

1 John Study Guide

“God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” -- 1 John 1.5b



Sunlight on the Mount of Olives

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1 John 1 -- Introduction

Overview -- The Un-Epistle Epistle

“For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.” — 1 John 3.11

The writings of 1 John (and 2/3 John) are unique to the group of material classified as epistles in our New Testament. Most of the New Testament epistles adhere to a standard template that includes three parts: the salutation, the body, and the closing.

The Salutation is an epistle’s opening movement, where the author identifies himself (often with a list of his credentials) and makes reference to his audience (see, for example, Romans 1.1-7 and 1 Peter 1.1-2 and James 1.1). Very often, the salutation includes an opening benediction or ascription of praise.

The Body represents the main block of material in the letter. The material can be directed to a specific congregation (like Galatians). Or the audience can be addressed in more general terms, such as James 1.1 or 1 Peter 1.1 who address “the exiles” or “the twelve tribes of the Dispersion.”

The Closing is characterized by a benediction that is often included with final instructions, greetings, warnings, and cautions. In some cases, the closing is very brief. Philemon’s closing, for example, is only three verses long (v 23-25). By comparison, the closing of Romans takes up all of chapter 16 and goes on like a “South Dakota Good-Bye” as it offers greeting from the whole extended clan before signing off.

1 John has no Salutation or Closing. The author didn’t even feel compelled to identify himself or list his credentials. There are not even any claims that the text’s author is John -- only later did Christian tradition assign authorship to this and the two epistles which follow.

These omissions suggest that the audience of 1 John and the author were well enough acquainted that there was no need for a list of the author's credentials to give the material in the epistle authority. The lack of a closing and a salutation also indicates that the community faced matters of grave urgency which left no time for any superfluous chit-chat.

Author and Audience:

In 1 John, the author employs the first person plural pronoun "We" in addressing his readers. This could be interpreted in several ways. By using the term "we," the author could be indicating that the thoughts shared in the epistle belong to two or more people -- perhaps those in leadership authority. Another possibility is that the author here employs "the plural of majesty" (like the queen of England when she declares: "We are not amused.").

No matter how the first person plural pronoun is interpreted, one thing is clear. Throughout 1 John, the author claims a high level of leadership authority over the community. In the challenges and admonitions which make up this text,



photo: Archeological remnants at Qumran, the community which produced the Dead Sea scroll. Like the believing community in 1 John, the Qumran community understood the world in terms of stark contrasts.

there is no wavering or hesitation. The author does not make suggestions to his readers; he makes demands.

This motif of authority is enhanced by the terms used to address the epistle's audience. No less than three different Greek terms are used by the author to identify his readers: children, little children, and young people. (See how all three terms are used in

the exhortations of 1 John 2.12-14.)

The terms translated as “children” or “little children” are common in the New Testament (as well as secular Greek literature of the same era). Often times, the word could be understood literally (see Matt 7.11). But, as in the case of 1 John, the term for “children” or “little children” can be interpreted figuratively — as the address of a superior to an inferior.

Language and Vocabulary:

Shared language and vocabulary provide the clearest ties between the writer of 1 John and the author of the fourth gospel. Compare the opening verse of John’s gospel with the opening verse of the epistle; both emphasize a perspective that looks in/at “the beginning.”

Other verbal themes are developed in the first chapter of 1 John which distinctly echo the opening movement of the fourth gospel. Themes of life, the contrast of light with darkness, and the concept of sin all are introduced in the initial verses of the epistle. A strong fondness for “the Word” is also shared between the epistle and the gospel.

Interpretive Strategies:

One of my seminary professors suggested that reading the epistles of our New Testament could be compared with listening to one side of a telephone conversation. We can’t hear the voice on the other end of the phone. Even so, we can make some conclusions about what that voice is saying.

That interpretive strategy works very easily with texts like 1 Thessalonians, 1 Peter, and Galatians. Since 1 John is an “un-epistle epistle,” this strategy is a little more difficult to employ -- but with some effort, you can “hear the voice on the other end of the line” and imagine the issues and challenges that gave rise to our text.

