

# Chapter 4

## COMMENTARY

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Chapter Four begins with John's warning of false teachers who are one with the spirit of anti-Messiah. John has already introduced the subject of anti-Messiah in chapter two (2:18, 22). Now he returns to this subject, for having ended the previous pericope with the notice that believers can be assured of their salvation through the knowledge of the truth and the abiding presence of the Ruach, the question no doubt remained in the minds of some of John's readers regarding those who had left the community and who were apparently seeking to persuade others to leave as well.

John therefore will center our attention upon these main themes in the remainder of the epistle:<sup>1</sup>

1. The Spirits of Truth and Falsehood: 4:1–6
2. God's Love and Our Love: 4:7–12
3. Assurance and Love—The Mark of a Believer: 4:13–5:4
4. True Saving Faith Confirmed: 5:5–12
5. Certainties of True Faith: 5:13–21

**1 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.**

Once again, as a wise Shepherd and loving Apostle, John begins with his characteristic "Beloved."<sup>2</sup> He wants to make certain that the people of this community do not think he is scolding them or in any manner belittling them. He seeks to encourage them, not only to stand firm in the truth that they know, but also to ready themselves to discern false teaching and the spirit that motivates such falsehoods.

And, as is characteristic of John, he describes the issue of true and false teaching and teachers as existing in two spiritual realms: one is the domain of the Ruach HaKodesh while the other is that which is ruled by the devil. This harkens back to 3:8–10 in which John differ-

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1 Themes for the entire epistle will be found in the Introduction pages to the commentary.

2 Found five other times in this epistle – 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:7, 11.

entiate between the children of God and the children of the devil. Not all teachers of falsehood are purposefully and cognitively seeking to do the devil's work. But this is the very real problem of self-deception. There may be many false teachers who are sure they are doing God's work, but in refusing to submit to the truth of the Scriptures, they are self-deceived and therefore easily succumb to being used by the evil one to spread falsehood.

What are John's initial admonitions? First, not to believe every spirit, and second, to test the spirits. We may first ask what John means by using the "spirit" (πνεῦμα, *pneuma*) in this context. Note that in verse 3, John states that "every spirit that does not confess Yeshua, is not from God." But it is not an evil spirit that is doing the confessing, but the false teacher. Granted, John makes it clear that the false teacher has put in with the devil, and thus with the spirit of anti-Messiah, but it is the false teacher who does not confess Yeshua.

It may well be then, that in these verses, the word "spirit" is a metonymy for "false teaching which, being false, aligns with the spirit of anti-Messiah." This is how Kistemaker understands the word "spirit" in our text.

This is a figure of speech called metonymy; that is, there is a relation between two words that evoke one concept. The word *spirit* stands for "teaching."<sup>1</sup>

We may therefore understand John's use of "spirit" in these verses to indicate teaching and particularly those who engage in some form of teaching, recognizing that their instruction will either be aligned with and therefore used by the Spirit of God to build up the community of faith, or it will be aligned with and therefore used by the enemy resulting in leading people astray and away from the truth as it is in Yeshua.

*do not believe every spirit...* – John's first exhortation is straightforward and one which is so very needed in our day. Just because someone states something as fact, even if that someone appears to have prestige and high station in life, it is still proper to test what he or she is teaching against that which we know to be true. The idea, all too prevalent in our times, is that if the "preacher" says it, it must be true. But this uncritical approach to learning must be abandoned. Surely we appreciate a teacher who has proven over a period of time their due diligence in preparing their message and who have a track record of aligning their teaching with established truths. But John's point is this: never be

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1 Kistemaker, *1John*, p. 324, n. 1.

afraid to ask good questions, especially when a teacher offers categorical and dogmatic statements without offering any support for them. A teacher who is unwilling to be respectfully questioned by those they are teaching is, on that account alone, suspect.

*but test the spirits to see whether they are from God...* – The word “test” translates the Greek imperative δοκιμάζετε from the verb δοκιμάζω (*dokimazō*), which carries the sense of “making a critical examination of something to determine whether it is genuine.” In order to do this, there must be some measure or standard against which the object is tested. How, then, are a teacher’s words to be tested? The touchstone of the teaching, that is, determining whether it is from God or not, is the word of God, the Bible. This, in essence, is the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, a Latin phrase meaning “Scripture alone.” Its meaning is this: that the Scriptures, and only the Scriptures, comprise the final authority in all matters relating to our faith and practice (how we live out our faith). While extra-biblical materials are valuable in studying the Scriptures, we hold the Bible to be the final and absolute standard by which we are able to know what is pleasing to God and what is not. Thus, as we follow John’s admonition to “test the spirits,” we do so by putting all teaching next to the “straightedge” of the Bible to see if it aligns. If it does, we receive it; if not, we reject it.

