

# FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

## INTRODUCTION

- I.** General Character of the Epistle:
- A.** Its form is neither that of a true letter intended only for the perusal of the person or persons to whom it is addressed nor an epistle written with literary art and with an eye to the public.
  - B.** It does not have an opening salutation (James) or customary conclusion (Hebrews has not opening salutation, only concluding), nor formal thanksgiving as with Paul's letters.
  - C.** One of its unique features among the books of the New Testament is that it does not contain a single proper name (except our Lord's), or a single definite allusion, personal, historical, or geographical, concerning the writer or readers.
  - D.** It is a composition of a person referring to himself in the first person, "I" or "we/us", writing to certain other persons whom he calls "you,".
  - E.** It is however in form at least, a letter.
  - F.** That it possesses the character of the New Testament epistles in general, is well described by Sir William Ramsay (Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia, 24): *"They spring from the heart of the writer and speak direct to the heart of the readers. They were often called forth by some special crisis in the history of the persons addressed, so that they rise out of the actual situation in which the writer conceives the readers to be placed; they express the writer's keen and living sympathy with and participation in the fortunes of the whole class addressed, and are not affected by any thought of a wider public. .... On the other hand, the letters of this class express general principles of life and conduct, religion and ethics, applicable to a wider range of circumstances than those which called them forth; and they appeal as emphatically and intimately to all Christians in all time as they did to those addressed in the first instance."*
  - G.** The 1st Epistle of John could not be more exactly characterized than by these words and though lacking certain external epistolary marks, its contents confirm it to be a real letter (not just a sermon for Christendom at large).
  - H.** The Epistle is designed for a specific group with special needs and reflects an author well acquainted with the addressees as seen in:
    - 1.** The affectionate appellations, "My little children" (2:1), "Beloved" (4:1) and "little children" (2:12,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21).
    - 2.** He shows an intimate acquaintance with their religious environment (2:19), dangers (2:26; 3:7; 5:21), attainments (2:12-14, 21), achievements (4:4) and needs (3:19; 5:13).
  - I.** Further, the Epistle is addressed primarily to the circle of those among whom the author has habitually exercised his ministry as an Apostolic teacher.

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- J.** This is seen in that the author incorporates his readers into the inner circle of his Apostolic authority by referring to himself and the readers together in the first person use of “we/us”.

## **II.** Canonicity and Authorship:

### **A.** External evidence:

1. As to the reception of the Epistle in the church, it is needless to cite any later witness than Eusebius (circa 325), who classes it among the books (homologoumena/undeniable) whose canonical rank was undisputed.
2. It is quoted by Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria (247-265), by the Muratorian Canon, Cyprian, Origen, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus (all dating within 150 AD – 258 AD).
3. Papias (who is described by Irenaeus as a "hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp" [circa 69 AD to 155AD and was a Bishop of Smyrna]) is stated by Eusebius to have "used some testimonies from John's former epistle".
4. Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians (circa 115 AD) contains an almost verbal reproduction of 1 Joh.4:3.
5. Irenaeus (140AD – 203 AD), who knew Polycarp, informs us that he (Polycarp) knew John (Polycarp was martyred at age 86).
6. The association and quotations strongly suggests John as the author.
7. Further, Irenaeus quotes 1Joh.2:18,19; 4:1,2 and 5:1 and identifies it as John's epistle.
8. We have two ancient witnesses (Irenaeus and Eusebius) dating back to the first half of the second century that are literally undisputed.
9. The external testimony is early, clear and strong.
10. All the early church Fathers already mentioned as quoting the Epistle, quote it as the work of John, and until the end of the 16th century, this opinion was held as unquestionable.
11. The first of modern scholars to challenge it was Joseph Scaliger (1540-1609), who rejected the entire trio of Johannine Epistles as unapostolic.
12. The verdict of tradition is essentially unanimous that the Fourth Gospel and the First Epistle are both the legacy of the apostle John in his old age to the church.

### **B.** Internal evidence:

1. The fact that the author remains anonymous indicates that he was so well known to his readers that it was unnecessary for him to declare his identity.
2. The impression about the author given by the epistle is that of a man with the knowledge and authority of an apostle.
3. He is seen to be an eyewitness of the incarnation. 1Joh.1:1-3

