

FIRST JOHN CLASS NOTES

Authorship

There is no explicit claim of authorship in 1 John. Externally, the authorship of 1 John is tied to the issue of the date of the letter as well as the interpretation of early church sources. Early church tradition attributes this letter to the Apostle John. Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, ca. A.D. 180), Clement of Alexandria (d. A.D. 220), Tertullian (d. A.D. 215), and Origen (d. A.D. 253) attribute 1 John to the apostle John.¹ Also, The Muratorian Canon (ca. A.D.200) refers to John as the author of the Fourth Gospel and then refers to his “epistles.”²

There are also internal clues that suggest that the Apostle John is the author. First, the author of 1 John was an eyewitness of Jesus’ life and work (1:1–4). Second, the author speaks as one who has apostolic authority (e.g. 2:15, 24, 28; 4:1; 5:21). Third, the style, vocabulary, themes, and theology are very closely related to that of the Gospel of John.³ They are so similar that John Painter can say, “The similarities between the two writings are closer than those between Luke and Acts or 1 and 2 Thessalonians.”⁴ If the Apostle John is the author of the fourth gospel, it seems very likely he is the author of 1 John. These three internal clues suggest the Apostle John is the author.

Some have suggested based on the superscription in 2 and 3 John that the author is not the apostle John, but a different John referred to as “John the Elder.” However, that could be reference to the author’s age, rather than a title that distinguishes him from the Apostle John. Others have suggested a disciple of John (who may have also written the Fourth Gospel), or a leader in the Johannine community. Both of these suggestions are highly speculative, and lack the evidence that the theory that the Apostle John is the author has. Some see it as a deliberate attempt by the author to imitate John’s writing and theology, much like a pseudepigraphal writing.⁵ However, the early Christians did not accept pseudepigraphal writings. Furthermore, if the author was not really an eyewitness to Jesus’ life and ministry, his argument fails.⁶

It seems best to attribute the letter to the Apostle John on the weight of the internal and external evidence. Perhaps he does not introduce himself since he is so familiar with his audience (2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21).

¹ Charles H. Savelle, “First John Argument,” (Unpublished Paper), 438.

² W. Hall Harris III, “The Authorship of 1 John,” Bible.org, entry posted July 28, 2004, <https://bible.org/seriespage/1-authorship-1-john> (accessed September 3, 2016).

³ Savelle, “First John Argument,” 438–39.

⁴ John Painter, *1, 2, 3 John*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 68.

⁵ W. Hall Harris III, “The Authorship of 1 John,” Bible.org.

⁶ Ibid.

Date

The date of 1 John is bound up with the issue of authorship, historical reconstruction and its relationship to the other Johannine writings. Given our belief that the Apostle John is the author, the date must be sometime in the first century. Furthermore, we believe that the Apostle John is also the author of the Fourth Gospel, 2 and 3 John, as well as Revelation. Therefore, the dating of any of these works will affect the date of the others.

Those who argue for an early date do so based on an early date for the Gospel of John (c. AD 65).⁷ They argue the letters were written after the Gospel, but before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The author needed some time to get to know his audience, and for the false teachers to leave (2:19). Therefore, according to this view a date of AD 68–69 seems probable. Some who hold this view also hold that 1 John was written after 2 John.⁸

Those who argue for a late date also tie it to the dating of the Fourth Gospel and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. According to this view, the Gospel was written ca. AD 80–85. This view holds that the destruction of Jerusalem is not mentioned in John's writings because it was so many years prior. Also, some proponents of this view hold that John was combatting incipient Gnosticism, which would fit a date later in the first century. Therefore, a date of AD 85–90 would fit this view.⁹

While firm conclusions are impossible, it seems likely that 1 John was written in the latter quarter of the first century. This is so based on the dating of the Fourth Gospel and the likely scenario that the letters were written after the Gospel and before Revelation. However, it is not our belief that incipient Gnosticism was the problem in 1 John, so a date in the latter quarter of the first century is not necessary and will not affect the exegesis.

Original Recipients

First John does not explicitly identify the recipients of the letter. Three characteristics of the audience are certain. First, the recipients were clearly Christians (e.g., 2:12, 20–21; 3:1–3; 5:13). Second, the author knew the recipients well (2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). Third, the recipients were experiencing problems related to false teachers and false teaching (e.g., 2:18–27; 4:1).¹⁰ Perhaps this community was the group of churches addressed in Revelation in western Asia Minor, or perhaps the church at Ephesus (though if John was in Ephesus at the time of writing, Ephesus is not a likely destination).¹¹

Historical Setting

Determining the historical setting of 1 John is difficult due to the uncertainties regarding date and authorship. We will argue that false teaching was causing division in the body (2:19; 4:1). This false teaching regarded the person and work of Christ. The false teachers argued

⁷ Daniel B. Wallace, "1 John: Introduction, Argument, and Outline," Bible .org, entry posted July 28, 2004, <https://bible.org/seriespage/23-1-john-introduction-argument-and-outline> (accessed September 3, 2016).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Savelle, "First John Argument," 439–40.

