

THE THREE WITNESSES AND THE ESCHATOLOGY OF 1 JOHN

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1. *The Challenge of Eschatology in 1 John*

The relationship between the eschatology of the Fourth Gospel and the eschatology of 1 John is hotly disputed. The difficulties in building any sort of consensus view are grounded in the first instance on the fact that there is considerable diversity of opinion on the nature and balance of eschatological perspectives in the two documents taken separately; inevitably, the permutations increase when the two documents are compared.

Virtually everyone acknowledges that the Fourth Gospel is characterized by realized eschatology. Discussion on this theme in the Gospel becomes complex when the passages that are avowedly futurist in their orientation (primarily Jn 5.24-29; 6.43, 54; 11.23-27; 14.2-3; 17.24; 21.22) are dismissed as exceptions, assigned to later redactors,¹ or interpreted in such a way that their futurist orientation is neutralized.² But virtually no one would deny that the Fourth Gospel, as we have it, though it includes a few passages with a futurist orientation, lays primary emphasis on realized eschatology.

On the face of it, 1 John lays a little more emphasis on futurist

1. Even most of those who do not accept the detailed source criticism of Bultmann are usually content to assign Jn 21, with its critical reference to Jesus' return (v. 22), to a later hand.

2. E.g., R.H. Gundry, "In my Father's House are Many *Μοῦαί*" (John 14.2)', *ZNW* 58 (1967), pp. 68-72, argues that 14.2-3 refer to the fellowship the disciples of Jesus will enjoy with Jesus through the Spirit. More dramatic is the work of A. Stimpfle, *Blinde Sehen: Die Eschatologie im traditions-geschichtliche Prozess des Johannesevangeliums* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), who argues that the apparently futurist passages are nothing of the kind: they are the evangelist's sleight-of-hand, carefully crafted 'misunderstandings' to lead astray the unenlightened. The elect will see them for what they are.

eschatology. Not only do we find apocalyptic expressions (*ἔσχατη ὥρα, παρουσία, ἀντίχριστος*) absent from the Fourth Gospel, but there is open anticipation of the future judgment when we shall see Christ (or God—the text could be rendered either way) and be like him (1 Jn 2.28; 3.2). Although believers have already passed over from death to life (3.14), and for them eternal life is a present possession (5.12, 13)—certainly Johannine themes—what does the small change in emphasis signify?

For Dodd, it signals a return to a more primitive eschatology.³ For Lieu, 'It is wrong to find in 1 John (a return to) a "primitive" future eschatology, although it may be that the author is picking up the language of this type'.⁴ She argues that the futurist themes 'are used to say something about the present' (but isn't that true even of all apocalyptic?), and 'they do not change the perspective of the picture'.⁵ Bultmann is as happy to assign apocalyptic elements in 1 John to an ecclesiastical redactor as he is to adopt such a course in the Fourth Gospel,⁶ though on the face of it the futurist elements are so interwoven into the text that they cannot be so easily dislodged.⁷

Klein argues that in the Fourth Gospel the light that has come into the world is focused in the ministry of Jesus, whereas in 1 John the darkness is gradually passing away and the light is triumphing in the period after Jesus' resurrection.⁸ He therefore concludes that there is a greater 'historicizing' of eschatology in 1 John:⁹ the Antichrist is not future but present, the last hour has already arrived, and so forth, even while certain futurist elements receive more emphasis than in the Fourth Gospel. But how much of these and related changes owe everything, or

3. C.H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), pp. xxxiv-xxxvi, liii-liv.

4. J. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 90.

5. Lieu, *Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, p. 90.

6. R. Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), *passim*.

7. Cf. G. Strecker, *Die Johannesbriefe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), pp. 54-55.

8. G. Klein, "Das wahre Licht scheint schon." Beobachtungen zur Zeit- und Geschichtserfahrung einer urchristlicher Schule', *ZTK* 68 (1971), pp. 261-326.

9. The expression is much used by R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), who argues that 1 John 'revived an earlier stratum of Johannine thought' (p. 99) in order to combat perceived secessionist distortion.

at least a substantial amount, to the author's (authors'?) decision in the first instance to write a *gospel*, and in the second to write, if not exactly an epistle, some sort of tractate that does not purport to set out the life and ministry and death of the Messiah, however much it insists on the importance of those events? Certainly some of the distinctions discovered by scholars should be assigned to the difference in genre. Nevertheless, many studies of the eschatology of John and of 1 John use the shape of this theme in the two documents (and often in the sources perceived to underlie these documents) to assist in the re-creation of the history of the Johannine community.¹⁰ Collaterally, some scholars deploy perceived differences in the eschatology of John and of 1 John to argue against common authorship,¹¹ or at very least to argue for a certain chronological sequence in the writing of the Johannine corpus (something already implicit in persistent scholarly references to 1 John 'returning' to a 'more primitive' form of eschatology).

