

Notes on Johannes' First Letter

Authorship and Date

Tradition is fairly unanimous in ascribing authorship of the letter to Johannes, son of Zebediah -- one of the Twelve. However, many scholars believe that the letter was written during the II century CE.

In discussing the account of Jesus' life associated with Johannes, we make several points in that article which attempt to illustrate that the account is genuinely apostolic. This letter is most definitely written by the same person at roughly the same time, and indeed there may have been a social situation which caused Johannes to write both this letter and the account of Jesus' life.

We assign the letter a date prior to 40 CE, while there were only Jewish Christians. As with the other written account (*According to Johannes*), this letter is anonymous.

Commentary

*What was from the beginning,
What we heard,
What we saw with our eyes,
What we observed and our hands felt
Concerning the message of life.*

God's message to his people has been consistent since the beginning, and in recent times, the author and the other members of the Twelve were able to perceive it not only by hearing others speak about it but also directly. For when they heard, and saw, and even touched the Messiah, they were learning about God's message, for Jesus completed the communication that had begun in the Garden of Eden, and he communicated it perfectly.

*And the life appeared,
And we saw and are testifying and are declaring to you
the life, the eternal life,
which was directed toward the Father
and which appeared to us.*

So far, the author has not said exactly how the Twelve saw, heard, and felt things that explained the message to them. God has always wanted his people to have eternal life, and there had been a partial communication of the access to the life in the Torah and through the sayings made to the prophets. However, it was the Anointed One (Messiah) who had completely explained that the

internal principles underlying the Torah bring life. Hence, at the coming of the Anointed One, "the life appeared."

Consequently, the Twelve (in a letter authored by Johannes) are able to provide first hand testimony about the eternal life that comes through accepting a spiritual Torah. This is the content of the message that had existed since the beginning, and it is this message (and the accompanying eternal life) that pointed humanity to God and which had become apparent to the Twelve by virtue of their knowing Jesus.

What we saw and heard we are also declaring to you, so that you too would have a partnership with us. Now also the partnership, ours, is with the Father and with his son, Anointed Jesus. And we are writing these things so that your joy would be full.

There was a result of the Twelve's having embraced this spiritual message of trust and love: they grew into a partnership with God, which was also a partnership with the Anointed One whom God had sent. Thus, Johannes introduces Jesus as both "Jesus" and as the "Anointed," but importantly, Jesus was the one who had this certain partnership with God -- a partnership that came through trust and love -- a partnership that he had shared with the Twelve. Now, the Twelve extend their partnership to the readers, and if they truly embrace this life of love, then they would have complete joy.

We will see shortly that the author is writing to his fellow Jews, but there is no distinction between Jews and Christians here except for one important fact: the Christian Jews realize that the Messiah had come (in the person of Jesus), and they have accepted his interpretation of the Torah -- an interpretation which summarized the Torah as (trust and) love.

1:5 *And this is the announcement that we heard from him and that we are declaring to you: "God is light, and no darkness is in him at all."*

Johannes now directs his message to the readers. What is it that the Twelve have been told to say? "God is light." Light signifies both spiritual enlightenment and justification, for God is both fully enlightened (understanding everything) and innately perfect.

He also uses "the light" synonymously with the teachings of the Anointed One.

If we claim that we have a partnership with him and if we are walking in darkness, we would be lying and not doing the truth. But if we are walking in the light, as he is in the light, we have a partnership with truth; the blood of his son Jesus is cleansing us from all sin.

This is a strong statement of logic. It is impossible to claim to have this special partnership with God and yet to "walk in darkness." Walking in darkness indicates both living in ignorance and living contrary to the message of love. Unless someone trusts God and lives a life of love, he cannot claim to have the partnership -- unless of course he lies.

On the other hand, anyone who lives according to the internal, spiritual teachings of the Anointed One ("walks in the light") has a partnership with "truth". The truth, here as in Johannes'

account of Jesus' life, indicates the internal Torah. What is truth? It is the spiritual understanding that God has always wanted us to have, and whoever accepts Jesus' teachings has a partnership with this truth that comes from God.

The writer uses "sin" in its general sense (of any wrongdoing), but he will later make a specific application, which he sets up here first. If someone lives a life of love and trust, then he should be confident that God forgives every misdeed. Metaphorically, Jesus' blood cleanses them, just as under the old covenant the blood of animals had provided that metaphorical cleansing. The true cleansing is and was always spiritual.

If we claim that we do not have sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is trustworthy and just, so that he will let our sins go and will cleanse us from all wrong.

Nobody's perfect, right? In other words, we all need that cleansing, and of course anyone who seeks trust and love (as explained by Jesus) has that cleansing. Therefore, if we acknowledge that we need him, God forgives us, for he is both trustworthy and just. He is trustworthy enough to keep his promises, and he is just because he does not see the mistakes of those who are seeking him.

