
13 *Did John's Epistles Identify Paul As A False Prophet?*

Introduction

John's First & Second Epistle talk in words *reminiscent* of Revelation 2:2. John speaks in his first epistle about testing those who claim to have come from God. John says you can find them to be false prophets. John writes:

Dear friends, don't believe everyone who **claims to have the Spirit** of God. **Test them all to find out if they really do come from God.** Many **false prophets** have already gone out into the world (1 John 4:1 CEV).

In John's epistles, John thereafter gives us several tests that his readers can use to know whether some alleged prophet comes from God.

His spirit [does not] say that Jesus Christ had **truly human flesh** (*sarx*, flesh). (1 Jn 4:2.)

We belong to God, and everyone who knows God will listen to us [*i.e.*, the twelve apostles]. **But the people who don't know God won't listen to us.** That is how we can tell the Spirit that speaks the truth from the one that tells **lies.** (1 John 4:6 CEV.)

These people came **from our own group**, yet they were not part of us. If they had been part of us, they would have stayed with us. **But they left**, which proves that they did not belong to our group. (1 John 2:19 ASV.)

Whoever **transgresses** [*i.e.*, goes beyond] and doesn't remain in **the teachings of Christ**, doesn't have God [*i.e.*, breaks fellowship with God]. He who remains in the teachings [of Jesus Christ], the same has both the Father and the Son. (2 John 1:9 Websters.)

Thus, John gives us several criteria to identify the false prophets even if they "claim to have the Spirit" of God:

- They teach a heresy that Jesus did not come in truly human flesh (*i.e.*, his flesh just appeared to be human flesh); or
- They do not listen to the twelve apostles; or
- They became a part of the apostles' group but left the apostles' group; or
- They do not remain in the teachings by the twelve of what Jesus taught.

As hard as it may be to believe, each of these four points in First and Second John apply to Paul.

Did Paul Refuse to Listen to the Apostles?

First, Paul did not listen to the twelve apostles. Paul rails in Galatians 2:1-9 at the three "so-called" apostolic pillars of the Jerusalem church (including John) (Gal. 2:9). Paul says again they were "reputed to be something" (Gal. 2:2,6), but "whatsoever they were it makes no difference to me; God does not accept a man's person [*i.e.*, judge by their position and rank]." (Gal. 2:6.) Paul then expressly declares that he received nothing from the twelve apostles.

I say [those] who were of repute [*i.e.*, the apostles in context] **imparted nothing to me**, but contrariwise they saw that I was entrusted with the gospel of the uncircumcision. (Gal. 2:7.)

Paul was boasting of his failure to take any information about Jesus's teachings from the original apostles at Jerusalem. He claimed his failure to do so was positive proof his message for Gentiles came direct from God. Paul puts a spin on his behavior that he would be a lesser figure in Christendom had he learned anything about Jesus from the twelve!

Please read all the commentaries you can on those verses. They all agree on this characterization of Paul's meaning. Read the verses yourself to verify the disdain Paul was expressing toward *learning* anything *about Jesus* from the apostles or the reputed pillars of the church—Peter, John, and James.

“test” those who claim to have the Spirit. We will see Paul’s admitted split from the twelve apostles is more proof that John is speaking of Paul in veiled terms.

In Galatians 2:9, Paul tells us:

and when they perceived the grace that was given unto me, James and Cephas and John, they who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship, that ***we should go unto the Gentiles, and they unto the circumcision;***

Does Paul’s account, any way you mull it over, make sense? Not only are there issues of plausibility, but, if Paul is telling the truth, it means the twelve apostles were willing to violate the Holy Spirit’s guidance to the twelve that Peter was the Apostle to the Gentiles, as is clearly stated in Acts 15:7.

God Already Appointed Peter the Apostle to the Gentiles

The Holy Spirit had already showed the twelve that Peter (not Paul) was the Apostle to the Gentiles. At the Jerusalem Council, with Paul among those at his feet, Peter gets up and says he is ***the Apostle to the Gentiles*** in Acts 15:7:

And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago ***God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel,*** and believe.

Peter’s statement in Acts 15:7 means God had spoken to him about his task to preach to Gentiles. We even have evidence what that included. God showed Peter visions of the unclean food so he would know to reach the Gentiles. As a result, Peter had converted Cornelius in Acts chapter 10.

If Peter sincerely believed “God made choice among us that” he was the apostle to the Gentiles in Acts 15:7, why would Peter later give this mission up to Paul? Yet, Paul in

Galatians 2:9 clearly says Peter agreed Paul would go to the Gentiles and “they [*i.e.*, Peter & the Jerusalem leaders] unto the circumcision [*i.e.*, Jews].”

