

asked which was the greatest commandment in the Torah. His answer encompassed the two “love imperatives”:

YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Torah and the Prophets. (Matt 22:37–40)

Some have interpreted this saying of Yeshua as replacing the whole of the Torah with just two commandments. But they miss the point. Yeshua is not diminishing the Torah, but describing the high watermark of true obedience. For unless obedience is from a heart of love to God, which then ignites love for one’s neighbor, there is no true obedience but only perfunctory compliance or self-aggrandizing actions. And what is more, to love God with all of one’s heart, soul, and mind is to love Him by giving all of one’s life to Him. This means loving Him in all aspects of one’s living. Thus, rather than diminishing the Torah, Yeshua’s summation goes to the heart of what constitutes true faith in God and obedience to His revealed will.

Further, the freedom we have in Messiah is freedom from the curse of the Torah, for Yeshua has become a curse for us (Gal 3:13) and taken our penalty upon Himself. Thus, true freedom is both the desire and ability to obey God’s commandments, as the Psalmist writes:

And I will walk at liberty (בְּרִחְבָּהּ, in a broad place), for I seek Your precepts. (Ps 119:45)

**7 For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Yeshua Messiah as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the anti-Messiah.**

In this verse John reveals the purpose of his having emphasized the love commandment first: the enemy would seek to derail believers and to snatch away those who are seeking the truth in order to disrupt the fellowship of the believing community and to diminish their effective witness for Yeshua. From John’s point-of-view as he writes these inspired words, one of the most important defenses that will guard the believing community against the erosion of the truth by false teachers is a strong and growing love for God’s truth and a well practiced love for each other. The enemy’s strategy is to divide and conquer, but he can never win against God’s people when they remain steadfast in obedience to God’s commandments and therefore in loving each other.

John writes about “many deceivers.” The Greek word translated here as “deceivers” is the plural form of *πλάνος* (*planos*), used only three other times in the Apostolic Scriptures (Matt 27:63; 2Cor 6:8; 1Tim 4:1). The word itself carries the sense “to lead someone astray,” “to be an impostor,” “to knowingly deceive others.” Interestingly, the Lxx uses this Greek word in Jer 23:32.

“Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams,” declares the LORD, “and related them and led My people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting; yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit,” declares the LORD. (Jer 23:32)

Clearly in the current “messianic movement” / “Hebrew roots movement” we are all too familiar with the very phenomena of which John warns us here.

That is, false teachers who refuse to accept the clear biblical teaching that, even though unexplainable in our own finite abilities, Yeshua is both fully God and fully man. Teachers who are denying the deity of Yeshua and leading others to deny this central truth seem to be multiplying in our day.

But towards the end of the 1st Century CE, when John was writing these epistles, it was the humanity of Yeshua which was being questioned and even denied by false teachers, who were persuading their disciples to likewise jettison the teaching of the Apostles, that Yeshua is fully divine while at the same time fully human. Herein lies the glorious mystery of the Incarnation.

----- Excursus: 2nd Century Christological Heresies -----

Ironically, what seems to be debated in the 1st Century in regard to Yeshua, no doubt under the influence of nascent Gnosticism, was whether He was truly human. John appears to be battling the Gnostic error when he writes:

By this you know the Spirit of God: 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. (1Jn 4:2-3)

Apparently for the community to which John addresses His epistles, the deity of Yeshua was well accepted but the question of His true humanity lingered and was being denied by an increasing number of

teachers.

The opposite problem surfaces in the 2nd Century among the Ebionites (Hebrew אֶבְיוֹן, *‘evyon*, “poor one”), a Jewish sect that regarded Yeshua as the Messiah but believed that He was an ordinary human being conceived through the union of Joseph and Mary. Unfortunately, we know precious little about the Ebionites. In fact, what we do know comes only from the writings of those who opposed them. For instance, Irenaeus, in his *Contra Haereses* (1.26.2), considers the Ebionites to be heretics because they observed the Jewish laws and rejected Paul’s view of the Law (Torah). Tertullian writes that the Ebionites denied the virgin birth, regarding Yeshua as merely a prophet who was adopted by God because of his strict obedience to the Torah. By the 4th Century, Christian writers (Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Jerome) still affirm that the Ebionites in general reject the virgin birth but note that some receive this doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus also states that the Ebionites “use the Gospel according to Matthew only” (*Contra Haereses* 1.26.2, cf. 3.11.7).

