This will be the final post in my thread on the Gospel and Letters of John. Here I will reflect further on what we can about the epistles and the context out of which they emerged.

If you want to read more, check out my chapter in The New Testament: A Historical Introduction.... In that chapter I explain how views similar to those found in these Johannine writings eventually contributed to what we now call Gnosticism. (That, of course, is a whole *other* story.) As always, at the end of the chapter in my book, I give suggestions for further reading.

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At this stage you may have recognized one of the difficulties of this kind of contextual analysis [i.e. that I explained in the previous chapter] It is very hard for the historian to know for a fact that the Johannine secessionists actually taught that it was unimportant to love one another and to keep God’s commandments. The problem is that the only source we have for the secessionists’ views is the author of the Johannine epistles, and he was their enemy.

As we know from other kinds of literature, ancient and modern, it is a very tricky business to learn what people say and do on the basis of what their enemies say about them. Imagine trying to reconstruct the beliefs and practices of a modern politician on the basis of what the opposing campaign says! Sometimes enemies misunderstand their opponents’ views, or distort them, or misrepresent them, or draw implications from them that the other party does not.

What, then, do we actually know about the Johannine secessionists? Do we know for a fact that they were docetists who taught others to disobey the commandments and live in sin? No, what we know is that this is how the author of 1 John portrays them. Some scholars are inclined to accept this portrayal as accurate; others are more cautious and say that we only know how the author himself perceived the secessionists. Others are still more cautious and say that we do not even know how the author perceived them, only how he described them. The issue is not easily resolved, and it is one you need to be alert to as you yourself engage in contextual studies of the New Testament writings.

With these caveats in mind, let me ...

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