If we claim that we have not sinned, we are making him a liar, and his message is not in us. My children, I am writing these things to you so that you would not sin. And if anyone should sin, we have an advisor toward the Father: Anointed Jesus the Just One.

Since he has proven that no one can rightly claim to be perfect, anyone who claims not to need God is a liar. Anyone who claims not to need the internal Torah (which brought the eternal life) is a liar. So, anyone who makes a claim not to need the Messiah or his teachings (the internal Torah) obviously is not listening to God -- he doesn't have God's message. He does not say this again, but he has just come from writing that living by the message ensures them of eternal life; therefore, those who don't have the message have no such assurance.

On the other hand, those who are Johannes' "children" -- those who are following the teachings of the Messiah that he had passed on to them -- he hopes that they will not sin. But they should have no cause for worry if they do make mistakes, because they need to realize that the fact they they are following the Messiah is enough.

Johannes says this in a court analogy. In the Judea of the first century CE, every defendant in a proceeding had to plead his/her own case before the court. The advisor (lawyer) did not plead the case for him, but served to advise the defendant as to what strategy to best use. In this metaphor, the Anointed Jesus gives the best possible advice, because of course he was completely just (innocent).

Jesus does not literally serve as advisor, but for those who follow his teachings it is as though he himself were telling us how to communicate with God. This was written to provide the readers with assurance that they, and not their opponents, should be assured that they have the eternal life, as long as they follow the principle of love, remaining in partnership with God.

And he is an atonement for our sins--but not for ours only, but for the whole creation's also.

Leaving the court analogy, Johannes returns again to his analogy from the First Covenant sacrificial code. If we follow Jesus' internalization of the Torah, then God sees no sins, for in metaphor, Jesus' sacrifice serves as an atonement. Of course, Johannes points out that the atonement is open to anyone who would embrace Jesus as Messiah, because his sacrifice (in metaphor) is good enough to work on behalf of all the people. In this sense, Jesus' sacrifice is like the sacrifice on Yom Kippur, which was on behalf of all the people.

2:3 *And in this way we know that we have known him: if we are keeping his precepts. The one who says that he knows him and who does not keep his precepts is a liar, and in this person the truth is not. But the one who keeps his message, truly, in him God's love has been made complete.*

How can the readers be assured that they have the life, the atonement, the advocacy? They are following Jesus' interpretation of the Torah -- God's precepts. Following God's precepts alludes directly to the Torah (and probably to the Decalogue), but here, the author intends to say that living in love assures that you are following the true Torah. Any Jewish opponent who claimed otherwise is mistaken.

How can anyone know God without keeping his precepts? Without following the Torah? Every one of the readers would have realized that this was impossible. But no one can keep the Torah externally -- it has to come from within. Consequently, no one is living spiritually, truthfully, if his religion is external -- anyone claiming this would be lying. But the one who lives in love -- the one who keeps the message *truly* -- also sees God's love made complete in him. I.e., he has the eternal life and the partnership with God and Jesus.

In this way we know that we are in him: the one who says that he is remaining in him is bound to walk just as he walked. Beloved: I am not writing you a new precept, but an old precept that you had from the beginning. The precept, the old one, is the message that you heard.

How can the readers be sure who is right? Are their fellow Jews who claim to accept Jesus but who keep the traditions of the rabbis correct? Or are they correct who follow Jesus' spiritual Torah? The judgment is simple: the true child of God follows Jesus' teachings by living a life of love -- just as Jesus had lived a life of love.

This is not "a new precept" in the sense that God had always taught about love, for Jesus had only summarized the Torah in sayings from the Torah, and every one of the readers knew that to keep the Torah meant loving God with all of one's self and loving one's neighbor. In a way, then, the Messiah did not initiate a strange new teaching, but he pointed out something that God had been saying to us all along.

8 *Again, I am giving you a new precept. Whatever truth is in him is also in you, because the darkness is fading away, and the light--the true light--is already shining. The one who says he is in the light and who hates his brother is in the darkness to the present time.*

On the other hand, the teaching to love others is new, because there are so many who do not practice it. Still, the readers know it is true, and so their ignorance is fading away. Their enlightenment (and justification) is already "shining".

What is the obvious truth, then? That whoever hates and claims to be with God is actually in darkness (ignorance, spiritual death), and this is the case with the readers' opponents. They have been claiming that Jesus was not really the Messiah, although apparently they still accept him as a rabbi. Returning to the teachings of the past several hundred years, they interpret the Torah as a code of actions and do not accept Jesus' spiritual treatment of the Torah -- which apparently they regarded as something radical.

