'veteran', and it is possible that John assumed, or was given, the title in his old age, much as Paul called himself 'Paul the aged' in his letter to Philemon (v. 9, AV; although there the word is the similar *presbytēs*, not *presbyteros*). It is not necessary to speak of the title as an 'affectionate nickname', like our 'The Old Man' (Dodd), which John would be unlikely to use in a formal and solemn pastoral letter. But as a serious title, it would be particularly appropriate to the apostle who had outlived the other apostles. He would not have dreamt of calling himself 'the apostle', for all the apostles shared the same special divine commission. He was only '*an* apostle', as Paul and Peter also styled themselves (e.g. Rom. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1).

But he could be called *'the elder' par excellence*. There were other elders in Ephesus, but he was unique among them because he was an apostle as well, and a veritable patriarch in age. It is even conceivable that the later technical use of the title 'elders' for 'disciples of the apostles' was derived from John, who as the last surviving apostle and 'the elder' was the link between the apostolic and the sub-apostolic periods. As 'the elder', whose leadership was accepted, he exercised a widespread supervision of the Asian churches surrounding Ephesus, perhaps especially the six others named in the seven letters of Revelation 2 and 3.

We conclude, therefore, that although we can only guess how and why the writer came to style himself 'the elder' in this anonymous and absolute way, the use of the title tends to confirm the unique position of the person who held it. Such an exceptional position, together with the author's authoritative tone and claim to have been an eyewitness, are fully consistent with the early tradition of the church that these three letters were in fact written by the apostle John.

2. Occasion

A number of authors have argued that the letters of John are to be regarded rather as pastoral than as polemical writings. There is some truth in this assertion. For John certainly exhibits a tender, pastoral care for his readers. His first concern is not to confound the false teachers, whose activities form the background of the letters, but to protect his readers, his beloved 'children', and to establish them in their Christian faith and life. Thus, he defines his own purpose in writing as being 'to make our joy complete', 'so that you will not sin', and 'so that you may know that you have eternal life' (1:4; 2:1; 5:13). Joy, holiness, assurance: these are the Christian qualities the pastor desires to see in his flock. John's first letter is 'a masterpiece in the art of edification' (Findlay).

Nevertheless, John also has a polemical purpose. His first letter is not a theological treatise written in the academic peace of a library, but a tract for the times, called forth by a particular and urgent situation in the church. This situation concerns the insidious propaganda of certain false teachers. 'I am writing these things to you