

The Nature of Yeshua in the General Epistles

abides in us by this—by the Spirit He has given us” (1 John 3:24, TLV).

While it may be true that the reference to “the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost” is inauthentic to the original reading of 1 John 5:7—a revealed tri-unity of God is present in 1 John 3:19-24.

1 John 4:1-2

“Yeshua the Messiah Come in the Flesh”

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Yeshua the Messiah has come in the flesh is from God.”

Many of us, in diverse religious settings, have quoted or have been quoted the strict admonition of 1 John 4:1: “Dear friends, don’t trust every spirit. On the contrary, test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (CJB/CJSB). Generally speaking, we know from some of the wider issues discussed in the Epistle of 1 John, that false prophets are those who would speak or declare something significantly blasphemous against Yeshua the Messiah and His atoning work. In 1 John 4:2, as the NIV puts it, “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” The key statement of importance is *pan pneuma ho homologeï Iēsoun Christon en sarki elēluthota ek tou Theou estin* (πᾶν πνεῦμα ὃ ὁμολογεῖ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν), “every spirit which confesses Jesus Christ in [the] flesh having come of – God is” (Brown and Comfort).⁶⁵

Much of the contemporary discussion and debate over the nature of Yeshua, involves whether or not Yeshua the Messiah is uncreated as the eternal Son of God, who is God, integrated into the Divine Identity. In 1 John 4:2, the debate present was “that Yeshua the Messiah came as a human being” (CJB/CJSB) or “that Jesus Christ came in a real body” (NLT). With some degree of late First Century background issues present, the Apostle John saw it necessary here to denounce as antimessiah those who denied “that Messiah Yeshua has come in human flesh” (TLV): “and every spirit that does not confess Yeshua is not from God; this is the *spirit* of the antimessiah, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world” (1 John 4:3).

What late First Century problem was in view, which denied that Yeshua the Messiah had come in human flesh? Examiners have proposed a number of possibilities, among the various heresies and aberrant teachings circulating in the late First and early Second Centuries C.E., particularly those in which physical matter was treated as evil. A denial of Yeshua’s humanity, is not only a denial of Yeshua showing His followers how to live properly as human beings in relationship to their Creator—but it is a stark denial of Yeshua’s sacrifice on the tree for human sin. A fairly standard evangelical Christian approach to 1 John 4:2 is offered by Marshall:

“[T]he emphasis lies on the reality of the incarnation, the fact that the Word became flesh (Jn. 1:14; cf. 6:51-55). There was a true union of the divine Word, the Son of God, with a human personality in Jesus Christ. With the NIV rendering the stress is more on belief in the fact of the incarnation as a historical event; with the alternative rendering the stress is rather on the human ‘state’ of Jesus, and indeed on his continuing state. The incarnation was not a temporary event but the permanent union of God and man in Jesus Christ. Moreover, to say that Jesus Christ came ‘in the flesh’ is to say that he was truly united with human flesh rather than that he merely

⁶⁵ Brown and Comfort, pp 836-837.

came into a human body and indwelt it (possibly only for a limited period). We should no doubt take 'has come' as a verb implying the coming of Jesus Christ from God; the pre-existence of Jesus Christ before the incarnation is presupposed."⁶⁶

Among the different First to Second Century heresies believed to be countered in 1 John 4:2 is docetism, derived from the Greek verb *dokeō* (δοκέω), "to seem" or "to appear." While hardly a comprehensive or cohesive error, docetism widely advocated that Yeshua the Messiah only seemed to be human. D.F. Wright offers the following useful summary of docetism in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments*:

"Docetic" derives from the common Greek verb *dokein* ('seem, appear'). This verb and the nouns *dokēsis* and *dokētai* in the plural are used in early Christian literature of a variety of teachings about Jesus Christ that are united perhaps solely in denying that the divine Redeemer, by whatever name or title he is identified, was the subject of all the human experiences attributed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels

....