The one who loves his brother remains in the light, and there is no stumbling-block in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness, and is walking in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Who is it that is causing the readers to stumble, to doubt that they have a relationship with God? Their opponents. But through practicing love, they will not stumble. The one who refuses to internalize the Torah -- the one who does not live a life of love, as demonstrated by his treatment of the Christians -- that person is not only stumbling, he is "walking in darkness." He is completely ignorant and unjustified. In the metaphor, he "does not know where he is going." Although the readers' opposition were well-intentioned in rejecting Jesus' treatment of the Torah, they were ignorant of the dire consequences that embracing ritual religion would have for them. They were "blinded."

12 *I am writing to you, children, because your sins have disappeared on account of his name.*

I am writing to you, fathers, because you have known him from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young people, because you are victorious over the evil one.

I wrote to you, young children, because you have known the Father.

I wrote to you, fathers, because you have known him from the beginning.

I wrote to you, young people, because you are strong, and God's message remains in you, and you are victorious over the evil one.

The first statement is Johannes' assurance to the readers that they are the ones who have the relationship with God. The other sayings parallel one another and are descriptive of that first statement.

The author addresses three classes of people. First, there are those Jewish Christians who are strong in their faith. Johannes calls them "fathers." All he needs to remind the fathers of is that they have known God from the beginning, and that is enough. Thus, he writes to and has written to them because he knows that they know God. The "fathers" should be confident of their standing before Yahweh.

Then there are the "young people." These people are maturing, but they still worry. He reminds these people that they are victorious and strong. Why? Because they have chosen to take a stand

with the Messiah and to follow his teachings. In the author's words, "God's message remains in you."

Finally, there are the "young children" -- those who have only begun to learn. How can they find assurance? Johannes wrote to remind them that they have indeed known God. Maybe they aren't sure of their relationship now, but since they are living in love, the relationship is solid -- even though they might not feel that way.

15 *Do not love creation, nor the things in creation. If anyone loves creation, the love of the Father is not in him. Because everything that is in creation--the strong desire of the flesh, the strong desire of the eyes, the pride of material things--these are not from the Father but are from creation. And the creation is passing away, along with its strong desires, but the one who does what God wants remains for the age.*

"The creation" often refers to the rebellion against God. Here, the author uses the word in that sense, but explicitly applies it to Judaism without the Messiah. The readers should not seek after anything having to do with their former way of life. If they love religion, then they don't love God.

What is there in the religious world? "The strong desire of the flesh." Not having to live a spiritual life allows someone to fulfill their own desires and then follow some sort of ritual -- a ritual that is supposed to get rid of sin.

Not living spiritually allows someone to seek after the things that they see and crave. They can do whatever is right in their own eyes.

Not living spiritually allows someone to become arrogant about their wonderful life, without giving a thought to what God might want for them.

But these things all lead to death, and following the path of ritual religion would eventually destroy the readers. Some commentators believe that this list of three items is borrowed from Gen 3:6, where Eva is lured away from what she believes is right by things that seem enticing.

The readers should not be deceived: these are the things that remained for them in religious Judaism, and Judaism was about to be judged by God (see *It's ALL Over*). The only way of devotion to God which would remain into the new age would be internal Judaism: Christianity.

18 *Young children, it is the last hour. And just as you heard that one who opposes the Anointed One is coming, even now many who oppose the Anointed One have arisen. By this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from among us, but they did not belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But they left so that it would become apparent that not all of them belong to us.*

The readers already knew who their opponents were: their fellow Jews who once accepted Jesus as the Messiah but who now claim otherwise, following his teachings only as though he were any other rabbi. In short, they had made him a part of everyday Judaism.

But "it is the last hour," because very soon Israel would be judged, and the physical nation of Israel and its priestly system of sacrifices would no longer exist. In warning of that event, they had been told that people would come who opposed the Anointed One. The author affirms that such people are already there, confirming that the end of the age was near. Who were these people? They were once "among us" -- they had been Christians, but they never really understood the message. If they had ever truly followed Jesus' teachings, then they would still be doing so.

Their departure from among the Christians must have dealt an emotional blow to the readers, and it is quite possible that many of them were friends or relatives to Johannes' "little children." "Why did they go?" That must have been a big question of theirs, and the author answers it by saying that their leaving was to prove that they never fully understood the Messiah. Maybe they were "going along with the crowd," but they never really embraced the good message that brings freedom.

And you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all these things. I didn't write to you because you don't know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie belongs to the truth. Who is the liar, if not the one who denies, "The Anointed One is not Jesus?" This person is the one who opposes the Anointed One, the one who denies the Father and the son. No one who denies the son has the Father either; the one who acknowledges the son has the Father also.

The "anointing" is the appearance of the holy breath, the signs and wonders that served to confirm the message for as long as Priestly Judaism still remained. These are the signs that Peter mentioned (quoting Joel) in Acts 2. That anointing proves that the readers really do have God's blessing, even if they doubt sometimes. They may worry that they don't really know the truth, but they do know it.