Clearly one's assessments in this area are tied to a nexus of other complex judgments, for example, whether 1 John is written against the background of some kind of rising proto-gnosticism (still the majority view), and if so what kind, or, alternatively, one of the more imaginative positions—for example, the view of Grayston, that 1 John was written before the Fourth Gospel,¹² or the view of Brown, that the secessionist opponents behind 1 John are arguing their case on the basis of their own reading of the Fourth Gospel, and that this case cannot rightly be said to embrace gnosticism.¹³ They are also tied to one's reconstruction of first-century Christianity. Did Christian eschatology develop in a straight line, so that one can reliably plot the date and origins of a document by simply analyzing the eschatology it embraces? Or was there some tension between realized and futurist eschatology from the first, leaving plenty of scope for varied emphases dictated not only by personal preference but also by any author's perception of the most urgent need?

10. E.g. M.-E. Boismard, 'L'évolution du thème eschatologique dans les traditions johanniques', *RB* 68 (1961), pp. 507-24; G. Richter, 'Präsentische und futurische Eschatologie im 4. Evangelium', in P. Fiedler and D. Zeller (eds.), *Gegenwart und kommendes Reich* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1975), pp. 117-52.

11. Not least Klein, 'Licht'.

12. K. Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984).

13. Brown, *Epistles*.

In this short paper, it is neither possible nor desirable to introduce the numerous points that are at issue. Instead, I shall probe one passage, the passage on the three witnesses, and draw attention to two or three points that are usually overlooked. This passage is one of several that simultaneously invite reflection on the position of John's opponents, and say something about the Spirit, who is clearly to be reckoned with in any accounting of Johannine eschatology. Then, assuming the exegesis, I shall consider its bearing on the evaluation of the eschatology of 1 John.

2. *The Three Witnesses Reconsidered*

Bonnard has rightly articulated the contribution of 1 Jn 5.6-7:

On abandonne maintenant la victoire de la foi [see v. 5] pour rappeler inlassablement qu'elle n'est possible que comme la foi à un certain Jésus. L'épître n'a pas été écrite pour susciter la foi, mais pour la sauvegarder, non dans ses propres qualités, mais dans son objet. L'authenticité de la foi lui vient, non de sa radicalité, mais de son objet historique, Jésus 'en chair'.¹⁴

The three witnesses, then, are meant to add substance and evidence to the repeated christological confession of 1 John: 'the Christ' or 'the Son of God' is Jesus.¹⁵ Any exegesis of these verses must account for at least the following points: (1) the force of *διὰ*; (2) the reason why *διὰ* governs both 'water' and 'blood'; (3) the reason for the shift to the preposition *ἐν* in the next line; (4) the reason why the preposition *ἐν* is repeated before both 'water' and 'blood'; (5) the reason 'water' and 'blood' now become articular; (6) the force of the *οὐ μόνον... ἀλλὰ* construction. In addition, it would obviously be helpful if some plausible background could be linked with the proposed exegesis.

The principal interpretations that are regularly advanced are three. In addition, three more or less idiosyncratic proposals have been advanced in recent years.

14. P. Bonnard, *Les épîtres johanniques* (Geneva: Labor & Fides, 1983), pp. 106-107.

15. I have argued elsewhere that 'Jesus' is the complement, not the subject, though that will make little difference to my argument here; see D.A. Carson, 'The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20.31 Reconsidered', *JBL* 108 (1987), pp. 639-51.

