

The First Epistle of John

I. Introduction

A. Authorship

Like most of the Old Testament writings and the epistle to the Hebrews, John's first epistle is anonymous. That is, the author didn't directly identify himself. The same is true of the four gospel accounts, including the one attributed to the apostle John. In one sense, the authorship of a particular biblical text isn't terribly important; the content and its interpretation are the critical issues. Of course, it's helpful to identify the author because this provides additional insight into the text itself and its meaning. So, for instance, knowing that Paul wrote Romans is helpful in that the things written in that epistle can then be viewed and interpreted through the lens of Paul's other writings. Interpreting his instruction concerning Israel in Romans 9-11 is made easier by comparing that section with what he wrote to the Ephesian and Galatian churches.

In the case of the present epistle, the reader doesn't have the benefit of the author's self-identification, so that the question of authorship must be answered on the basis of internal and external evidence. Internal evidence refers to content and clues within the letter itself; external evidence has to do with references and allusions to the epistle from other sources. The considerations and arguments surrounding this epistle and its authorship are numerous and complicated and wading through them is beyond the scope of this study. However, one of the obvious issues involves the relationship between the three epistles ascribed to John. For, while the first one is anonymous, the latter two have the writer identifying himself as "the elder" (2 John 1; 3 John 1). This has a couple of important implications for the question of authorship:

- First, if the apostle John was in fact the author of all three epistles, then he regarded himself as "the elder" in some sense and was known that way by at least some in the Christian community. In itself, this doesn't present an obstacle to John's authorship, for Peter – another of the Twelve – also referred to himself as an elder (1 Peter 5:1).
- Secondly, John's authorship of all three epistles implies that the recipients of the first one either didn't know him as "the elder" or he didn't feel the need to identify himself with this title. One possibility is that the second and third epistles were directed at individuals (one individual, in the case of the third epistle) with whom John had had personal ministerial involvement as an apostolic elder. His first epistle, on the other hand, had a larger Christian audience in view (though perhaps one he oversaw as an apostolic elder and devoted "father" – 2:1, 3:7, 18, 4:4, 5:21). Others argue that First John isn't a letter as such, but a general polemic written in defense of John's meaning in his gospel account. (Many found – and still find – support for Gnostic ideas in the Gospel of John.)

Though Johannine authorship of all three epistles has been the traditional view, there are many who believe all three shared the same author, but this "elder" wasn't John the apostle. Still others maintain that the unique anonymity of the first epistle points to it having a different writer than the other two. In the end, it's impossible to know for sure, but a careful examination of the internal and external evidence can lead to a reasonable conclusion.

1. With respect to the *internal* evidence (evidence drawn from the epistle itself), the first and most obvious observation is that writer of First John was a person who was an intimate eyewitness of Jesus of Nazareth (1:1-3). This self-description doesn't prove that the writer was one of the Twelve, much less the apostle John, but it does show that he had an intimate relationship with Jesus that few beyond the apostolic circle could claim. He wasn't someone who observed the Lord at a distance or was a casual acquaintance, but one who companied with Him and knew Him well.

Secondly, the epistle carries an air of authority consistent with apostolic authorship (though not necessarily John's). The writer claimed accurate insight and understanding of Jesus' person and the purpose and outcome of His work and he bound his readers to the truths he proclaimed without any reluctance or qualification. He saw himself as a truthful witness, but also an authority to which he expected his audience to submit themselves as children to a father. So Guthrie: "*His letter at once creates the impression that here is a man who knows beyond question where he stands and expects all other Christians to conform to the same standard, because he knows it to be true. The author, in short, stands out as a man of considerable spiritual stature.*"

But there are features in the epistle that point specifically to John as the author, particularly when it is compared with the fourth gospel. Of course, this presumes that the apostle John was the author of the gospel account bearing his name, a claim which some dispute to this day. But there is strong evidence for this conclusion, and, that being the case, there are many similarities between John's gospel and this epistle. Among those are concepts that are common to both – concepts such as *light* and *darkness*, *eternal life* and especially *love* as defining God and those who know Him. Both also share similarities of style, vocabulary and usage evident in the Greek texts. A reader reading both texts in Greek wouldn't be the least bit surprised to learn that they were composed by the same person. Every writer has his own style, vocabulary, etc., and the same is true of the biblical writers. Paul, Luke and Peter, for instance, all wrote very differently and a person conversant with New Testament Greek immediately knows which author he's reading. (This difference among writers is an important argument against Paul being the author of Hebrews; it contains a style of Greek not consistent with Paul's writings.)

Other textual support for John's authorship – as well as contrary considerations and arguments – are beyond this study; suffice it here to say that there are more than sufficient reasons to hold to the traditional view that John the apostle wrote this epistle. Moreover, there aren't any compelling or determinative reasons to conclude otherwise.

2. This points to the second consideration, namely *external* evidence for Johannine authorship. The first likely allusion to this epistle comes from Polycarp (AD 69-156), a disciple of John, who became the Bishop of Smyrna early in the second century. The church father Irenaeus cited directly from First and Second John in his work *Against Heresies* (circa AD 180) and he ascribed them (and the gospel of John) to the apostle John. A generation later Origen made the same affirmation in his writings. Although some apparent allusions to First John in early church writings are doubtful, it is fair to say that both the Greek and Latin church fathers accepted John's authorship of this epistle.