Then their opponents are liars, for now they deny something that they probably know is really true. They now deny that Jesus had been the Anointed One. Notice that there is a direct connection between their "anointing" and the "Anointed One." They have their anointing from God because they follow someone who truly was anointed by God.

But "the denier is the liar," and he denies God along with Jesus, because the anointing proves that the Christians have God's approval. On the other hand, whoever understands the Messiah and embraces his teachings also accepts God. Therefore, the readers have God along with Jesus.

What you have heard from the beginning, let this remain in you. If what you heard from the beginning remains in you, you will also remain in the son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made to you: life, eternal life.

The Twelve have been teaching what "was from the beginning," and this spiritual Torah is exactly what the readers have "heard from the beginning." Here, the *beginning* refers, of course, to their first hearing the message. For the readers, the message is the same now as it had been when they so happily embraced it. They need to hold on to that message, despite the opposition that they now face. If they remain in the teachings of the Messiah (and therefore in God), then

God has promised them the partnership, the eternal life, the atonement. The readers need to be assured that this is the path that they are on -- the path to eternal life -- for this is what is at stake for them.

I wrote these things to you about your being deceived. And the anointing that you received from him remains in you. And you have no need for someone to teach you. But just as this same anointing is teaching you about all things (and is truth and is not a lie), just as it taught you, remain in him.

Instead of "teaching" the readers, their opponents were "deceiving" them, and so Johannes warns them that they no longer need any rabbi to teach them. The message is internal, and their own anointing from God teaches them everything they need to know. In other words, it distinguishes the truth of the spiritual Torah from the lie of ritual religion. That anointing serves as a sign that the readers should remain with Jesus rather than turning back to Judaism.

And now, children, remain in him so that if he should appear, we would have freedom of speech and would not be ashamed before him in his presence. If you know that he is just, you know also that everyone who does what is right has been fathered by him. Look at what sort of love the Father has given us, that we should be called God's children! And we are. For this reason, creation does not know us: because it did not know him.

The Jewish Christians were awaiting a judgment that had been predicted to come upon Priestly Judaism. Although the truth of the message should have been enough to convince the readers to firmly acknowledge Jesus as the Anointed One, and although they had an anointing from God that distinguished their beliefs from the system of Judaism, the author produces yet another reason for holding firm: the coming judgment. At the time of the coming judgment, "Christian" Jews would be able to speak freely -- a goal in any relationship. Those who shrink back into ritual religion because of social pressures would be condemned to one of its opposites: shame.

Since Yahweh is a just God, those who do right will be rewarded at the time of judgment. And naturally everyone who does right is distinguished as a true child of God -- as opposed to the physical lineage advocated by the readers' opposition. God loves those who follow him -- those who know the spiritual principles -- so much that he calls them (us) his children.

If the readers are his children, then who are their opponents? They are people who do not know God, as evidenced by the fact that they did not recognize their Anointed One when he came.

3:2 *Beloved, we are now God's children, and it has not yet become apparent what we will be. We know that if it should become apparent, then we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him is purifying himself, just as he is pure. Everyone who does sin is also doing lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.*

Those who recognize and live by God's spiritual principles are now God's children. God's children are not reckoned by physical lineage. As to what would happen after the removal of Priestly Judaism, the author acknowledges that he does not know exactly what will happen.

However, once these things become apparent, God's children will be like God. That is, they will live in love, just as God is love, and in love they will know God for who he is.

Those who live in trust and love should look ahead to this time, and that life according to the spiritual Torah is what justifies, because people will be justified by trust and not by ritualistic deeds.

"Sin is lawlessness" is a catch phrase. The teachings of Jesus make one pure, so that remaining in ritual religion and rejecting the Anointed One is sin. Embracing what they ought to know is a lie is sin. And all sin is "lawlessness"; that is, it is a rejection of God's own guidance. "Lawlessness" was the term for refusing to follow the Torah, and Johannes merely applies that term to the refusal to spiritualize the Torah.

And you know that he appeared so that he would bear sin; and there is no sin in him. No one who stays in him is sinning; no one who is sinning has seen him, nor does he know him.

Jesus "bears sin" in that the one who accepts the Messianic explanation of the Torah has his sins ignored and is judged instead by trust. Thus, "there is no sin in him." On the other hand, it is impossible to embrace ritual religion and the spiritual Torah. Therefore, no one who is sinning -- no one who rejects God's teachings -- really knows the Messiah.

7 Children, no one should deceive you: the one who does what is right is just, even as he is just. The one who does sin is from the Accuser, because from the beginning the Accuser has been sinning. For this reason God's son appeared: so that he might release the deeds of the Accuser. No one who has been fathered by God is doing sin, because God's seed remains in him. And he is unable to sin, because he was fathered by God.

