

Reading 3 John Within a Jewish Framework: An Overdue Reconsideration of the Text

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Abstract

This article challenges the interpretive decision made by many scholars to group 3 John with the rest of the Johannine Epistles (and sometimes John's Gospel). This interpretative method fails to treat 3 John, as well as the rest of the Epistles, on their own terms. It also often places these texts within a hypothetical 'Johannine Community' and its various phases of development. However, if 3 John is read on its own, the text itself points us to interpret it within a Jewish framework. The seemingly lack of interest in Jews and Judaism, rather than being a sign of a later date when this group was no longer rooted in any Jewish community and no longer cared about such issues, is a sign that the epistle dates from a period before this community of Christ-believers began to markedly differentiate themselves from other Jews. These points, as well as the author's use of τὸν ἔθνικόν when describing the missionary work by some of those within the community, may also suggest that the conflict between the Elder and Diotrephes was related to disagreements over the nature of missionary work within the early Jesus movement.

Keywords

3 John, Early Christian Identity, Early Christian Mission, Judaism

I. Introduction

When it comes to scholarship on the Johannine literature, it would be fair to say that the Third Epistle of John has received little attention compared to its counterparts in the corpus.¹ It is not only the shortest text in the New Testament, but also one with seemingly little to contribute theologically. As a result, these other texts in the

Johannine corpus have often clouded scholarly treatments of the historical backdrop of 3 John, resulting in the loss of the epistle's individuality. While in recent years there have been some scholars who have highlighted the importance of reading each of the Johannine Epistles (and John's gospel) apart from one another,² there is still work to be done.

¹ John Christopher Thomas, 'The Order of the Composition of the Johannine Epistles', *Novum Testamentum* 37.1 (1995): 68-75, on 74.

² E.g. Judith Lieu, *I, II, & III John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: John Knox, 2008); Toan Do,

Rethinking the Death of Jesus: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Hilasmos and Agape in 1 John 2:1-2 and 4:7-10, CBET 73 (Leuven: Peeters-Leuven University Press, 2014), 1-26.

In what follows, this article will seek to show that the text of 3 John, particularly the Elder's use of τὸν ἔθνικός in verse 7, points us to interpret it within a Jewish context, which remains a minority position in scholarship. It will also argue that a philosophical difference related to the nature of early Christian mission may underlie the conflict between the Elder and Diotrephes (3 John 9-10), which would also point to an earlier composition date for 3 John than previously thought. In doing so, I hope to highlight and build upon the recent work by those scholars who have stressed the importance of reading these texts individually, and within a Jewish framework.³

II. Reexamining the Text

A. *The Place of 3 John in Past Scholarship*

As with the rest of the Johannine Corpus, 3 John is usually placed within the context of a 'Johannine Community'. While this community is entirely a scholarly construction with many well-known methodological issues, its general premise has nonetheless been highly influential.

Raymond Brown and J. Louis Martyn were some of the first to forcefully argue for some reconstruction of this community while also breaking down its development into various stages.⁴ Within these reconstructions 3 John, as well as the rest of the epistles, are situated in a later and less Jewish context compared to John's gospel.

While there has been pushback against the idea of a Johannine Community and the endeavor to reconstruct it, many still place 3 John in a later period. For example, in his recent article on the matter, Hugo Mendez, although thoroughly rejecting the idea of a Johannine Community, contends that the textual data itself provides 'reasons to assign the gospel priority.'⁵ Even between the three epistles, Mendez argues that 3 John (and probably 2 John) 'should date to the latest stratum of Johannine texts.'⁶

This comparatively late dating of 3 John has significant consequences in terms of how we interpret the epistle. It is often argued that unlike John's gospel, 3 John displays little to no interest in Jews or Judaism, indicating that 3 John is from a later period.⁷ Rather, it is focused, much like 1 and 2 John, on the conflict within Johannine circles over how to properly interpret the Gospel of John and the nature of Jesus' divinity.⁸ This type of debate,

³ E.g. Daniel R. Streett, *They Went Out From Us: The Identity of the Opponents in First John* (Berlin: Humbert & Co., 2011); Birger Olsson, *A Commentary on the Letters of John: An Intra-Jewish Approach*, trans. Richard Erickson (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013); Matthew D. Jensen, 'John is No Exception: Identifying the Subject of εἰμί and Its Implications', *JBL* 135.2 (2016): 341-53.

