

Critical Concerns regarding the Johannine Epistles

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Epistles of John enjoy a unique position in the writings of the New Testament. While 1 John is among the most loved and most quoted in the New Testament, 2 and 3 John exist in relative obscurity.¹ The “forceful simplicity”² of the letters demonstrate the gentleness of the author as well as his deep love for the recipients. Most especially in 1 John, the ungarnished thoughts and direct sternness are simple enough for a child to grasp yet complex enough to warrant a lifetime of study. Likewise, the unique contributions of 2 and 3 John provide sufficient room for investigation and study as well.³

All three Johannine epistles find themselves amassed with the latter letters of the New Testament under the unfortunate heading of “General” epistles, as if that term could encompass the breadth and vastness of the themes demonstrated therein. Perhaps this term was coined as a reference term for the remaining seven epistles, especially since the other thirteen (or fourteen) are attributed to the Apostle Paul. Perhaps the number seven gained support in deference to the special significance of the number seven,⁴ or this term was applied to demonstrate the encyclical

¹ Daniel Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, ed. David S. Dockery, New American Commentary Series, vol. 38 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 21.; Cf. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1970). C.H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper and Row, 1946).; E. Earle Ellis, *The World of St. John: The Gospel and the Epistles* (Lanham, Mass.: University Press of America, 1995).; Hans-Josef Klauck, *Die Johannesbrief* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991).; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New International Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).; Alexander Ross, *The Epistles of James and John*, New International Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954).; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, ed. Ralph P. Martin, Word Biblical Commentaries, vol. 51 (Waco: Word Books, 1984).; Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, 3 John*, ed. Harold Attridge, trans. Linda M. Mahoney, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).; John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969).; Klaus Wengst, *Der Erste, Zweite Und Dritte Brief Des Johannes* (Wurzburg: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohnm Echter Verlag, 1978).; Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistles of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1905).; Hans Windisch, *Die Katholischen Briefe*, Handbuch Zum Neuen Testament ; 4. Bd., 2. T. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1911).

² D. E. Hiebert, *The Epistles of John* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1991), 1.

³ Akin, 22.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, ed. David Noel Freedman and William F. Albright, Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1982), 3.

and general nature of the epistles.⁵ For whatever reason, the three Johannine epistles were in the category with the others, despite their unique flavoring.

The three Johannine epistles reflect a style and a structure that is uniquely Johannine. While that structure, especially for 1 John, is difficult if not impossible, to understand, it is a structure centered on themes common to all three epistles. Regardless as to their discrepancies in length and structure the commonality of their authorship can be seen throughout the three writings.⁶

The Johannine style shared by all three result in the fundamental questions on authorship. Originating in Ephesus, the dating of each is based late in the first century. The purpose of each of the letters also provides information on the basis of what John addresses as the occasion for his writing.

The acceptance of each of the epistles into the canon provides insight into the early church and the use of the Johannine writings. While 1 John is a textbook case of early acceptance, 2 and 3 John are not. Their inclusion, however, is appropriate based on their intimate connection with 1 John and the Gospel of John (hereafter GJohn).

The Johannine epistles are unique in character and tone as compared to the Petrine epistles, the Hebrews correspondence, James and Jude. However, the Johannine writings provide an integral bridge between the conclusion of the General epistles (excluding Jude) and the beginning of Revelation.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Ibid., 76-17. “In comparing (the three epistles) it has been observed that seventy percent of the significant words of 3 John are found in 1 John or the Gospel of John, as are eighty-six percent of those in 2 John.”

CHAPTER ONE
THE STRUCTURE AND GENRE OF
THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

The Structure of First John

A structural analysis of 1 John is described best be called as a study in diversity. Despite its brevity and the relatively simple Greek employed in its writing, the options regarding its structure range from the simple to the exceptional.⁷ Much of the discussion regarding structure seeks to analyze the connection between the GJohn and 1 John. However, this, so far, has proven unsatisfactory at best largely because albeit the connection is undeniable, it is ambiguous at best.⁸ Thus, other options become necessary.

One reason for so many structure possibilities is the repetition of certain themes (God is love, God as light) and yet the introduction of other themes. This diversity seems to require more than a single approach. Thus, many suggestions from many different angles are available about the unifying schematic underlying 1 John.