1. The water refers to baptism and the blood refers to the eucharist. In this sacramental reading, the Spirit could refer either to a third sacrament that some find in the anointing passages (2.20, 27) or to the Holy Spirit as the agent who in some way renders the other two effective. Although this interpretation was popular in the fourth and fifth centuries (Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria), and found its supporters in the nineteenth century, it is now relatively rare. It has been espoused by Cullmann,¹⁶ and has more recently been defended by Brooks¹⁷ and Grech.¹⁸ Despite their best efforts to argue that for John the eucharist constitutes a pointer or ‘witness’ to Jesus’ humanity, they are entirely unconvincing. ‘Blood’ is an unprecedented way of referring to the eucharist; more importantly, there is simply no evidence that John is responding to secessionist doubts about the value of the Lord’s Table. Throughout 1 John, the author focuses on the reality of the historical manifestation of the Son of God, not the disputes over the modes by which Jesus makes himself known in the church. And if someone argues, as Brooks does, that the eucharistic presence of Christ might well serve as a pointer to the historical reality that undergirds it, then the argument is surely backward. Quite apart from debates about just what the eucharist actually meant to Christians in the Johannine tradition, the idea of an appeal to the eucharist to defend the incarnation strikes me as a remarkable case of appealing to the weak to defend the strong, or, better, of appealing to the derivative to defend the source. True, two or three decades later Ignatius criticizes an anti-eucharistic group (*Smyrn.* 6–7), but that group may well have been made up of Jewish Christians, and it is far from clear that they are the same people as the docetists who are also occasionally framed from time to time in Ignatius’s sights. Moreover, the sacramental interpretation makes little of the exegetical details—why, for instance, that pesky *διὰ*? And exactly what does one make of the third witness, the Spirit? What *textual* appeal does one make to fit the Spirit into this interpretation (as opposed to theological arguments in the sacramental tradition)?

16. O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (London: SCM Press, 1953), p. 110 n. 1.

17. O.S. Brooks, ‘The Johannine Eucharist: Another Interpretation’, *JBL* 82 (1963), pp. 293–300.

18. P. Grech, ‘Fede e sacramenti in Giov 19,34 e 1 Giov 5,6–12’, in Puis-Ramon Tragan (ed.), *Fede e sacramenti negli Scritti giovannei* (Rome: Abbazia S Paulo, 1985), pp. 149–63.

But if the sacramental reading of 1 Jn 5.6 is no longer widely accepted as the primary meaning of the passage, several scholars detect either a secondary allusion to the sacraments, or a shift in meaning within the passage itself. Affirmations of *secondary* allusions are notoriously difficult to deny; they are usually highly dependent on antecedent theological commitments. More intriguing is the suggestion that *δι’ ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος* refers to the historical Jesus, while *ἐν τῷ ὕδατι καὶ ἐν τῷ αἵματι* refers to the sacraments.¹⁹ But most of the same problems apply to this variation of sacramental interpretation. Its one significant variation, the distinction between the *διὰ* phrase and the *ἐν* phrases, is unconvincing, for the *οὐ μόνον...ἀλλά* construction surely rules it out. If John had written *οὐ δι’ ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος ἀλλ’ ἐν τῷ ὕδατι κτλ.*, presumably one could have made a case for it. But because the *οὐ μόνον* part of the construction has already shifted to the preposition *ἐν* but covers only the first of the two nouns, viz. ‘water’, then the entire construction, if it follows on from the preceding line at all, really must have the same referents for ‘water’ and ‘blood’ as in that preceding line. The reason why the preposition changes must then lie elsewhere. In short, from a syntactical point of view this is an exceedingly unlikely rendering.

Yet another variation of the sacramental interpretation distinguishes between the meaning of v. 6 and the meaning of vv. 7–10 or vv. 8–10. In this view, ‘water and blood’ have some other meaning (still to be explored) in v. 6, but take on sacramental meaning in vv. 7–10. I think this unlikely, but it does not greatly affect my argument. I shall briefly discuss it a little farther on.

2. In recent years a view that has gained substantial support is that the epistolary author is making explicit reference to Jn 19.34–35.²⁰ The

19. See B.F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St John: The Greek Text with Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 4th edn, 1966 [1892]), p. 182. Cf. similarly J. Bonsirven, *Épîtres de Saint Jean* (Paris: Beauchesne, 2nd edn, 1954), *in loc.*; H. Windisch, *Die katholischen Briefe* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 3rd edn, 1951), *in loc.* Cf. also E. Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), p. 312.

