

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO JOHANNINE EPISTLES

Authorship and date

1 John anonymous (along with Hebrews)

2 & 3 John by “the elder”

The author claims to be an eyewitness of Christ (1 John 1:1; 4:14). And the “elder” title is appropriate for an apostle, especially an aged apostle (cf. 1 Pet 5:1, Peter an “elder”; and Phlm 9, Paul an “old man”).

Because of their evident similarity, it is generally recognized that the author of the epistles is the same as the author of John’s Gospel (e.g., Kümmel, p. 445; but now see Smalley, p. xxii). We believe the author of the Fourth Gospel is the Apostle John (evidence for the authorship of John’s Gospel given in another class—Christ in the Gospels).

External evidence for the author of the epistles being the Apostle John is strong. They are quoted authoritatively in the beginning of the second century, and attributed to John by the last quarter of the century (see Brooke, pp. lii-lxii). Especially important is the use of the epistles by Polycarp in his letter to the Philippians (ca. A.D. 110-140). External evidence for 2 & 3 John is somewhat later and weaker than for 1 John; this is natural, viewing the small size of the books.

Church tradition places all John’s writings near A.D. 90, from Ephesus. There seems to be a development in the church from the time of the Gospel until the epistles, with the heresies showing more strength, and secessions taking place (see Smalley, p. xxxii; for description of heresies, see pp. xxiv-xxv). Perhaps the epistles were written in the middle of the 90s, and the Gospel somewhat before A.D. 90.

Type of literature

1 John does not purport to be an epistle as such; and does not name the author or recipients. Yet it shows a need to write to a particular situation (using “I, we” and “you”). Probably it is a general epistle for the churches around Ephesus, churches which were under John’s more personal sphere of influence. 2 & 3 John are letters, conforming closely to the normal Hellenistic form, even more than Philemon (Kümmel, p. 446, n. 1).

Characteristics of 1 John

(Taken from class notes of Dr. James Boyer, Grace Theological Seminary)

1) Aphoristic and repetitive in style

- Aphoristic—short pointed sentences
- Not reasoned arguments
- More contemplative
- Ideas move in circle, or spiral

2) Marked by contrasts, antitheses, opposites

- Light and darkness
- Truth and falsehood
- Love and hate
- Life and death
- Love of Father, love of world
- Children of God, children of Devil
- Spirit of truth, spirit of error
- Doing righteousness, doing sin

(Now recognized to be Palestinian background theologically)

3) Carries a tone of authority

- Merely states the point
- Does not argue, or defend himself
- Authority of author assumed to be unquestioned
- However, maintains loving and tender spirit

4) Combines profound majesty of thought with simple language

- Similar to Fourth Gospel

5) Maintains a moral and personal approach to truth

- Truth not merely intellectual
- “Know” is same as “walking in light,” “doing his commandment,” “loving the brethren”
- Assurance of knowledge arises from “anointing” (KJV “unction”)

6) Employs high contrasts: “a line drawing rather than half-tone”

- No middle ground between love and hate; obedience and sin
- Produces picture of ideal Christian life

(Contrast this with actual experience)

Occasion and purpose

Many of the earlier conflicts in the church seem to have been settled (faith vs. works; Mosaic regulations). At the time of these letters the main problems involve theology (person of Christ) and ethics. The errors seem to come from two directions (Jewish-Ebionite and Gnostic-Docetic). Note the chart in Smalley, p. xxiv:

	<u>Jewish</u>	<u>Gnostic</u>
Theology:	Jesus as man	Jesus as God
Ethics:	The Mosaic law is indispensable	Righteousness is unimportant

Thus John’s epistles (especially 1 John) were written to encourage the orthodox Christians not be led astray by heretical beliefs about Christ, or to forsake Christian conduct. Rather, they are to find assurance of their salvation in right belief and right conduct—the Holy Spirit then dispensing in their hearts his assurance.

Purpose of John— “that you might believe” (20:31)

Purpose of 1 John— “that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13)

Outline of 1 John

- I. Preface, 1:1-4
- II. The believer's fellowship, 1:5 - ch. 2
 - A. Tests of fellowship, 1:5 - 2:11
 - 1. A proper attitude toward sin, 1:5 - 2:2
 - 2. Keeping his commandments, 2:3-6
 - 3. Loving the brethren, 2:7-11
 - B. Encouragement for true believers, 2:12-14
 - C. Destroyers of fellowship, 2:15-29
 - 1. The world, 2:15-17
 - 2. Antichrists, 2:18-29
- III. The believer's sonship, ch. 3
 - A. Our obligation as sons, 3:1-3
 - B. Sonship revealed by righteousness, 3:4-9
 - C. Sonship revealed by love, 3:10-24
- IV. The believer's assurance, ch. 4 - 5:12
 - A. Assurance through truth, 4:1-6
 - 1. Warning to test the spirits, 4:1
 - 2. The test defined, 4:2-3
 - 3. The test results, 4:4-6
 - B. Assurance through love, 4:7 - 5:3
 - 1. The evidence of God's presence, 4:4-13

- a. Essence of God's love, 4:7-8
 - b. Evidence of God's love, 4:9-11
 - c. Effect of God's love, 4:12-13
 - 2. The confession God's love produces, 4:14-16
 - 3. The fruits of love for God, 4:17 - 5:3
 - a. Boldness, 4:17-19
 - b. Brotherly love, 4:20-21
 - c. Righteousness, 5:1-3
- C. Assurance through faith, 5:4-12
 - 1. The victory of faith, 5:4-5
 - 2. The witness for faith, 5:6-11
 - 3. The life of faith, 5:12
- V. Conclusion, 5:13-21
 - A. Primary purpose of the epistle, 5:13
 - B. Assurance expressed in prayer, 5:14-17
 - C. Three points of knowledge, 5:18-20
 - D. Timely warning concerning idols, 5:21

Commentaries on Johannine Epistles

John Calvin (1 John)

Robert S. Candlish (1 John; 3rd ed. 1877; republished by Banner of Truth, 1993)

Joh. Ed. Huther (H. A. W. Mayer series, E.T. from 3rd Ger. ed., 1883)

Brooke Foss Westcott (3rd ed., 1892)

Alfred Plummer (Camb. Bible for Schools, Thornapple Com., 1883)

Alfred Plummer (CGT, 1894)

George G. Findlay (1909)

A. E. Brooke (ICC, 1912)

Robert Law, *The Tests of Life* (1 John, 3rd ed., 1914)

John R. W. Stott (TNTC, 1964; 2nd ed. 1988)

F. F. Bruce (1970)

I. Howard Marshall (NIC, 1978)

Raymond E. Brown (AB, 1982)

Kenneth Grayston (NCBC, 1984)

Stephen S. Smalley (WBC, 1984)

Donald W. Burdick (Moody, 1985)

Simon J. Kistemaker (NTC, with James, 1986)

John L. Anderson (SIL, 1992)

Thomas F. Johnson (NIBC, 1993)

Colin G. Kruse (Pillar NTC, 2000)