While some scholars have opted to suggest that there is no structure⁹ their pessimism appears unwarranted, since there seems to be a definite structure of some sort. The enigma lies in discerning it. The three major approaches to structure are traditional approaches, discourse analysis and rhetorical criticism. Albeit these headings are general, many scholars in Johannine studies fit into one of these three categories.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, ed. Robert W. Funk, trans. R. Philip O'Hara, Lane C. McGaughey, and Robert W. Funk, Hermenia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973). Bultmann suggests an underlying *vorlage* document behind 1 John. Unfortunately, he offers this *vorlage* only sporadically and never fully develops it. It appears in footnotes, sidebars and scattered within his writings. Fortunately, Brown, *Epistles*, provides an appendix (B) in which he has collated this information into a comprehensive whole, compiling it into a list format containing the 26 couplets (or triplets) drawn from the five chapters.

⁸ Ibid., 1. "So far as the relationship of the three letters to each other is concerned, complete clarity, in my opinion, is not possible. It can be said with certainty only the 2 John is dependant upon 1 John, indeed, that 2 John is definitely a secondary work and is evidence for an early catholicism."

⁹ Strecker, xliii. "For the most part, 1 John is seen as a relatively loose series of various trains of thought hung together on the basis of association."

Traditional Approaches

Many scholars have sought to analyze the structure of 1 John based on the text and its natural divisions. These scholars have offered theories for the arrangement of 1 John.¹⁰ There seems to be consensus at the point of the prologue (1 John 1:1-4), but little else. Most of these scholars have attempted to argue for their analysis based on the “flow of the argument” of 1 John. However, there are widely divergent opinions about this “flow.” For example, D. Jackman argues for a cone or pyramid-shape construction since John seems to return repeatedly to certain themes.¹¹ Thus, for him, 1 John has no need of an extensive outline since it has only one or possibly two main points around which it rotates. Other scholars break 1 John into two parts and others into as many as seven parts. The parade of outlines is long. Even a short list of suggested outlines demonstrates the diversity of thought found among scholars.¹²

Division into Two Parts

1:5-2:29 3:1-5:12

Feuillet¹³

1:5-2:28 2:29-5:13

Chaine¹⁴

Division into Three Parts

1:1-2:17 2:18-3:24 4:1-5:21

Thüsing¹⁵

1:5-2:17 2:18-3:24 4:1-5:12

Schnackenburg¹⁶

1:5-2:17 2:18-4:6 4:7-5:21

Westcott¹⁷

1:5-2:28 2:29-4:12 4:13-5:13

Dodd¹⁸

¹⁰ Akin, 37.

¹¹ David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters: Living in the Love of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 18.

¹² This chart is adapted from R. Brown, *Epistles*, 764. It demonstrates a far deeper diversity among scholars with 25 different outlines listed, each with proponents (and followers) apparently convinced of their position.

¹³ André Feuillet, *Johannine Studies* (Staten Island, N. Y.: Alba House, 1965).

¹⁴ Joseph Chaine, *Les Épitres Catholiques; La Seconde Épître De Saint Pierre, Les Épitres De Saint Jean, L'épître De Saint Jude*, 2e éd. ed., Études Bibliques (Paris,: Lecoffre, 1939).

¹⁵ Wilhelm Thüsing and Alois Støger, *The Three Epistles of St. John* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1971).

¹⁶ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary*, trans. Reginald & Ilse Fuller (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

¹⁷ Westcott, 158.

¹⁸ Dodd, 221.

Division into Seven Parts

1:5-2:11; 2:12-17; 2:18-27; 2:28-3:24; 4:1-6; 4:7-21; 5:1-12 Houlden¹⁹

As is clear, there is no shortage of “traditional” outlines for 1 John. Even when deliberating the prologue, which most contemplate as a portion unto itself, there are those who maintain that it is simply part of the argument.²⁰ Despite the fact that each of these has some measure of truth and validity and even some measure of a following, none of these are fundamentally the most applicable or the best singular proposal.