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4. The parallelism of theology and terminology with that of the Fourth Gospel is prima facie so strong as to overwhelmingly suggest that one man wrote both.
5. That type of thought that we call Johannine equally characterizes both.
6. This is seen in keywords and phrases like, “begotten of God”, “abiding”, “keeping his commandments” and “love”.
7. Other matches of vocabulary include but are not limited to: “The Word”, “joy fulfilled”, “bear witness”, “to do the truth”, “to have sin”, “to keep the word (of God or Christ)”, “the true light”, “new commandment”, “little children (teknia)”, “children (paidia)”, “to abide for ever”, “to do sin”, “to take away sins”, “works of the devil”, “to pass from death into life”, “murderer”, “to lay down one's life”, “to be of the truth”, “no man has beheld God at any time”, “knowing and believing”, “Saviour of the world”, “water and blood”, “to overcome the world”, “to receive witness”, “to give eternal life”, “to have eternal life (in present sense)” and “to believe in the name”.
8. Other terms common to both that are found very rarely elsewhere in the New Testament include: Beginning (= past eternity), to be manifested (9 times in each), to bear witness (6 times in the Epistle, 33 times in the Gospel, once only in Matthew, once in Luke, not at all in Mark), light (metaphorical), walk (metaphorical), to lead astray, to know (God, Christ, or Spirit, 8 times in the Epistle, 10 times in the Gospel), true (alethinos), to confess Jesus (elsewhere only in Rom 10:9), children of God, to destroy (lauein, elsewhere only in 2 Pet), the spirit of truth, to send (apostellein, of mission of Christ), only begotten son, to have the witness (elsewhere only in Apocrypha), to hear (= to answer prayer).
9. In addition with see in both writings the same monotonous simplicity in the construction of sentences, with avoidance of relative clauses and the habit of resuming consideration of a subject from a slightly different point of view.
10. The unique similarity of the two writings in style and vocabulary and in the whole matter and manner of thought, together with the testimony of a tradition which is ancient, unanimous and unbroken, all point to the Apostle John as the author of this Epistle.

### III. Date and place of writing:

- A. Regarding the question of priority as between John's Gospel and the Epistle, the only certainty is that the Epistle presupposes its readers' acquaintance with the substance of the Gospel.
- B. Otherwise such expressions as "Word of life," and "new commandment" would have been unintelligible.

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- C.** Though that does not demand its subsequentness to the composition of the Gospel in literary form, the majority of scholars regard it written later than the Gospel and separated from it by an appreciable interval.
  - D.** In view of the strong tradition about John's ministry in Asia Minor and the fact that men like Polycarp, etc., came from there, most consider Ephesus as the most probable location of origination.
  - E.** That the Gospel of John is considered to have been written circa 85-90 AD, the Epistle is dated sometime after that, but probably before 95 AD, since there is no mention of the persecution under Domitian.
- IV.** Recipients and purpose of writing:
- A.** That the readers of First John had been believers for a long time and were advanced in their knowledge of doctrine is clear from the contents.
  - B.** Repeatedly, the author declares that he has nothing new in the way of doctrine or exhortation to offer them. 1Joh.2:7,18,20,21,24,27; 3:11
  - C.** There is no suggestion that he had taken part in their initial evangelism. 1Joh.2:7,24
  - D.** That the Apostle Paul had died (80 AD), it appears that John has assumed additional Apostolic authority geographically to help cover the basis in Asia Minor.
  - E.** Therefore, the Epistle is addressed to a circle of churches in Asia Minor.
  - F.** The immediate occasion for First John was the presence of false teachers.
  - G.** Having been believers for so long, they were beset with the temptation to seek to reinterpret their faith in terms of modern thought. (Such attitudes on the part of believers are still the source of much confusion and heresy.)
  - H.** Explicit references to persecution such as seen in First Peter are entirely absent.
  - I.** Things were not particularly difficult, but they must not permit spiritual laxity to creep in, neutralizing their doctrinal position and producing a void of brotherly love, and a tendency toward worldliness.
  - J.** John found it necessary to write to them to bolster their faith so as to counter the false teaching and the pull of the cosmos.
  - K.** His purpose of writing is stated first and foremost in general terms (1:4).
  - L.** The spiritual well-being of the Christians will bring happiness to those that are responsible for them in the Lord.
  - M.** Associated with this is complete assurance of salvation (5:13) and victory over the STA (2:1).
  - N.** The epistle's polemical purpose is designed to counter the Gnostic and Docetic tendencies of the heretical false teachers.
  - O.** Gnosticism tended to make, as its first principle, the superiority of knowledge over the simplicity and devotion to the Lord.
  - P.** These forerunners of the Gnostics of the second century prided themselves as the elite of Christendom.
  - Q.** They held the unenlightened in the church with contempt.
  - R.** They held to a superior knowledge that enabled them to rise above the things of earth into a higher realm.

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- S.** John's early comments indicate a form of teaching that held to sinlessness and a special relationship to God (1:6,8,10).
- T.** That these three criticisms revolve around the principle of  $R_B$  (1:9), the force of the Gnostic attack presented a form of self-righteous viewpoint that they claim could elevate one to sinless perfection.
- U.** This kind of teaching led to a disregard to the totality of all of the ethical demands of Christianity and pitfalls produced by the STA, as they considered themselves above these things (2:4).
- V.** So both asceticism and/or antinomianism characterize them.
- W.** Along with elitism and arrogance respecting their "advanced doctrine" was a guiding principle that matter was evil and spirit was good.
- X.** If this was the case, then there could be no true incarnation.
- Y.** This led to two solutions to Christology?
  - 1.** One view held that Christ did not have a real human body, but only appeared to have one—this view came to be known as Docetism (from *dokein*-*dokeo* meaning "to seem").
  - 2.** The other attempt was known as Cerinthianism, from the heretic Cerinthus, a contemporary of John. (Tradition says that John and he were opponents.) This view sought to separate Jesus from Christ and denied the virgin birth.
- Z.** The particular heretics and their beliefs are not fully expounded by John; he only alludes to their antichrist tendencies to minimize and distort the true doctrine pertaining to Christ.