20. So Brown, *Epistles*, p. 578; R. Kysar, *I, II, III John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), pp. 107–108; M.M. Thompson, *1–3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 132–33; with some variations, cf. also H. Balz, ‘Johanneische Theologie und Ethik im Licht der “letzten Stunde”’, in W. Schrage (ed.), *Studien zum Text und zur Ethik des Neuen Testaments* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), pp. 35–56.

strength of this view is that Jn 19.34-35 is the only other Johannine passage where water and blood are joined. The flowing of the blood and water from Jesus' side is understood to anticipate, among other things, the gift of the Spirit (note the apparent connection between water and Spirit in 7.37-39). The secessionists, in this view, are happy to stress Jesus' baptism, but do not take on board the significance of his death for their Christology. They may have believed in some true incarnation, but thought of that incarnation as taking place at Jesus' baptism, with nothing of great Christological significance taking place after that point: 'nothing further was salvifically necessary'.²¹ So John is denying that the 'coming' (clearly an important word in 5.6) at Jesus' baptism was sufficient; he is insisting that 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God, fully came as Savior of the world (1 Jn 4.14) *only* [emphasis mine] through his death when he served as an atonement for the whole world (2.2)'.²²

The apparent weakness of this view—namely, that the οὐ μόνον... ἀλλά construction demands two referents, 'water' referring to one and 'blood' referring to the other, not one 'blood and water' incident—is rebutted by its proponents. The Presbyter, they argue, is denying the secessionist claim that Jesus came by water, by insisting that he came by 'water and blood', that is, he substitutes a different reference point drawn from Jesus' earthly mission.²³ But this will not do. That is precisely what μόνον will not allow: John does not say 'not this, but that'; he says 'not *only* this, but that'. Moreover, on this reading 'water' has to change its referent in midstream (at the risk of a bad pun): the 'not (only)' element has to refer to Jesus' baptism, yet the 'but' element has to be linked with 'blood' so that the two nouns together refer to the incident of Jn 19.34-35. Moreover, as Smalley has pointed out,²⁴ this interpretation depends to no small degree on a disputed interpretation of Jn 19.34-35. If that passage does not symbolize the giving of the Spirit, or, at some primary level, the provision of the sacraments (a denial many commentators are happy to make),²⁵ the proposed interpretation of 1 Jn 5.6 seems even more remote.

There are still more reasons for rejecting this second interpretation.

21. Brown, *Epistles*, p. 578.

22. Brown, *Epistles*, p. 578.

23. Brown, *Epistles*, p. 574; Thompson, *Epistles*, p. 133 n.

24. S.S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), pp. 277-78.

25. E.g. C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2nd edn, 1978), pp. 556-57.

(a) In Jn 19.34-35, the order is 'blood and water'; here it is 'water and blood'. If the author of 1 John were trying to make an allusion to Jn 19.34-35, it is strange that he did not cite the crucial words in the same order. The arguments advanced to explain the reversed order might have some minor weight if it were already clearly established on other grounds that direct dependence between the two texts exists; failing such evidence, these arguments sound circular at best, weak special pleading at worst. (b) This view necessarily makes nothing of the change from διὰ to ἐν. This objection is scarcely fatal to the interpretation, of course; while at least half a dozen explanations of the change have been proposed, nowadays the majority of scholars think there is no difference in meaning, and that the change is purely 'stylistic'. Often they quote Heb. 9.12, 25, where first one preposition and then the other governs 'blood' as that *with or by which* one enters (εἰσέρχομαι) the most holy place. Most of these scholars take διὰ to be governing 'the genitive of accompanying circumstances',²⁶ and the ἐν rather similarly.²⁷ But although John is notorious for his slight changes in vocabulary without much (or any detectable) semantic shift, in this case one must notice that, as far as I know, there is no clear evidence that διὰ plus the genitive ever has anything but local force when it is construed with a simple verb of coming or going.²⁸ This still leaves some difficulties to face (see below), but if this syntactical judgment is right it tells against this second interpretation of the passage. (c) Brown suggests that this interpretation may be related to the later Mandaean literature (citing *Ginza Right* 2.64.10-14).²⁹ Of course, this is put forward as nothing more than a mild suggestion. But it is vaguely disquieting to find a willingness to tie a passage in 1 John to sources from a half millennium later, combined with a spirited denial that Cerinthus has anything to do with the background (see further below). (d) Finally, this interpretation, though it rightly sees the importance of Jesus' death in 1 John as the climactic saving point in the mission of the historical Jesus (see especially 2.2, and the quotation from Brown,

26. So, for instance, Grayston, *Epistles*, p. 136.

27. In the latter case, scholars often refer to BDF §§198(4), 219(4).

28. 'Denkbar ist freilich auch, dass die Partikel διὰ in Verbindung mit ἔρχομαι, eine lokale Bedeutung impliziert'; so Strecker, *Johannesbriefe*, p. 273 n. 10 and references there.

