

NAME

The epistle is named "Ioannou A" (Ιωαννου Α) after the traditional author, John the apostle. The letter is called "First John" to distinguish it from John's two other canonical epistles.

AUTHOR

The author is not identified by name in the epistle, but both internal and external evidence supports the position that the author is John the apostle, also the author of the Fourth Gospel.

Laney:

The author claims to have been an eye witness of the life and ministry of Christ (1:1) as John the son of Zebedee indeed was. The writer is a man of spiritual maturity and considerable authority (2:1,12,128; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21). He expects not only to be heard, but obeyed (4:6). He writes in dogmatic terms, condemning error and leaving no opportunity to compromise. Most scholars recognize the similarity in thought, vocabulary, and style between the Gospel of John and First John. Both contain such expressions as light, love, eternal life, truth, witness, abide, "paracletos" (παράκλητος - used only in John and 1 John = "advocate" = Christ), new commandment, begotten of God, comforter, works of the Devil, and Savior of the world.

Both the epistle and the gospel have similar style and sentence construction. Stylistically, the author uses a Semitic Greek that consists of short, coordinate clauses: "...and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us." (1 John 1:2 - compare with Classical Greek which consists of careful structure and subordinate clauses i.e. Luke 1:1-4).

Laney:

Substantial external evidence also supports the contention that John the apostle and son of Zebedee authored the epistle. Irenaeus cited the epistle as authored by the Lord's disciple John, the writer of the Fourth Gospel. Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian similarly cite it as John's. Polycarp and Cyprian all give testimony to the authorship of the Apostle John. Origen often quotes the epistle and refers to it as John's as does his pupil Dionysius.

It has been argued by some on the basis of Papias (2nd Century) (Historia Ecclesiastica 3:39) that there was a John at Ephesus called "elder" who wrote the epistles and another John, the apostle, who wrote the Gospel. However, it is not at all clear that Papias intends to have made any distinction between "John" and "John the Elder." A careful reading of Papias will reveal that he used the term in an apostolic sense, and that both references to John are to the same individual.

John was apparently an early disciple of John the Baptist and followed Christ after encountering Him at Bethany beyond the Jordan (John 1:35-42). He accompanied Jesus on His first tour in Galilee (John 2:2), and later with his partners quit the fishing trade to become fishers of men (Matthew 4:19-21). John was at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1), Last Supper (John 13:23), trial (John 18:15,16), and crucifixion of Jesus (John 19:26,27). When he arrived at Jesus' empty tomb, "he saw and believed (John 20:8). John was associated with Peter in a number of events in Acts (Acts 3:1ff; 4:3-21; 8:14-25). He was regarded with Peter and James as a pillar of the early church (Galatians 2:9). Irenaeus writes that he was later named bishop at Ephesus. Upon his return from exile on the island of Patmos during the persecution of Domitian (81-96 A.D.) he took up residence again in Ephesus where he spent the closing years of his life (Historia Ecclesiastica 3:18,20,25,31).

One cannot but conclude that First John and the Gospel of John were written by the same author.

DATE

Laney:

The date assigned to First John is related to the date given to John's Gospel (85-90 A.D.). The epistle was probably written after the Gospel since the author seems to assume an acquaintance on the part of the readers with the facts of the gospel. The absence of any reference to persecution would indicate that the letter was written before the persecution of Domitian (81-96 A.D.) against the church (c. 95 A.D.). The epistle should probably be dated after John's Gospel around 90 A.D.)

THEME

Carl: *"Love, Trust, and Obey"*

Halley (page 44): *"Love"*

Laney: *"Fellowship with God in the family of God"*

The epistle is intended to combat false teaching with a clear presentation of the truth. The primary purpose of the epistle is to promote Christian fellowship (1:3) and knowledge in Christian truth (5:13). John seeks to promote fellowship in the family of God through instruction in true knowledge, and to encourage the believers in their love for one another.

Mitchell: *"Fellowship"*

The book mentions the matter of purpose thirteen times. The author wrote it with definite objectives in views. They are reductable to two:

1. To give foundation to Christian assurance. It is our privilege to be sure we are saved. The phrase "we know" occurs 13 times. (*"Don't be a hope so, but a know so!"*)
2. To reveal the method whereby fellowship may be enjoyed.

1 John is the practical application of the Gospel of John.

Key Word (Nelson's): Fellowship with God - John wants his readers to have assurance of the indwelling God through their abiding relationship with Him (2:28; 5:13). Belief in Christ should be manifested in the practice of righteousness and love for the brethren, which in turn produces joy and confidence before God.

Key Verses (Nelson's):

"—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1:3,4)

"And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:11-13)

Key Chapter (Nelson's): 1 - The two central passages for continued fellowship with God are John 15 and 1 John 1. John 15 relates the positive side of fellowship, that is, abiding in Christ. First John 1 unfolds the other side, pointing out that when Christians do not abide in Christ, they must seek forgiveness before fellowship can be restored.