For the readers, "doing what is right" means following the spiritual Torah that they know the Anointed One brought them, and "sinning" means rejecting the Messiah and his teachings. Who is justified? The one who follows the Messianic teachings. But whoever continues to practice ritual religion -- as the readers opponents so strongly advocate -- is from the Accuser. Here, the author makes use of that name of the Enemy which indicates that the Enemy is the accuser of those who do right. His implication is that the readers' own opponents are making accusations against God's people, and so they are allied with the Accuser.

The appearance of the Messiah proves that these people are allied with the Accuser and not with God, because they rejected him. Their deeds prove that they belong not with God but with his enemies. In other words, their lineage avails them of nothing, nor do any of their teachings -- not even their claim to follow the Torah.

God's people live forgiven lives. Recall that being called a child of God means following the spiritual principles of love and trust, which means following God's very nature. Someone who does this has God's very nature guiding his actions, and God's nature has no sin in it. Here, the author adds, "He is unable to sin." This seems in contrast to what he has said earlier about God forgiving the misdeeds of those who follow God from the heart, but the author means the same

thing each time. This is simply stated more extremely, creating a sharper dichotomy between the readers and their opponents.

If someone lives a life of complete love, he is following God's nature. Since rejection of God is what defines sin, someone who is completely loving and trusting cannot possibly sin. The logic here is good, but the author does not mean to assign perfection to every one of the readers. Instead, he hearkens back to what he has just written about being free after the judgment to pursue love, and that loving makes one more like God.

10 *In this way, God's children and the Accuser's children become apparent: Everyone who does not do what is right, the one who does not love his brother, is not from God. Because this is the announced message that we heard from the beginning: that we should love one another. We should not be just as Kain was, who was of the evil one and who murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil, but those of his brother were just.*

Since love and not lineage is the deciding factor between who is and who is not from God, the author marks his dichotomy simply. Love is the message. Whoever lives according to love -- as opposed to practicing rites, sacrifices, temple devotion, and the trappings of religion -- that person is from God. The readers' opposition is not from God because it does not practice that principle.

Is that principle a *new* message? Not really. Not only had the readers heard it consistently since they first learned of their Anointed One, but also the attitude of Kain demonstrates that love for one's brother was centrally important from the beginning. What reason did Kain have to murder his brother but that his own "deeds were evil"? The author assigns the same motives to the people who want to maintain the trappings of physical religion.

And no not wonder, brothers, if the creation hates you. We know that we have passed through from death into life because we love the brothers. The one who does not love remains in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

Everyone seems to hate the readers because of their conviction. In particular, the whole Jewish world seems opposed to them. "The creation" signifies not only "everyone" but also "the rebellion against God." Those who do not love God may hate the readers, but since they live according to love, they are God's. They will be given eternal life, but the person whose love is his religion "remains in death." His religion (Priestly Judaism) was about to be destroyed, and he would be judged by his deeds.

Again, the author provides a statement of dichotomy. Either one loves or one hates. The Torah as Jesus explained it teaches love as the primary principle. The readers' enemies are like Kain, living by hatred. Like Kain, they too are "murderers," even if they do not physically kill. For Jesus had explained that the one who hates his brother to the point of rage is just like the one who commits murder. Therefore, it is clear that the proponents of ritual religion will not be given eternal life.

In this way, we have known love: because he laid down his life on our behalf. And we are bound to lay down our lives on behalf of the brothers. But whoever has the material things of creation, and who observes his brother having a need, and who shuts up his compassions from him, how can God's love remain in him? Children, let us not love in word or with the tongue but in deed and truth.

The conversation between Jesus and the Twelve at the "last supper" had had a great impact on Johannes. Here, recalling Jesus' words about giving up his life, Johannes reminds the readers that the Anointed One had shown his love in such a complete way. Therefore, we need to be willing to show our love similarly -- to the point where we would give our lives for one another.

But if we are willing even to give up our lives, then what of our property? Johannes argues the necessity to share with one another. "The sharing" (Gk., κοινωνία) was an integral part of the Christian way of life, as evidenced in Acts 2, 4, 5, and 6. The author considers it unfathomable that someone could live a loving life and not share his belongings. Therefore, he provides a means by which the readers can know whether or not someone's life indicates that they are following Jesus' teachings. Presumably, he is aware that the readers' more traditional Jewish countrymen are unwilling to share. In the context of the letter, it may be this very thing to which the opposition so objects: they will not accept Jesus as the Anointed One because of his teachings about love. Consequently, Johannes calls their way of life "loving with the tongue." They may claim to love as much as Jesus taught, and without Jesus, but they are practicing stinginess. The recipients of the letter must show genuine love for one another.