⁴ Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) and J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harpers & Row, 1968). See Raymond Brown, *Epistles of John*, AB 30 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), where Brown elaborates on the place of the epistles within his reconstruction of the Johannine Community.

⁵ Hugo Mendez, 'Did the Johannine Community Exist?' *JSNT* 42.3 (2020): 350-74, on 358.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 24-5. Cf. Paul Anderson, 'Antichristic Crises: Proselytization Back into Jewish Religious Certainty – The Threat of Schismatic Abandonment', in *Text and Community: Essays in Commemoration of Bruce M. Metzger*, vol. 1, J. Harold Ellens (ed.) (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2007), 217-40, on 237-40. Streett, *They Went Out*, represents one of the more recent works that argue in favor of placing the Johannine Epistles (in Streett's case specifically 1 John) within a Jewish context.

⁸ Marinus de Jonge, 'The Gospel and the Epistles of John Read Against the Background of the History of the Johannine Communities', in *What We Have*

Bibliowicz argues, ‘could take place only among Gentiles.’⁹ Although not everyone would agree with Bibliowicz, such proposals situate 3 John a fair distance away from any kind of Jewish roots or influences. But within discussions of 3 John and its seemingly elusive historical backdrop, few have paid ample attention to the use of τὸν ἔθνικός in 3 John 7 and its potential implications for how we situate 3 John historically.

B. Interpreting and Explaining τὸν ἔθνικός

Since 3 John is often dated into the second century and, in many respects, severed from any Jewish influence, the vast majority of scholars argue that τὸν ἔθνικός in 3 John 7 must refer to non-Christian Gentiles. In the context of the letter itself, the Elder is explaining to Gaius why these ‘brothers’, who were most likely missionaries and/or emissaries, are worthy of hospitality and support. One of the reasons the Elder cites is that these missionaries ‘went out on the behalf of the Name’ while ‘accepting nothing from the Gentiles (τῶν ἔθνικῶν).’¹⁰

While we should be cautious not to read too much into a single word, τὸν ἔθνικός would be a ‘rather pejorative way’ to speak about Gentiles, especially if the audience of the letter was predominately Gentile in makeup.¹¹ Furthermore, few have offered an explanation as to why the Elder felt the need to mention this point in the first place, since we have no evidence of early Christian missionaries accepting support from non-

believers. This is supported by what is found in other early Christian texts, such as the *Didache*, that discuss early Christian mission. For example, when addressing the subject of false traveling teachers, the *Didache* does so under the assumption that these teachers are believers of one sort or another, even if they bring an ‘incorrect’ doctrine with them (*Did.* 11). Indeed, many of the signs that would reveal a teacher to be ‘false’ are based on their actions rather than their doctrine.

In response, it is sometimes argued that these missionaries, if anything, were more like Paul, who preached the gospel without demanding funds for personal use, rather than ‘Hellenistic’ and ‘popular philosophers’ who ‘peddled their wares.’¹² However, this does not necessarily mean that early Christian missionaries were not entitled to such monetary support. For example, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul’s defense of his monetary policy testifies to the fact that the norm for early Christian missionaries was to accept support, as was their right, and proclaimed by Jesus himself (see 1 Cor. 9).

