

THE BOOK OF 3 JOHN

ORIENTING DATA FOR 3 JOHN

- **Content:** to borrow the words of New Testament scholar Archibald M. Hunter, 3 John is all about “the Elder, who wrote it; Gaius, who received it; Diotrephes, who provoked it; and Demetrius, who carried it”
- **Author:** the same elder who wrote 2 John (see 1 John)
- **Date:** probably in the A.D. 90s
- **Recipient:** Gaius, a beloved friend of the elder who lives in another town; other believers are to be greeted by name (v. 14)
- **Occasion:** an earlier letter to the church had been scorned by Diotrephes, who also refused hospitality to the elder’s friend(s) and disfellowshipped those who would do so; consequently John writes to Gaius, urging him to welcome Demetrius
- **Emphases:** the obligations of Christian hospitality, especially toward approved itinerant ministers

OVERVIEW OF 3 JOHN

This is the shortest letter in the New Testament and thus the shortest book in the Bible (it is twenty-five Greek words shorter than 2 John). Along with Philemon, it is a personal letter; unlike Philemon, it is a private letter as well.

At issue is Christian hospitality, as evidence that one is “walking in the truth.” The recipient, Gaius, perhaps a convert of John (v. 4), is a dear friend (vv. 1, 2, 5, 11; “dear friend” translates the Greek word *agapētos*, “beloved”). Along with the truth of the gospel (vv. 3–4), Gaius and the elder share the practice of Christian hospitality toward approved itinerants (vv. 5–8, 11–12).

Sandwiched between Gaius’s two responses of hospitality toward strangers is the opposite example of Diotrephes, who has a twofold problem: (1) He is self-assertive in terms of leadership in the church (KJV, “he loveth to have the preeminence”!), and (2) his way of asserting himself is to reject both a letter from the elder and the approved itinerants who were being commended to the church in that letter. In light of 1 and 2 John, one is tempted to see Diotrephes as also on the false teachers’ side of things, although doctrinal issues as such are not mentioned in this case. But in light of 2 John 10–11, hospitality toward strangers is not automatic; they must be approved as those who walk in the tr¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 420–421.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING 3 JOHN

This letter may seem strange to a North American culture, where itinerant ministers are usually *invited* to the church and put up in motels or hotels. But in some ways you might find the original recipients' culture more to your liking. In the first century, hospitality toward strangers was considered a virtue, and accommodations were often linked to a temple or synagogue. This practice became heart and soul for the earliest Christians. Thus if you were on the move, you could expect to receive hospitality within a local church community anywhere in the known world, a fact that runs throughout the New Testament. We find it in Jesus' sending out the twelve and the seventy-two (Luke 9:4–5; 10:5–8); it is mentioned by Paul as an expression of love (Rom 12:13) and is urged as a form of Christian conduct in Hebrews 13:2. By the very nature of things, such hospitality was usually expected of a householder, who was also the leader of the church (1 Tim 3:2), but it could also be the responsibility of any others who had sizable households (1 Tim 5:10).

Together 2 and 3 John help us see how closely connected a householder, hospitality in her or his house, and the church that meets in the house were in the first-century church. Strangers who claimed to be bearers of the good news about Jesus Christ needed to have letters of commendation (such as 3 John is for Demetrius) in order to be given Christian hospitality in the home that housed a church community. But even when the itinerants were well known (e.g., Titus in 2 Cor 8:16–24), they often carried a letter of commendation from a leader known to the community to which they were going (see Acts 15:23–29; Rom 16:1–2; cf. 2 Cor 3:1–3, where Paul is miffed at the idea that he needed such a letter in Corinth).

This cultural phenomenon is crucial to your understanding of 3 John, as well as of 2 John 10–11. In the present case, such a letter from the elder had accompanied some whom he had sent to a church; but Diotrephes had rejected it, refused hospitality, and disfellowshipped those who would like to have shown it—exactly the position the elder himself took in 2 John 10–11, indicating that the touchstone of everything is the gospel of Christ.²

² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 421–422.