The proper application of the term *Docetism* is a matter of dispute among patristic scholars...Some wish to restrict its usage exclusively to those presentations in which the human life of Jesus in all its aspects was mere illusion; though visible, it was no more than substance, devoid of flesh-and-blood-reality...This limitation of the label would certainly confine its use far more narrowly than is found in the sources. Since the latter employ it much less rigidly and furnish nothing akin to an official or agreed definition, most modern writers have sought to pinpoint some common element that might unify the diverse historical references. This can be found, it seems, only in what Docetists of whatever kind denied and probably also in presuppositions that informed this denial.

The Docetists of primitive Christianity were united in being able to affirm inseparable lifelong identity between the heavenly or divine One (often distinguished as *Christ) and the human Jesus. But they differed widely in their christological* accounts. Some believed that Jesus was born and lived like other human beings but was indwelt by the Christ only temporarily, from his baptism to the eve of the crucifixion, thus avoiding implicating the divine power* or agent in the processes of human birth and death...

Others at the opposite end of the docetic spectrum regarded the figure of the Gospels literally as ghostlike, a phantom, an optical illusion...Between these two extremes cluster a number of versions that attribute to the divine or heavenly Savior while on earth an abnormal human nature of some sort but falling decisively short of an insubstantial specter. The body of Jesus was variously portrayed as composed of a different substance from that of other human bodies, originating perhaps through Mary* but not by normal processes of human birth, capable of some range of human functions but not such as to entangle the Christ himself in the suffering* of death.* Most of these varieties of Docetism deployed not only a distinction between divine and human natures...but also a belief in their essential incompatibility, so that whatever humanity might be predicted of Christ must have been of a special kind, tailor-made for the purpose...⁶⁷

Another major proposal offered, is that 1 John 4:2 confronts the specific error of Cerinthianism, a heresy taught by Cerinthus, an opponent of the Apostle John. While likewise hardly comprehensive or cohesive, Cerinthianism largely advocated that at the immersion of Yeshua, the "Christ spirit" indwelt Yeshua the mortal, and at His death, such a "Christ spirit" departed from Him. So once again, Cerinthianism would be seen to decisively deny the

⁶⁶ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 205.

⁶⁷ D.F. Wright, "Doceticism," in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), pp 306-307.

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Incarnation of Yeshua: God made manifest in human flesh. A.M. Renwick offers the following from *ISBE*:

“The earliest Gnostic known by name is Cerinthus, the antagonist of the apostle John. On the authority of Irenaeus, who quoted Polycarp the disciple of John, there is little doubt that the two met in Ephesus. Cerinthus was a Jew who seemed to have stood between the EBIONITES and Gnostics. From the accounts that have been preserved of Cerinthus and his teaching, it can be gathered that he taught that the world was created not by the Supreme God, but by an inferior power; he also taught a docetic theory of the Incarnation. Caius of Rome, a disciple of Irenaeus, recorded that Cerinthus held there would be a millennium of unrestrained sensuality. Dionysius of Alexandria (*ca.* A.D. 260) confirmed this...There is the testimony of Irenaeus, that the Gospel of John was written to oppose that form of Gnosticism taught by Cerinthus and, before him, by the Nicolaitans. According to Irenaeus, Cerinthus maintained that the world was made not by the sovereign Power but by some inferior being who was ignorant of the supreme God. He taught that Jesus was not born of a virgin but was the son of Joseph and Mary, born after the manner of other people. After His baptism the Spirit in the form of a dove descended on Him, and before His crucifixion the Spirit left Him. Thus, while the man Jesus suffered and rose again, the Christ remained impassible as a spiritual being.”⁶⁸

Today’s discussion and debate over Christology is widely focused around the question of, “Is Yeshua/Jesus God?” There were late First and early Second Century discussions over whether or not Yeshua the Messiah was human. The Apostle John makes it quite clear, “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come as a human is from God” (1 John 4:2, Common English Bible). Without the humanity of Yeshua, you have no Yeshua who can be executed at Golgotha as an atonement for sins. While it is witnessed that many of us adamantly affirm that Yeshua the Messiah is God, let it not be to the detriment of His humanity.

1 John 4:7-21

“No one has seen God at any time”

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son *to be* the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Yeshua is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.”

⁶⁸ A.M. Renwick, “Gnosticism,” in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 2:489.