3 John itself also argues against this assertion since these missionaries are not actually preaching the gospel free of charge but are taking support from Gaius and, presumably, other Christians as well. Indeed, the Elder expects that such support would and should be provided by other Christians (v. 8). All of the evidence we have speaks to early Christian missionaries being viewed as wage-earning workers, not as charismatic beggars of one sort or

Heard From the Beginning: The Past, Present and Future of Johannine Studies, Tom Thatcher (ed.) (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 127-44, on 135-37. Cf. David Rensberger, ‘Conflict and Community in the Johannine Letters’, *Interpretation* 60.3 (2006): 278-91.

⁹ Abel Mordechai Bibliowicz, *Jews and Gentiles in the Early Jesus Movement: An Unintended Journey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 75.

¹⁰ ὑπὲρ γὰρ τοῦ ὀνόματος ἐξῆλθαν μηδὲν λαμβάνοντες ἀπὸ τῶν ἔθνικῶν. Translation is my own.

¹¹ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians – Volume 1: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), 402.

¹² Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 372. Cf. Lieu, *I, II & III John*, 273.

another.¹³ Of course, the situation in Johannine circles might have been similar or might have been different, but one should not argue for either position without corroborating evidence.

To avoid delving into too much speculation or repetition of dated ideas regarding a particular Johannine ‘school’ or ‘community,’ a few general points are worthy of note, with the hope of further elaborating on the above discussion and contributing to recent scholarly trends regarding the Jewish context of the epistles and the importance of reading each epistle in its own right.

III. 3 John in the Future of Johannine Studies

Although one can forcefully argue in favor of reading the Johannine Epistles apart from any other texts or constructed communal history, it is hard to deny some kind of relationship between the texts included in the Johannine corpus. Thus, a fruitful approach, exemplified in Toan Do’s recent work on the issue, is to treat each Johannine epistle as distinct from John’s gospel and independent from one another, without flatly denying any kind of ‘dialectical’ relationship between the texts.¹⁴

With this type of approach in mind, it would also be advantageous to more seriously consider the possibility of a thoroughly Jewish historical context behind

3 John. As mentioned earlier, there has been some recent work arguing in favor of a Jewish background for the Johannine epistles, but most of that work has been centered on 1 John. However, the language of 3 John hints at the author’s Jewish ethnic background. In response to the common observation that 3 John is not concerned at all with Jews and shows no signs of polemic with Jewish communities, Brumberg-Kraus rightly contends that 3 John represents ‘an early stage in the development of Jewish-Christian Johannine communal identity before this Johannine sect began to differentiate themselves dramatically and polemically from other Jews.’¹⁵

A. *Early Christian Mission in 3 John*

Another potential avenue for additional exploration is the missionary context of 3 John and the conflict between the Elder and Diotrephes. Although there are some scholars who argue that a theological or hierarchical issue underlies this conflict, many have followed in the footsteps of Abraham Malherbe, who argued that this conflict is best understood in light of ancient hospitality and related social issues.¹⁶ However, an argument could be made that a doctrinal issue related to their respective missionary philosophies may have something to do with why Diotrephes refused to welcome the missionaries (v. 9). But these doctrinal issues were not related to

¹³ Judith M. Gundry, ‘Having One’s Cake and Eating it Too—or Not: Paul’s Defense of Apostles’ Eating Other People’s Food and Not Doing So Himself, in 1 Corinthians 9’ (paper delivered in the SBL program unit, Early Christianity and the Ancient Economy Section, 2012 annual meeting, Chicago), 17-18.

¹⁴ Toan Do, ‘The Epistles of John’, in *The State of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, Scot McKnight and Nijay K. Gupta (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 444-58. A very similar approach was pioneered by Judith Lieu, *The Second*

and Third Epistles of John (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986).

¹⁵ Johnathan Brumberg-Kraus, ‘The Third Letter of John’, in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd edn, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 529; Olsson also makes a similar argument. See Olsson, *An Intra-Jewish Approach*, 37.