29. *Epistles*, p. 578. My access to the Mandaean literature is through the Lidzbarski translation.

above), it is curiously reticent about the more obvious Johannine connection, namely, the major christological credal statements on which so much turns (2.22-23; 4.2, 15; 5.1, 5; cf. 2 Jn 7).

In short, this second interpretation does not seem very convincing.

3. By far the most common interpretation (though it has many variations) is the one that sees in 'water' and 'blood' symbols for Jesus' baptism and death respectively. Certainly it has been repeatedly shown that 'water' can easily stand for baptism, and 'blood' for death or sacrificial death. Objections have usually been of two sorts: (a) Why does the one preposition *διὰ* govern both 'water' and 'blood'? Brown thinks this syntactical datum tells against this view, and favours his (i.e. the second view, above): coming by (*διὰ*) water and blood should be understood as a composite action.³⁰ I am inclined to agree; but as we shall see, one form of this interpretation not only meets Brown's objection, but is strengthened by it. (b) Increasingly it is argued that the background usually proposed to support this interpretation, namely, the heresy of Cerinthus, cannot be reliably tied to 1 John, and therefore should not enter into the discussion. I shall challenge that point shortly.

How the third witness, the Spirit, is understood on this interpretation of 1 Jn 5.6 varies a great deal. Before offering support for a particular version of this interpretation, I should briefly mention some of the more idiosyncratic views.³¹

4. Grayston offers a significant variation on the second interpretation.³²

Since water is associated with life, illumination and truth, and blood is a biblical symbol for violence, suffering and sacrifice, the Johannine image may mean that the violence endured by Jesus is accompanied by life and light to those who have seen and borne witness; or even that the benefits symbolised by water cannot be had apart from the sufferings symbolised by blood.³³

As for Spirit, the third witness, Grayston's view depends on his reconstruction of the position of the secessionists: they have adopted the

30. *Epistles*, p. 577.

31. By 'idiosyncratic' I mean no opprobrium; I mean only to say that, so far as I know, each of the views (or specific versions of those views) I now mention is held by only one person.

32. *Epistles*, pp. 136-38.

33. *Epistles*, p. 137.

stance that with the reception of the Spirit nothing more is needed; John replies by a reference to Spirit used as in 4.1: spirit prompted prophetic utterance must be controlled by the Johannine tradition.

Grayston's interpretation seems to depend on thematic associations he finds for water, blood and Spirit in biblical and extra-biblical literature, with too little attention paid to the flow of the argument in 1 John 5. It is unclear to me how water and blood, in his view, witness to who Jesus is, which is surely required by both the immediate and the epistolary contexts. It is beyond the scope of this essay to criticize his understanding of the stance of the opponents, on which his grasp of this passage substantially depends, except to say that it is *sui generis*.

5. Richter has argued at some length that both water and blood refer to Jesus' physical birth, that is, to his incarnation. The docetists (understood to be the opponents) denied that the Christ had a genuine human birth; John affirmed it.³⁴ Richter has been challenged by Wengst³⁵ and Brown.³⁶ It is unclear that John specifies exactly when the incarnation took place: why specify the birth, as opposed to the conception (certainly Luke's witness)? Richter assumes that John's opponents were docetists, and argues that they held that Jesus had only an apparent body, made of water. John replies in terms of the physiology of the day (Wis. 7.2): the human embryo is made up of a woman's menstrual blood, and of male semen. His response, in other words, is that Jesus' body is real, of water and blood, not just water. But the connection of 'unreal' bodies with water alone is late. Enosh-Uthra, the Mandaean Saviour, was thought to be garbed in water (*Ginza Right* 1.29.5),³⁷ but the source is exceedingly late. When much earlier Ignatius emphasizes blood against his adversaries (*Smyrn.* 1.1; 12.2), he is referring to the cross, not the incarnation. And in any case Richter's view does not adequately handle the reference to the Spirit, the third witness.

34. G. Richter, 'Blut und Wasser aus der durchbohrten Seite Jesu (Joh. 19,34b)', *MTZ* 21 (1970), pp. 1-21.

35. K. Wengst, *Häresie und Orthodoxie im Spiegel des ersten Johannesbriefes* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1976), pp. 19-20.

36. *Epistles*, p. 576.