Here are some themes introduced in the opening chapter of 1 John that will be in play through the rest of the epistle and continue in 2 and 3 John:

Light/Darkness: Like the fourth gospel, the prevailing theology of 1 John is one of stark contrast. There is no middle ground. This is best exemplified in the

themes of light and darkness. John's argument is built on the statement of 1 John 1.5: "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." Either the believer and the believing community walk in that light or they are in darkness.

Sin: 1 John shares the fourth gospel's perspective of human sin -- which focuses on sin as a human condition rather than sins manifest in particular actions. In the fourth gospel, the first human words spoken about Jesus are found on the lips of John the Baptist, who declares: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1.29) Note that John's statement is in the singular (sin) not the plural (sins).

Both the gospel and the epistle understand sin as part of our human condition that is manifest in various transgressions. The concern is not in the acknowledgment and overcoming of these various transgressions but rather the eradication of the flaw which manifests itself in those transgressions. Perhaps it helps to think of this from a medical perspective -- John is interested in the transgressions of believers only as they are symptoms of the disease which needs to be treated.

Inside/Outside: In the epistle, John challenges his readers to make decision regarding light and darkness, sin and righteousness, belief and unbelief. Will the reader choose to "walk in the light as he himself is in the light" (1 Jn 1.7)? Or will they walk in darkness? Will they embrace the truth? Or will they live a lie? Like the fourth gospel, the author of the epistle makes the choices the reader must make very clear. There is no room for any middle ground. The reader has to decide.

1 John 2-- Introduction

“Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you.” — 1 John 2.24a

After the brief prologue of chapter one, the narrative of 1 John explodes in chapter 2 with exhortations, challenges, admonition, and warnings — particularly about “the last hour” and “the antichrist.” It is almost as if the believing community’s veneer is peeled back and the reader is allowed to grasp inner dynamics at work, shaping the community’s struggles as it seeks to remain faithful and pure.

What’s Going On? A careful reading of 1 John 2 reveals a number of significant realities for the believing community.

Stratification: The admonitions of v 12-14 seem to be directed to the various segments of the community. Little children, fathers, young people, and children are all addressed with unique exhortations. The different names may also suggest a hierarchy within the community that allows members to ascend as they gain more proficiency and knowledge. Except for the first and last groups, all these exhortations involve specific knowledge.

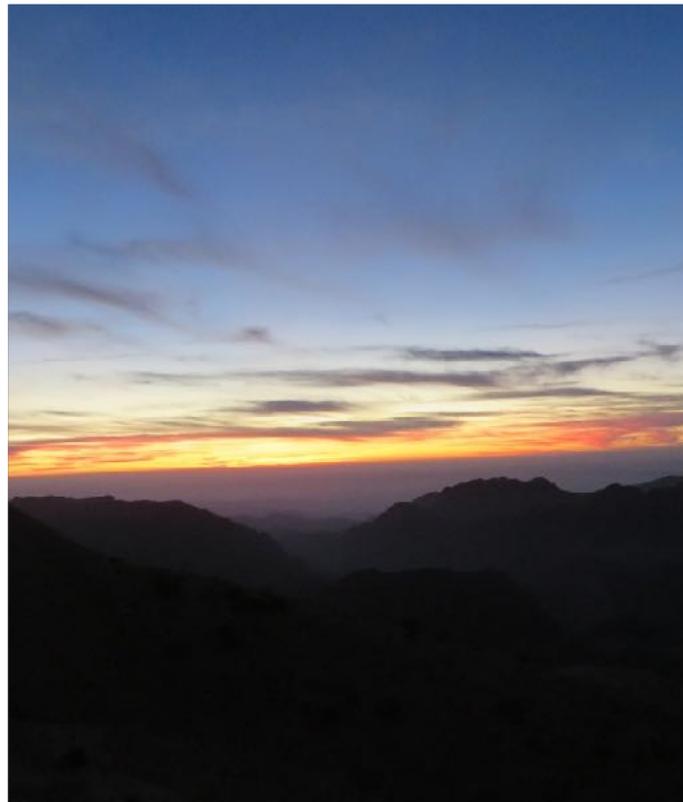
Stratification is part of any organization as it develops, and the different groups here suggest that the Johannine community has grown in sophistication as well as size. Subgroups differentiate from each other. Individuals belonging to one subgroup probably aspire to move to the next. One can imagine the communal novices (perhaps identified as “little children”) anxious to meet the requirements allowing it to ascend to the next category (possibly “children”).