¹⁰ Savelle, "First John Argument," 440.

¹¹ Daniel B. Wallace, "1 John: Introduction, Argument, and Outline," Bible .org.

that it was not through Jesus Christ that one has access to the Father and eternal life (5:13). The false teachers had left the community and were causing the believers problems by their false teaching. Perhaps this community was the group of churches addressed in Revelation, or perhaps the church at Ephesus (though if John was in Ephesus at the time of writing, Ephesus is not a likely destination).¹²

Relationship to 2 and 3 John

The main issues in the relationship between the Johannine letters are authorship and relative dating. Some hold that a different author, “John the Elder,” penned 2 and 3 John. Many who hold this view believe one or more of the letters to be the work of a forger, since the similarities between the letters are so striking. However, authors are able to vary their style, even in their salutations, as the occasion demands. Furthermore, the problems with the forgery view are too numerous. It seems best to see all three letters as coming from the same hand.¹³ This view is strengthened by the close affinities 2 John shares with both 1 and 3 John.¹⁴

Regarding the relative dating of the letters, some see 2 and 3 John as being later than 1 John. Wallace sees the false teachers in 2 John as itinerant preachers still considered to be part of the church, but that by the time 1 John was written they had left the church.¹⁵ Others see the three letters as a “package deal.” Jobes argues that 1 John was a sermon delivered in John’s home church soon after the false teachers had gone out. In order to stop the spread of the false teaching, John sends 1 John with 2 John as a “cover letter.” However, Diotrephes refuses to receive John’s emissaries and so John reaches out to Gaius in 3 John.¹⁶ This theory is attractive, but impossible to prove. Jobes herself cautions that it should not be allowed to “dictate exegesis.”¹⁷

Regarding the content of the letters, 1 and 2 John are closely related in their concern regarding false teaching. Second and 3 John are closely related in “vocabulary (i.e., love/loved, truth), epistolary form, similarity in size.”¹⁸

Relationship to the Gospel of John

As we argued above, it seems that the Johannine epistles were written after the Gospel of John. Also, it is our belief that the Apostle John wrote the Fourth Gospel and the epistles. This is significant, since the theology and terminology used in the Gospel can help to inform the interpretation of 1 John.

¹² Wallace, “1 John: Introduction, Argument, and Outline,” Bible.org.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Savell, “First John Argument,” 441–42.

¹⁵ Wallace, “1 John: Introduction, Argument, and Outline,” Bible.org.

¹⁶ Jobes, *1, 2, 3 John*, ZECNT, 29.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Savelle, “First John Argument,” 441.

Some Similarities between John's Gospel and the Epistles of John¹⁹

Gospel of John	1 John	2 John	3 John
<p><i>John 1:1</i> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.</p> <p><i>John 1:14</i> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.</p> <p><i>John 15:26</i> But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me</p> <p><i>John 15:27</i> And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.</p>	<p><i>1 John 1:1</i> That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.</p>		
<p><i>John 3:21</i> But whoever does what is true comes to the light</p>	<p><i>1 John 1:6</i> If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.</p>	<p><i>2 John 4</i> I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father.</p>	<p><i>3 John 3</i> For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth.</p>
<p><i>John 1:5</i> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.</p>	<p><i>1 John 2:8</i> ...because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.</p>		
<p><i>John 8:12</i> Again</p>	<p><i>1 John 1:5</i> This is the</p>		

¹⁹ This table is taken from, Jobes, *1, 2, 3 John*, ZECNT, 25–27. The translation used here is the ESV.

<p>Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”</p>	<p>message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. <i>1 John 2:9</i> Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.</p>		
<p><i>John 1:12–13</i> But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.</p>	<p><i>1 John 5:1</i> Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.</p>		
<p><i>John 15:12</i> This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.</p>	<p><i>1 John 3:23</i> And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.</p>	<p><i>2 John 5</i> And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another.</p>	
<p><i>John 15:7</i> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.</p>	<p><i>1 John 3:24</i> Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.</p>	<p><i>2 John 9</i> Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.</p>	
<p><i>John 13:34</i> A new commandment I give to you</p>	<p><i>1 John 2:8</i> At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you</p>		
<p><i>John 14:16</i> And I will ask the Father, and</p>	<p><i>1 John 2:1</i> My little children, I am</p>		