37. Even here, however, as Brown points out, there is no contrast with blood.

6. Witherington ties this passage to one of the possible interpretations of Jn 3.5.³⁸ He holds that 'born' or 'begotten of water and spirit', read in the light of Jn 3.6 and the background he sketches in, refers to natural birth and spiritual birth. Applying that use of 'water' to 1 Jn 5.6, he argues that the three witness are the incarnation (water, a reference to Jesus' physical birth), the passion (blood), and the Spirit. Elsewhere I have argued against his interpretation of Jn 3.5;³⁹ here I would only add that, even if he were right on Jn 3.5, it would not follow that he is right here. Water has a variety of symbolic values in the New Testament, and none of the associations it enjoys in Jn 3.5 is carried over here.

The interpretation of 1 Jn 5.6 I wish to defend is a variation on the third: Jesus came through water (his baptism) and blood (his death). Without attempting a detailed exegesis, it may be helpful to organize the discussion around the following points:

1. On this view the *διά* is significant: Jesus came *through* water and blood—the obvious local meaning of this preposition with the genitive, when bound with a verb of coming or going. It is often objected that whereas this makes good sense with respect to the water (Jesus came *through* the water at his baptism), 'no good sense' can be attached to the notion of coming 'through blood'.⁴⁰ But this, surely, confuses the symbol with the thing symbolized. Doubtless Jesus came through water at his baptism, but that is scarcely the point: he came through *baptism*; he came through *death*. The point is especially telling if John is responding (as I shall argue) to a Cerinthian-type heresy. It appears that Cerinthus taught that the Son/Spirit/Christ fell on Jesus at his baptism, and left him while he was still hanging on the cross, that is, *at* his death. John argues that this one person, Jesus Christ, came *through* both the baptism and the death: he was, in other words, one person, Jesus Christ, before the baptism and after the death, and he came *through* both epochal events.

38. B. Witherington, 'The Waters of Birth: John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6-8', *NTS* 35 (1989), pp. 155-60.

39. D.A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 191-96.

40. So, *inter alios*, I.H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 232 n.6; Smalley, *Epistles*, p. 280; C. Haas, M. de Jonge and J.L. Swellengrebel, *A Translator's Handbook on the Letters of John* (London: UBS, 1972), p. 118.

2. Similarly, it is significant that the one preposition governs both 'water' and 'blood', that the nouns are anarthrous, and that they are in that order (instead of the order found in Jn 19.34-35). Coming *through* both the baptism and the death is one significant composite action. The focus of attention, from this perspective, is not on the baptism itself, or on the passion itself, but on the coming that brought Jesus Christ through both of them, and in that order.

3. The shift to the preposition *ἐν*, the distribution of the preposition over both nouns, the use of the article with those nouns, and the οὐ μόνον...ἀλλά construction, all serve the same purpose. From one perspective, it was important for John to stress that the one person, Jesus Christ, came *through* both the baptism and the passion; from another perspective, it was important to stress Christ's death over against the baptism; at least the opponents (whether followers of Cerinthus or other gnostic heretics akin to those described by Ignatius and later fathers) had some place for Jesus' baptism. The passion, by contrast, could be dismissed, from their perspective, as quickly as possible. That element of the problem was best addressed by distinguishing the two events: Jesus Christ came *not only* in the one, *but also* in the other. The preposition *ἐν*, then, does not here govern a dative of accompanying circumstances, namely, water and blood. As in the previous line, that is to confuse the symbol and the symbolized. Christ came in the 'water-event' and in the 'blood-event', that is, not only in his baptism but also in his passion. This is simply a metaphorical use of the simple locative *ἐν*, a common function of the preposition. The articles, then, are either anaphoric, or help to draw attention to two definite, distinguishable events.

4. A very large number of reasons have been put forward as to why the Spirit is now identified as the third witness. There is little point in canvassing them here; the larger commentaries do a masterful job of surveying most of the options. But if the line of interpretation being advanced here is correct, then it is tempting to think that the 'third witness' theme is directly dependent on Jn 1.32-34, in connection with Jesus' baptism. There John the Baptist testifies,

I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit'. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.

If this is the passage to which the epistolary author refers, then his point is that even in their interpretation of Jesus' baptism they are wrong, and none less than the Holy Spirit contradicts them.