What Paul claims happened makes no sense. If it happened by mutual agreement, then you would have to conclude Peter believed God changed his mind about Peter’s role. This would require Peter to disregard God’s choice a “good while ago” mentioned in Acts 15:7 that he be the Apostle to the Gentiles. This is completely implausible.

Thus, to believe Paul, you have to believe God would change His mind who was to go to the Gentiles. Yet, for what purpose? Wouldn’t two be better than one? ***Why would God cut out Peter entirely?***

Furthermore, why would Peter diminish this Gentile ministry among the twelve that he initiated with Cornelius? Why would he put Paul ***alone*** as the leader to convert Gentiles? Moreover, there were Gentiles right in Jerusalem. How could the apostles sensibly divide up their mission field on the basis of Gentile and Jew?

The answer to all these paradoxes is quite obvious. Paul is putting a good spin on a division between himself and the home church. By claiming in a letter to Gentiles that he was still authorized to evangelize to them, they would believe him. They could not phone Jerusalem to find out the truth. Now listen to John’s evaluation of what this really meant:

These people came ***from our own group***, yet they were not part of us. If they had been part of us, they would have stayed with us. ***But they left***, which proves that they did not belong to our group. (1 John 2:19 ASV)

Did Paul Teach Jesus Did Not Truly Have Human Flesh?

Most Christians might concede the prior points from First John *possibly* apply to Paul. What most Christians would not concede as possible is that Paul also taught Jesus did not have truly human flesh.

Before we address this point, let's distinguish this next point from what has preceded. This 'human flesh' issue is a completely independent ground to evaluate Paul. John could be talking about Paul on the issue of leaving their group (1 John 2:19) and not listening to the twelve (1 John 4:6), but not be addressing Paul on the 'human flesh issue' in 1 John 4:2. One point does not necessarily have anything to do with the other.

That said, let's investigate whether this issue of 'human flesh' in 1 John 4:2 applies to Paul as well.

To understand what teaching John is opposing when he faults as deceivers those who say "Jesus did not have human flesh," one must have a little schooling in church history. We today assume John is talking about people who say Jesus came in an imaginary way. This is not John's meaning.

The heresy that John is referring to is the claim Jesus did not have truly human flesh. Marcion's doctrine is an example of this viewpoint. Marcion came on the scene of history in approximately 144 A.D. John's epistle is written earlier, and thus is not actually directed at Marcion. Marcion helps us, however, to identify the precursor heresy that John is attacking. Marcion's doctrines are well-known. Marcion taught salvation by faith alone, the Law of Moses was abrogated, and he insisted Paul alone had the true Gospel, to the exclusion of the twelve apostles. (See Appendix B: *How the Canon Was Formed* at page ix.) Upon whom did Marcion claim his authority that Jesus only came in the appearance of human flesh? It was obviously Paul.

Marcion said, according to Tertullian's derisive quote, that Jesus "was not what he appeared to be...[saying He was] flesh and yet not flesh, man and not yet man...." (Tertullian, *On Marcion*, 3.8.)

Marcion was not denying Jesus came and looked like a man. Rather, Marcion was claiming that Jesus' flesh could not be human in our sense. Why? What did Marcion mean?

Marcion was a devout Paulinist, as mentioned before. Paul taught the doctrine that all *human* flesh inherits the *original sin* of Adam. (Romans chapter 5.) If Jesus truly had *human* flesh, Marcion must have been concerned that Jesus would have come in a human flesh which Paul taught was inherently sinful due to the taint of *original sin*. Incidentally, Paul's ideas on human flesh being inherently sinful was contrary to Hebrew Scriptures which taught all flesh was clean unless some practice or conduct made it unclean. (See, *e.g.*, Lev. 15:2 *et seq.*) In light of Paul's new doctrine, Marcion wanted to protect Jesus from being regarded as inherently sinful. Thus, Marcion was denying Jesus had truly human flesh.

Marcion's teaching on Jesus' flesh is known by scholars as *docetism*. The word *docetism* comes from a Greek work that means *appear*. Docetism says Jesus only *appeared* to come in human flesh. Docetism also became popular later among Gnostics who taught salvation by knowledge and mysteries. (Marcion taught salvation by faith in Jesus, so he is not Gnostic in the true sense.) The Gnostics were never the threat to Christianity that the Marcionites represented. Gnostics were simply writers who had no churches. The Marcionites, on the other hand, were successful in establishing a competing Paul-oriented Christian church system in most major cities that rivaled the churches founded by the twelve apostles. The Marcionites had church buildings, clergy, regular services, etc.