It is interesting to note that another Jewish sect, the Nazarenes, never show up in the “heretic lists” of the Church Fathers. They are described as living like the Jews in every way except that they accept Yeshua as the Messiah. Unlike the Ebionites, they received the letters of Paul as authoritative. One wonders whether the notice in *b.Shabbat* 116a has these two sects (Ebionites and Nazarenes) in view:

R. Joseph b. Hanin asked R. Abbahu: As for the Books of Be Abedan (דְּבֵי אֶבְיָדָן), may we save them from a fire or not? — Yes and No, and he was uncertain about the matter. Rab would not enter a Be Abedan, and certainly not a Be Nizrefe (לְבֵי נִצְרֵפִי); Samuel would not enter a Be Nizrefe, yet he would enter a *Be Abedan*.

It is possible that *Be Abedan* and *Be Nizrefe* are intended corruptions of *Beit Abionin* (Ebionites) and *Beit Netzorim* (Nazarenes). If so, it is interesting that the rabbis favor the Ebionites over the Nazarenes, just opposite of the Church Fathers, who accepted the Nazarenes (though disapproving of their Jewish life-style and observances) but considered the Ebionites to be heretical on the basis of their rejection of the virgin birth of Yeshua. If indeed this Talmudic reference is in regard to the Ebionites (though this is admittedly debated), then their marginal acceptance by the rabbis would strengthen the case that the Ebionites denied the deity of Yeshua, for to hold Him as only a prophet would easily fall within acceptable limits for rabbinic Judaism.

1 See Stephen Goranson, “Ebionites” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.

A second non-orthodox view of Yeshua gained prominence in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries, and was called Docetism, from the Greek δόκεω, *dokeo*, “to seem” or “to appear.” According to this view, which was based upon Gnostic doctrine and Platonic philosophy, Yeshua was completely divine, but His humanity was merely an appearance, a kind of “cloak.” As a result, Yeshua was not considered to be a real human being, and consequently, His suffering on the cross was not real. From a Gnostic viewpoint, to have the Messiah actually take on “flesh” (=become a real human being, Jn 1:14) would compromise both His divinity and His spirituality, since all material substance is inherently evil.

The Christian Church denied both Ebionitism and Docetism since both presented theology that went contrary to the Apostolic message contained in the Gospels and Epistles. The Ebionites presented Yeshua as merely a high moral example, but not divine. The Docetics presented a divine Savior Who had no real connection with humanity. Neither view fit the teaching of Yeshua Himself nor that of His Apostles.

Note the following verses from the Apostolic Scriptures which directly affirm the humanity of Yeshua our Messiah.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14)

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Messiah Yeshua, (1Tim 2:5)

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Messiah Yeshua, who, although He was always existing in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5–8)

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, (Heb 2:14)

----- End of Excursus -----

*For many deceivers have gone out into the world...* – The NASB rightly begins the sentence with the English “For,” which translates the Greek word “Ὅτι (*hoti*), a word which can also carry the sense of “because.” It therefore links this verse with what comes before, so that here, in our verse, John is giving the reason why he previously admonished the recipients of his epistle to love one another by keeping the commandments of God. The reason for this emphasis is “Because (*hoti*) many deceivers have gone out into the world....” The proper love between believers in a local community therefore includes a willingness to lovingly guard one another from following errant teachings which, if accepted, would cause people to leave the truth and become snared by falsehood. Here, again, we see that the love John enjoins is one that supports and cares for one another, but it does so with a full allegiance to the truth of God’s revealed word.

What does John mean by the phrase “gone out into the world” (ἐξῆλθον εἰς τὸν κόσμον)? He uses very similar wording in 1Jn 4:1, “...many false prophets have gone out into the world,” but in our current text he calls them “deceivers.” While the word “deceiver” could be taken to mean that these false teachers were knowingly leading people into error, the word and context does not necessarily require such a meaning. Rather, the sense of arrogance and pride in a teacher who thinks he possesses special knowledge may be what the Greek word suggests here. In other words, the false teachers may have honestly believed that what they were teaching was the truth, but they had convinced themselves of this by viewing themselves as having come to “greater knowledge” than that which the Apostles possessed.