It will not do to protest that the evangelist does not actually describe Jesus' baptism. For that matter, he does not actually describe the institution of the memorial supper, either. Virtually no one doubts that the events themselves are presupposed. But this passage (Jn 1.32-34) has several instructive features that would make it an attractive reference point for the author of 1 John.⁴¹ First, the one to whom the Baptist bears witness is 'the Son of God', twice used in the epistolary christological confessions (1 Jn 4.15; 5.5; cf. 2.23). Secondly, the Baptist's witness is cast in such a way that the text makes clear that the descent of the Spirit does not *constitute* Jesus as the Son of God, but *identifies* him as the Son of God. That is entirely in line with the point derived from the force of *διὰ* with a form of *ἔρχομαι*: against Cerinthus, Jesus the Son of God, one person, existed before the baptism, came *through* the baptism, and was (according to the Baptist) identified to others by the experience of the Spirit's descent. Thirdly, quite clearly it was the Spirit's function, descending as a dove, to bear witness to Jesus the Son of God in this regard. That is precisely why the Spirit is here introduced into the discussion. Thus the heretic who ignores what John says not only misunderstands the true nature of Jesus' baptism and passion, but refuses to listen to the Spirit's witness, clearly given.⁴² Fourthly, at the same time this particular announcement to John the Baptist of the role of the Spirit in identifying the Son of God was given by the One who sent him to baptize, that is, by God himself. This paves the way, I suspect, for John's insistence, in 1 Jn 5.9, on the importance of heeding God's testimony—it is God himself who stands behind the three witnesses.

5. If this is correct, there is no need to follow the many commentators who argue that, whatever the interpretation of 5.6, these later verses (5.7-10 or 5.8-10) clearly stress the sacramental. The many nuanced arguments need not detain us here; they have been briefly but

41. Although in my view the author of the Fourth Gospel and the author of 1 John are one and the same, my argument in this essay nowhere requires that identification.

42. It follows, of course, that this passage offers no support for some 'internal witness of the Spirit' theme (compare Rom. 8.15-17), *pace* T. Preiss, *Le témoignage intérieur du Saint-Esprit* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1946), pp. 36-39.

competently critiqued by Venetz.⁴³ If it is God himself who stands behind the three witnesses, then 'human testimony' in v. 9 is what takes place in common experience, while 'God's testimony' has been given in the three witnesses: the argument is *a fortiori*, and reinforces the line of thought already established.

6. Even if we knew nothing of what the fathers say about Cerinthus, the exegesis just advanced makes reasonable sense in its own right. Nevertheless, because at this point the heresy of Cerinthus meshes so closely with this line of interpretation, considerable controversy has broken out as to whether one can responsibly posit such a background. From Irenaeus we learn that Cerinthus taught that the Christ came upon Jesus at his baptism and abandoned him on the cross (*Adv. Haer.* 1.26.1); from some other fathers there is confirming evidence.⁴⁴ But doubts have been raised, principally on three fronts: (a) Some minimize the evidence of Irenaeus, once errors have been found in his work; (b) it is sometimes noted that some of the teachings of Cerinthus are not found in 1 John, such as the gnostic distinction between the supreme God and the inferior god who created the universe; (c) so far as our information goes, some themes important to 1 John, such as the rebuke of claims to sinlessness (1.6–2.2), would have no purpose among Cerinthian heretics.

I shall try to exonerate Irenaeus a little in my forthcoming commentary on the Johannine epistles.⁴⁵ Suffice it now to say that just because someone is wrong some of the time does not mean he or she is wrong all of the time! There is a sufficiently broad support for certain claims about Cerinthus, even if we rightly discount much of the later source material that becomes more and more speculative as time elapses, that it is premature to write off the evidence too quickly. As for the other two objections, it is surely right to recall that gnosticism was never a coherent and well-defined system. It was, as C.H. Dodd used to say, a 'theosophical hotch-potch'. To cite a contemporary parallel, it is not at

43. H.-J. Venetz, "'Durch Wasser und Blut gekommen": Exegetische Überlegungen zu I Joh 5,6', in U. Luz and H. Weder (eds.), *Die Mitte des Neuen Testaments: Einheit und Vielfalt neutestamentlicher Theologie, Festschrift für Eduard Schweizer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), pp. 345-61, esp. p. 355.

44. For admirable surveys of the evidence, see G. Bardy, 'Cérinthe', *RB* 30 (1921), pp. 344-73; Wengst, *Häresie*, pp. 24-34; Brown, *Epistles*, pp. 766-71.

