

SECOND JOHN CLASS NOTES

Authorship

Second John 1 identifies the author as simply “the elder” (πρεσβύτερος). Because of the close similarities in vocabulary and presumed historical circumstances to 1 John, many have concluded that they are from the same author.¹ Since we have already noted that John the Apostle is the likely author of 1 John² then 2 John would also then be authored by John the Apostle. This would be consistent with the otherwise ambiguous designation “the elder” since it would make sense if the epistle came from a well-known apostle (cf. 1 Pet 5:1).

Externally, the evidence is not as strong for 2 John for Johannine authorship as it is for 1 John. But this is not wholly unexpected given the relative brevity of the epistle. Still, Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 180), the Muratorian Canon (ca. A.D.200, which mentions two letters by John), Clement of Alexandria (d. A.D. 220), Origen (d. A.D. 253) and Dionysius of Alexandria (d. A.D. 264) all give evidence towards the recognition of 2 John as a writing of the Apostle.³ However, it should be noted that Eusebius placed 2 and 3 John among the antilegomena (disputed books).⁴ Nonetheless, there seems to be little warrant internally or externally for denying Johannine authorship.

Date

The similarities between 1 John with 2 John noted above suggests that these epistles were written at the same time. Since 1 John was probably written around A.D. 85–90, then 2 John should also be dated in that general period as well.

Original Recipients

The original recipients of 2 John are identified in as “the elect lady and her children” (1). The problem is trying to unpack this cryptic designation.⁵ There are two basic possibilities. First, the “elect lady” could be a real Christian woman, possibly named Eklecta or Kyria, and the

¹ For example, 1 and 2 John both use common words and phrases such as “love in the truth,” “have known the truth,” “walking in the truth,” “new commandment,” “love one another,” “deceiver,” “antichrist,” and “abide.” For a complete list see Donald W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle: An in-Depth Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 414-15. Likewise, 1 and 2 John assume similar historical circumstances such as false teaching, etc. The linkage is so strong that Thompson concludes, “it is safe to say that the two letters illumine each other and are so obviously written with the same situation in view that each may be used to interpret the other.” Marianne Meye Thompson, *1-3 John*, ed. Grant R. Osborne, Ivp New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 150.

² See the discussion on 1 John.

³ Some have suggested that Polycarp (d. ca. A.D. 155) quoted from 2 John 7 but this is disputed (Philippians 7.1).

⁴ *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.

⁵ This is not to suggest that the original recipients would have found the designation to be cryptic, but only an acknowledgment that it is cryptic to modern readers.

familial designations in vv. 1, 13 represent literal family members. A second possibility is that the “elect lady and her children” are a personification of the church and her members. This latter view is generally held and is supported by references to the church as “the bride of Christ” (cf. Eph 5:22–33; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:7) and the plural pronouns which dominate the book.

Historical Setting

There is some ambiguity regarding the specific historical circumstances to the epistle. However, the similarities to 1 John such as references to false teachers as “antichrists” (2 John 7; cf. 1 John 2:18, 22) who are denying of the person and work of Christ (2 John 7; cf. 1 John 2:22–23; 4:1–3) suggest a shared historical background between the epistles. But the specifics are a bit different. In 1 John the false teachers had separated from the believing community. But in 2 John, the same false teachers are apparently traveling elsewhere seeking to infiltrate churches like the one addressed in 2 John. John then writes to warn them not to show hospitality to these itinerant teachers (7–11).

Relationship to 1 and 3 John

Authorship is the primary issue in discussing the relationship between 1 John and 2–3 John. As early as Eusebius there have been genuine questions as to whether a single author was responsible for all three writings.⁶ J. Moffatt also raised this issue and concluded that they were not written by the same author.⁷ But we have already suggested that the same author is involved. As far as content is concerned there appears to be a closer affinity between 1 John and 2 John both of which address false teaching. But, 2 John shares some similarities with 3 John, including vocabulary (i.e., love/beloved, truth), epistolary form, similarity in size. Painter concludes, “2 John stands in a close relationship to each of the other Johannine Epistles but that 3 John seems to be more independent of the language and subject matter of 1 John.”⁸

Canonicity

The brevity of 2 John probably contributed to some of the neglect and uncertainty in the early church fathers and canonical lists. For example, although Polycarp identifies around sixteen books as canonical he does not include any of the Johannine epistles. Similarly, neither Justin Martyr nor Marcion make reference to 1, 2, 3 John. Eusebius notes that some Christians questioned the acceptability of 2, 3 John (Ecclesiastical History 3.25). Nevertheless, as has already been noted the Muratorian Canon, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Dionysius of Alexandria all give evidence towards the recognition of 2 John as a writing of the Apostle. Ultimately all three Johannine epistles were recognized as canonical by Athanasius (A.D. 367), and the Councils of Hippo (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397).

⁶ *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.

⁷ James Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, ed. Charles A. Briggs and Stewart D. F. Salmond, 3d ed., International Theological Library (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), 479–81.

⁸ John Painter, *1, 2, 3 John*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 51.

Purpose

The main purpose of 2 John is to warn the church (the elect lady and her children) not to welcome the false teachers who were seeking to infiltrate their fellowship. To accomplish this purpose, the apostle both affirms (1–4) and admonishes (5–11).

Contribution

Second John makes two important contributions. First, it affirms and assumes the existence and importance of truth. Second, it provides an important reminder that truth must be guarded from those who would seek to undermine it.

Literary Features and Structure

At least three significant literary features characterize all the Johannine Epistles including 2 John. First, it has been noted that the Greek of the Johannine Epistles give evidence of some Hebraisms.⁹ Second, like 1 John, 2 John contains antithetical or dualistic language in the book. Third, although it is relatively brief, 2 John contains a number of key words “truth” (thirteen times), “love” (four times), “commandment” (four times), “walk” (three times), “teaching” (three times), “children” (three times).

Unlike 1 John, 2 John is clearly epistolary in form. It contains an introduction (1–3), the main body (4–11), and a conclusion (12–13). This standard form makes identifying the basic structure easier.

Message

The message of Second John is, “The truth of the gospel is to be continually held and protected, which results in loving those who believe the gospel and protecting the community against those who do not.”¹⁰

Basic Outline¹¹

- I. The truth is the purpose of the epistle (1–3).
- II. Holding to the truth results in loving others (4–6).
- III. Holding to the truth results in protecting the community from error (7–11).
- IV. Conclusion (12–13).

⁹ Painter, *1, 2, 3 John*, 77.

¹⁰ This message statement is adapted from Charles Savelle, but has been significantly modified by Joshua Bramer.

¹¹ Adapted from Charles Savelle, but some changes in wording have been made by Joshua Bramer.

Select Bibliography

See the bibliography for 1 John.