

New Testament Survey

Epistles of John

I. Attestation and Authorship

A. 1 John¹

1. External

- a. Polycarp has an almost verbal reproduction of 4:2-3 in his *Epistle to the Philippians*.
- b. Papias is described by Irenaus as a “hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp” and is said by Eusebius to have “used some testimonies from John’s former Epistle.”
- c. The *Epistle to Diognetus* seems to allude to the ideas in 4:19 (chapter 10).
- d. The Muratorian Canon recognizes two Epistles of John, but does not name them.
- e. Irenaus quotes 1 John 4:1-2 almost verbally and 5:1 as well. He also says, “John the disciple of the Lord” testifies in his Epistle and then loosely quotes 1 John 2:18-19.
- f. Tertullian gives the substance of 1 John 4:1-3 and then assigns it to the Apostle John in *Against Marcion* (V.xvi) and quotes 1 John 1:1 in *Ad Praxeas* (chapter 15). He also combines ideas in 1 John 2:22, 4:2-3 and 5:1 in the same work (chapter 28).
- g. Clement of Alexandria quotes from 1 John frequently, and assigns the work to the Apostle John.
- h. Cyprian, Origen, and Dionysius of Alexandria all quote from 1 John.

2. Internal Evidence

- a. The author presents himself as an eyewitness of Christ’s ministry (1 John 1:1-4; 4:14).
- b. There is near universal agreement that the person who wrote the Gospel of John also wrote 1 John. The vocabulary, language, and style are very similar. Also, the Gospel of John and 1 John use many of the same words and concepts, for example, Word, light, love, new commandment, abide, lay down one’s life, take away sins, the works of the devil, etc.

B. 2 John²

1. External.

¹ Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Co., 1987), p p. 306-308.

² Thiessen, pp. 311-313.

- a. 2 John was classified with the antilegomena by Eusebius.
 - b. Because of its size, there are not many quotes from it by the early church fathers.
 - c. Additionally, many of the early church fathers classified 2 and 3 John along with 1 John as a single work.
 - d. The Muratorian Canon considers 1, 2, and 3 John a single work.
 - e. Ireneaus quotes 2 John 1:10-11 somewhat loosely and verses 7-8 almost verbally, but thinks he is quoting from 1 John.
 - f. Clement of Alexandria, in his *Adumbrations* (page 1011) writes, "John's Second Epistle which was written to the virgins is the simplest; but it was written to a certain Babylonian named the Elect Lady."
 - g. Dionysius of Alexandria says the John does not mention himself by name in his Epistles, "not even in the Second and Third Epistles, although they are short Epistles, but simply calls himself the presbyter."
2. Critical Objections.
- a. The writer calls himself an elder (presbyter) instead of an Apostle. However, Peter considered himself an elder (1 Peter 5:1-4), and no doubt the Apostles functioned as elders in their respective churches. Additionally, the word *presbuteros* was used to speak of someone advanced in years. When John wrote this Epistles he was most likely in his eighties or nineties.
 - b. Some go back to the question of John the Elder vs. John the Apostle as found in the discussion regarding the Gospel of John.
- C. 3 John³
1. External
 - a. Many of the same evidences for 2 John are also relevant for 3 John.
 - b. Clement of Alexandria and Dionysius of Alexandria both accepted 3 John.
 - c. Neither 2 or 3 John are in the Old Syriac or Muratorian Canon, although the latter appears to have considered 2 and 3 John as part of 1 John.
 - d. Cyril of Jerusalem accepted all of the Catholic Epistles (Heb-Jude).
 2. Internal
 - a. Language, vocabulary, and style all point to John.
 - b. The usage of the word "elder" also connects it with 2 John.

³ Thiessen, pp. 313-314.

II. Background and Destination

A. 1 John⁴

1. There is little internal or external evidence as to whom this book was addressed.
2. To whomever it was written, there is evidence that John knew who they were and the circumstances they were in.
3. Irenaeus represents John as living in Ephesus during the latter years of his life. This would mean that John would have been the presiding elder for not only Ephesus, but the other churches in the area which include Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Thus it may be highly likely that this letter is addressed to them.

B. 2 John⁵

1. There is little information as to the background of this book other than it is written to an “elect lady” and her children.
2. There is great scholarly debate as to who this “elect lady” is. Theories that have been postulated are:
 - a. Jerome says it is the whole church.
 - b. Lightfoot, Brooke, and Zahn say some local church that we don’t know about.
 - c. Wordsworth thinks it is the church in Babylon (from 1 Peter 5:13).
 - d. Some influential lady in the circuit of churches that John ministered to.
 - e. The lady Electa, taking “elect” to be a proper name.
3. The most likely interpretation is that John wrote to an elect lady in one of his churches and to her family.

C. 3 John⁶

1. 3 John was written to deal with the problem of Diotrephes and his desire for power. It is written to Gaius to encourage him and let him know that John would soon visit.

III. Occasion and Date

A. 1 John⁷

1. Irenaeus tells us that 1 John was written to deal with Cerentian Gnosticism. Elements of this brand of gnosticism are:

⁴Thiessen, p. 308.

⁵ Thiessen, p. 313.

⁶ Thiessen, p. 315.

⁷ Thiessen, pp. 309-310.