Discourse Analysis

This method seeks to examine the use of grammar on both the discourse and paragraph level. Usually applied by linguists²¹ and Bible translators,²² this method seeks to analyze the semantical structure of the work. Then, by applying the principles of these semantics, a dynamic equivalence structure can be formed for use in assembling the epistle and in finding the connective links that bind it together. An example of such an outline for 1 John is as follows:

INTRODUCTION: 1:1-2:29 - Embedded discourse of seven paragraphs.

1:1-4 -Prologue

1:5-10- Covert exhortations not to profess to be sinless but to “walk in the light,” confess our sins and enjoy forgiveness.

2:1-6- Covert exhortations not to sin

2:7-11- A new / old command is announced and inferentially connected with a covert command to love

2:12-17-Ethical peak of this embedded discourse. Here, the writer develops his reasons for writing the epistle and warns against loving the world.

2:18-27-Doctrinal peak. Remain in Christ and in his teaching in spite of adverse teaching and practice.

2:28-29-Closure. Echoes of previous paragraph: “Hold steady: don’t get sidetracked.”

¹⁹ J. L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

²⁰ On Brown’s chart, only five of the twenty-five proposed outlines include the prologue as part of the first section.

²¹ Robert E. Longacre, *The Grammar of Discourse*, Topics in Language and Linguistics. (New York: Plenum Press, 1983). Cf. George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews : A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, V. 73 (Leiden [The Netherlands] ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1994).

²² Kenneth Lee Pike and Evelyn G. Pike, *Grammatical Analysis*, Rev. ed., Summer Institute of Linguistics Publications in Linguistics ; No. 53 (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1982). Cf. Richard T. De George and Fernande M. De George, *The Structuralists: From Marx to Lévi-Strauss* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972).

BODY: 3:1-5:12 - Embedded discourse contraining seven paragraphs.
 3:1-6- Mitigated covert command to purify ourselves in v. 3
 3:7-12- Mitigated covert command to not practice sin.
 3:13-18-Mitigated command (not covert) to love by laying down our lives for our brethren
 3:19-24-“Hortatory Essence”of book given in v. 23.
 4:1-6- “Doctrinal Peak”of the book. Believe correctly regarding Jesus Christ
 4:7-21- “Ethical Peak”of the book; composed of two paragraphs. No mitigation now, but covert exhortation. “Let us love one another.”
 5:1-12- Conclusion of this embedded discourse in that v. 1 refers to those who believe and love, harking back to the two previous paragraphs.

CONCLUSION: 5:13-21- Theme of book is contained here (5:13). Accordingly, his purpose in writing is assurance.²³

By use of this method of outlining, it is possible to get at the heart of the discourse and thus translate that heart to another (receptor) language. This method is a valuable resource, but alone it seems insufficient to arrive at a conclusion for a structure of 1 John.

Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetorical criticism analyzes ancient rhetoric to discover what strategies in use around them were used in the author’s writing.²⁴ This method was a popular choice in the latter part of the twentieth century despite its many variations.

One popular choice in rhetorical criticism is to argue in favor of a chiasmic structure for 1 John. For example, P. Berge argues for a quite simple construction using a chiasmic argument.²⁵

- A The Word of life 1:1-4
- B God is Light 1:5-4:6
- B’ God is Love 4:7-5:5
- A’ The witness of faith 5:6-21

J. Thomas suggests a structure centered on the repetition of certain words and catch phrases. This, he suggests was intended to aid in the memorization of the epistle for further communication, perhaps even suggesting an oral foundation for its further communication.²⁶ His structure is as follows:

- A 1:1-4 - Prologue - Eternal Life
- B 1:5-2:2 - Making Him a Liar (Walking)

²³ Akin, 39-40. Cf. Robert E. Longacre, "Exhortation and Mitigation in 1 John," *Selected Technical Articles Related to Translation* 9 (1983).

²⁴ Akin, 37.

²⁵ P. S. Berge, "The Word and Its Witness in John and 1 John: A Literary and Rhetorical Study," *Word and World* Supplement Series 3 (1998).

²⁶ Thomas does not imply this directly. It is perhaps this author’s interest in the arena of oral communication which led to this previously mentioned interpretation.

