

THE EPISTLE OF 1 JOHN

A. Authorship

1. Internal evidence

- Zane Hodges, *The epistle has been traditionally ascribed to John the Apostle. The author's name, however, does not occur in the letter. Yet it is plain from the tone of the letter as a whole that the writer possessed spiritual authority. Moreover, he placed himself among the eyewitnesses to the incarnate life of the Lord Jesus (1:1–2).*
- Gary Wiley, *The claims of the author in the introduction point to the conclusion that the writer was personally acquainted with the Lord Jesus. In 1 John 1:1, the first person plural pronoun points to eyewitness accounts ... The epistle also bears much resemblance to the Gospel of John. There are similarities in precise words and phrases, as "only begotten," "born of God," and common themes, as "love," "light," and "life."*
- Nelson, *Though this epistle does not state the name of its author, solid evidence suggests that it was written by John, the son of Zebedee and the brother of James (Mark 1:19, 20). Strong similarities between this letter and the Gospel of John substantiate the testimony of many early church fathers, including Papias, Polycarp, and Irenaeus, that both works are the products of John the apostle of Jesus. Both share many distinctively Johannine phrases, and the characteristics of limited vocabulary and frequent contrast of opposites are also common to both.*

2. External evidence

- Thomas Constable, *This epistle, like Hebrews, does not contain the name of its writer, but from its very early history the church believed that the Apostle John wrote it. Several ancient writers referred to this book as John's writing. Though modern critics have challenged this view, they have not destroyed it.*
- Zane Hodges, *Early Christian writers including Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian cited the epistle as John's. There is thus no good reason for denying the traditional belief that the letter is of apostolic authorship.*
- John Stott, *The first to refer specifically to a Johannine letter was Papias of Hierapolis in the middle of the second century, who, according to Eusebius (3:39. 17), 'used testimonies drawn from the former Epistle of John'. It is not until we reach Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–200) that at least the first and second letters are clearly attributed to the John who was both the 'disciple of the Lord' and the author of the Fourth Gospel. In his Adversus Haereses (3. 16. 18) he quotes fully from 1 John 2:18–22; 4:1–3; 5:1, and 2 John 7, 8 ... Clement of Alexandria, who survived Irenaeus by a few years, evidently knew more than one Johannine letter, since he uses the expression 'the greater Epistle', which he ascribes to 'the apostle John'. His quotations are even more numerous than those of Irenaeus. In chapters 2–5 of Stromateis he quotes 1:6–7; 2:4, 18–19; 3:3, 18–19; 4:16, 18 and 5:3, 16–17, while in Quis Dives Salvetur? chapters 37 and 38, he quotes 3:15 and again 4:18 ... Tertullian, his Latin contemporary (d. c. 220), made considerable use of the first letter, quoting it about fifty times (especially 1:1, 3; 2:22; 4:1–2; 5:1) in his polemical writings against Marcion, Praxeas and the Gnostics. Origen of Alexandria, a little later (d. c. 255), also relied much on the first letter, ascribing it to John, although like Tertullian he does not quote from the two shorter letters.*
- Gary Wiley, *The external evidence in favor of authorship by the Apostle John is early and strong. The earliest reference is from Polycarp, the disciple of John, who martyred about A.D. 155. Other writers from the second century who quoted from 1 John and ascribed its authorship to John included Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, A.D. 185–202, Clement, the head of the catechetical school in Alexandria, A. D. 180–202, as well as the Muratorian Canon which is the earliest list of New Testament books deemed canonical.*

B. Place and date of writing

- Thomas Constable, *Since John ministered in and around Ephesus later in his life, Ephesus seems to be the most probable place from which he wrote this epistle.*
- Nelson, *First John was probably written in Ephesus after the Gospel of John, but the date cannot be fixed with certainty. No persecution is mentioned, suggesting a date prior to A.D. 95 when persecution broke out near the end of the Roman emperor Domitian's reign (A.D. 81–96).*
- Thomas Constable, *One of the few references in the book that may help us date it is 2:19. If John meant that the false teachers had departed from among the apostles, a date in the 60s seems possible. This could place it about A.D. 60–65, before the Jewish revolts of A.D. 66–70 resulted in the scattering of the Jews from Judea. In this case John may have written from Jerusalem. However many conservative scholars believe that John wrote this epistle much later, between about A.D. 85 and 97, when he evidently wrote the Gospel of John (ca. A.D. 85–95) and the Book of Revelation (ca. A.D. 95–96). I prefer a date in the 90s, following the writing of John's Gospel, which 1 John seems to assume.*