- a. Christ was not divine. The “Christ Spirit” descended on the human Jesus at his baptism and left sometime prior to his crucifixion.
 - b. Antinomianism.
 - c. A denial of the physical resurrection of Christ. Christ arose as a glorified spirit, but not in physical form.
2. It appears as though some of the heretics had left the church (1 John 2:18-19). However, John writes to encourage the true believers of the reality of their faith.
 3. Evidence suggests that 1 John was written sometime between A.D. 85-90:
 - a. John could not have gotten to Ephesus until some time after Paul’s death, say A.D. 67-68.
 - b. The epistle must have been written some time after the destruction of Jerusalem since there is no mention of the sacrificial system or nation itself.
 - c. 1 John fits in very well with the Gospel of John, and hence must have been written about the same time.

B. 2 John⁸

1. Probably written about the same time as 1 John.
2. This would be the date A.D. 85-90.

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IV. Purpose and Plan

A. 1 John¹⁰

1. To enhance his own joy (1 John 1:4).
2. To keep the readers from sin (1 John 2:1).
3. To lead his readers into full assurance of their salvation (1 John 5:13).
4. To warn his readers against error (1 John 4:1-3; 2:26).

B. 2 John¹¹

1. To express his appreciation for the loyalty of the “elect lady” and her children.

⁸ Thiessen, p. 313.

⁹ Thiessen, pp. 314-315.

¹⁰ Thiessen, pp. 310-311.

¹¹ Thiessen, p. 313.

2. To entreat the lady to walk in love and keep the Lord's commandments.
3. To warn her against the deceivers that were abroad.
4. To inform her that he soon plans to visit.
5. To convey a greeting to her sister.

C. 3 John¹²

1. To express his love for Gaius.
2. To tell him of his joy that Gaius stood for the truth.
3. To commend him for his hospitality for traveling preachers.
4. To inform Gaius that he may come to deal with Diotrephes.

V. A Basic Outline

A. 1 John¹³

1. The Reality of the Incarnation - 1 John 1:1-4.
2. The Practical Aspects of the Sin Question - 1 John 1:5-2:6.
3. The New Commandment of Love of the Brethren - 1 John 2:7-11.
4. The Exhortations to Separation from the World - 1 John 2:12-17.
5. The Warnings Against Heretical Teaching - 1 John 2:18-29.
6. The Admonition to Live Consistently - 1 John 3:1-12.
7. The Tests of Salvation - 1 John 3:13-24.
8. The Distinctions Between the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Error - 1 John 4:1-6.
9. The Entreaty to Practice Brotherly Love - 1 John 4:7-21.
10. The Logical Outworking of Faith in Christ - 1 John 5:1-12.
11. The Assurance of Salvation and the Outworking Thereof - 1 John 5:13-17.
12. The Things which the Believer Really Knows - 1 John 5:18-21.

B. 2 John¹⁴

1. Expression of Appreciation to the Elect Lady - 2 John 1:1-4.
2. Encouragement to Walk in Love - 2 John 1:5-6.
3. Warning Against Deceivers - 2 John 1:7-11.

¹² Thiessen, p. 314-315.

¹³ Thiessen, p. 311.

¹⁴ Thiessen, p. 313.

4. Plans for a Visit - 2 John 1:12
5. Greetings to the Elect Lady's Sister - 2 John 1:13
- C. 3 John¹⁵
 1. Expression of Love to Gaius - 3 John 1:1-2.
 2. Encouragement to Gaius to Stand for Truth - 3 John 1:3-4.
 3. Commendation to Gaius for Receiving Travelling Preachers - 3 John 1:5-8.
 4. Plans to Deal with Diotrephes - 3 John 1:9-10.
 5. Commendation of Demetrius - 3 John 1:11-12.
 6. Plans for a Future Visit - 3 John 1:13-14.

VI. Chapters To Remember

1 John 1	That Which We Have Seen and Heard
1 John 2	Love Not the World!
1 John 4	The Spirit of Antichrist
1 John 5	This Is The Record
2 John	Joy Over Truth
3 John	Beware of the Diotrephes in the Church

VII. Points and Peculiarities

1. In Paul's Epistles the emphasis is on justification, in John's Epistles the emphasis is on regeneration.
2. 1 John contains no proper names, historical allusions, or geographical details.
3. 3 John is the shortest book in the New Testament.
4. 2 John warns us against receiving false teachers and bidding them God speed.

VIII. A Closer Look

- A. 1 John - Eleven Tests of Salvation
 1. Do you enjoy fellowship with Christ? - 1 John 1:2; 5:1
 2. Are you sensitive to sin in your life? - 1 John 1:5-9
 3. Are you obedient (direction, not perfection) to the Word? - 1 John 2:3
 4. Have you rejected the world? - 1 John 2:15-16

¹⁵ Thiessen, p. 315.

5. Do you eagerly await the second coming? - 1 John 3:2
 6. Do you see a pattern of decreasing sin in your life? - 1 John 3:5
 7. Do you love other Christians? - 1 John 2:9-11
 8. Have you experienced answered prayer? - 1 John 3:22; 5:14-15
 9. Have you experienced the ministry of the Holy Spirit? - 1 John 4:13
 10. Can you discern truth from error? - 1 John 4:1; 6
 11. Have you experienced persecution because of your faith? - 1 John 3:16
- B. 2 John
1. Joy in Truth
- C. 3 John
1. Dealing with Diotrephes