Dissension and Conflict: Warnings of an antichrist are introduced in 1 John 2.18. Altogether, there are about half a dozen references to an antichrist in the New Testament. All of them are found in 1 and 2 John. In certain Christian circles,

there is an almost obsessive fixation with the idea of an Antichrist, as well as rabid speculation in regard to which prominent individual of the day can best claim the title.

Two things, I believe, are important here. 1 John 2.18 describes not just one but “many” antichrists. And v 19 declares: “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.” These individuals at one time belonged to the believing community. But they have broken away — creating a rival group which is perceived by the author of our text as a grave threat.

Understood in this contextual sense, the opponents of Christ (a literal meaning of the word “antichrist”) are opponents of the believing community’s teachings and values. They are believers who have gone rogue, threatening the community (and especially the community leaders) by challenging their authority and teaching.



“Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light.” --
1 John 2.10 photo: Sunset on the Arabian peninsula
near the ancient ruins of Petra.

Contrasts. The Epistle began with an emphasis on stark, contrasting themes: light/dark, truth/lies, clean/unclean. The list of contrasts grows in chapter 2 with categories that continue presenting the reader with stark, urgent choices. Obedience is opposed to disobedience. Being in the world is contrasted with not being in the world. Love and hate are oppositional categories, as are abiding/not abiding and transient/eternal.

The epistle’s author goes to extreme lengths to contrast those who are within the believing community with those on the

outside — who seem to be actively opposing the community. In addition to heightening the contrasts between those who are within the community and those who are outside it, the rhetorical force of the narrative makes the choice between them a matter of utmost urgency.

Key Terms: The strongest ties between the fourth gospel and 1 John are forged with a shared vocabulary. Like the fourth gospel, the language of 1 John is very common. But the terms that are shared with the New Testament and the secular Greek of the era have different (sometimes profoundly different) meanings.

Knowledge. “Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments.” — 1 John 2.3

The New Testament Greek has two distinct terms for knowledge: οἶδα and γινώσκω. There is a significant concentration in the use of both these terms in 1 John. In the Hebrew Bible, knowledge conveys a sense of intimate acquaintance — a sense that is used strongly in 1 John. This intimate acquaintance privileges those within the community and serves to separate them from outsiders.

In the New Testament world, religious and quasi-religious communities centered around a special, secretive knowledge were quite common. The community at Qumran (which produced what we know as the Dead Sea Scrolls) could be an example of this kind of community — centered, like John’s community, around a special knowledge which separated it from the larger society.

World: “Do not love the world or the things in the world.” — 1 John 2.15a

The Greek term for world (we know the word in English as “cosmos”) is used throughout the New Testament. In most cases, the term benignly refers to the material universe. But in the fourth gospel and the Johannine epistles, the “world” always refers to a place of hostility and opposition to God, Christ, and the believing community. For both the gospel and the epistles, an important and constant challenge involves intentional, sometimes radical separation from the world — ironically, the world which God so loved.

1 John 3

“Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” -- 1 John 3.2

The narrative landscape of 1 John changes again as the text moves into chapter 3. (It is important for us to realize that the chapter and verse designations are not original to any text of Scripture; they were added by later generations to provide ease in copying and referencing.) What is the best way to describe the contents of 1 John 3?

Here’s one analogy -- the content of this chapter resembles some of my less-than-efficacious sermons which hopped around from one point to another, without any real cohesion. Or, if you like food, try this analogy: 1 John 3 is like a buffet (remember such things from the good old pre-COVID days?) where the offerings are arranged haphazardly -- the pickled beets are next to the peach pie and ice cream, while the tossed salad is stuck in between the mashed potatoes and the roast beef.

