



1 John Introduction

Author and Title

Manuscript evidence is unanimous that someone named John wrote this epistle, which is consistently labelled the first of his extant letters in titles found in ancient copies. But who is this John? For a number of reasons, John the son of Zebedee, author of the Fourth Gospel, is the most likely candidate.

Firstly, the style and vocabulary of John's Gospel and 1 John are so similar that a common author is extremely likely. This is particularly evident in the opening verses of the respective documents, but the language of the Gospel echoes across the whole of this epistle. For example, only verbal forms of 'believe' occur, about one hundred times, in John's Gospel, while the noun 'faith' never appears. First John follows suit, with nine occurrences of a verbal form of 'believe' and just one use of the word faith: <<**for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith**>> (1 John 5:4).

Secondly, major themes and emphases of the writings overlap. These include Christ's simultaneous full humanity and divinity, the close relationship between believing, i.e. faith and doctrine; obeying God's commandments, i.e. ethics; and the primacy of love as marking authentic knowledge of the true God through trust in his Son, Christ Jesus.

While John is not mentioned by name in the Fourth Gospel, he was accepted by the early church and by most scholars and bible commentators today, to have been: <<**the disciple whom Jesus loved**>>, who sat beside Jesus at the Last Supper: <<**One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him**>> (John 13:23).

Arguments put forward by some scholars that he was Lazarus, an 'elder' John, or a fictional creation, are unconvincing.

John is the only apostle known to have been an eye-witness of the crucifixion. Shortly before his death, Jesus had entrusted his mother Mary into John's care: <<**When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into**>>

his home>> (John 19:26-27). It is widely accepted that Mary travelled with John to Ephesus over 30 years later so had remained with him all that time.

Along with Peter, John witnessed the empty tomb on the first Easter morning: <<**Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead)**>> (John 20:1-10). He also saw, spoke with, and ate breakfast at a lakeside fire, with Jesus, along with Peter and the others who had been fishing the previous night as recorded in John Chapter 21. John was therefore highly qualified to write of what he and the others had heard, seen, looked at, and touched - recorded so eloquently in the opening passage of this letter.

As the disciple whom Jesus loved, he was also well suited to plumb the depths of the meaning of Jesus’ coming, his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension and subsequent intercessory ministry at the Father’s right hand, and his promise to return to claim his inheritance on the Day of Judgement; all of which come to the fore through the eyes of this witness, giving sound instruction, and admonition in this rich and highly concentrated letter. He also had a good grasp of Jesus’ full humanity and simultaneous full deity.

Date

It is widely held that John was at most 20 years old when he became a disciple of Jesus around AD30, thus he would have been in his late 50s at the start of the Roman-Jewish war of AD67-70. By the time he wrote this letter he was the only one of the apostles still alive, as all the others had been martyred by that time. He died in approximately AD100, apparently of natural causes, at some point after personally receiving Christ’s Revelation. This was not unexpected due to a conversation that had been held on the occasion that Jesus had appeared to them in Galilee after his resurrection. Speaking to Peter: <<**Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me”**>> (John 21:22).

Early post-apostolic figures like Polycarp and Papias, circa AD100, presuppose or cite 1 John in their own writings. This suggests a date of composition no later than the 90s, with the mid-80s preferred by many. This dovetails with the testimony of church fathers that, at the start of the Jewish-Roman war in AD67, John left Jerusalem prior to its destruction by the Romans. Historians, including Josephus and Philo, claim that between 580,000 and 1.1 million people died in the Jewish-Roman war, but that no Christians died at all in the siege of Jerusalem!

John reportedly resumed his apostolic ministry in the vicinity of the great but highly idolatrous city of Ephesus, in modern day western Turkey. He likely wrote 1 John as an elder statesman of the faith in the last third of the 1st Century, perhaps to churches in the surrounding region. This might have included towns like those mentioned alongside Ephesus in the opening chapters of Revelation, that is, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Refer to Revelation 2:8-3:22 for details of the letters written to those churches.

Theme

In 1 John the author calls readers back to the three basics of Christian life: true doctrine, obedient living, and fervent devotion. Because: **<<God is light>>** (1 John 1:5b), Christ's followers can and should overcome evildoers who seek to subvert them. The one who lives in and among them – God's Son – is greater than the spirit of 'the antichrist', who John warned was already a threat to the early church: **<<but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world>>** (1 John 4:3). Anyone who believes in the name of the Son of God and accepts him as their personal Lord and Saviour, has the assurance of everlasting life: **<<I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life>>** (1 John 5:13).

Purpose of 1 John

There is a school of thought that suggests all three of John's epistles were written to form a single packet. 3 John was a personal letter to a dear and trusted friend of John named Gaius. 2 John was then written to be read to Gaius own church with 1 John to be read to that church and then passed on to others in the Province of Asia as a general sermon; if all three are read together in reverse order this will make sense. This is an interesting thesis and there is evidence within the letters to support it but no other evidence exists.