And this may help us understand what John means when he writes they have “gone out into the world.” These were people who professed faith in Yeshua and who were part of the believing assembly, but who, through pride and arrogance, believed they had been given special knowledge, a knowledge that went contrary to the teachings of the Apostles. As a result, they left the believing community and became aligned again with the “world.” While the Greek word *κόσμος* (*kosmos*), translated “world,” can carry a number of meanings within its semantic range, in its basic sense it may convey that which is contrary to the holiness of God. We see this meaning in 1Jn 2:15.

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (1Jn 2:15)

Thus, when John writes that these false teachers have gone out “into the world,” he is portraying them as leaving the believing communi-

ty and joining “the world,” i.e., aligning themselves with that which opposes God and is contrary to His righteous standards. In denying that Yeshua had come in the flesh, that is, that Yeshua is fully human, they likewise denied that He effected eternal and infinite atonement for those He would save. If Yeshua did not take on true human nature, He could not act as a representative for human beings. This is precisely the argument of the author to the Hebrews when he writes:

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, (Heb 2:14)

... *those who do not acknowledge Yeshua Messiah as coming in the flesh.* – The deceivers deny that Yeshua has come in the flesh. Above I noted the parallel to 1Jn 4:2, where John states “every spirit that confesses that Yeshua Messiah has come in the flesh is from God.” In this verse John uses a participle in the perfect tense (ἐληλυθότα < ἔρχομαι) to state that Yeshua Messiah “has come in the flesh.” In our verse, however, John uses a present participle (ἐρχόμενον < ἔρχομαι), translated by the NASB “as coming.” But the emphasis that John intends us to understand is that the mystery of Yeshua being both God and man is an eternal reality. In commenting upon the different tenses used by John when comparing 1Jn 4:2 with 2Jn 1:7, Akin comes to the same conclusion:

The key, it seems, is to discover what John is affirming. Here in 2 John the emphasis falls on the abiding reality of the incarnation. 1 John 4:2 teaches that the Christ, the Father’s Son (v. 3), has come in the flesh. Second John affirms that the wedding of deity and humanity has an abiding reality.<sup>1</sup>

*This is the deceiver and the anti-Messiah.* – John has previously equated the false teachers with the spirit of anti-Messiah (1Jn 2:18, 22; 4:3) but here he also uses the title “deceiver” (πλάνος, *planos*), the very word he used to describe the human “deceivers” or “false teachers.” But

1 Akin, *2John*, p. 229. Note also Brooke, *2John*, p. 175, “By the use of ἐρχόμενον instead of ἐληλυθότα the confession is taken out of all connection with time and made timeless. In the First Epistle stress was laid on the historical fact and its permanent consequences. Here the writer regards it as a continuous fact. The Incarnation is not only an event in history. It is an abiding truth. It is the writer’s view that humanity has been taken up into the Deity. The union is permanent and abiding.”

the fact that he includes the definite article for each of the titles would strongly indicate that he is referring to the spirit of the evil one, Satan. Thus John is making this bold assertion: those who deny that Yeshua is the Messiah Who has come in the flesh, i.e., Who is fully divine as well as fully human, have agreed with the devil himself and furthermore, have assisted him in advancing his abominable lies in a futile attempt to defeat the very person and work of Yeshua, the Son of Man, the Son of God. Here, John makes something perfectly clear: the doctrine of Yeshua, Who He is, and what He has accomplished in His incarnation, is foundational to true saving faith.

**8 Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward.**

John admonishes his readers and us to “watch yourselves” (βλέπετε ἑαυτοὺς). This idiom, to “Look at yourself” means to do an honest assessment of one’s own spiritual temperature and to maintain the spiritual disciplines necessary to continue growing in one’s faith and thereby in sanctification, i.e., in having one’s life patterned more and more after the very person of Messiah. In the First Epistle, John speaks of “walking in the light” as contrasted by those who “walk in the darkness” (1Jn 1:6–7). “Walk in the light” means to live in accordance with the truth as given to us by God. To “walk in darkness” means to be ignorant of the truth and to live in a way that is contrary to it. Thus, in the face of the heresy being taught by the deceivers, John exhorts us to be on the alert. Culy, in commenting on the words “Watch yourselves,” puts it this way:

The idiom points to self-vigilance: “to be ready to learn about future dangers or needs, with the implication of preparedness to respond appropriately.”<sup>1</sup>

While there are some textual variants in our verse pertaining to pronouns,<sup>2</sup> it is clear that the exhortation John is giving is obviously direct-

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1 Culy, *2John*, p. 148, quoting Lowe and Nida, ed. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (United Bible Societies, 1988), §27.58.

