I can now describe and explain the letters of 1, 2, and 3 John. 1 John has always been one of my favorite books of the New Testament, and only takes a few minutes to read; the final two are incredibly short, less than a page each. Think about reading them!

The author never gives us his name. But because the books are so similar in theme and writing style to the Fourth Gospel—whose author from antiquity was thought to be Jesus’ disciple John—these letters were also assigned to him. Critical scholars today almost entirely think that the author was not the *same* person as the author of the Gospel, and was almost certainly not John the Son of Zebedee. He probably was, though, an author living in the same community, at a later time, with a similar point of view.

Here is how I explain what these letters are by situating them in a historical context in light of what was happening in the author’s community. Again, this is taken from my *New Testament: A Historical Introduction*. If you’re interested in this kind of information for all the books of the New Testament—that would be a good place to start (7th edition, Oxford University Press).

I will be treating these letters as a group of works produced by the same author at roughly the same time. The first is an open letter or persuasive treatise written to a community (1 John), the second a personal letter to the same community (2 John), and the third a personal letter to an individual within it (3 John). There are clues within the letters themselves concerning the historical context that prompted the author to produce them. The first step in the contextual method of interpretation is to examine these clues and use them to reconstruct the situation.

The most important event in the recent history of this community is that …

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[private] The most important event in the recent history of this community is that it experienced a serious rift. The author of 1 John indicates that a faction from within the community split off from the rest of the group and left in a huff: “They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us” (1 John 2:19).

Why did this Christian community split, with some members leaving, presumably to start their own congregation? In the next few verses the author designates those who left as “liars” and “antichrists,” a word that literally means “those who are opposed to Christ.” He then contrasts them with those who have remained, who “know the truth.” What do these antichrists believe that makes them so heinous to this author? He indicates that they have “denied that Jesus is the Christ” (2:22). The author’s language may appear to suggest that those who have seceded from the community, a group that some scholars have labeled the “secessionists,” are Jews who failed to acknowledge that Jesus is the messiah. But they used to belong to the community, that is, they were Christians. In what sense, then, could they deny that Jesus is the Christ?
There are two other places where the author discusses these “antichrists.” In 1 John 4:2–3 the author claims that unlike those who belong to God, the antichrists refuse to confess that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” A similar statement occurs in 2 John 7, where the antichrists are called “deceivers who have gone out into the world” and are said to deny that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” These descriptions suggest the secessionists may have held a point of view that we know about from other sources from about the same period, such as the writings of Ignatius (which we will be discussing at greater length in Chapter 28). Ignatius opposed a group of Christians who, like Marcion a few years later (see Chapter 1), maintained that Jesus was not himself a flesh-and-blood human being but was completely and only divine. For these persons, God could not have a real bodily existence; God is God—invisible, immortal, all-knowing, all-powerful, and unchanging. If Jesus was God, he could not have experienced the limitations of human flesh. For these people, Jesus only seemed to experience these limitations. Jesus was not really a human; he merely appeared to be one.

These Christians came to be known by their opponents as “docetists,” a term that derives from the Greek verb for “appear” or “seem.” They were opposed by Christian leaders like Ignatius who took umbrage at the idea that Jesus and the things he did, including his death on the cross, were all a show. For Ignatius, Jesus was a real man, with a real body, who shed real blood and died a real death.

It may be that the secessionists from the Johannine community had developed a docetic kind of Christology. In the words of the author, they “denied that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh.” If they were, in fact, early docetists, then a number of other things that the author says in these letters makes considerable sense. Take, for instance, the opening words of 1 John. Readers who do not realize that the essay is being written because a group of docetic Christians have seceded from the community may not understand why the author begins his work the way he does, with a prologue that in many ways is reminiscent of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel (with which he was probably familiar):

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father, and was revealed to us. (1:1–2)

Once a reader knows the historical context of the epistle, however, this opening statement makes considerable sense. The author is opposing Christians who maintain that Jesus is a phantasmal being without flesh and blood by reminding his audience of their own traditions about this Word of God made manifest: he could be seen, touched, and handled, that is, he had a real human body, and he shed real blood. Thus, the author stresses the importance of Jesus’ blood for the forgiveness of sins (1:7) and of the (real) sacrifice for sins that he made (2:2; 4:10).

What led a group of Johannine Christians to split from the community because of their belief that Jesus was not a real flesh-and-blood human being? We have seen that after the community was excluded from the synagogue, it developed a kind of fortress mentality that had a profound effect on its Christology. Christ came to be seen less and less as a human rabbi or messiah and more and more as a divine being of equal standing with God, who came to reveal the truth of God to his people only to be rejected by those who dwelt in darkness. Those who believed in him claimed to understand his divine teachings and considered themselves to be children of God. By the time the Fourth Gospel was completed,
some members of the Johannine community had come to believe that Jesus was on a par with God.

It appears that Christians in this community did not stop developing their understandings of Jesus with the completion of the writing of the Gospel. Some of them took their Christology a step further. Not only was Jesus equal with God, they came to believe, but he was God himself, totally and completely. Moreover, if he was God, he could not be flesh because God was not composed of flesh; Jesus therefore merely appeared to be a human.

This view proved to be too much for some of the other members of the community; battle lines were drawn, and a split resulted. The Johannine epistles were written by an author who thought that the secessionists had gone too far. For this author, Christ was indeed a flesh-and-blood human being; he was the Savior “come in the flesh,” whose blood brought about salvation from sin. Those who rejected this view, for the author of the epistles, had rejected the community’s confession that the man Jesus was the Christ and so were antichrists.

The charges that the author levels against the secessionists do not pertain exclusively to their ideas about Christ. He also makes moral accusations. He insinuates that his opponents do not practice the commandments of God (2:4), that they fail to love the brothers and sisters in the community (2:9-11; 4:20), and that they practice sin while claiming to have no contact with it (1:6–10). It is possible that, in the mind of the author at least, these moral charges related closely to the doctrinal one. If the secessionists undervalued the fleshly existence of Jesus, perhaps they undervalued the importance of their own fleshly existence as well. In other words, if what really mattered to them was the spirit rather than the flesh, then perhaps they were unconcerned not only about Jesus’ real body but also about their own. Thus, they may well have appeared totally uninterested in keeping the commandments that God had given and in manifesting love among the brothers and sisters of the community. This would explain why the author stresses in his letters the need to continue to practice God’s commandments and to love one another, unlike those who have left the community.[/private]