

Introduction to 1 John

NIV Study Bible

Author

The author is John son of Zebedee (see Mk 1:19–20)—the apostle and the author of the Gospel of John and Revelation (see Introductions to both books: Author). He was a fisherman, one of Jesus’ inner circle (together with James and Peter), and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (Jn 13:23; see note there). He may have been a first cousin of Jesus (his mother may have been Salome, possibly a sister of Mary; cf. Mt 27:56; Mk 15:40 and note; 16:1; Jn 19:25—this view assumes that “his mother’s sister” in Jn 19:25 refers to Salome; some further assume that “Mary the wife of Clopas” there stands in apposition to “his mother’s sister,” which would mean that this Mary and Salome were one and the same person).

Unlike most NT letters, 1 John does not tell us who its author is. The earliest identification of him comes from the church fathers: Irenaeus (c. a.d. 140–203), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), Tertullian (c. 155–222) and Origen (c. 185–253) all designated the writer as the apostle John. As far as we know, no one else was suggested by the early church.

This traditional identification is confirmed by evidence in the letter itself:

1. The style of the Gospel of John is markedly similar to that of this letter. Both are written in simple Greek and use contrasting figures, such as light and darkness, life and death, truth and lies, love and hate.
2. Similar phrases and expressions, such as those found in the following passages, are striking:

1 John	Gospel of John
1:1	1:1,14
1:4	16:24
1:6–7	3:19–21
2:7	13:34–35
3:8	8:44
3:14	5:24
4:6	8:47
4:9	1:14,18; 3:16
5:9	5:32,37
5:12	3:36

3. The mention of eyewitness testimony (1:1–4) harmonizes with the fact that John was a follower of Christ from the earliest days of his ministry.
4. The authoritative manner that pervades the letter, seen in its commands (2:15,24,28; 4:1; 5:21), its firm assertions (2:6; 3:14;4:12) and its pointed identification of error (1:6,8; 2:4,22) is what would be expected from an apostle.
5. The suggestions of advanced age (addressing his readers as “children,” 2:1,28; 3:7) agree with early church tradition concerning John’s age when he wrote the books known to be his.

6. The description of the heretics as antichrists (2:18), liars (2:22) and children of the devil (3:10) is consistent with Jesus' characterization of John as a son of thunder (Mk 3:17).
7. The indications of a close relationship with the Lord (1:1; 2:5–6,24,27–28) fit the descriptions of “the disciple whom Jesus loved” and the one who reclined “next to him” (Jn 13:23).

Date

The letter is difficult to date with precision, but factors such as (1) evidence from early Christian writers (Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria), (2) the early form of Gnosticism reflected in the denunciations of the letter and (3) indications of the advanced age of John suggest the end of the first century. Since the author of 1 John seems to build on concepts and themes found in the fourth Gospel (see 1Jn 2:7–11), it is reasonable to date the letter somewhere between a.d. 85 and 95, after the writing of the Gospel, which may have been written c. 85 (see Introduction to John: Date).

Recipients

1Jn 2:12–14,19; 3:1; 5:13 make it clear that this letter was addressed to believers. But the letter itself does not indicate who they were or where they lived. The fact that it mentions no one by name suggests it was a circular letter sent to Christians in a number of places. Evidence from early Christian writers places the apostle John in Ephesus during most of his later years (c. a.d. 70–100). The earliest confirmed use of 1 John was in the Roman province of Asia (in modern Turkey), where Ephesus was located. Clement of Alexandria indicates that John ministered in the various churches scattered throughout that province. It may be assumed, therefore, that 1 John was sent to the churches of the province of Asia (see map No. 13 at the end of this study Bible).

Gnosticism

One of the most dangerous heresies of the first two centuries of the church was Gnosticism. Its central teaching was that spirit is entirely good and matter is entirely evil. From this unbiblical dualism flowed five important errors:

1. The human body, which is matter, is therefore evil. It is to be contrasted with God, who is wholly spirit and therefore good.
2. Salvation is the escape from the body, achieved not by faith in Christ but by special knowledge (the Greek word for “knowledge” is *gnosis*, hence Gnosticism).
3. Christ's true humanity was denied in two ways: (1) Some said that Christ only seemed to have a body, a view called Docetism, from the Greek *dokeo* (“to seem”), and (2) others said that the divine Christ joined the man Jesus at baptism and left him before he died, a view called Cerinthianism, after its most prominent spokesman, Cerinthus. This view is the background of much of 1 John (see 1:1; 2:22; 4:2–3 and notes).
4. Since the body was considered evil, it was to be treated harshly. This ascetic form of Gnosticism is the background of part of the letter to the Colossians (see Col 2:21,23 and notes).
5. Paradoxically, this dualism also led to licentiousness. The reasoning was that, since matter—and not the breaking of God's law (1Jn 3:4)—was considered evil, breaking his law was of no moral consequence.

The Gnosticism addressed in the NT was an early form of the heresy, not the intricately developed system of the second and third centuries. In addition to that seen in Colossians and in John's letters, acquaintance with early Gnosticism is reflected in 1,2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Peter and perhaps 1 Corinthians.

Occasion and Purpose

John's readers were confronted with an early form of Gnostic teaching of the Cerinthian variety (see Gnosticism above). This heresy was also libertine, throwing off all moral restraints.

Consequently, John wrote this letter with two basic purposes in mind: (1) to expose false teachers (see 2:26 and note) and (2) to give believers assurance of salvation (see 5:13 and note). In keeping with his intention to combat Gnostic teachers, John specifically struck at their total lack of morality (3:8–10); and by giving eyewitness testimony to the incarnation, he sought to confirm his readers' belief in the incarnate Christ (1:3). Success in this would give the writer joy (1:4).

Outline*

- Introduction: The Reality of the Incarnation (1:1–4)
- The Christian Life as Fellowship with the Father and the Son (1:5—2:28)
 - Ethical Tests of Fellowship (1:5—2:11)
 1. Moral likeness (1:5–7)
 2. Confession of sin (1:8—2:2)
 3. Obedience (2:3–6)
 4. Love for fellow believers (2:7–11)
 - Two Digressions (2:12–17)
 - Christological Test of Fellowship (2:18–28)
 1. Contrast: apostates versus believers (2:18–21)
 2. Person of Christ: the crux of the test (2:22–23)
 3. Persistent belief: key to continuing fellowship (2:24–28)
- The Christian Life as Divine Sonship (2:29—4:6)
 - Ethical Tests of Sonship (2:29—3:24)
 1. Righteousness (2:29—3:10a)
 2. Love (3:10b–24)
 - Christological Tests of Sonship (4:1–6)
- The Christian Life as an Integration of the Ethical and the Christological (4:7—5:12)
 - The Ethical Test: Love (4:7—5:5)
 1. The source of love (4:7–16)
 2. The fruit of love (4:17–19)
 3. The relationship of love for God and love for one's fellow Christian (4:20—5:1)
 4. Obedience: the evidence of love for God's children (5:2–5)
 - The Christological Test (5:6–12)
- Conclusion: Great Christian Certainties (5:13–21)