All sorts of subjects are raised in the 24 verses of this chapter -- in no particular order and with no apparent cohesion. Reflections on what it means to be children of God quickly gives way to a discussion of sin and the devil. There is a warning not to be like Cain and an excursus on murder, equating murder with hatred (something Jesus himself did in his teaching in Matthew 5). The importance of love comes back as the chapter concludes with an emphasis on action and obedience to the commandments and a challenge to abide in Christ.

Reflections: Perhaps 1 John 3 is the most epistle-like chapter in this un-epistle epistle. Remember that reading the New Testament’s epistles can be compared with listening to one side of a phone conversation. Even though you can’t hear the voice on the other end of line, you can make assumptions about

what that voice is saying based upon the information that is available. With this in mind, we can make some conclusions about the challenges being faced by the believing community -- based on the witness of 1 John 3.

Uncertainty Over the Future: “Beloved, we are God’s children now. What we will be has not yet been revealed.” -- 1 John 3.2a

The future represented a source of great anxiety and concern for the communities of the New Testament. Part of our earliest New Testament documents (1 Thessalonians) addressed that future anxiety, which was specifically focused on the fate of those who had died (euphemistically referred to as having “fallen asleep”) prior to the return of Christ -- an event that was largely expected to take place within a generation of the Resurrection.

In 1 John, the anxiety over the future is more amorphous. It is difficult from a textual perspective to document one specific, overriding concern the community had for the future. Even so, the text allows us to make some “educated guesses.” Most obviously, there must have been concern over the community’s future as it was threatened by “children of the devil,” lawlessness, and impurity. With these hostile threats facing it, what would the community’s future look like? What specific part or role would the believing community have in that future? John’s message in this regard seems to be one of embracing human ignorance (as the old gospel hymn teaches, “I don’t know about tomorrow..”) and trusting divine providence.

Belonging/Not Belonging: “All who do not do what is right are not from God.” -- 1 John 3.11b

Although issues of human sinfulness seem to preoccupy part of this chapter, a careful reading of these verses (v 4-10) seems to suggest that the real issue at stake involves membership in the believing community. Members of the believing community are defined as those who do not sin (v 5-6), those who do what is right/righteous (v 7 and 10), those who are born of God (v 9), and those who love their siblings (v 10).

All communities have boundaries which serve the important purpose of defining their identity. Those boundaries can be formal or informal. They might be subtle or obvious. Sometimes boundaries are vigorously policed -- preventing anyone who is on the outside from getting inside. Other times, the enforcement of a community's boundaries is less clearly defined and the difference separating those who truly belong and those who have infiltrated the community as interlopers is not so obvious.

The textual evidence of 1 John (especially 1 John 3) suggests that issues of belonging were of primary importance to the believing community, which struggled with and debated over who truly belongs and who does not. `Belonging is defined by standards of purity (v 3), righteousness (v 7), love (v 1, 11, 16ff), and obedience (v 24).



“We must not be like Cain...” photo: Swords, daggers, and knives dating from the Middle Bronze Age (1500 BC) -- Jordan Museum, Amman. Humanity's earliest technological achievements involved the creation of weapons to kill each other.

standards and competing prognosticators of orthodoxy. The conflicts which emerge from this competition are vicious and bitter. (Can you ever imagine a church having bitter conflict?!?)

Community

Fragmentation: “We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother.” -- 1 John 3.12a

And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. Perhaps cohesion is lacking from the material in 1 John 3 because it is missing from the believing community itself. The sense I get as I read 1 John (especially chapter 3) is that of a community that is on the edge of implosion as a consequence of competing

The theological dualism which undergirds the witness of both 1 John and the Fourth Gospel creates an environment where this communal fragmentation can be inherent. In the midst of an ideology which leaves room for no middle ground, one either is a child of God or a child of the devil. One is either righteous or evil. One can either be from God or not from God.