45. NIGTC.

all difficult to find ‘Christians’ who have bought into some form or other of ‘new age’ spirituality totally inimical to their putative faith. In our (and the first century’s!) eclectic age, it is disturbingly common to find people adopting religious convictions in a smorgasbord fashion, with no feel for what belongs together, let alone what is intellectually coherent. Cerinthus should be set forward, then, not as the sole source of John’s ecclesiastical problems, but as a telling example of the kind of pressures that nascent gnosticism was beginning to exert on the church. To insist on utter alignment between 1 John and our flimsy sources for Cerinthus before one is permitted to discern any connections is totally unrealistic, not only because of the brevity of the sources (and their secondary nature in the case of Cerinthus), but also because of the intrinsic nature of virtually all branches of gnosticism.

In short, the three witnesses are Jesus’ baptism, Jesus’ death, and the Spirit-given witness to Jesus’ Sonship—all played out to combat a Cerinthian-like gnosticism.

3. Conclusion: The Bearing of the Three Witnesses on the Eschatology of 1 John

Of course, one cannot legitimately infer the entire background of an epistle by a cursory exegesis of one passage, a difficult and disputed passage at that. Nevertheless, if this interpretation of the three witnesses were sustained, along with an acknowledged background in the ‘theosophical hotch-potch’ that was gnosticism—in this case gnosticism with a Cerinthian flavour—then certain things might be usefully inferred about the eschatological emphases of this document.

1. The more concrete and novel the opponents, the less suitable it is to construct a ‘systematic theology’ of eschatology from 1 John and place it on some nicely erected trajectory of eschatological development. If both the Fourth Gospel and 1 John were presented as cool, reasoned attempts to set out, in dispassionate form, the convictions of their author(s)—something akin, say, to an ordination statement—then it would be worthwhile investigating the changes *as changes to a system of thought*. But the more obvious it is that one or the other is written in the heat of theological controversy, the less plausible it is to treat the author’s eschatological pronouncements, insofar as they bear on the controversy, as reflections of dispassionate and systematic thought.

2. If the background to 1 John is one branch or another of gnosticism,

resulting in fundamental christological aberrations and outright secessionism, then it is entirely understandable why 1 John should reflect a little more emphasis on futurist eschatology than does the Fourth Gospel. All branches of gnosticism were notorious for their emphasis on the present, on what they had already received. John finds himself in the awkward position of having to articulate the true joys of Christian experience *now*, while insisting that the best is still to come. Christianity that loses its eschatological orientation by the simple expedient of focusing all its attention on present blessings is crying out to be corrected by futurist emphases.

3. Talk about returning to a ‘more primitive’ eschatology is trifling. It assumes a straight line of development in relation to which there are apparent aberrations. The opposing thesis is far more likely: the tension between futurist and realized eschatology was present from the beginning, and in many instances the element that receives emphasis is determined by the need to rebut a particular opponent.

4. It follows that the eschatology of 1 John cannot be deployed as a reliable indicator of the date of the document, or of when it was written relative to the other documents of the Johannine corpus.

5. On the other hand, if the background to 1 John lightly sketched here is judged largely right, then it is plausible to argue, if not on the basis of the eschatological themes themselves, but on the basis of the known rise of gnosticism, that 1 John was written after the Fourth Gospel. Neo-platonic dualism troubled some branches of the church almost from its inception, but the rise of full-fledged gnosticism awaited the end of the first century and beyond. If the kind of docetic gnosticism confronted by 1 John had been a major concern when the Fourth Gospel was written, it is hard not to conclude that it would have been written slightly differently. This is not to agree with Käsemann, who argues that the Christology of the Fourth Gospel is docetic through and through.⁴⁶ It is simply to say that it is hard to imagine how the author could have resisted taking far more shots at the docetic errorists, had that been called for, granted some of the themes already present (cf. Jn 1.14!). It appears, then, that the Fourth Gospel was written before the gnostic controversy was really underway, at least in the horizons of the evangelist. By the time 1 John is written, that is no longer the case.

46. E. Käsemann, *Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (London: SCM Press, 1968).

6. Finally, the role of the Spirit in the three witnesses passage calls for further comment. It appears that 1 John appeals not to the Spirit's role as set forth in the Paraclete passages, but to the Spirit's role in connection with the baptism of Jesus. The former would have better suited an emphasis on realized eschatology; the latter largely ignores such niceties of the eschatological debate, and focuses on who Jesus Christ is. Granted the author's concern to combat a heresy in the christological arena, that is not surprising. But that is simply another way of saying that eschatological concerns are not at the top of the agenda in 1 John, but are deployed in a variety of ways to serve christological, ecclesiastical and pastoral interests.