

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

3 JOHN

THEME

Author and Title

See Introductions to [1 John](#) and [2 John](#). Like 2 John, 3 John claims to have been written by “the elder,” most likely the apostle John. In NT times and into the post-apostolic era, “elders” (Gk. *presbyteroi*) could refer to the pastoral leaders of local congregations. They appear by this title first in [Acts 11:30](#), which speaks of church leaders (pastors) in Jerusalem in the mid-40s A.D. Paul and Barnabas appointed “elders” to be ministers in the churches they planted ([Acts 14:23](#)). “Elders” presided at the Jerusalem council (c. A.D. 49) alongside the apostles ([Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4](#)). Nearly a decade later Paul addressed the “elders,” apparently the pastors of churches at and probably around Ephesus ([Acts 20:17](#)). “Elders” at Jerusalem were alongside head elder James when Paul reported back to the church at the end of his third missionary journey ([Acts 21:18](#)). This shows that the title “elder” for pastoral leaders at Ephesus had been in use 20 to 40 years by the time 2 and 3 John were written. It was widely employed in the early church, particularly around Jerusalem but also in distant areas like Ephesus. The fact that Peter understood himself to be a “fellow elder” of church leaders across a wide geographical area ([1 Pet. 5:1](#)) makes it plausible for John to have referred to himself in the same manner.

Date

See [Introduction to 2 John](#). John probably writes from around Ephesus in the last quarter of the first century.

Theme

The theme of 3 John is steadfastness in the face of opposition. The recipient of the letter, Gaius, faces a troublemaker named Diotrephes. By “walking in the truth” ([vv. 3, 4](#)), Christians can embrace and live out the apostolic message that John conveys in all his letters.

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Purpose, Occasion, and Background

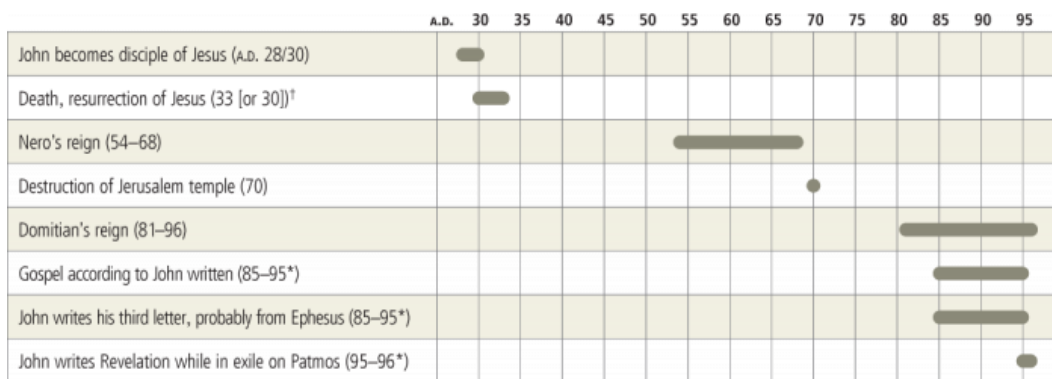
It has been suggested that 2 and 3 John were originally preserved because they were part of a single packet containing all three Johannine letters. On this view, 3 John was a personal letter to Gaius commending the courier of the shipment, Demetrius ([v. 12](#)); 2 John was to be read aloud to Gaius's church; and 1 John was a sermon for general distribution and not a letter in the strict sense. This scenario cannot be verified but is a useful hypothesis in envisioning how John's letters could have arisen and been preserved in early Christianity. Unfortunately, no other information about Gaius has survived.

Key Themes

1. The support of traveling Christian workers is noble and needful.	5-8
2. Church discipline can be necessary for healthy ministry to flourish.	9-10
3. The integrity of faith is proven by actions.	11

Third John is so brief, personal, and situation-specific that its “themes” are really just emphases:

Timeline



* denotes approximate date; † signifies either/or; ‡ see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. 1809–1810

History of Salvation Summary

Since Christ has accomplished salvation, believers are to continue in his truth. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the [Overview of the Bible](#).)

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Literary Features

Third John is a personal epistle, addressed to a friend of the author. The customary epistolary conventions are evident: an opening salutation, a body of instruction, and concluding greetings. Reinforcing the identity of this book as a personal letter is the way in which it is built around references to specific acquaintances from start to finish. Whereas 2 John was written to an unidentified church, this letter is filled with references to specific people and situations. It speaks of hospitality to traveling Christians. The main motif is “a home away from home,” and accompanying that, the pattern of arrival and welcoming of guests.

Outline

- I. Greeting: The Elder’s Joy at Gaius’s Faithfulness (vv. [1-4](#))
- II. Praise for Gaius’s Support for Itinerant Christian Workers (vv. [5-8](#))
- III. Concern about Diotrephes (vv. [9-10](#))
- IV. Advice and Commendation of Demetrius (vv. [11-12](#))
- V. Closing with Promise to Visit (vv. [13-15](#))¹

¹ Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 2443-2444). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.