

AFFIRMING THE RESURRECTION OF THE INCARNATE CHRIST: A READING OF 1 JOHN¹

Matthew D. Jensen

It is often claimed that 1 John contains no references to Jesus' resurrection. However, for this claim to hold, a possible allusion to the resurrection in the opening verse of 1 John needs to be denied. There are three reasons given to discard this allusion. First, under the influence of the historical reconstructions that dominate the interpretation of 1 John, the opening verses of 1 John are often understood to affirm the incarnation and not the resurrection. Second, the allusion to the resurrection is rejected because of the similarity between the prologues of the Gospel of John and 1 John. Since John 1:1-18 affirms the incarnation, so too must 1 John 1:1-4. Third, the allusion to the resurrection is dismissed due to the apparent lack of other references to the resurrection in 1 John.

The thesis proposes that 1 John affirms the resurrection of the incarnate Christ in the context of an intra-Jewish disagreement over Jesus' identity. The thesis presents a reading of 1 John that flows from understanding the opening verses of the book to be affirming the resurrection of the incarnate Christ. It argues that the resurrection is explicitly mentioned on three other occasions (4:2; 5:6-7, 20). Further, it also suggests that these resurrection affirmations are made in the historical context of an intra-Jewish disagreement over the identity of Jesus as the Christ, a disagreement in which the vital proof is Jesus' resurrection.

The first part of the thesis outlines and reviews the reading methods used in previous research on 1 John before sketching out its adopted reading method.

¹ Matthew D. Jensen, 'Affirming the Resurrection of the Incarnate Christ: A Reading of 1 John' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sydney, 2010). Supervisors: Prof. Iain Gardner and Dr Bill Salier.

The first chapter reviews previous methods for reading 1 John. The Historical Critical method and its resultant identifications are critically surveyed in order to evaluate the viability of rejecting the possible allusion to the resurrection under the influence of any of the historical reconstructions. The section concludes that none of the proposed situations behind the text of 1 John are viable and so should not be a basis for ruling out the possible resurrection allusion in 1:1. A discussion of the more recent literary approaches (Lieu, Neufeld, Griffith, Schmid) is presented in order to inform the methodology of the thesis.

The second chapter outlines the method adopted in the research. Building on the early work of Wolfgang Iser, the thesis argues that gaps in the text of 1 John are located in places where there is a break in the flow of sentences, where cataphoric pronouns occur, and where the reader, as a result of their presuppositions, is unable to make sense of a sentence. The way these gaps can be ‘filled’ is limited by the use of the verb γράφω, the occurrence of vocatives, and the crossing of boundaries in the text. ‘Filling the gaps’ is the role of the reader who draws on other texts (intertextuality) to make sense of 1 John. These texts need to conform to Hays’ seven tests for identifying an intertextual echo. Thus the thesis uses a historically conditioned intertextual approach.

The second part of the thesis presents the reading of 1 John using the method outlined in chapter 2. It pays particular attention to the introduction, because of its importance in establishing the reader’s expectations.

The third chapter is devoted to 1:1-5 and argues that the verses refer to the author’s preaching of his first hand experiences of Jesus’ resurrection appearances. It evaluates the extent of the links between 1 John 1:1-5 and John 1:1-18 concluding that even though there are links, these are not sufficient for ruling out a possible allusion to the resurrection. Further, it notes links with John’s resurrection narratives and argues that what is on view in the opening verses of 1 John is not *either* the incarnation *or* the resurrection but rather the resurrection of the incarnate Christ. This is why there are links with John’s prologue and resurrection narratives.

The fourth chapter presents a detailed reading of 1:6–2:11 arguing that these verses comprise the rest of the introduction to 1 John and as such provide a characterisation grid for understanding the situation of

the author and readers. Through intertextual links with the Old Testament and earliest Christian writings, it suggests that first-century Jews could have made the 'claims' in 1:6–2:11.

With the introduction in mind, the fifth and subsequent chapters explicate the rest of 1 John, paying particular attention to texts that apparently question either the proposed Christology or the suggested historical situation ascertained from 1:1–2:11.

The fifth chapter examines the verses that discuss the schism (2:15–27). It argues that 1 John can be understood in the context of intra-Jewish disagreement about the identity of Jesus. The audience view themselves as the true Israel from which those who deny 'Jesus is the Christ' have departed. It provides an extended discussion of the historical evidence that supports such a reconstruction of first-century Judaism.

The sixth chapter provides the results of applying the reading method to 2:28–3:24. It argues that the 'appearing' of the Son of God in 3:5 and 8 do not refer to the incarnation but to Jesus' entrance into heaven as the high priest. Further, the apparent inability of believers to sin (3:6, 9) is understood in light of Jesus' being in heaven as the believers' priestly representative.

The seventh chapter is dedicated to a thorough discussion of the test for discerning if a spirit is from God or from the antichrist (4:2–3). After a critical review of the way the test is understood, the thesis argues that the confession identifies Jesus as the Christ. The phrase ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα is understood to refer to Jesus' incarnate resurrection appearances that demonstrate that he is the Christ. The argument pivots on understanding the verb ἔρχομαι in light of its use with reference to Jesus in the resurrection narratives of John.

The eighth chapter outlines the results of applying the reading method to 1 John 4:7–5:21. It argues that the references to Jesus' being sent (4:9, 10, 14) are missiological in meaning and do not refer to the incarnation by itself. Jesus' coming in water, blood and Spirit (5:6–8) are references to Jesus' resurrection appearances in his crucified body that reveal him to be the Christ who gives the Spirit. The sin that leads to death (5:16–17) refers to the denial that Jesus is the Christ and thus to the apostasy of those who have left the true Israel. This is the idolatry that the readers are to keep themselves from (5:21). Finally, the coming of the Son of God that gives understanding (5:20) is another reference to Jesus' resurrection.

The reading presented in the thesis thus finds explicit references to Jesus' resurrection in three other places in 1 John (4:2-3, 5:6-7, 20) so refuting the third reason for rejecting the allusion to the resurrection in 1:1-3. Further, it demonstrates the viability of understanding the historical situation behind 1 John as involving an intra-Jewish disagreement over the identity of Jesus.

So by allowing the introduction to establish the framework for interpreting 1 John, the resurrection is brought to the foreground. This results in a new understanding of the historical situation behind 1 John, a fresh perspective on some of the disputed parts of 1 John, and a more satisfying reading of 1 John as a whole.