Fellowship:

Mitchell:

The Greek word (κοινωνία) translated "fellowship" has three primary ideas:

1. A common basis
2. A joint participation
3. Intimacy

In the writings of Paul the word fellowship is at times almost synonymous with the idea of organic union with Christ. But in John's usage, fellowship is the experience which is the normal result of our union with Christ. Hence, fellowship as used in this letter refers to the experience of communion and harmony between the believer and God (Father and Son) as well as between believer and his/her fellow believers. This fellowship is possible by virtue of the common nature received by believers when they were regenerated.

The more we focus on Jesus the greater our fellowship.

Love:

Nelson's:

The central theme of John's letter is God—what He is like, how we can have fellowship with Him, and the effect that fellowship will have (the quality of love [1 John 3-5]), as the chart below describes.

THE SOURCE OF LOVE

God personifies love (4:8,16)

God loved us (4:19)

God gave His Son for us (4:9,10)

Christ laid down His life for us (3:16)

THE EFFECT OF LOVE

We reflect God's love in the world (4:7)

We love God; our fear is gone; we keep His commands (4:18-19; 5:3)

We give our substance for others (3:17; 4:11)

We lay down our lives for others (3:16)

Outline:

Laney:

First John is one of the most difficult books in the New Testament to outline for the structure of the epistle is not immediately apparent. The following suggested outline is based on the major themes of light (1:5), love (4:8), and faith (5:4).

- I. Walking in the Light 1-2
- II. Abiding in Love 3-4
- III. Overcoming by Faith 5

The following outline, based on the theme of fellowship, is adapted from Dr. Mitchell:

- I. Prologue 1:1-4
- II. The Condition of Fellowship 1:5-10
- III. The Remedy for Fellowship 2:1,2
Fellowship as the remedy for daily sins committed by the believer - the constant advocacy and intercession of Christ (our High Priest) assures a salvation "unto the uttermost (Hebrews 7:25)
- IV. The Conduct of Fellowship 2:3-17
- V. The Doctrine of Fellowship 2:18-29
- VI. The Characteristics of Fellowship 3:1-24
- VII. The Cautions of Fellowship 4:1-21
- VIII. The Ground of Fellowship 5:1-20
- IX. Concluding Challenge 5:21

RECIPIENTS

This is a General Epistle, not addressed to a church or individual, but to all the children of God. The addressees are regarded as believers (3:1,2) of Gentile background (5:21). Since John spent his later years at Ephesus it is likely that the epistle was written from that city to a nearby group of Asian churches with whom John was personally acquainted. The supposition of Augustine that the churches of Parthia are in mind has no foundation and probably arose from a corruption of the text.

Historical Setting:

Laney:

First John is written to churches in which false prophets had appeared (4:1) who apparently drew some professing Christians from fellowship with the true believers (2:19). The false teachers claimed a "special illumination" by the Spirit (2:20,27) that imparted them with a deeper knowledge. John combats this error by emphasizing true knowledge (2:3,5; 3:16,19,24; 4:2,6,13; 5:2). The heretics also claimed to have reached a state of moral perfection (1:8-10). This ethical error brought pride and haughtiness and John combats such attitudes by placing a strong emphasis on love for the brethren (4:7-21).

The chief theological error among the readers was a denial of the incarnation (2:22; 4:2). This reflects the position of an early form of Gnosticism known as docetism. The Gnostic docetics held that since all matter was evil, God could not have come into contact with the material world in the person of Christ. Hence, they denied the incarnation altogether or claimed that the body of Christ was only an appearance and was not real. Christ only seemed to take an earthy, human form. Many went further to deny the reality of Christ's sufferings. John combats this error by claiming to have been an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Christ (1:1-4). He claims to have "handled" His body and thus refutes the view that it was just a phantom. John affirms the reality and efficacy of Christ's death on the cross (1:8; 2:2; 3:16; 4:10).

In refuting the heresy, John does not attack the false teachers, but carefully expounds the truth,

encouraging his readers to continue in the faith and live consistent Christian lives with an awareness and concern for the error which surrounds them.

CONTRIBUTION TO CANON

Peculiarities:

Mitchell:

1. Frequent repetition - John keeps harping on the same thought over and over
2. Frequent use of antithesis - one thought against another:

Light/Darkness	Flesh/Spirit
Truth/Falsehood	Life/Death
Love/Hate	God/Devil
3. Frequent use of the word "love" (ἀγάπη) (51 times) - more than any other book. John has three favorite words: Love, Light, Life.
4. Frequent use of the word "know" (γινώσκω - knowledge by observation and experience) (41 times in various cognates of the verb)

It is the privilege of every believer to know that he is saved and enjoy unbroken fellowship with God. Fellowship is not only the key to this epistle, but it is likewise central in the entire Bible. In a sense the Bible is a product of God's desire to have fellowship with man. At the beginning of the Scriptures we have God saying, "*Where are you?*" (Genesis 3:9) which is the cry of a broken hearted lover. At the end of Scripture we have the glorious words, "*The tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them...*" (Revelation 21:3), in which God and man are pictured in fellowship forever. Fellowship is what you and I need and what God wants.

1 John is a significant description of what fellowship is: The basis, means, reassurance, practice, and mutual experience of fellowship.

RESOURCES

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Nelson's Quick Reference - Bible Maps And Charts, Nashville, Tennessee; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994

As general resources I've relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (WCBS - [especially those of Dr. J. Carl Laney]), and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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