OK, we return now to some of the books in the New Testament attributed to “John.” I have talked at some length about the Gospel of John and the community that appears to lie behind it. I now move to the three epistles of John, found among the “catholic” or “general” epistles near the end of the New Testament. (When I was at Princeton Seminary, one day I went into the men’s room and over the three urinals, in sequence, someone had written, as graffiti, 1 John; 2 John; 3 John. I guess it was a seminary joke....).

All of this is in preparation for a series of blog posts being written for us by my colleague Hugo Mendez, in which he will argue *against* the idea of a Johannean community. (!)

Before talking directly about these three letters, I need to explain one of the most common ways scholars analyze epistolary literature in the NT (i.e. the books that started out as actual *letters* — written by a Christian author to a community or another individual). I have taken this from my book *The New Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction*, edited slightly to make good sense here.

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**THE CONTEXTUAL METHOD**

With the Johannean epistles we come to the first New Testament writings of our study that are not, strictly speaking, narratives. The Gospels each narrate accounts of Jesus’ words, deeds, and experiences. The epistles, on the other hand, are writings of Christian leaders to individuals or churches to address problems that have arisen in their communities. Indeed, it is safe to say that all of the New Testament epistles are written in response to situations that the authors felt a need to address. Given the “occasional” nature of these letters (meaning they were written for certain occasions), how should we go about studying them? The question, of course, relates not only to the Johannean epistles but to all the others as well, including those appearing under the name of the apostle Paul.

One method widely used by scholars to study such occasional literature can be called “contextual analysis.” The method is particularly useful to historians who are interested in knowing not only what this literature says or teaches but also the specific historical circumstances that led to its production. As you will see, this approach is closely related to the socio-historical method described in Chapter 10 (that I described earlier on the blog in relation to the Gospel of John; see [https://ehrmanblog.org/the-social-history-behind-the-fourth-gospel/](https://ehrmanblog.org/the-social-history-behind-the-fourth-gospel/)). That method focuses on the social history of the community as it can be traced over a period of time, and the text is used to provide evidence for reconstructing that history. In the contextual method, the principal concern is the literary text itself; the social history of the community that is presupposed by the text is used to explain some of its important features.

The concern for understanding the socio-historical context within which an occasional writing was produced is rooted in a theoretical view of language shared by many scholars that knowing a document’s historical context is absolutely vital for its interpretation. According to this view, words convey meaning only within a context; thus, when you change the context of words, you change what they mean.

This is because, as we have seen, words and phrases do not have any inherent meaning but ...
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What Are The Epistles of John?