It is customary among some scholars to understand 1 John as a response to the rise of an early form of Gnosticism. This was a religious mysticism that pirated Christian motifs to propagate an understanding of salvation based on esoteric knowledge, Greek gnōsis. According to this view, redemption is through affirming the divine light already in the human soul, not through repentance of sin and faith in Christ's death, to bring about spiritual rebirth. Writings widely publicised in recent years, like the Gospel of Thomas and Gospel of Judas, for example, were products of Gnostic writers. But the heyday of Gnostic thought was the 2nd - 5th Centuries, well after the time the NT books were written. It can neither be proven nor ruled out that John had this or a similar movement in mind as he wrote.

John wrote to Christians who had witnessed an exodus from their ranks, mostly drawn away by false teachers described by other NT authors: **<<As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer>>** (1 Timothy 1:3), **<<But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves>>** (2 Peter 2:1), and: **<<For certain men whose condemnation was**

written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord>> (Jude 4); as well as by John in this letter: <<They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us>> (1 John 2:19).

However, his does not mean that all John wrote should be interpreted as a response to schism. John is neither anti-Gnostic nor anti-schismatic. John's focus is positive, not polemical. His aim is redemptive, not reactionary. He urges readers to refine their theological understanding, sharpen their ethical rigour, and heighten their devotional intensity. That is, they must grow in faith, obedience, and love.

Yet the letter is not a list of do's and don'ts. It is rather a manifesto of 'Done!' – where Jesus' words: <<**It is finished**>> come to mind, (John 19:30b). This letter highlights what God the Father has 'done' in sending God the Son, offering him up as an atoning sacrifice for the whole world's sins, and sending forth: <<**the Word of life**>> (1 John 1:1e), which John puts forward as a new command: <<**Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining**>> (1 John 2:8).

God's action becomes the mandate of those who believe in his Son, for: <<**The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever**>> (1 John 2:17). God's will is for John's readers to receive the saving message of Christ's coming, rejoice in the commands of Christ's teaching, and revel in the love of the Father as it continually translates into Christian love for one another and its ministry to the world. This is to be true love in action: <<**Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth**>> (1 John 3:18).

Summary of Salvation History

Christians are to live in love, as Christ loved us. They are to endure suffering for the sake of Christ, looking back on Christ's sufferings and forward to the consummation of salvation at his Second Coming.

Writing Style

This document lacks certain earmarks of a typical Hellenistic letter. For example, the writer does not name himself at the outset, as Paul always does, unless of course he was the author to the Hebrews - a much contested point of discussion since the early centuries of Christianity, and the book is somewhat sermonistic in tone. Yet, on several counts, it is highly letter-like, as seen from the expressed motive of shared joy, i.e. <<**We write this to make our joy complete**>> (1 John 1:4), the repeated mentions of the act and purpose of writing to his recipients, with 13 uses of the Greek verb 'I/we write' or 'I am writing', and the many instances of direct address to the readers. First John was judged to be in the form of a letter by ancient writers such as Irenæus, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Eusebius, who would have understood the prevailing conventions of letter writing.

The rhetoric of 1 John is challenging. John rarely sustains a clear line of argument for more than a few lines or verses. He wanders from subject to subject, unencumbered by any discernible outline. Yet if he has no plan, he does follow a pattern: after leaving a subject he often returns to it. His style of thought has been termed circular rather than linear. It has also been termed symphonic, in that he states themes, moves away from them, and then revisits them with variations, as any good composer would.

While the rhetoric of 1 John poses difficulties, his content is rich in doctrinal substance, ethical challenge, and devotional fervour. John is insistent that no one has ever seen God the Father in his unmediated glory, yet just as insistent that to know Jesus is to know 'the true God and eternal life'. The mystery of this dialectic suffuses the letter from start to finish and moves John to write with insight, consistency, intensity, and depth. Yet his language is, for the most part, simple and his vocabulary modest. Line for line there are few biblical writings that surpass 1 John in the imposing demands made on the reader, along with the rich rewards that studied interpretation will yield.

First John is ostensibly an epistle, but its content is more fluid than that found in most NT letters. There is no epistolary salutation, nor is there a conventional epistolary conclusion. A more accurate designation is to call this book a treatise or pamphlet. Alternatively, it can be read as an address or loosely structured sermon. The topic changes with virtually every paragraph, so the best advice for reading the book is to 'think paragraphs'.

Nevertheless, even though the structure of 1 John is not strictly linear, the author keeps coming back to topics that have been introduced earlier, so that readers can profitably think of the book as being arranged like a musical symphony. The main theme is testing by which a believer can know if he has the correct mindset and attitude that authenticate his claims to be a follower of Jesus.