*...because many false prophets have gone out into the world.* – The errant teaching about which John warns is the product of “false prophets,” where the title “false prophets” (ψευδοπροφήται, *pseudoprophētai*) can just as properly be understood as “false teacher.” This is because the role of the prophet, even from the time of ancient Israel, was not only or even primarily to give revelation of future events, but most often simply to announce to the people the truth that God had for them in their time. Thus Moses, who brought the word of God from Mt. Sinai to the people, is called a prophet (Deut 34:10).

John tells us that not a few but “many” false prophets have gone out into the world. The emphasis upon “many” (πολλοί, *polloi*) heightens the warning and is very apropos for our times, and particularly for those of us who are seeking to recover a Torah perspective as we follow our Messiah, Yeshua. For in the so-called “Messianic Movement,” just as in many “renewal” movements of the past, false teachers and false teaching abound. This is because renewal movements begin with a distrust of what the majority teaches, and thus are vulnerable to discarding what is true because (to use a building analogy) they want to lay a new foundation and build the edifice with all new materials. The fallacy in this is that the foundation of our faith is Yeshua, and we know Him in truth by receiving the testimony of the Scriptures as divinely inspired,

therefore true and authoritative. This means that the Scriptures, given to us by Israel's ancient prophets and Yeshua's chosen Apostles and disciples, is a divine legacy that comes to us from ancient times, passed on from generation to generation, and must therefore be received as the very foundation of our faith.

A further pitfall in discerning false prophets or teachers is the human penchant for discovering something new or being privy to secrets and even mystical realities which only the few and initiated know. This was the draw of Gnosticism in the early centuries, for the gnostic teachers promised would-be followers to empower them with secrets and knowledge available only through their dream visions and other mystical experiences.

We find similar promises among the errant teachings in our day, in which teachers promise to unveil layers of meaning from the biblical text through the use of things like the PaRDeS hermeneutic, itself the fruit of kabbalistic teachings of the 13th Century, first mentioned in the *Sefer HaZohar*, attributed to Moses ben Shemtov de Leon who lived in Guadalajara, Castile, Spain until 1290 and who died in 1305.<sup>1</sup> The acronym PaRDeS, taken from the Hebrew פְּרָדֵס (*pardes*) meaning "garden" or "park," is transliterated in the English as "paradise" and in the Greek as παράδεισος (*paradeisos*).<sup>2</sup> The acronym stands for: P=*pashat* meaning "simple"; R=*remez* meaning "hint"; D=*darash* meaning "to search"; and S= *sod* meaning "hidden" or "secret." The goal of this mystical hermeneutic is to uncover the "Sod," the secret meaning which lies hidden in the "lowest layer" of the text. Since this contrived hermeneutic has nothing by which it can be measured, fantastic claims of inventive minds are derived from the text even though they have no connection whatever to the meaning the author actually intended. It is this kind of practice which opens the door to all manner of errant teachings and which bypasses and obscures the actual message of the inspired text and the application to the life of faith which the Spirit desires to apply.

It should be noted that in the phrase "many false prophets have gone out into the world," the verb "have gone out" (ἐξελθύθασιν, *exelēluthasin*) is in the perfect tense, indicating that false teachers in the past may continue to have an influence in the present through their errant teachings. Indeed, the false teachings which continue to undermine and seek

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1 For a refutation of the rabbinic tradition that the Zohar was authored by R. Shimon b. Yochai, see the article "Zohar" in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1st Edition, 1971), 16.1193–1215; (2nd Edition, 2007), 21.647–664.

2 Cf. Song 4:13; Qoh 2:5; Neh 2:8; Lk 23:43; 2Cor 12:4; Rev 2:7.

to destroy the very person and work of Yeshua are, according to John, from the spirit of anti-Messiah, that is, they are encouraged and even empowered by the devil.

That false teachers would exist and even multiply as the end of time draws nearer was something about which Yeshua Himself gave us warning.

For false Messiahs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. (Matt 24:24)

Paul likewise warns us to be on our guard against false teachers and their errant instructions:

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Eph 5:6)

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, (1Tim 4:1)

Thus, we must know the word of God and be ready to always test what is being taught against its infallible and unchanging truth.

