

Article: JAJ210

2 JOHN 10: SHOULD WE LET CULTISTS INTO OUR HOUSES?

This article first appeared in the Practical Hermeneutics column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 27, number 4 (2004). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting” (2 John 10).¹

Not long ago, a friend e-mailed me to express his concern about allowing Jehovah’s Witnesses into his home for the purpose of evangelism. His concern was rooted in his desire not to violate 2 John 10, which he understood as a restriction not to let people who hold a heretical view of Christ into our homes. He could not understand why the apostle John — himself an evangelist — would object to evangelism in the home. My friend asked me if I could help him clear up the mystery. In this case, a review of history removes the mystery.

When investigating the historical context of a particular biblical book, the interpreter’s goal is to examine such issues as: What do we know about the author of this book? To whom was the author writing? When was the book written? What were the historical circumstances of the author and his readers? What was the author seeking to accomplish among his readers? Answering these questions helps us understand what the verse originally meant to its first-century audience. Only then can we properly apply the verse to situations in our own day.

We must not forget that we are reading 2 John more than 1,900 years after it was written. We are also reading this epistle (i.e., letter) in a different language, in a different geographical region of the world, and in an entirely different religious context. It makes good sense, therefore, to investigate the historical context of John’s writings when seeking to understand his intended meaning; so let’s dive in and see what we can discover about the historical context of 2 John.

What do we know about the author of this epistle? Fishermen by trade, John and his brother, James, were sometimes called “Sons of Thunder” by Jesus — perhaps because of their feisty nature (Mark 3:17). John was very close to Jesus, identifying himself as the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23). So close was John to Jesus that John was with Mary at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified, and Jesus entrusted the care of His mother to John before He died (John 19:26–27). Understandably, then, John would take any doctrinal attack against his beloved friend and Savior with utmost seriousness.

When was the epistle written? Most scholars believe this epistle was written around AD 90 (plus or minus a few years). This means that by the time the aging apostle John wrote this epistle, Christianity had already been around for more than 50 years, which was plenty of time for doctrinal errors to have developed.

To whom was the author writing? Bible scholars have debated this issue, offering two primary viewpoints: the *literal view*, which says John was writing to a specific lady and her children, and the *personification view*, which says John was writing to a church personified as a lady. Let’s briefly consider both viewpoints.

In favor of the literal view is the contention that it makes the best sense of a plain, literal reading of the text. John’s opening words are, “The elder to the chosen lady and her children...” (v. 1). The word “chosen” may point to the prominence of this woman. A reference is made to the lady’s “chosen sister” (v. 13), who may have been another prominent woman.

The other view is that John personified a particular church as a “chosen lady” and her members as “children” in this epistle. The fact that the church is elsewhere referred to as the “bride of Christ” shows that using feminine terms to speak of the church is appropriate (e.g., Eph. 5:22–33; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7). In favor of this view is the argument that John says “all who know the truth” love this “lady” (v. 1), which may fit better with a local church than a particular woman. The exhortation in verse 5, moreover, that we should “love one another” seems strangely inappropriate as an exhortation to a woman and her children, but would be perfectly fitting in a church context. The closing greeting — “the children of your chosen sister greet you” (v. 13) — would also make sense in terms of members of one church sending greetings to another church. Proponents of this view argue that John may have written this way to protect church members in the event that the epistle ended up in the hands of Roman persecutors. If the letter were discovered, the Romans would think nothing more than that this epistle was a private letter to a friend, and then the church would be safe.

What were the historical circumstances of the author and his readers? In all three of his epistles, John seems to have been dealing with an early strain of a heretical belief known as *Gnosticism*. Gnostic teachers apparently were trying to conduct an itinerant ministry in some of the churches overseen by John.