B. Occasion and Purpose

It's reasonable to conclude that Jesus' disciple John, the son of Zebedee, penned this epistle, but the writer's identity isn't nearly as important as his *status*. This is obvious from the epistle's opening statements: The author wasn't concerned to name himself, but he was adamant to establish his status as a man who'd communed with Jesus during His earthly ministry. It was his intimate personal *knowledge* of Jesus that gave credibility and authority to the things he wished to communicate, not his identity as such. This was fitting, for he penned his epistle to impress upon his readers the critical importance of knowing Jesus as He actually is; they would not be able to *follow* Him in truth unless they first *knew* Him in truth. His burden was that they would not find themselves embracing an idol in the name of following Jesus the Messiah (5:20-21).

1. Thus the occasion for the letter is more general than specific. John didn't point to a particular circumstance or issue that provoked his writing. Rather, he wrote to address general patterns already emerging in the Church which he recognized as dangerous and threatening to the Christian community's well-being. Those patterns reflected distorted and erroneous ways in which believers were thinking about Jesus' person and work.

There are several arenas of error John confronted, but three stand in the forefront. Two pertain to Jesus Himself, namely His *incarnation* (cf. 1:1-3 with 4:1-3, 5:4-5; cf. also 2 John 7) and His *messiahship* (2:18-22, 5:1), while the third pertains to the *understanding* and *practice* of those who claimed to know Him. The latter issue is predominant in the epistle, but it is grounded in the former two errors. *That is to say, the misjudgment and malpractice being manifested among John's readers reflected their misunderstanding of Jesus Himself, what He'd accomplished and what it means to know Him.*

The orientation of John's concerns has led many to conclude that the primary reason for his epistle was *Gnostic* influence making its way into the Church. Gnosticism is a form of mystical spirituality likely having its ideological roots in Greek philosophy, particularly as it sought to understand the duality of matter and spirit (the material and immaterial dimensions of reality). Gnostic concepts predated Jesus and the Christian faith, but began to make inroads into Christian thought and understanding very early on, certainly by the end of the first century. The first-century teacher Cerinthus seems to have been influenced by Gnostic ideas, as also the adherents of Docetism, which also originated in the first century. (Irenaeus wrote that the apostle John opposed Cerinthus' ideas in his gospel and epistles, though this is uncertain. Similarly, many believe Ignatius (AD 35-108) confronted Docetism in some of his writings as Bishop of Antioch.)

Gnostic influence in the Church was only germinal at the time of John's death, so it's an overstatement to say that his first epistle directly confronted Gnosticism as a developed and entrenched belief system. Nevertheless, John almost certainly was aware of Gnostic ideas infiltrating the churches and he would have recognized the threat they posed – not only to Christians' understanding of Jesus as God's Messiah, but also to how they perceived Christ's Church and the Christian life and vocation. The great danger of Gnosticism is that it is an embrace which smothers: It embraces terms and concepts intrinsic to Christian truth, only to redefine and reorient them within a pagan framework.

2. Again, John didn't identify any particular issue as the occasion for his epistle. Instead, he wrote out of concern for troubling patterns he saw developing in the fledgling Christian community with whom he was associated. The influence of Gnostic ideas certainly seems to have been one of those, *but there were others as well* – patterns consistent with natural human reasoning rather than a particular philosophical system or ideology. Together, all of these aberrations posed a threat to Christ's Church and its authentic life and witness in the world. Left unchallenged, they would flourish and act as a cancer in Christ's Body, destroying its health and vitality and rendering it utterly incapable of fulfilling its vocation on His behalf. John's directness and zeal show that he understood the gravity of the situation and he was intent on exposing and confronting these errors and directing his readers to return to a right understanding and practice. The truth as it is in Christ was at stake, as was the authenticity and fruitfulness of their faith in Him (1:1-4, 5:13).

C. Interpretive Issues

John composed his letter to a Christian community with whom he was intimately acquainted. Whether or not he'd served them as an apostolic overseer, he clearly regarded them as his beloved children in the faith, sons and daughters to whom he was devoted and for whom he felt personally responsible. The obvious implication is that Christians cannot embrace his letter as if it were written to them; *as with all of the Scriptures, the contemporary reader must guard against reading his own personal and cultural perspectives and circumstances into John's epistle*. At the same time, John's instruction is relevant for every Christian in every age. But one must begin by interacting with his letter as he penned and directed it toward his specific audience. This requires that the reader strive to enter *their* context and circumstances and receive John's instruction the way they would have. Only then can any personal relevance be determined and applied. With that goal in mind, a couple of general observations are in order:

1. First, the reader must guard against the tendency to treat John's epistle as a corrective to wrong behavior. This tendency is natural, evident in the emphasis on behavior in all religions. And the reason for this orientation is that human existence is defined by a fundamental *alienation* – alienation from others, from God and from oneself. In this state, personal interactions – including with deity – are a matter of appropriate conduct rather than authentic intimacy. This is not to say that John wasn't at all concerned with conduct, but that he recognized right *knowledge* as the essence of right conduct. He was concerned that his readers know and embrace the true Jesus, not simply conform to proper behavior.
2. This concern reflects another dimension of natural human existence, namely the inherent tendency to formulate one's own "Jesus." All people live in their own minds, so that all things *are* (as far as they're aware) what they *believe* them to be. This is why knowledge of the truth and conformity to it is a matter of the renewing of the mind (cf. Romans 12:1-3 with Ephesians 4:17-24). In the absence of this renewal – wrought by the Spirit through the means He's appointed, every person will inevitably form a concept of Jesus that conforms to his own perspective, notions and interests. Not surprisingly, this dynamic has plagued the Church and its life and witness from the very beginning. And to the extent that a person embraces a "Jesus" of his own imagination, he worships an idol created in his own image; whatever his convictions, he continues to be a worshipper of himself.