- Zane Hodges, *Many conservatives suggest a date late in the first century A.D., about the time of or shortly after the writing of the Fourth Gospel. But a good case can be made for dating the Gospel of John sometime prior to A.D. 70. If this is done, there is no particular reason why 1 John may not be assigned to the same period of time. If 2:19 suggests that the false teachers had seceded from the Palestinian churches which the apostles supervised, then this perhaps can be taken to indicate a time before the calamities of the Jewish revolt against the Romans in A.D. 66–70.*

C. Recipients

- Thomas Constable, *Neither is there any reference to who the first recipients of this epistle were, or where they lived, other than that they were Christians (2:12–14, 21; 5:13). They may have been the leaders of churches (2:20, 27). According to early church tradition, John ministered in Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia, for many years after he left Palestine. We know from Revelation 2 and 3 that he knew the churches and the Christians in that Roman province well. Perhaps his readers lived in that province. This was probably a letter designed to circulate among several congregations in contrast to having been intended for only one.*
- Zane Hodges, *The letter contains no hint about the identity or location of the readers beyond the fact that they are Christians. Since early church tradition associates John with the Roman province of Asia (in western Turkey), it has often been thought that the readers lived there. This may well be true especially since this association is confirmed by Revelation 2 and 3 ... That the initial readers were indeed Christians is clear from 2:12–14, 21; and 5:13 ... the letter would naturally have been read to the entire congregation(s) since only in this way could it perform its purpose of supporting the established teachers' authority. The larger audience could then receive the instruction which the letter contained while at the same time being encouraged to rely on the guidance offered by their Spirit-taught leadership.*
- William Barclay, *The letter itself gives us no clue as to where it was sent. Tradition strongly connects it with Asia Minor, and especially with Ephesus, where, according to tradition, John lived for many years ... We may take it that these letters were written in Ephesus and to the surrounding churches in Asia Minor. When John wrote, it would certainly be to the district for which he had oversight—and that was Ephesus and the surrounding territory.*

D. Characteristic features

- Nelson, *Like 2 Peter and Jude, 1 John has a negative and a positive thrust: it refutes erroneous doctrine and encourages its readership to walk in the knowledge of the truth. John lists the criteria and characteristics of fellowship with God and shows that those who abide in Christ can have confidence and assurance before Him. This simply written but profound work develops the basis of fellowship (1:1–2:27) and the behavior of fellowship (2:28–5:21).*
- I. Howard Marshall, *It bears all the marks of being addressed to a specific situation in some church or group of churches known to the author. It is probably best to regard it as a tract written to deal with a specific problem; it is a written sermon or pastoral address.*
- David Jackman, *... John's first letter is written that believers may know that they have eternal life (5:13). The signs of reality and therefore the marks of assurance are not mystical and philosophical but down-to-earth and observable. To profess knowledge of God without a holy life, without a clean break with sin and a deep love for other Christians, is as much a delusion as to deny the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Belief and behaviour are inseparable. Mind and heart belong together. True light leads to real love.*
- Gary Wiley, *This epistle does not have the normal components of a personal letter. It contains no introduction, identification of author, thanksgiving, author's greetings, or concluding salutation ... Yet, it is flavored by a specific response directed toward specific individuals. It was possibly a circular letter sent to those in a certain region. Its importance is in its authoritative message to the needs of a specific group.*

E. Key themes in 1 John

- Thomas Constable, *The false teachers and teachings to which John alluded in this letter suggest that he wrote about conditions that existed in Asia: Judaism, Gnosticism, Docetism, the teachings of Cerinthus (a prominent Gnostic), and others ... These philosophies extended beyond Asia, but they were present there during John's lifetime ... If I were to boil down the message of this epistle into one sentence it would be this: Fellowship with God is the essence of eternal life. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:7–14 that his relationship with God was the most important thing in his life—by far. John wrote this epistle in order to enable believers to appreciate their fellowship with God, and he wrote to deepen that fellowship.*