It was in this context that John's letter from the 90s A.D., in particular 1 John 4:2, must be understood as condemning *docetism*. John's epistle became crucial later in

defeating Marcionism. This victory did not decisively happen until the 400s. Marcionite churches survived even into the eighth century A.D., but they remained weak. They later even spawned the Armenian Paulicians. This group endured into the 1200s.

However, a mystery remains. John in the 90s A.D. is writing 50 years prior to Marcion's appearance on the stage of world history.

Then of whom was John speaking? Was it Paul who Marcion claimed as his mentor in all things? Did Paul teach *docetism*?

Yes. Heretical *docetism* is found *expressly* in Paul. For Paul writes Jesus only appeared to be a man and to come in sinful human flesh. (Rom. 8:3 "likeness" or "appearance" of "sinful human flesh;"¹ see also Phil. 2:7 "appeared to be a man".)²

**"God sending His own Son in the likeness (homomati) of sinful flesh condemned sin in the flesh."
Rom. 8:3**

Specialists in ancient Greek who are Christian struggle to find no heresy in Paul's words in both passages. Vincent is one of the leading Christian scholars who has done a Greek language commentary on the entire New Testament. Here is how *Vincent's Word Studies* tries to fashion an escape from Paul uttering heresy. First, Vincent explains Paul liter-

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1. In Romans 8:3, Paul writes: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending his own Son in the *likeness* [*i.e.*, appearance] of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." (ASV)
 2. Of course, like Marcion, Paul does not dispute that Jesus was the God-head who appeared in a "body" (*somatikos*). (Col. 2:9.) A *body* does not imply *human flesh*. Yet, Robertson believes that Col. 2:9 disposes with the docetic theory. Yet, Robertson describes this theory as "Jesus had no human body." This is not a precise description, at least of Marcion's docetism. Rather, docetism says the *body* in which Jesus lived *lacked human flesh*. It just appeared to be *human flesh*. Robertson's analysis thus lacks precise focus on what is *docetism*.

ally says in Romans 8:3 that Jesus came in the *likeness of the flesh of sin*. Vincent then says had Paul not used the word *likeness*, Paul would be saying Jesus had come in “*the sin of flesh*,” which “would [then] have represented Him as partaking of sin.” Thus, Vincent says Paul does not deny Jesus came in the *flesh* (*i.e.*, Paul is not denying Jesus’ humanity), but rather Paul insists that Jesus came only in the *likeness of sinful flesh*.

My answer to Vincent is simple: you have proved my case. Vincent is conceding the Greek word *homomati* (which translates as *likeness*) means Jesus did not *truly* come in the *flesh of sin*. Vincent is intentionally ignoring what this means in Paul’s theology. To Paul, all flesh is sinful. There is no such thing as *flesh* that is holy in Paul’s outlook. For Paul, you are either in the Spirit or in the flesh. The latter he equates with *sin*. (Gal. 5:5,16-20.) So Paul is saying Jesus only *appeared* to come in sinful human flesh. In Paul’s theology of original sin (Rom. ch. 5), this is the same thing as saying Jesus did not come in *truly human flesh*. It only appeared to be human (sinful) flesh. Paul was completely *docetic*. That is how Marcion formed his doctrine: *straight from Paul*.

Furthermore, when you compare Romans 8:3 to Philippians 2:7, there is no mistaking Paul’s viewpoint. In Philippians 2:7, Paul this time says Jesus came in the “likeness (*homomati*) of men,” not *flesh of sin*. Following Vincent’s previous agreement on *homomati*’s meaning, this verse says Jesus did not *truly* come as a *man*. He just *appeared as if he was a man*. Vincent again struggles desperately to offer an interpretation of Philippians 2:7 that avoids Paul being a heretic. Vincent ends up conceding “*likeness of men* expresses the fact that His Mode of manifestation *resembled* what men are.” When you strip away Vincent’s vague words, Vincent concedes Paul teaches Jesus only appeared to be a man. Thus, he was not truly a man. This means Paul was 100% *docetic*. Listen to John’s evaluation of the false prophets:

His spirit [does not] say that Jesus Christ had a **truly human flesh** (*sarx*, flesh). (1 Jn 4:2.)