The fault lines are obvious in 1 John 3 as are the efforts of the epistle's author to hold the line -- exhorting members of the believing community to love and not hate, to be obedient to the commandments, and to abide in God (v 6), eternal life (v 15), and in the Spirit given by God.

1 John 4

“Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” -- 1 John 4.4

1 John 4 is a trove of dear verses, treasured by the Christian community; they are centered around the subject of love. Here we find the short but profound theological statement: “God is love.” Other significant statements echo through the verses of this brief chapter. “Perfect love cast out fear.” “We love because he first loved us.” “Those who abide in love abide in God because God is love.” “Since God so loved us, we must also love one another.” In addition to these many, familiar references to love, the chapter also contains important theological statements that will develop into credal statements regarding the nature and being of Christ.

Primacy of Love: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” -- 1 John 4.10

Of the 143 references of love (Greek = agape) in our New Testament, 28 of them -- almost one out of every four uses of the word -- are found in 1 John. 15 references (more than ten per cent of the New Testament total) are compressed into the witness of this chapter’s 21 verses.

Whatever troubles the believing community faces or the internal struggles about who belongs and who doesn’t belong, 1 John 4 makes clear that love represents its defining force and power. The emphasis on love is remarkable and powerful, particularly as the community struggles to define itself.

While righteousness is a standard that is highly valued in 1 John 4, love matters even more -- as v 20 declares: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

Emerging Orthodoxies: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.” -- 1 John 4.2-3a



“Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.” -- 1 John 4.3a photo: reconstruction of a Byzantine era sanctuary, Israel Museum -- Jerusalem

1 John offers a fascinating glimpse of what could be described as an emerging Christian orthodoxy. Out of the community’s struggles to establish and define its boundaries, we find broadly sketched theological principles which ultimately will be codified in official, credal statements -- such as the Nicene Creed.

The most important of these theological principles in 1 John 4

involves the incarnation. The statement in the opening movement of the chapter, regarding Jesus Christ coming in the flesh, strongly echoes the Fourth Gospel’s prologue makes the bold statement that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

Ancient Greek thought was largely defined by a mentality of dualism, which neatly separated the world into opposing and contradictory realities. The spirit, for example, was seen as eternal and thus had ultimate worth. By contrast, the flesh -- bound by its mortality -- was considered was without value.

The same dichotomy could be applied to other categories. Things that were divine or heavenly (thus enduring through eternity) were valued while things considered worldly were not. One can see where this kind of thinking found itself

naturally attracted to the stark, no-middle-ground ideology of the Johannine community.

But as the witness of 1 John 4 makes clear, the believing community's either/or attitude had no room for an ideology which would deny what involved the most profound divine action -- God becoming human, the divine and eternal Word made flesh. 1 John 4.2-3 makes the incarnation a standard by which believers (and especially communal leaders) could be judged. Those who confess "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" are from God. Those who refuse to make such a confession are not.

You and Me Against the World?: "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." -- 1 John 4.4

We could devote an entire four week study to John's understanding of "the world" (Greek = kosmos). Even then, one could only begin to grasp the significance of this term and its relationship to God, Jesus Christ, and the believing community in the Johannine literature.

For other New Testament witnesses, the world is understood largely as the material universe -- a place that is relatively indifferent to the gospel and its message. Largely benign, the world at its worst can be opposed to the values of the believing community ("For what will it profit a person," Jesus wonders in Mark 8.36, "to gain the whole world but forfeit their life?").

But in the Fourth Gospel and in 1 John (where more than half of the New Testament references to the term "world" are found), the world is a place of hostility, struggle, tribulation, and hatred. So, with all this in mind, the world -- in John's black and white, either/or mentality -- should be written off, right?

The Fourth Gospel and 1 John would be much easier, theologically and spiritually, if it advocated such a position. I would argue, based upon the text's very challenging witness, that we can't.