19 *And in this way we will know that we are of the truth, and we will persuade our hearts of this in his presence. Because if our hearts should fault us, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things. Beloved, if our hearts do not fault us, we have freedom of speech toward God, and we receive whatever we ask from him, because we are keeping his precepts and are doing the things that are pleasing in his sight.*

This loving way of life, "the sharing," is distinctive, so distinctive that the readers ought to recognize that it points to their own salvation. Here we get to what is one of the foci of the letter and certainly a reason for writing. Some of Johannes' friends have been partly persuaded by the arguments in favor of ritual religion, leaving them wondering if the Messianic way is really the path that leads to eternal life. What if the way of the Perushim were the true way? How can we know? Johannes provides some answers.

Here he says that knowing and practicing love should alone be a witness that they are following God. It ought to reassure their hearts, but even if they are doubtful, God knows the truth. He hopes, though, that they will feel that reassurance, because if they do, they will feel free to speak to God as a loving friend. If anyone lives in love, and asks something of God out of love, then God will grant their needs. Johannes' sincere desire is that his readers have the confidence that they can speak to God freely. What should give them that freedom of speech? The knowledge that they are keeping the principles of trust and love.

And this is his precept: that we should trust the name of his son, Anointed Jesus, and that we should love one another, just as he gave us the precept. And the one who keeps his precepts remains in him, and he in them.

And there we have it. Like Jesus before him, Johannes summarizes the whole duty of humanity. The closeness of a loving relationship with God comes from two things: trust and love. Anyone who claims to follow God ought to trust that the Messiah came in the person of Jesus, and of course love is necessary. Whoever keeps these things is a child of God, and God watches over them.

This is such a simple saying, and yet according to Jesus it encompasses the full meaning of life. Knowing that Jesus is the Anointed One, we follow his interpretation of the Torah; that is, we live by trust and love. That's all there is to life -- far from the rituals and structure provided by the Jewish leaders.

4:1 *And in this way we know that that one remains in him: from the breath that he gave us. Beloved, do not trust every breathing, but examine the breathings to see if they are from God. Because many false prophets have gone out into creation. In this way we know God's breath: every breathing that acknowledges Anointed Jesus to have come in the flesh is from God, and no breathing that does not acknowledge Jesus is from God. And this is the one who opposes the Anointed One whom you have heard is coming. And now he is already in creation.*

Since the priesthood had been mentioned by God in the Torah, and since the lineage of the priesthood still existed at the time of this letter, God had provided signs of distinction to demonstrate that his people were a spiritual people -- not merely a physical race. If the readers were afraid or unable to realize that living by love and trust was enough to show that they were the people of God who would be given eternal life, then they should realize that they themselves possessed the distinctive and genuine holy breath -- the sign of God's favor.

"The breath" is a witness to the readers that they are following God, and they were unable to deny that the breathings that they received were anything other than interaction with God himself. Still, Johannes realized that others might come along *claiming* to experience the holy breath -- hoping to lead people back into religion. Therefore, he pointed out to his readers that the genuine breathings, which they already knew they had received, identified Jesus as the Anointed One. Therefore, if someone claimed to have received a breathing that said otherwise, that man is a false prophet. It is necessary, then, to examine any reported breathings, to make sure that they are genuine. For whoever claims to have had a revelation that Jesus is not the Messiah is opposing the Messiah and God.

You are from God, children, and you have conquered them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in creation. They are from creation. On account of this, they are speaking from creation, and the creation hears them. We are from God. The one who was fathered by God hears us; the one who is not from God does not hear us. From this, we know the breath of the truth and the breath of deceit.

On the other hand (and by way of reassurance), the readers themselves have received genuine breathings from God. They ought to know then that they are "from God." The pronoun "they" refers to those among the Jewish people who wanted to return to the religion of Judaism. They are "from creation" -- part of the rebellion against God, but the author has already said that these people hate what is godly (even refusing to love). Naturally, anyone else who hates godliness will listen to them, which is why so many people were listening to them.

The author expresses confidence that the readers will realize that they are "from God" and will not listen to these people who oppose God's chosen one. Why don't these other people listen to the readers? They are not from God -- any child of God would be listening to God's voice, and God had spoken through Jesus. Therefore, it ought to be clear that those people who refuse to love and who reject Jesus are living against God's spiritual teachings. They are not from God, even if they might claim divine guidance, and so the readers should pay no attention to what they say.

Beloved, we should love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been fathered by God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. God's love for us was showed in this: that God sent his unique son into creation so that we might live through him. Love is this way: it isn't that "We loved God," but that, "He loved us" and sent his son as an atonement for our sins.

Then what *should* the readers do? They should continue to live lives of love. They should continue to trust in God and to practice "the sharing." Why? Because "love is from God." Since God shows love, one must practice love in order to be a child of God. In fact, God's whole nature is love -- we must practice love in order to follow God.