- C 2:3-17 - New Commandment
 D 2:18-27 - Antichrists
 E 2:18-3:10 - Confidence - Do not Sin
 F - 3:11-18 - Love One Another
 E' 3:19-24 - Confidence - Keep the Commands
 D' 4:1-6 - Antichrists
 C' 4:7-5:5 - God's Love and Ours
 B' 5:6-12 - Making Him a Liar (Testimony)
 A' 5:13-21 -Conclusion - Eternal Life²⁷

Again, this structure does well to provide for the chiasmic units and for the reinforcement of the circular nature of the epistle. However, it must be maintained as at least possible that this was a sermon or a homily without the rigid structure of the first century epistle. Thus, while chiasm is a strong possibility, it is not the only one offered by rhetorical criticism.

Other scholars use this same approach but combine it with other methods to arrive at a structural eclecticism. For example, G. Strecker suggests that 1 John, based on its perceived polemical nature,²⁸ fluctuates between paranesis and dogmatic exposition.²⁹ For him, neither approach alone is sufficient.

The Genre of First John

The epistolary format was a standard means of communication in the first century world and in the early church. It was a means of greetings and encouragement as well as discipleship and correction. It was a method of addressing a congregation publicly regarding a particular or general area of doctrine or ethics.³⁰ Generally, these were informal documents were written on sheets of papyrus with a standard form for Greek and early Christian epistles.

The usual epistolary format began with an opening formula (*praescription*) which included a sender (*scriptio*), an addressee (*adscriptio*) and a greeting (*salutio*). This formula was followed by a word of Thanksgiving (*eucharistio*). The body or the main portion of the message followed the Thanksgiving. Generally, epistles were ended with a closing formula which generally contained a personal word or a personal greeting.³¹ Several first century documents demonstrate

²⁷ J. C. Thomas, "The Literary Structure of 1 John," *Novum Testamentum* XL 4 (1998), 369-381.

²⁸ For further discussion on purpose, theme and recipients, see below, p. 11ff.

²⁹ Strecker, xliv.

³⁰ Bo Reicke, *Epistles of James, Peter and Jude*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1964), XXXI.

³¹ Brown, 788-794. Duane F. Watson, "Letter, Letter Form," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 654.

this form. The *Seven Letters of Ignatious*, the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* and the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippian³² each demonstrates the use of the standard epistolary format. Therefore, at least to some extent, the epistolary format of ancient Greek and Jewish letters can be quantified.

In comparison to the above-mentioned forms it is definitely legitimate to not call 1 John it an epistle. It has almost none of the features of ancient letters. It has no author listed. It lacks a personal greeting and does not designate recipients.³³ It does contain a word of thanksgiving, but has no closing formula or personal designations. In short, it has none of the features of a common ancient epistle.³⁴ Thus, its genre interpretation is open for discussion.

Some have viewed 1 John as a universal religious tract.³⁵ This tract was intended for the church worldwide. Such an explanation allows for the lack of an author's name and the lack of specific designated recipients. This possibility, however, fails to explain how an anonymous letter without designated recipients would carry any weight in the early church.

A second possibility for the genre of 1 John is a circular epistle.³⁶ This view seeks to attempt to do justice to both the lack of epistolary format and the presence of specific contents. It also accounts for the lack of opening and closing formulas and a lack of personal names in the greetings. It also allows for a wide range of recipients since none are designated formally.

A third genre possibility for 1 John is a homily or an informal pastoral tractate. Within 1 John, there is a definite hortatory style in keeping with a pastoral writing.³⁷ The simple starkness of the tone and the directness in the commands, coupled with the familial statements, such as referring to the recipients as "dear children" make it easy to see the pastoral style. The weakness of this view lies in the anonymity of epistle. If it is a pastoral letter, then it seems reasonable that the pastor would have identified himself as such.

³² Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians*.

³³ Westcott, xxix. Cf. Gary M. Burge, "John, Letters Of," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 596. Cf. Reicke, XXX.

³⁴ Watson, 696. Cf. Judith Lieu, *The Second and Third Epistles of John: History and Background*, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 37-51.; Reicke, XXX. Thomas D. Lea, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 561.

