

## *The Second Epistle of John*

### **I. Introduction**

#### **A. Authorship**

This epistle, like the other writings attributed to the apostle John, doesn't identify him as the author. Nevertheless, John's authorship has been widely accepted since early in church history.

- The Muratorian Fragment (the oldest known list of New Testament writings, dated to around 170 A.D.) mentions two Johannine epistles and cites from First John, leaving the question of whether the second one refers to Second or Third John, or perhaps another letter lost to history. There is no way to be certain, but most scholars agree that, if only two Johannine epistles were known by the Muratorian compiler, they must have been First and Second John.
- Later, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 A.D.) also spoke of more than one epistle he attributed to John, and he actually cited from Second John in one of his works. Another Alexandrian father named Dionysius also mentioned Second and Third John as Johannine letters circulated in the churches of his day.
- On the other hand, Eusebius (c. 265-340 A.D.) placed Second and Third John among the disputed books of the New Testament, while Jerome (who produced the Latin Vulgate) ascribed them to a different "John" he identified as "John the Elder."

These considerations (and others) provide no conclusive answer regarding the author of Second John, but this has both positive and negative import: Just as the external evidence doesn't prove Johannine authorship, it doesn't preclude it. Quite the opposite, it tends to support it.

As to internal evidence (evidence derived from the letter itself), the most important clue is the author's self-identification as "the elder." This same title appears in Third John, which, along with the similar content of the two letters, strongly suggests that both epistles were penned by the same individual. Whether this person also wrote First John is a different matter, and many have pointed to the absence of this self-identification in First John as evidence for a different author. On the other hand, others note Papias' mention of "John the elder" as compelling evidence that all three epistles shared the same authorship. This claim is said to be reinforced by Papias' apparent reference to others of the apostles under the same title of *elder*. Papias' statement, as recounted by Eusebius, is as follows: "*And again, if any one came who had been a follower of the Elders, I used to enquire about the sayings of the Elders – what was said by Andrew, or by Peter, or by Philip, or by Thomas or James, or by John or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, and what Aristion and the Elder John, the disciples of the Lord, say.*"

While this statement might possibly support the conclusion that John the Apostle was "the elder" of Second and Third John (thereby strengthening the claim that all three epistles share the same author), it just as readily – and perhaps more convincingly – supports the view that John the Apostle and John the Elder were two different disciples (the view held by Eusebius and Jerome).

Despite the fact that First John lacks the ascription shared by Second and Third John, the content of the three epistles points to them being penned by the same author. Indeed, there are many phrases and ideas in the latter two epistles that either mirror First John or are identical to it (cf. 2 John 1-4 and 3 John 1-4 with 1 John 2:21, 2 John 5-6 with 1 John 2:7-10, 3:23, 4:21, 2 John 7-9 with 1 John 2:18, 4:1-6, 5:18-21). And inasmuch as many of the ideas and emphases in First John reflect the Gospel of John, the same is true of Second and Third John. In the end, there are many considerations that indicate that the same author penned the gospel account and three epistles ascribed to John; it seems, then, that if he authored one of them, he authored them all.

In summary, there is much early external evidence for the apostle John (often referred to as John the Evangelist) writing the three epistles that carry his name, and this is further supported by the internal evidence that closely connects the three and the gospel account ascribed to him. On the other hand, there is relatively little early support for the idea that a different individual (John the Elder) wrote Second and Third John. This view has the added difficulty that no “John the Elder” is known to history (outside of Papias’ reference).

## **B. Occasion and Purpose**

The place to begin in considering the occasion and purpose for the letter is to note the recipients. Again, the writer identified himself as “the Elder,” and he addressed his letter to “the chosen lady and her children” (v. 1). Three things are especially important in interpreting this phrase: The first is the meaning the adjective *chosen* (elect); the second is John’s omission of a definite article (which might suggest that he didn’t have a particular lady in mind); the third is the lady’s *children*. Was John referring to physical children, spiritual children or both?

Beyond these questions, the content of the letter provides clues regarding its occasion and purpose. First of all, it seems reasonable to conclude that the deceiving influences John mentions in this letter are of the same sort he addressed in the first epistle (cf. vv. 7-11 with 1 John 2:18-22, 4:1-3). Assuming that to be the case, John was writing with the same general purpose in both epistles, namely warning his readers about the serious danger posed by these influences and the need to recognize them and guard against them – i.e., to “walk in the truth.” This was the reason for his instruction concerning hospitality: The early Christians met “house-to-house,” so that deceivers would accomplish their ends by being welcomed into the homes of the believing community. While the letters differ in their particular audience, they share the same concern and message. The first epistle seems to have had a wider audience, while this second one was apparently penned to one woman and her children. (This is one interpretation of John’s salutation – “*To the chosen lady and her children*” – which will be examined shortly.)