What is the important thing to remember? Our love for God? The author seems to have heard that the ritualists claim to love God as well. That's not the important thing. The important thing to remember is that love is God's nature. God loved us enough to send the Messiah to die. So again, the focus is on Jesus.

The Jewish system was based on the sacrificial system of the Torah. That system involved making regular atonement for one's sins. Since God actually saves through trust, those sacrifices were lessons to us about what is loving and what is sinful. Therefore, in the same metaphor as that system, God sent his Anointed One as an atoning sacrifice. But this "sacrifice" had actually taught Jesus' love for us, so that we could practice the love that we are bound to practice. In other words, even the rituals were there ultimately to teach about God's love, so that we could practice love. All of this points to the kind of Messiah that Jesus revealed himself to be.

Beloved, if God loved us this way, we are bound also to love one another. No one has ever observed God. If we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is made complete in us. In this way, we know that we are remaining in him and he in us: because he gave us from his breath. And we observed and are testifying that the Father sent his son to be savior of creation. Whoever acknowledges that Jesus is God's son, God is remaining in him and he in God. And we have known and trusted the love that God has in us.

God showed his love to us by sending his Anointed One, that the readers must by now realize had to be Jesus. God's own demonstrations of love to us ought to prove that we need to love one another. So, although we have never observed God, he was revealed to us through the loving example of Jesus, as also evident in his teachings. Therefore, we must love, and that love that we show completes the relationship. As God and we love each other, and as we show love for one another, we are God's partners, God's friends -- as the author has already indicated (chapter 1).

So, the author brings together his two witnesses (so far) that the teachings of Jesus are God's way: first and foremost, that he taught a principle of love; and secondly, that the holy breath is a sign. "We observed" refers to the envoys, who witnessed everything that Jesus said and did. Since there are witnesses to the Anointed One, the readers should realize that the author himself is one of those witnesses. Therefore, the testimony of those eyewitnesses ought to be recognized.

And what do those eyewitnesses say? That whoever lives the life of love, knowing that Jesus was the Anointed One -- that person is the one who has a relationship with God. The envoys know for certain, having witnessed Jesus personally, that God has given them the love that they are able to share because of Jesus' example.

16 God is love. And the one who stays in love stays in God, and God stays in him. In this way love is made complete with us, so that we would have freedom of speech in the day of judgment. Because just as he is, we also are in creation. There is no fear in love. On the contrary, completed love casts out fear, because fear holds punishment. But the one who fears has not been made complete in love. We love because he loved us first.

Repeating and summarizing his earlier points, Johannes continues to emphasize the necessity of following Jesus' example of love. Living by trust and love -- this is what it means to have a relationship with God. That relationship is so close, because of love, that it brings freedom of speech. The readers' opposition appear to have cited "fear" as the appropriate response to God, explaining that they do not need to practice love and sharing. The letter's author counters by pointing out that since love is God's nature, and since love cast out fear, it is inappropriate for the true child of God to live in fear. Fear is what those who await punishment have, but the one who loves will experience no fear, knowing that there will be no punishment.

Therefore, love is superior to fear, and those who claim to love God need to live in love, not fear.

If someone says, "I love God," and yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For the one who does not love his brother whom he sees is unable to love God whom he does not see. And we have this precept from him: that the one who loves God should also love his brother.

Can someone claim to love God and yet not live as Jesus explained? The author says it is impossible. Anyone who claims that they can love without demonstrating love is a liar. Simply put, if you are unable to love someone you can see, it is not possible to love someone (God) whom no one has seen. And anyway, God says in the Torah that we must love others. {This saying, Lev 19:18, is the one that Jesus has said is part of the summary of the whole instruction.}

5:1 *Everyone who trusts that Jesus is the Anointed One has been fathered by God. And everyone who loves the one who fathers a child also loves the one who is fathered by him. In this way we know that we love God's children: when we love God and are doing his precepts. For this is God's love: that we keep his precepts, and his precepts are not burdensome, because everyone who was fathered by God is victorious over creation. And this is the victory which is victorious over creation: our trust.*

Johannes has now separated the Jewish people into two groups: those who accept Jesus as Messiah and live by his principles of love and trust, and those who reject Jesus. Whoever acknowledges Jesus lives by love, and love is God's nature. But whoever rejects the Messianic teachings rejects God's own nature. Therefore, it is not possible to "love God" without accepting the loving teachings of Jesus. To love God is to love Jesus as well.

To the author, then, the matter is clear. We can clearly distinguish the children of God from those who don't really love God by whether or not they practice the loving and sharing that Jesus taught. We can be caught in the quagmire of ritual religion, or we can simply live freely in love. If we love God, then we will keep God's teaching. God's teaching is simple and not a burden: he wants us to love one another.

If we live in love, trusting that Jesus is the Anointed One, then in the long run we are victorious over all of God's opposition. Our trust gives us this victory, which is not merely a victory in the three dimensional world over human opponents but yields the ultimate prize in the long run: eternal life.