2 The KJV and NKJV have all of the pronouns in the verse as 1st p. pl., i.e., “we.” The NASB, NEB, ASV, RV, have the 1st p. pl. “we” in the phrase “lose all that we worked for.” The NAB, RSV, NIV have 2nd p. pl “you” for all the pronouns. While the external evidence might favor 2nd p. pl. for all the pronouns, internal considerations are weighted toward the 1st p. pl. “we” for the



ed to individuals, but it also takes into consideration the community as a whole. The point is simply this: wisdom teaches us that we are not always able to assess our own situation as we ought for the simple reason that everyone deals with “blind spots” when considering one’s own weaknesses or inabilities. Therefore, “Watching ourselves” as John admonishes us, also means looking out for each other as we fellowship together in community. Loving each other, as John emphasizes in the previous verses, also includes guarding each other from false teaching or the deceptive schemes of false teachers.

*...that you do not lose what we have accomplished*, – John may, once again, be relying upon the words of Yeshua when He taught:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; (Matt 6:19–20)

John is obviously not teaching here that one could lose one’s salvation, for the Scriptures are clear that our eternal salvation is not earned but is a free gift of God’s grace, given to us by the work of Yeshua and made ours through faith (e.g., Rom 3:28; Eph 2:8–10; 2Tim 1:9; Tit 3:8). Indeed, John has stated this in the first two verses of our epistle:

The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth, for the sake of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever: (2Jn 1:1-2)

Rather, in v. 8 John is reminding his readers and us that there are rewards laid up for us in the world to come as we labor for the Lord in this life. John had labored to teach and guide this community to which he is writing, and thus he speaks of losing “what we have accomplished,” that is, the full reward for our labors in the service of the Messiah. This understanding fits perfectly with the final phrase of our verse.

*...but that you may receive a full reward*. The Greek word translated “reward” is μισθός (*misthos*), which can also carry the meaning of “a workman’s wages” (e.g., Matt 20:8; Lk 10:7; Jn 4:36; 1Tim 5:18; James 5:4). The idea then fits well with the teaching of Yeshua in His parable of the vineyard (Matt 20:1–16), that faithfully laboring for the Lord, to

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middle clause, as the NASB has it. See Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, p. 652.



sanctify His Name in the world, and to live as witnesses for Him and for His truth, will be rewarded by the Lord Himself in the world to come. Yet even these rewards are a matter of His grace, for apart from Him and His Spirit within us, we could do nothing. Even as the 24 elders are pictured by John in Revelation as casting their golden crowns before the throne, and proclaiming

Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created. (Rev 4:10)

so all who make up the redeemed people of God will affirm that whatever rewards we receive for laboring in His vineyard, are tokens of His free and sovereign grace.

Clearly those who have left the community, denied the reality of Yeshua's incarnation and thus denied Him, have no reward in the world to come but only eternal punishment. But those who have been born again by the power of God's Spirit are those who will continue to persevere in their faith and will continue to be witnesses of His greatness. Yet we must persevere, and we must encourage one another in the life of faith which we share. Indeed, perseverance is the inevitable product of saving faith, but it is also true that perseverance in faith is a cooperative work between God and those He has redeemed. "Persevere we must; persevere we will."

John's exhortation, which is in concert with the whole of Scripture, is that as children of God, we must take seriously the grand privilege we have of being the bearers of His saving grace to a watching world.

**9 Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Messiah, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.**

The situation which was occurring in the community to which John addresses his epistles was this: some who had initially confessed Yeshua to be the promised Messiah and therefore the One and only One through Whom eternal salvation is possible, had been persuaded by false teachers that there was a more advanced knowledge of God which had been hidden from them. Once they came to accept this more advanced knowledge, obtainable only from teachers who had this special insight into the truth about God, they would realize that their initial confession of faith in Yeshua was ill-founded, and would abandon it, leaving their ignorance behind and advancing into the true knowledge