³⁵ W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 437. "1 John is not to be understood as being in any way a tractate intended for specific readers. . . (but) seems rather to be a tractate intended for the whole of Christianity, a kind of manifesto." Cf. Windisch, 67.; Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 28.; Brown, 87.

³⁶ Kruse, 88. Cf. Ernst Gaugler, *Die Johannesbriefe*, ed. Ernst Gaugler, Auslegung Neutestamentlicher Schriften ; 1. (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1964).; August Neander and H. C. Conant, *The First Epistle of John* (New York: Lewis Colby, 1852).

³⁷ Brown, 89.

A fourth view is the view 1 John as a comment on GJohn. “The peculiar format of 1 John may have been influenced by the author’s attempt to refute the secessionist view by commenting on GJohn to which they also appealed as a justification for their views.”³⁸ These secessionists were abusing GJohn to their own ends. First John, according to this view, is a polemical attempt to destroy the credibility of those who seek to misuse the Gospel.³⁹

A final genre option is offered by S. Smalley. He suggests that 1 John is a “paper” although not necessarily in the academic sense.⁴⁰ This paper, intended as a follow-up to GJohn, is written for the heterodox members of the Johannine community who were “indebted to the teaching of the Gospel, but who also were understanding it differently, indeed, erroneously.”⁴¹ It contemplates the Christological and ethical issues involved which were causing debate and even division in the Johannine community.⁴²

Conclusion for 1 John

There does not seem to any single structure that best applies to the enigmatic 1 John, nor does there seem to be any single most likely genre choice. Perhaps, then, a composite alternative is the best option. Thus, the best option is a conglomeration approach, combing the best of several views. The traditional approach seems to be the most satisfactory in developing a strict outline. The discourse analysis view has the advantage of drawing upon the kernal sentences for the crux of the meaning. Thus, in combining the two, one can strike a balance and develop a workable solution to this enigmatic problem. Therefore, combing the two would develop an outline akin to the following:

- The Prologue - Eyewitnesses to the Word - 1 Jn 1:1-4
- I. The Light and the Results of Obedience to it - 1 Jn 1:5-2:27
 - Command to Stay in touch with the Loght
 - Command to Avoid Sin
 - Command to Obey the Ancient Commands and Teachings
 - Command to Not Love the World
- II. The Love of God and for His Children - 1 Jn 2:28-3:24
 - Continue in Faithfulness
 - The Love God has lavished on Man
 - Man’s responsibility as God’s children
 - Love for One Another
 - Love of Christ for Man

³⁸ Ibid., 90. Cf. Marshall, 14.

³⁹ Ellis, 84.

⁴⁰ Smalley, xxvii.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Smalley, xxxiii.

- III. Recognize Falsehood - 1 Jn 4:1-6
 - The essentiality of Discernment
- IV. The Love for God and Faith in the Son of God - 1 Jn. 4:7-5:21
 - Love for One Another comes from Love for God
 - The life of Man is Enveloped in the Love of God
 - Faith is the Foundation of Eternal Life
 - Life in God comes to Man through the Gift of Christ

The Structure of 2 John

While there is seemingly little if any consensus on the structure of 1 John, there seems to be little discrepancy on the structure and genre of 2 and 3 John. Much of this can be attributed to the brevity of the latter epistles, but just as much can be attributed to the discussion regarding the connection of 1 John and the Gospel of John.

Far less complex than 1 John, the latter⁴³Johannine Epistles demonstrate a simple structure centered around a singular theme or concept. Their brevity⁴⁴assumes a directness and singularity in theme and purpose. Their tone assumes an authority granted to them by the reader as well as a deep love for those to whom the author speaks. The language and vocabulary of the epistles reflect the unique Johannine style. For example, 2 Jn 5 compares quite closely to 1 John 2:7 and GJohn 13:34-35. The common theme of the new command of love for one another makes the conclusion of common authorship clear.