5 *Now who is the one who is victorious over creation, if not the one who trusts that Jesus is God's son? This is the one who comes by water and blood, Anointed Jesus. Not in water only, but in water and blood. And the breath is the one who testifies, because the breath is the truth. Because there are three who testify: the breath, and the water, and the blood; and the three have one testimony.*

"God's son" is a synonym for "the Messiah." Who will experience this ultimate victory? The Messianic Jew who lives by the spiritual Torah that Jesus explained.

The author has already provided several "witnesses" that this is the case. Here, he chooses to remove his own testimony and that of the other envoys, replacing that testimony with things that the readers cannot deny. First, there are the two events: "the water" and "the blood." Jesus himself had publically identified himself with a reform movement in Judaism by being baptized, and Jesus ultimately died for his beliefs. Similarly, the readers have no doubt that Jesus had shown his love in the ultimate fashion -- they are "Christians" (Messianics) on account of Jesus' blood. Likewise, the early Christians were baptizing converts from Judaism as a matter of distinction -- to identify them with the Messianic reform movement. These events -- the crucifixion and their own baptism -- were also witnesses to the fact that the readers were on the right path.

The holy breath, mentioned earlier, was then a third witness along with these two: another "event" that they could not deny. These three witnesses all agree to the same thing.

If we receive the testimony of human beings, God's testimony is greater. Because this is God's testimony which he has testified about his son. The one who trusts in God's son has the testimony in him. The one who does not trust God makes him to be a liar, because he has not trusted in the testimony which God testified about his son. And this is the testimony:

The Torah specifies that the testimony of two or three witnesses establishes a fact. If the readers will not believe that the loving lifestyle alone proves that they are from God, then they must believe the testimony of these events -- a testimony that ultimately comes from God. True, the envoys themselves provide such testimony, but the author has removed himself from the witness stand because "God's testimony is greater."

All of these things point to Jesus as having been the Messiah. All of these things prove that Jesus' interpretation of the Torah was correct. All of these things show that those people who were so adamant against practicing love were opposing God.

That God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his son. The one who has the son has the life; the one who does not have the son does not have the life.

The testimony is clear then: that God gave "us" eternal life. Not only the envoys but the readers as well. Who has the eternal life? The people who live by Jesus' teachings. That life is "in his son" -- in the Anointed One. The conclusion of the matter can be stated so simply: whoever follows God's teachings -- as Jesus explained them -- has eternal life; whoever rejects their Messiah has nothing. The one who rejects would soon see his religion and way of life destroyed.

13 *I have written these things to you so that those of you who trust in the name of God's son would know that you have eternal life. And this is the freedom of speech that we have toward him: that if we ask anything according to what he wants, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us if we ask, we know that we have the things we ask from him.*

This part of the letter is the "statement of purpose" or "reason for writing," and here it is clear. Let the readers know that they who follow the teachings of love are the ones who have the eternal life. Love makes their relationship with God so strong that they ought to freely ask him for whatever they need, knowing that he will provide.

16 *If someone notices his brother sinning a sin which is not toward death, he should ask, and God will give life to him who was sinning not toward death. There is a sin toward death. I am not saying that he should ask about that. All wrong is sin, and there is a sin which is not toward death. We know that no one who was fathered by God is sinning. On the contrary, the one who was fathered by God is following him, and the evil one does not touch him.*

The sin "toward death" is the rejection of the principles of trust and love. If someone knowingly rejects God, that person will wind up wandering away. But if there is any other fault apart from deliberate rejection, the readers ought to pray for one another so as to strengthen one another, remembering that God will forgive any misdeeds. God's people ought to help one another in such ways.

19 *We know that we are from God and that the whole creation lies in the evil one. But we know that God's son came and gave us intelligence, so that we would know the True One. And we are in the True One, and in his son Anointed Jesus. He is the true God and eternal life. Children, guard yourselves from the "idols."*

After those words of admonition to help one another in times of weakness, the author is ready to conclude. His formula is a note of reassurance, beginning typically with "we know." After all has been written, what do "we know"? First, that the loving people are from God; whoever rejects this life is embracing evil. Second, we know that the Messiah really did come. Some of the readers' countrymen decided to reject love, and therefore they claimed that Jesus had not been the Anointed One, but we know otherwise. Looking at the Messianic example, the author and his readers should realize that they now have the intellect, the ability to discern, that demonstrates that the loving life advocated by Jesus is what God wants. They know "the True One" because the love is the true way of worship, the Truth.

On the other hand, ritual religion is an idol every bit as bad as the idols mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. The God who teaches love and sharing is the True One, but this is to be contrasted with the "idols" of the Jewish leaders: political structures; buildings; rituals; and all of the things embraced by the opposition but rejected by Jesus.