Was Marcion really that far from Paul? As Tertullian summarized Marcion's view, we hear the *clear echo* of Paul. Marcion taught Jesus "was not what he appeared to be...[saying He was] flesh and yet not flesh, man and not yet man...." (Tertullian, *On Marcion*, 3.8.)

*John's Epistles Are Aimed At A False
Teacher Once at Ephesus*

The likelihood that John's epistles are veiled ways of talking about Paul gets stronger when we look at other characteristics of the heretic John is identifying in his first two epistles. Historians acknowledge that John's epistles are written of events "almost certainly in Asia Minor in or near **Ephesus**."³ John's concern, Ivor Davidson continues, was about someone in that region who said Jesus was "not truly a flesh-and-blood human being." To counter him, John also later wrote in his Gospel that the Word "became flesh" (John 1:14.)

Who could John be concerned about who taught *docetism* in that region of Ephesus? Again the answer is obviously Paul. For it was Paul who wrote in Romans 8:3 and Philippians 2:7 that Jesus only appeared to come as a man and in sinful human flesh. Paul must have carried the same message with himself to Ephesus. John's focus in his epistles is obviously on the same person of whom Revelation 2:2 is identifying was "a liar" to the Ephesians. John has the same person in mind in **the same city of Ephesus**. John's intended object must be Paul.

3. Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine A.D. 30-312* (Tim Dowley Ed.) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2004) at 162.

Did Papias Understand John's Epistle Message Was Against Paul?

The only later figure whom we confidently can conclude knew Apostle John is Papias. He was John's pupil. Papias appears to have understood Apostle John was criticizing Paul. The surviving fragments of the writings of Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (130 A.D.) "do not contain any quotation from Paul" even while quoting John's Gospel and 1 Peter.⁴ This and other evidence led Christian scholar Charles M. Nielsen to argue that Papias was writing "against a growing 'Paulinis' [*i.e.*, Paulinism] in Asia Minor *circa* 125-135 A.D., just prior to full blown Marcionism [*i.e.*, Paul-only-ism]."⁵ Nielsen contends Papias' opponent was Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who favored Paul. (We have more to say on Polycarp in a moment.)

Thus, in Papias—a bishop of the early church and close associate of Apostle John—we find a figure who already is fighting a growing Paulinism in pre-Marcion times. This allows an inference that Apostle John shared the same concern about Paul that we identify in John's letters. Apostle John then passed on his concern to Papias. This led Papias to fight the "growing Paulinis" (*i.e.*, Paulinism) in Asia Minor—the region to which Ephesus belonged.

4. "Papias," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

5. Rev. (Lutheran) D. Richard Stuckwisch "Saint Polycarp of Smyrna: Johannine or Pauline Figure?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (January-April 1997) Vol. 61 at 113, 118, citing Charles M. Nielsen, "Papias: Polemicist Against Whom?" *Theological Studies* 35 (September 1974): 529-535; Charles Nielsen "Polycarp and Marcion: A Note," *Theological Studies* 47 (June 1986): 297-399; Charles Nielsen, "Polycarp, Paul and the Scriptures," *Anglican Theological Review* 47 (April 1965): 199-215.

What About Polycarp? Did He Know John Yet Accept Paul?

A word on Polycarp is necessary. Polycarp's surviving epistle holds high praise for "glorious Paul." However, it is still not Pauline in a thematic sense. There is no grace teaching in them. There is no salvation-by-faith doctrine in them. Regardless, the surviving epistle does highly praise Paul. At the same time, it is often said that Polycarp knew Apostle John. If so, and these Johannine Epistles were written by Apostle John *negatively* about Paul, as I contend above, then why does Polycarp have such high praise for Paul?

It is a good question. However, it turns out that Polycarp did not likely know Apostle John. Thus, the question becomes irrelevant. It rests on a faulty assumption that Polycarp knew Apostle John.

How did we arrive at the commonly heard notion that Polycarp was associated with Apostle John? It comes solely from Irenaeus and those quoting Irenaeus such as Tertullian. However, there is strong reason to doubt Irenaeus' claim.