¹⁶ Abraham J. Malherbe, ‘The Inhospitability of Diotrephes’, in *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, Abraham Malherbe (ed.) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 92-112.

a specific Christology or some kind of Gnostic tendency, as some have argued. Rather, the doctrinal issue was related to the fact that the Elder/missionaries refused to accept support from Gentiles (τὸν ἔθνικός), and if the Elder/missionaries considered themselves Jewish, this could also include Gentile Christ-followers.

As Lieu entertains in her commentary, Diotrophes may have refused to welcome and support the missionaries not because of their personal association with the Elder, but because he disagreed with what they stood for.¹⁷ Along similar lines, Peter Rhea Jones, in his work on the role of mission in the Johannine Epistles, argues that the ‘critical issue centers in opposition to the mission, not just the Elder...’¹⁸ Thus, the Elder invokes the fact that the missionaries did not accept anything from the Gentiles (v. 7) to further justify his plea to Gaius to extend such support to them and not follow the actions of Diotrophes.¹⁹ If Diotrophes did have an issue with what the Elder/the missionaries stood for, one of the points of disagreement between them could have centered around their refusal to accept support from the Gentiles and/or Gentile Christians.

We do have evidence in the New Testament, specifically the letters of Paul, of differences between early Christian missionaries causing conflict. For example, in Galatians, Paul paints the situation as a struggle between him, the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:8), and ‘those from James’. In Gal. 2:11-14, Paul criticizes Peter, who is the acknowledged apostle to the circumcised

(2:8), since he backed away from fellowship with Gentiles because of fear of the ‘circumcision faction’ (2:12). That is to say, there were clearly disagreements over how Gentiles were to be ‘properly’ incorporated into the family of Jewish Christ-believers and what actions could be considered appropriate for a Jewish Christ-believer in the midst of non-Jewish believers.²⁰

If seen from this perspective, the author’s use of τὸν ἔθνικός takes on a different meaning, otherwise the author’s use of this type of vocabulary is odd and seemingly unnecessary. In other words, why does the Elder feel the need to tell Gaius that these missionaries have not accepted any support from τὸν ἔθνικός?²¹ As discussed above, the most common arguments put forward, that the Elder is either asserting that these missionaries have not accepted support from non-believing gentiles or is distinguishing these missionaries from the many other philosophers and itinerants who peddled their messages, simply does not hold up to the evidence that we do have, none of which supports the notion that early Christian missionaries accepted support from non-believers or were charismatic beggars of one sort or another.

IV. Concluding Thoughts

When 3 John is read in a Jewish context, the use of τὸν ἔθνικός, as well as the nature of the letter as a whole, can be more clearly understood. Reading 3 John apart from the Johannine corpus also helps in this respect. Instead of placing 3 John within a

¹⁷ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 276.

¹⁸ Peter Rhea Jones, ‘The Missional Role of ὁ Πρεσβυτερος’, in *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (eds.) (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 141-156, on 148.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Olsson, *An Intra-Jewish Approach*, 41-43. See James D. G. Dunn, *Neither Jew nor Greek: A*

Contested Identity (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 12-25, for a more detailed treatment of the issues related to early Christian identity.

²¹ The proposal that the phrase is simply a rhetorical tool the author is using to exhort Gaius, while plausible, falls short of an adequate explanation. In any case, this explanation is not often put forward in scholarship on the matter.

complicated reconstruction of a Johannine community, or pinning the theological statements made in 1 and 2 John as the backdrop to the conflict in 3 John, simpler explanations are justified.

Rather than dating 3 John to a later period because it shows little to no interest in Jews or Judaism, perhaps these interests do not surface because 3 John is from a much earlier period 'before this Johannine sect began to differentiate themselves dramatically and polemically from other Jews.'²² And if we take the evidence we have concerning early Christian missionaries seriously, the Elder's statements in 3 John 7 make much more sense. In short, as the interest and advancement in Johannine studies continues to grow, 3 John, and the Jewish context that may underlie it, deserve more attention and may prove to be a fruitful avenue for further insights.

²² Brumberg-Kraus, 'The Third Letter', 159.