John’s main concern in his second epistle was the Gnostic denial of the humanity of Christ. The root of the problem was the Greek idea that the spiritual and material (physical) realms are entirely separate and have nothing to do with each other. In this line of thinking, spirit is good but matter is evil. Some false teachers, therefore, argued that the spiritual Christ could not have actually become human.

The Gnostics denied Christ’s humanity in two ways. Some, called Docetists, claimed that Jesus had only the appearance of flesh, without substance or reality (like a phantom). (“Docetism” comes from a Greek word, *dokeo*, meaning “to seem” or “to appear.”) Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross, they said, was not real, for the body was not real.

Other Gnostics, following the lead of Cerinthus, believed the spiritual Christ entered into a human (physical) Jesus at the time of his baptism (in the form of a dove) and left the human Jesus before the crucifixion. History reveals that Cerinthus lived in Ephesus toward the end of the first century, which was also where the aged apostle John lived. Irenaeus (AD 130–200) tells us that John specifically directed his Gospel against Cerinthus (e.g., John 1:14; 20:19–31).² John’s epistles also effectively refute Gnostic heresy (e.g., 1 John 2:22; 4:2–3; 5:1; 2 John 7).

What was the author seeking to accomplish among his readers? John’s goal in this epistle was to commend truth (notice that the word “truth” is mentioned five times in the first four verses) and to warn against deceivers who taught heresy concerning Christ — more specifically, the heresy of denying that Christ came in the flesh (v. 7). John, therefore, warned, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting” (v. 10).

The backdrop to understanding John’s warning in the early days of Christianity is the absence of centralized “church” buildings where believers could gather. Since such church buildings did not appear until the third century, meeting in homes was a necessity for the early believers. In the New Testament we are specifically told that a church met in Nympha’s house (Col. 4:15), in Aquila and Prisca’s house (Rom. 16:3–5; 1 Cor. 16:19), and in Philemon’s house (Philem. 1–2; see also Acts 2:46; 5:42; 8:3; 12:12; 20:20). Such house-churches were widespread.

It was common for visiting religious teachers to be given a platform to deliver messages in house-churches. Such a platform, however, should *never* be given to one who teaches a heretical view of Christ — especially those who were as seriously errant regarding Christ as were the Gnostics. Seen in this context, John’s warning in 2 John 10 takes on great significance. If such teachers were allowed to deliver their heretical message to a house-church, all the members of that church might become doctrinally confused, and this confusion might then spread to other neighboring house-churches like a disease. In order to prevent such doctrinal disease from spreading, John advised that false teachers were to be *quarantined* outside the church, with no access whatsoever. They were not even to be greeted (vv. 10–11),

for such a greeting might be misconstrued as some form of approval. A lack of greeting, by contrast, would communicate to those false teachers as well as Christian observers that they were in need of repentance.

An alternate interpretation, also based on historical considerations, is that the particular “house” in 2 John 10 may *not* be a house-church. In this view, the epistle was addressed to a lady who had made her home available to traveling missionaries in the past (cf. 3 John 5–8; Matt. 10:9–14). In order to keep expenses down, such missionary teachers would often stay in the home of a local Christian family (e.g., Acts 18:2–3; 21:7) and use it as a base of operations to bring their message to the rest of the city. It may be, then, that the apostle John was merely instructing this lady to be discerning in regard to whom she showed hospitality. Obviously, no such hospitality was to be shown to heretical missionaries, otherwise the lady would be participating in an evil ministry, thereby making her an “accessory to the crime.” John said this should never be!

Regardless of which of the above views you think has the stronger evidence (I think the first is correct), it is clear that the historical context of 2 John 10 rules out the idea that this verse prohibits believers from allowing Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons into their homes, especially if the believers’ purpose is to evangelize *them*. History clears up this mystery quite well. The main application of this verse for today is that neither our churches nor our homes should be provided to cultists as a platform or base of operations from which to spread their heresies.

— Ron Rhodes

NOTES

1. All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.
2. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 26.1; see also 1.8.1 and 3.16.3, 8.