Irenaeus wrote of a childhood memory listening to Polycarp tell of his familiarity with Apostle John. However, none of the surviving writings of Polycarp make any mention of his association with Apostle John. Nor is such an association mentioned in the two biographical *earlier* accounts of Polycarp contained in *Life of Polycarp* and *The Constitution of the Apostles*. Yet, these biographies predate Irenaeus and thus were closer in time to Polycarp's life. Likewise, Polycarp's own writings show no knowledge of John's Gospel. This seems extraordinarily unlikely had John been his associate late in life. As a result of the cumulative weight of evidence, most Christian scholars (including conservative ones) agree that Irenaeus' childhood memory misunderstood something Polycarp said. Perhaps Polycarp was talking of a familiarity with John the Elder rather than Apostle John.⁶

Thus, it is not likely that Polycarp knew Apostle John personally in a period after these Johannine Epistles. Also, technically speaking, we have no dates on Polycarp's epistle. Thus, we do not know if his "glorious Paul" comment came

before or *after* John's epistles. Thus, even if there were some association between John and Polycarp, we cannot be sure whether Polycarp's positive view of Paul continued *after* that association began.

Accordingly, there is no clear case that someone associated with John after he wrote his epistles had a positive opinion of Paul. To the contrary, the only person whom we confidently can conclude knew John in this time period—Papias—was engaged in resistance to rising Paulinism, according to Christian scholars.

Thus, John's letters appear to reveal even more clearly who was being spoken about in Revelation 2:2. John's true friends (*i.e.*, Papias) had the same negative outlook on Paulinism at that time.

Conclusion

Accordingly, when John's epistles tell us the four characteristics of a false prophet and teacher who left associating with the twelve apostles, they fit Paul like a glove. Scholars agree that John is identifying a false teacher who once had been at Ephesus who taught Jesus did not come in truly human flesh. This too fits Paul like a glove. Paul expressly taught Jesus did not come in human flesh—it only appeared that way. John in his epistle is thus pointing precisely at Paul without using Paul's name.

John, in effect, tells us in 1 John 4:2-3 to regard Paul as uninspired and a liar, no matter how appealing Paul's theological arguments may sound.

6. Rev. (Lutheran) D. Richard Stuckwisch "Saint Polycarp of Smyrna: Johannine or Pauline Figure?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (January-April 1997) Vol. 61 at 113 *et seq.* (agrees that Polycarp did not likely know Apostle John).

Given what we find in 1 John 4:1-3, is it then really any coincidence that by the hand of the same John, Revelation 2:2 depicts someone as a liar who told the Ephesians he was an apostle but he was not? Or is it really coincidence that John's hand wrote Revelation 2:14 which refers to a Balaam figure in the apostolic New Testament era who teaches it is permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols? Balaam, remember, was a prophet converted from evil to a Holy Spirit-filled prophet of God by his experience of seeing an angel on the Road to Moab. Yet, Balaam later apostasizes by teaching it is permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Paul likewise followed the identical pattern.⁷ Apostle John like ourselves can read where three times Paul says it is permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols. John is not so unaware that he could not have known of whom Jesus was speaking when referencing an apostolic era Balaam.⁸

Accordingly, when we turn to John's epistles, we hear John talk about false prophets in terms that uniquely fit Paul:

- A recent figure at Ephesus said Jesus only appeared to have human flesh.
- A recent figure once had been part of the apostolic church but who later took a route *exclusive* of the twelve apostles.
- A recent figure had been at Ephesus and did not accept the teachings of Jesus from the twelve, and instead transgressed them.

John always omits names, even as John in his own Gospel never refers to himself by name. John refers to himself as the "apostle whom Jesus loved." John prefers we use deduction and context for us to deduce of whom he speaks.

7. For a full discussion on the Balaam-Paul identification, see the chapter entitled "Why Does Jesus Mention Balaam in Rev. 2:14?" on page 131 *et seq.*

8. See the chapter entitled "Paul Contradicts Jesus About Idol Meat" on page 117.

Yet, the fact Revelation 2:2, 14 and John's epistles are referring to Paul is shocking to most Christians. It is even more shocking because you can deduce Paul is being identified by relying alone on Scripture you have read for years.

**“But... took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness (homo-mati) of men.”
Phil. 2:7**

Historical Note: Tertullian's Observations on Paul in 207 A.D. in *Against Marcion*

“I must with the best of reasons approach this inquiry with uneasiness when I find one affirmed to be an apostle, of whom ***in the list of the apostles in the gospel I find no trace...*** [Let's] put in evidence all the documents that attest his apostleship. ***He [i.e., Paul] himself, says Marcion, claims to be an apostle,*** and that not from men nor through any man, but through Jesus Christ. Clearly ***any man can make claims for himself:*** but his claim is confirmed by another person's attestation. One person writes the document, another signs it, a third attests the signature, and a fourth enters it in the records. **No man is for himself both claimant and witness.”** (See Tertullian, *Against Marcion* (207 A.D.) quoted at 418-19 *infra*.)