The Genre of 2 John

The epistolary structure of the latter Johannine epistles is clearly that of classical epistle, especially 2 John.⁴⁵ The length of each epistle is equal to the approximate size of a single sheet of papyrus (20x25cm) or approximately the same length as a standard personal letter in Greek epistolary writing.⁴⁶

Second John emphasizes a community as its recipients, however, the individual is not lacking in its admonishment. The emphasis of this epistle, especially when compared to the other Johannine epistles, is doctrinal in nature but has a practical element as well, thus further reinforcing its position as a unique epistle. Thompson observes that 2 John centers on the “purpose of Christian spirituality and conduct.”⁴⁷ Smalley suggests 2 John is structured on

⁴³ This term is meant to imply latter in terms of canonical order, not necessarily date.

⁴⁴ 2 John has 245 words and 1,126 letters. 3 John has 219 words and 1105 letters.

⁴⁵ Burge, 596. Cf. Smalley, 315.

⁴⁶ Lieu, 37-38. Also O Roller, *Das Formular Der Paulischen Briefe* (Stuttgart: Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament IV.6, 1933), 35, 359.

⁴⁷ Marianne Meye Thompson, *1-3 John*, ed. Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon Robinson, *Intervarsity New Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 15.

“living in truth and Love.”⁴⁸ Thus, the structure of 2 John may be prescribed following the traditional analysis and discourse analysis.

- I. Salutation - 1-3
 - Love founds the writing
 - Epistolary greeting
- II. Commendation - 4
 - Life according to the Father’s Truth
- III. Exhortation and Warning - 5-11
 - Love for One another
 - Love seen in Obedience
 - Deceivers
 - A Warning against false teachers
- IV. Conclusion - 12-13
 - Desire to write and visit
 - Epistolary Closing Formula

The Structure and Genre of 3 John

The epistolary structure of 3 John is one of the best examples of ancient letter writing in the Bible, something of an anomaly when compared to the rest of the New Testament. Unlike the previous two letters, it has both an author and a recipient listed. It is practical and decisive in tone, a style in keeping with the balance of Johannine literature. It is much more “individual in character” than the other epistle.

- I. Salutation - 1-2
 - Formulaic introduction
- II. Commendation of Gaius - 3-8
 - A greeting of peace
 - Command to stay faithful
 - The foundation of Christ
- III. Condemnation of Diotrephes - 9-10
 - A warning against Diotrephes
 - Warning against specific problems
- IV. Exhortation to Gaius - 11
 - Command to Do well
 - The foundation of faith in God
- V. Example of Demetrius - 12
 - The truth of Demetrius’ testimony
- VI. Conclusion - 13-14
 - Formulaic Conclusion

⁴⁸ Smalley, xxxiv.

Conclusion

The structure of 2 and 3 John is much simpler and far easier to develop than 1 John. With a centralized purpose, the structure is much less enigmatic than the previous epistle. Both epistles address specific concerns within a definitive structure. Both admonish the recipients to hold firmly to the truth and yet live in the love that God has given to his people. Their structure underscores the simplicity of the message combined with the complexity of the application.

The genre of the latter epistles is definitively epistolary in nature. With all the characteristics of ancient letters in place, there can be no doubt. It has the salutation, the personal greetings, the message, the thanksgiving and the personal remarks at the conclusion. These features enable one to categorize 2 and 3 John as epistles.

CHAPTER TWO

CRITICAL CONCERNS FOR THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

Authorship IssuesAuthorship of 1 John

As is GJohn, 1 John is technically anonymous. When one examines the evidences, however, both external and internal that point to the Johannine authorship of this book, the conclusion that a single author wrote each book is hard to escape. Many believe this is an “acknowledged fact.”⁴⁹

There are some who declare the Johannine epistles to be the work of a community of writers who took up John’s work after his death.⁵⁰ When one deliberates the entirety of the Johannine corpus, however, it seems difficult to establish that this was anyone other than the Apostle John. The language used in the prologue of 1 John seems to assert that the author was an eyewitness (1 John 1:1-3). The tone of language seems to imply an assumed authority. Granted, each of these concepts is perception that may or may not be accurate, however, there seems little reason to assume anyone other than the Apostle John as the author.⁵¹

The intertwining of this epistle with the Gospel has roots deeper than simply a title. History and tradition aside, the compassion and pathos of the author are markedly analogous to the Gospel writer. Despite the objections of some like Dodd,⁵² the Hebraistic parallelism (*e.g.*, 1 John 2:10-11 with GJohn 3:18, 20-21) and style of authorship are intimately connected and unique to the New Testament.⁵³ Furthermore, the tone of apostolic authority seems to be found throughout the epistle as the author gives instruction on life with authority (1 John 4:1, 7; 5).