- Nelson, *A major theme of 1 John is fellowship with God (2:28). John wants his readers to have assurance of the indwelling God through their abiding relationship with Him. Phrases emphasizing Christian certainty occur five times in this brief epistle ... Against false teachers who denied the reality of the incarnation by saying that Jesus only appeared to have a human body, John strongly affirms that the Son of God took to Himself a complete and genuine human nature (4:2, 3). The heresy John confronts here was a forerunner of second-century Gnosticism, which taught that matter is essentially evil and spirit is essentially good. This dualistic error caused the false teachers to deny the incarnation of Christ. The true God, they taught, could never indwell a material body of flesh and blood, and therefore the human body that Jesus supposedly possessed was not real ... Another prominent theme in this epistle is love—the word appears more than thirty-five times in the epistle. The apostle uses the example of Cain to illustrate what love is not: hatred is murdering in spirit, and it arises from the worldly sphere of death. John then uses the example of Christ to illustrate what love is: love is practiced in self-sacrifice, not mere profession. This practical expression of love results in assurance before God and answered prayers because the believer is walking in obedience to God's commands to believe in Christ and love one another.*
- I. Howard Marshall, *Perhaps the most widely accepted view of the heresy is that it was related to Gnosticism, and in particular that it was akin to the views of Cerinthus. Gnostic thinking was based on a sharp dualism between spirit and matter. The spiritual was regarded as divine and good, while the material was created and evil. It followed that the material world could not have been directly created by the supreme God, and different Gnostic systems of thought devised various ways of explaining how the world had come into existence.*
- William Barclay, *For John, knowledge of God and obedience to him must always go hand in hand. It is by keeping his commandments that we prove that we really do know God. Those who say that they know him and who do not keep his commandments are liars (2:3–5) ... It is, in fact, this obedience which is the basis of effective prayer. We receive what we ask from God because we keep his commandments and do what is pleasing in his sight (3:22).*
- Gary Wiley, *A true profession of faith in Jesus Christ must be characterized by correct belief, Godly obedience and brotherly love ... His excellent foundation for the fundamentals of the faith in the Gospel of John are now keyed to his insistence that belief must be evidenced by action ... This epistle confirms one's position in Christ as one lives out one's faith in a hurting world.*

F. John's purpose for writing 1 John

- Thomas Constable, *John's purpose in writing was to motivate his readers to cultivate greater intimacy with God. The greater the intimacy, the greater our fellowship, the better we know God experientially, and the closer we abide in Him (cf. John 14:21–24). The greater our intimacy with God, the more we will experience the life that is eternal. All Christians possess eternal life, but not all Christians experience that life as God intended us to enjoy it (John 10:10). Similarly, all living human beings have life, but not all live an abundant life.*
- Zane Hodges, *The First Epistle of John is an intensely practical letter addressed to Christian readers. It warns against the dangers of false teaching and exhorts believers to lives of obedience to God and love for their brothers and sisters. Its controlling theme is fellowship with God the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1:3) ... The readers had been confronted with false teachers, whom John called antichrists (1 John 2:18–26). The exact character of these false teachers has been much discussed. Many have thought they were Gnostics who held to a strict dualism in which spiritual and material things were sharply distinguished. Others have seen the letter as directed against Docetism, the belief that Jesus' humanity was not real and that He only appeared to have a physical body. Often too, the letter is thought to refute the heresy of Cerinthus. According to church tradition, Cerinthus lived in Roman Asia and was strongly opposed by the Apostle John. Cerinthus taught that Jesus was only a man and that the divine Christ descended on Jesus at His baptism and left Him before the Crucifixion.*
- I. Howard Marshall, *A crisis had arisen in the church due to the rise of teachers who were advocating an understanding of Christianity different from that upheld by John and his colleagues. The point had been reached where they had actually left the church, presumably to set up their own rival institution (1 Jn. 2:19), but, although they had left the church, they were still in contact with its members and were causing considerable uncertainty among them regarding the true character of Christian belief and whether the members of the church could truly regard themselves as Christians. John considered it necessary to write a careful statement of the apostolic understanding of Christianity for the benefit of his friends so that they might see where it was distorted by the seceders and confirm their own understanding of it and their place in the company of God's people.*

- William Barclay, *The trouble which 1 John seeks to combat came not from people who were out to destroy the Christian faith but from those who thought they were improving it. It came from people whose aim was to make Christianity intellectually respectable. They knew the intellectual trends and currents of the day, and felt that the time had come for Christianity to come to terms with secular philosophy and contemporary thought ... John's object in writing is twofold; yet the two aspects are one and the same. He writes that the joy of his people may be completed (1:4), and that they may not sin (2:1). He sees clearly that, however attractive the wrong way may be, it is not in its nature to bring happiness. To bring his people joy and to preserve them from sin are one and the same thing.*
- Gary Wiley, Developing philosophical and spiritual turmoil is the background of this epistle. If the Gospel of John was written to promote faith in Jesus Christ, the Epistle of John was written to promote assurance. Such assurance was essential as many were confronted by false teachers.

G. Outline of 1John (To be developed)