For John, the world is a place which pays attention to the spirit of the antichrist (1 John 4.3, 5). The world represents a place of inherent conflict and hostility, which the believer is challenged to conquer (1 John 4,4). But John specifically defines Jesus Christ as "the Savior of the world." (1 John 4.14)

The world is the place where God sent his Son (1 John 4.9) explicitly so that people might believe and in believing find life in him. And as the famous verse of John 3.16 explains, the world is a place which “God so loved that he sent his only begotten Son.”

1 John 5

“And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.” -- 1 John 5.4b

1 John 5 carries on the theological urgency which gained momentum in 1 John 4 -- an urgency defined by the necessity of confessing the believing community’s unique understanding of Jesus Christ’s identity. 1 John 5.1a makes the point clearly: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.”

The unique identity of Christ was a critical issue for the early and emerging church as it separated itself from the theological milieu of ancient Greek thought and Judaism of the Second Temple period. You can hear other narrative voices in the New Testament echo the truth claims of 1 John. All three synoptic gospels (Mk 8.27-30, Lk 9.18-21, and Mt 16.13-20) record Jesus’ dialog with his followers over the question: “Who do you say that I am?”

Even with its very different witness, the Fourth Gospel witnesses a similar dialog which, interestingly enough, takes place between Jesus and Martha at the grave of Lazarus. Like Peter, Martha answers the question of Jesus’ identity in technical terms: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” (John 11.27). The epistle carries on with this strong emphasis.

Similarly, the exhortations of 1 John 5 (especially v 1-12) proclaim this unique understanding of who Jesus is. To the world, which doesn’t believe, the person of Jesus Christ is but John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets (see Matthew 16.14). But for the believing community, the critical boundary which separates it from the world is this confession “that Jesus is the Christ.”

Relationship with the Fourth Gospel: The witness of 1 John 5 provides the clearest and most elegant resonance between the epistle and the Gospel of John.

In 1 John 5.1-12 alone, I found 16 references to material in John's gospel. These references include the necessity of obedience to God's commandments revealed through Jesus Christ, the testimonies of Spirit, blood, and water which affirm the truth that Jesus is God's Son, and the promise of eternal life available through believing in the Son.

This shared material raises several questions: Is the epistle's author borrowing arguments from an already existing gospel to emphasize these points? Or does the material here in 1 John 5 provide foundational theological points which are used by the Fourth Gospel's author?

In other words, does the epistle pre-date the gospel or does the gospel pre-date the epistle? There is no way to know for sure -- but my hunch is that the epistle came first, establishing and developing principles that later are enshrined in the gospel.

Affirmation of Knowledge: Our conversations last week on 1 John 3 highlighted the importance of knowledge. As Millie pointed out the author

emphasizes knowledge in several places such as 1 John 3.24b: "And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us." Knowledge is obviously very important for the author and for the community that is addressed in 1 John.



"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments." -- 1 John 5.2 photo: facsimile of the Isaiah scroll found at Qumran

1 John 5 (and the epistle) continues this emphasis regarding knowledge. 1 John 5.13 affirms the epistle's purpose -- believing in the name of the Son of God: "so that you may know that you have eternal life." This appeal is followed by six affirmations on behalf of the author

and, since the first person pronoun is plural, the believing community's leadership.

These affirmations reach a crescendo in v 20, which combine two of the epistle's great themes -- knowledge and truth: "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life."

Other: This "un-epistle" epistle concludes much like it began -- without any characteristic motifs that we find in other New Testament epistles. There are no extended greetings (such as the ones in Romans 16.21-23 or 1 Peter 5.12-14). There is no reference regarding authorship -- as Paul made in 1 Corinthians 16.21. There isn't even the simplest benediction, like the one which concludes Galatians (6.18). 1 John ends very abruptly, with a warning about idolatry.

And then there is no more. Fanciful speculation imagines that there was a longer, more traditional ending to the epistle that somehow has been lost. No evidence supports such a theory. And personally, I feel the abrupt conclusion fits the author's nature. The urgency of the text's theological argument leaves no room rhetorical flourishes. When the author is done, the author is done -- and ends this fascinating epistle as bluntly as he began.