<p>he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever.</p>	<p>writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.</p>		
<p><i>John 17:3</i> And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.</p>	<p><i>1 John 2:25</i> And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life. <i>1 John 5:11</i> And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.</p>		
<p><i>John 14:6</i> Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.</p>	<p><i>1 John 2:23</i> No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.</p>		
	<p><i>1 John 2:18</i> Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.</p>	<p><i>2 John 7</i> For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.</p>	
<p><i>John 13:30</i> So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he [Judas] immediately went out. And it was night.</p>	<p><i>1 John 2:19</i> They went out from us, but they were not of us.</p>		
<p><i>John 20:31</i> But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may</p>	<p><i>1 John 5:13</i> I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.</p>		

have life in his name.			
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Canonicity

First John (and 2 and 3 John) appears to have been readily accepted as canonical. Irenaeus (c. 180) and Origen (c. 253) appear to consider 1 John as inspired Scripture. The church historian Eusebius lists it among the recognized books (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.25) and they are included in the Muratorian Canon.²⁰ By the fourth century all three letters were considered canonical and are included in Athanasius' canon list (A.D. 367).²¹

Purpose

There are four “purpose statements” in 1 John that could be used to determine the purpose of the letter (1:4; 2:1, 26; 5:13).

Passage	Purpose
1:4	And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.
2:1	My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.
2:26	These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you.
5:13	These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life.

Depending on whether one understands “these things” in each of the passages will affect one’s understanding of the epistle as a whole. That is, “these things” may refer to the immediate context only, or to the letter as a whole.²² However, we will argue that John was writing to refute a false teaching that was resulting in division. This false teaching was that Jesus Christ was not the only means to the Father, but that access to the Father and eternal life was gained by works of the law.

Therefore, John was writing to refute this false teaching and assure his readers, who had believed in Jesus, that Jesus was the Christ and it was through belief in him that they had eternal life and access to the Father (5:13). Therefore, we think that 5:13 is best seen as the purpose statement by which the others are to be interpreted.

²⁰ Ibid., 442.

²¹ Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, 3, John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 31.

²² Savelle, “First John Argument,” 442.

Contribution

There are four significant contributions that 1 John makes to the canonical plot. The first contribution is the emphasis on the “existence and importance of the truth.”²³ Truth is used to substantiate right belief and right practice. Second, 1 John contributes to the canonical plot with its emphasis on Christian love. Third, 1 John contributes to our Christology in significant ways. Fourth, 1 John contributes to the canonical plot by insisting that fellowship with the Father and access to eternal life is through belief in the Son (though this is not a unique contribution of course!).

Literary Features and Structure

Despite being classified as an epistle, 1 John reads more like a sermon than a letter.²⁴ This could explain the sharp dualistic language and circularity of the letter.²⁵ The letter contains “Hebraisms,” which tell us something about the author, that he was Jewish and not Gentile (as his audience most likely seems to be Gentile).²⁶

The structure of the letter is notoriously difficult to determine. D. Akin has identified three major approaches in structuring the outline of the book: “(1) traditional scholars who seek to discern basic topic or subject divisions (even sources) and an overarching outline through inductive analysis; (2) discourse analysis—linguist scholars who apply principles of semantic structural studies or “discourse linguistics” to discover the semantic relations that weave the epistle together as a unified whole; (3) rhetorical criticism—students of ancient rhetoric who seek to discover what, if any, rhetorical strategies common to the author’s world were used to set forth and further his argument.”²⁷ We will primarily follow the first approach.

Message

The message of 1 John is, “Access to the Father and eternal life is through faith in Jesus Christ alone, and results in a life of love.”

Basic Outline

- I. Fellowship with the Father is based on acceptance of the Apostles’ testimony which is authoritative because they were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life and ministry (1:1–4).
- II. Access to the Father and eternal life requires accepting the Apostle’s gospel of belief in Jesus Christ for forgiveness (“walking in the Light”), and rejecting the false teachers’ way of self-justification (“walking in darkness”) (1:5–2:27).

²³ Ibid., 443.

²⁴ Jobes, *1, 2, 3 John*, ZECNT, 29.

²⁵ Savelle, “First John Argument,” 443.

²⁶ Ibid,

²⁷ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2001), 37.

- III.** Imputed righteousness and membership in the “Family of God” is accessed through belief in Jesus Christ according to the Apostolic gospel and witness of the Spirit, and results in love of God and love of the brethren (2:28–4:6).
- IV.** Since believers have experienced God’s love in His Son, which is validated by the OT and the Spirit, they will also love one another and keep His commandments (4:7–5:12).
- V.** Summary: Exhortations to those who obey the revelation in Jesus (5:13–21).

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