Under that umbrella, subordinate themes appear: Christology, doctrine about the person and work of Christ; walking in the light; love; and the need to reject fallen, worldly culture. These topics weave in and out of the book. The book is structured on an implied dialectical principle in which John continuously seeks to oppose viewpoints that are contrary to his assertions. For example, John's assertions that Christ has come in the flesh are an implied refutation of those who deny the incarnation.

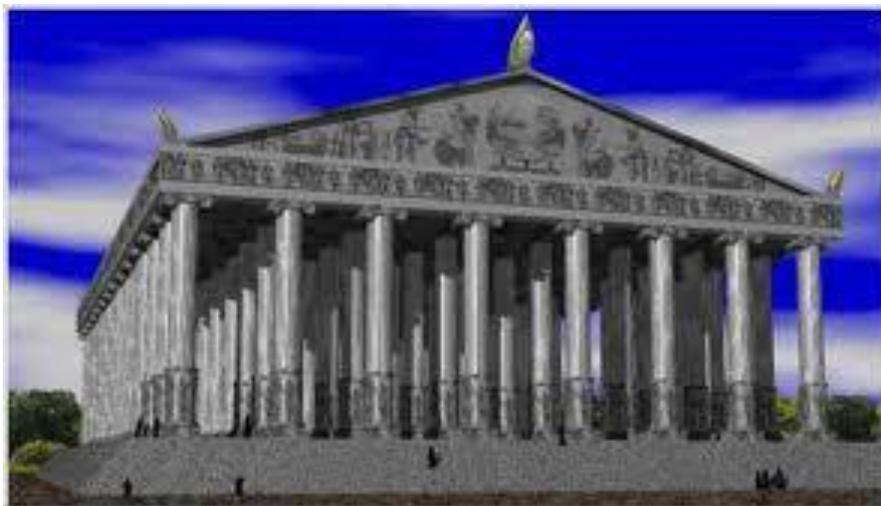
Finally, there is an incipient poetry and mysticism about John's writing, so that a lot of what John asserts about the Christian life is embodied in great symbols like light and darkness, or walking and abiding in Christ.

Key Themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Verses</u>
1. The one eternal God became incarnate in his Son, Jesus the Christ, who is 'the true God, the Word, and eternal life'.	1:1-3; 4:2; 5:20.
2. All humans are sinful, but Christians have joyful fellowship with the Father, with the Son, and with each other through repentance and faith in Jesus as the Christ.	1:3-10.
3. Christ is a believer's advocate with the Father and the propitiation for their sins.	2:1-2; 4:10.
4. Those who know Christ forsake sin and keep God's commands – in particular the command to love God, each other and their neighbour.	2:3-11; 3:4-24; 4:7-21.
5. Denial of Jesus Christ as God's Son in the flesh is denial of God the Father.	2:22-23; 4:2-3; 5:10-12.
6. Faith in Christ results in forgiveness of sins, eternal life, confidence in prayer, protection from the evil one, and understanding and knowing the true God.	5:12-21.

The Setting of 1 John

John likely wrote 1 John from Ephesus, where apparently he had relocated before the time of the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in AD70. Many hold that he travelled there with Jesus' mother Mary. The letter was probably intended to be read by the church in Ephesus and most likely by other churches in the surrounding cities. Ephesus was a wealthy and highly influential port city in the Roman province of Asia, which was renowned for its temple of the Greek goddess Artemis, known as Diana by the Romans.



An artist's impression of the Temple of Artemis, one of the Wonders of the Ancient World.



The map shows the main cities in Asia during the 1st Century AD

Outline

- I. God is Light and Christ is Love (1:1-2:17)**
 - a. The Word of Life (1:1-4)
 - b. Walking in the Light (1:5-2:14)
 - i. God's Nature and Human Sin (1:5-10)
 - ii. Jesus Christ in Everyday Life (2:1-6)
 - iii. The Primacy of Love (2:7-11)
 - iv. The Confidence of God's People (2:12-14)
 - c. Do Not Love the World (2:15-17)
- II. Overcoming Antichrist by Confession of the Son (2:18-3:10)**
 - a. Warning Against Antichrists (2:18-27)
 - b. Children of God (2:28-3:10)
- III. Overcoming Evil by Listening to the Apostle (3:11-4:6)**
 - a. Love One Another (3:11-24)
 - b. Test the Spirits (4:1-6)
- IV. God's Love and Ours (4:7-21)**
 - a. The Perfecting of God's Love (4:7-12)
 - b. The Assurance of God's Spirit (4:13-21)
- V. Faith in the Son of God (5:1-12)**
 - a. Faith keeps the commandments of God (5:1-5)
 - b. Faith receives the testimony of God (5:6-12)
- VI. Concluding Remarks (5:13-21)**
 - a. The confidence that faith furnishes (5:13)
 - b. The prayer that faith enables (5:14-17)
 - c. The understanding that faith grants (5:18-21)