Concerning its location and date, many scholars believe it was written from Ephesus around 90 A.D. at about the same time as the first epistle. Early Christian tradition holds that John remained in the vicinity of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 8:1, 14-15; Galatians 2:1-10) and departed sometime before Jerusalem’s fall (70 A.D), relocating to Asia Minor. There he ministered throughout the region, especially in the area around Ephesus. (The seven churches in Revelation to which the Lord directed him to send letters were all located in Asia Minor.) Eventually John was exiled to Patmos during the reign of Domitian (or possibly Nero, based on the date of John’s *Apocalypse*), but most believe John penned his three epistles from Ephesus, either prior to or after his exile.

## C. Interpretive Issues

The same challenges that confronted the reader of John's first epistle are present here as well. Some of those are common to all of the scriptural texts as ancient writings far removed from the contemporary world. But there are others that are especially associated with epistles, such as the fact that the reader is interacting with someone else's mail. Christians ought to be mindful of these things when reading the Scripture, and a few general reminders are worthwhile here.

1. First and foremost, the contemporary reader must guard against the natural tendency to read his own personal and cultural perspectives and circumstances into the letter. John wrote to a particular ancient audience regarding issues they were personally experiencing, and he addressed those issues in a way that pertained specifically to them. This doesn't mean that his instruction has no relevance to other readers, but that relevance must be determined from the epistle's own context. So, for instance, one cannot take v. 10 as John forbidding Christians from speaking with cultists who appear at their front door.
2. The fact that the reader must situate himself in the epistle's original context means that he cannot treat John's instruction as a corrective to bad behavior. Sadly, many approach the Scriptures in general as a body of religious, moral and ethical counsel (the Bible as "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth"), and this perspective is often brought to John's epistles (perhaps especially the first one). This error is far more insidious than people realize, for it reflects the human inclination to relate to the divine (however one might conceive it) in terms of proper conduct rather than authentic intimacy. Even Christians struggle against the tendency to treat obedience as conformity to doctrinal and behavioral standards rather than the relational integrity of intimate love and devotion.
3. One final challenge, which is perhaps more evident with John's first epistle, is people's inherent propensity to fashion their own "Jesus." To the extent that a person's thinking isn't informed by the scriptural revelation of Jesus as the incarnate Son and Messiah, he is certain to create a counterfeit of Him – an image formed in his own likeness.

## II. John's Second Epistle – Exhortation to Walk in the Truth

### A. John's Salutation (vv. 1-3)

The writer identified himself with the title, "the elder," a Greek noun often rendered as *presbyter*, and addressed his letter to "the chosen lady and her children." As noted previously, there are three primary considerations in deciphering this address. The first is the question of whether John had a particular lady in mind. Secondly, what did he mean by identifying her as *chosen* (elect). Finally, was he referring to her literal children or her spiritual ones?

1. With respect to the writer's self-designation, the title "elder" neither proves nor disproves Johannine authorship. Among the Twelve, at least Peter referred to himself this way (ref. 1 Peter 5:1), so it's possible John did as well. On the other hand, there is no indication of this in the New Testament, and many throughout Church history have regarded the apostle John and John the Elder as two different individuals.

In scriptural usage, the title *elder* refers to recognized leaders in church communities (similar to Jewish practice) (cf. Matthew 15:2, 16:21; Acts 14:23, 15:1ff; Titus 1:5-9), but also generically to elder men (and women) (Acts 2:17; 1 Timothy 5:1-2; 1 Peter 5:5). John certainly regarded himself as such a leader – indeed, he saw himself as a spiritual father to those under his care (1 John 2:1-28, 3:1-18, 4:4; 3 John 4). Whoever the writer was, he clearly was using the term “elder” with this connotation of doctrinal and pastoral authority and oversight, rather than simply identifying himself as an older, more mature man (ref. vv. 5-6, 8-11). This sort of authority and oversight on the Lord’s behalf obviously marked the apostles themselves, but it also belonged to their disciples who were charged with preserving the apostolic tradition in doctrine and practice (cf. Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 1:1-4, 4:1-11; 2 Timothy 2:1-2; Titus 1:7-9; also Hebrews 2:1-4). The church father Irenaeus alluded to this situation in one of his statements in his treatise, *Against Heresies*: “*I heard it from a certain presbyter [elder] who had heard it from those who had seen the apostles and from those who had taught.*”

In the end, the title *elder* provides nothing conclusive regarding the author. Perhaps the most important consideration is whether this title can reasonably be applied to the apostle John, since the early tradition held that he penned First John (at least) and there are many reasons to believe First and Second John had the same author. And while nothing in the Scripture or church history proves that John ever gave himself this title, there is nothing that disproves it. Even if John didn’t pen this letter (or one or both of the other two), the writer was clearly a mature and faithful disciple of John’s doctrine and practice. In that sense at least, it’s proper to refer to these three letters as epistles of John.