**2–3 By this you know the Spirit of God:<sup>1</sup> every spirit that confesses that Yeshua Messiah has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Yeshua is not from God; this is the spirit of the anti-Messiah, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.**

Here John makes it amply clear that the primary and central criterion by which true and false teachers are delineated is christocentric, that is, the person and work of Yeshua the Messiah. When he writes that “you know the Spirit of God,” the meaning in context is that we know a teacher is teaching in accordance with the will of God’s Spirit when his or her teaching aligns with the Scriptures which the Spirit of God has inspired. Such teaching is therefore that which the Spirit of God uses to

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1 This is the only time the couplet “Spirit of God” is found in 1John, and the construction is emphatic, both the word Spirit and God being articular, with “Spirit” being in the neuter: τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ. We find this construction also in Paul, cf. 1Cor 2:11; 3:16, and perhaps Matt 3:16 (note textual variants).

make application to each individual child of God as the word of God is understood and received by them.

Here, as in v. 1, John uses “spirit” to identify the source of the teaching, either from the Spirit of God or the spirit of anti-Messiah. The hallmark of a teacher of truth is that he or she confesses that Yeshua is the Messiah, and that He has come in the flesh. The first important aspect to note is that of confession, i.e., the teacher of truth, the one who teaches in accordance with the Spirit of God, openly and without hesitation confesses Yeshua to be the Messiah promised by Israel’s prophets, Who came from the Father and lived upon the earth as a man. Thus, the spirit of truth, that is, the teacher who teaches what the Spirit of God has revealed, openly affirms the dual nature of Yeshua, that He is both divine and human.

... and every spirit that does not confess Yeshua is not from God; this is the spirit of the anti-Messiah – John gives no allowance to the idea that religious Jews who profess to be waiting for the messiah in some way have actually received Yeshua unwittingly. The argument goes like this: they confess to be awaiting the messiah’s coming, and the reason they have rejected Yeshua is because they have been given a false picture of Jesus by the Christian Church. For instance, Mark Kinzer writes:

...we must be able to affirm that Yeshua abides in the midst of the Jewish people and its religious tradition, despite that tradition’s apparent refusal to accept his claims. We must be able to conclude, with Bruce Marshall, that “there is at this point a divinely willed disharmony between the order of knowing and the order of being.”<sup>1</sup>

But this obviously cannot fit with John’s criteria of how to recognize a false teacher, for unless the teacher willingly confesses Yeshua to be the Messiah and that He has come in the flesh, that teacher is aligned with the spirit of anti-Messiah. He is not in a state of flux between true and false, nor is there a “divinely willed disharmony between the order of knowing and the order of being.” If there is no open and sincere confession of Yeshua as the true Messiah, the teaching of that person is not to be received.

This does not mean, of course, that such a teacher is without hope, for Paul is a perfect example of one who fiercely taught against Yeshua,

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1 Mark Kinzer, *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism* (BrzosPress, 2005), p. 217, quoting Bruce Marshall, “Christ and the Cultures: The Jewish People and Christian Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge Univ Press, 1997), p. 91.

but who, by God's grace came to confess Him and thus to serve Him. But what it does mean is apparent: anyone who denies that Yeshua is the promised Messiah, or claims that He is not divine or did not take on human flesh, the teaching of such a person is aligned with the spirit of anti-Messiah.

In history, as well as in our times, there are those who seek to diminish the person and work of Yeshua in other ways. Kistemaker gives an example.

Moreover, anyone who teaches that when Jesus was baptized God gave him a divine spirit, and that this spirit left Jesus when he died on the cross distorts the gospel. And last, whoever says that after Jesus' death God appointed him Son of God fails to present the truth of God's Word. All such teachers do not speak as representatives of Jesus Christ, have not been commissioned by God, and are not the mouthpieces of the Spirit of God in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Note, once again, the words of Yeshua:

Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. (Matt 10:32–33)

*...this is the spirit of the anti-Messiah, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.* – John has already alerted us to this reality (cf. 2:18) but here he repeats it in order that we should take special notice. This reality is not something that is coming in the future, though the spirit of anti-Messiah may become more prominent and with greater antagonism at the end of time, but is something that exists now in our world. John warns us so that we might be diligent and vigilant to stand firm in the truth which is in Yeshua our Messiah.

**4–5 You are from God, little children, and have conquered them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world's perspective and the world listens to them.**

*You are from God, little children, and have conquered them...* – This is now the sixth time John addresses his readers as “little children” (*τεκνία, teknia*), and he does so throughout this epistle when his words

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1 Kistemaker, *1John*, p. 325.