2. Again, the writer penned this letter to “the chosen lady and her children.” The first thing one notices in the original is the absence of the definite article (*the*), which some interpret as indicating that he wasn’t addressing a particular person (i.e., he was addressing *a* lady). But it is more likely that he omitted the article in order to emphasize the lady’s chosen status and duty rather than her person. If this was John’s intent, he wanted the recipient to receive his letter and process his instruction through the lens of her election.

That points to the second issue, namely the sense in which John referred to her as “elect.” Though it’s common for Christians today to think of election in terms of the dynamics of the divine and human roles in personal salvation, the term has a much broader signification in biblical usage. It refers to a person or thing that is superlative or unique (Exodus 14:17; Song of Solomon 6:9-10; Jeremiah 22:7), or set apart for a specific purpose. Thus Abraham’s election and Israel’s identity as God’s elect son (cf. Exodus 4:22 with Psalm 89:3, 19, 105:6, 43; Isaiah 44:1, 45:4). Thus also Jesus the Messiah as the “elect One”: the Son of Abraham, the fulfillment of Israel, and the embodiment of Israel’s God for the sake of His purpose for His world (Isaiah 42:1, 49:1-7; Haggai 2:23).

Another consideration is John’s terminology. He used the feminine form of the noun rendered *lord*, a term that connotes prominence, dignity and prestige. (Hence the expression, *lords and ladies*.) Whoever John was referring to, this was a person (or entity) of notable status, dignity and esteem; one who rules her house. And this status was bound up in the fact that this person (entity) was elect – in context, chosen by God.

One final consideration is that this lady had an *elect sister* who also had children (v. 13). These two ladies were sisters, but also sisters who shared the same election. Moreover, the one sister and her children were present with the writer, such that he could send their greetings to the recipients of his letter.

Taken together, these considerations point toward a couple of general interpretations:

- 1) The first is that John was writing to an actual *woman* regarding matters confronting her and her family. This view has several versions: One is that John identified this woman as *elect* to highlight her identity as one of God's "chosen ones" who know the truth and walk in it. It was from this vantage point that she was to address her challenges. Another version holds that the woman's *name* was Electa, or some variation of it. Thus John's salutation: "to the lady Electa." The problem with this is that John identified a second person as *eklektos* (v. 13). Similarly, others have argued that the noun rendered *lady* (*kyria*) is actually the person's name, with the adjective *chosen* having the connotation of nobility or distinction; hence the salutation should read, "to the noble (or dear) Kyria."
- 2) The second is that John wasn't addressing a person, but a *community of believers*. This may seem strange, but there are many reasons why this view is likely correct. First, the symbolism of an elect woman and her children was a common metaphor for the covenant house of Israel. Zion was Yahweh's covenant wife who bore children for Him, and Israel's prophets used this same imagery to depict the new (renewed) covenant household associated with the coming Messiah (cf. Isaiah 49:1-22, 53:1-54:13; cf. also Galatians 4:21-31). So also the Church is God's election, chosen in the Elect One as the "Israel of God" having its substance in the One who fulfilled Israel's election in Himself (ref. Isaiah 49:1-3; Galatians 3:26-29, 6:14-16; Ephesians 2:11-22; Philippians 3:1-3; 1 Peter 2:4-10).

And if the same "John" who wrote Revelation also penned this letter, there's no doubt that he was familiar with these concepts and symbolism (which one would expect since he was a Jew). For, when God communicated to John a vision concerning Babylon (signifying the antithetical world system) and His Church, He chose to use the imagery of two women (Revelation 18-19), just as He had done in representing the covenant house of Israel (Revelation 12:1-17). This would make no sense if this sort of imagery was foreign to John.

The epistle's personal nature suggests the first interpretation, but it equally suits the second one in that early Christian communities were very small, often numbering only a handful of people. Thus one would expect John to write to a local church body with the same familiar intimacy as he would to a Christian family. Others point to Third John being written to an individual to support the first interpretation. But John's second epistle actually corresponds more closely to his first one, which was written to a community of believers. Most importantly, the second interpretation finds strong support in the parallel of vv. 1 and 13, the fact that both ladies' children are unnamed, and especially the fact that this lady and her children were loved by *all* who know the truth.