⁴⁹ David Smith, *1 John*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, Expositors Greek Testament, vol. V (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 154. Cf. Stott, 15. Burge, 587. F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 259.

⁵⁰ James Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1918), 479-481.

⁵¹ Akin, 23.

⁵² Dodd, p. lvi. and xxxix. Here, Dodd seems to suggest that another Evangelist could have just as easily written this book. Cf. Lieu, *2 and 3 John*, 24.

⁵³ David K. Rensburger, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John*, ed. Victor Paul Furnish, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 17.; Smith, 152.; Ross, 111.

The doctrine of love is replete through this book as well. As the author speaks to his readers as “Dear children”(Τεκνία μου) and “Dear friends / Beloved”(Αγαπητοί,), the love for Christ and his church exhibited by the author seems to overflow. While this love had not always been a part of the author’s character (cf. Mk. 3:17), the centrality of love is prevalent. This is not an article of the polemic of the author as it would be for others (cf. Ignatius), but rather an abiding and pervasive factor of the life of one changed by the power of love.

On external evidences, most manuscripts title this epistle “Ἰωαννοῦ Α”⁵⁴ or “Ἰωαννοῦ ἐπιστολὴ Α”⁵⁵ or in the case of Codex L (*et al.*) “ἐπιστολὴ καθολικὴ τοῦ ἁγίου ἀποστόλου Ἰωάννου.” Thus, it emanates that at least by the third or fourth century, there is little question regarding the connection 1 John shares with the Gospel of John in terms of authorship. If one accepts the Apostle John’s authorship of the Gospel, then one can attribute this book to his hand as well thus fulfilling the first element of canonicity.

Dibelius offers the most interesting solution to the matter of the Johannine epistles. He suggests the epistles are fictitious throughout.⁵⁶ He, along with others⁵⁷, contend that the use of crucial vocabularic tendencies differs so widely as to render all of them mute since they could not possibly be connected in any coherent manner. Such a view has merit only as a side note.

Authorship of 2 and 3 John

On the authorship of 2 and 3 John, the author claims to be Ὁ πρεσβύτερος. No other introduction is given. The title implies a sense of authority beyond names. It implies an ability to issue missives from the hand of God as the messenger of God. It implies an assumed authority that would be recognized by the readers. Thus, despite that fact that some have attributed these two epistles to the mysterious “John the Elder,” such a view seems unnecessary.⁵⁸ The Apostle John identified himself as the “Elder” because no other introduction was necessary.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Codex A and B.

⁵⁵ Codex Ⲙ.

⁵⁶ Martin Dibelius, *Religion in Geschichte Und Gegenwart*, vol. 3 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1957-62), 3.343. Cf, Emmanuel Hirsch, *Studien Zum Vierten Evangelium*, Beitrage Zur Historischen Theologie (Tübingen: Mohr, 1936), 170-179.

⁵⁷ Hirsch, 170-179; Cf. Roland Bergmeier, “Glaube Als Gabe Nach Johannes : Religions- Und Theologiegeschichtliche Studien Zum Prädestinarianischen Dualismus Im Vierten Evangelium” (Kohlhammer, 1980), 93-100.

⁵⁸ Smalley, 317. This view, according to Smalley, is based on a misinterpretation of the works of Papias. For further information, see Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1983).

⁵⁹ Akin, 219, 239; Kruse, 220.

The external evidence in favor of 2 and 3 John as Johannine demonstrates the validity of this exercise. Both are titled “ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ” clearly meaning to imply Apostolic authority. Furthermore, the support of these titles is solid.⁶⁰

Date and Provenance of the Johannine Epistles

The date for the writing of the Johannine Epistles is a matter of wide discussion. Opinions range from the mid-first century to the latest part of the first century. What can be ascertained with reasonable confidence is that John was in Ephesus until the time of Trajan (98-117) and there published a Gospel.⁶¹ If John published his Gospel from Ephesus in the late first century, approximately A.D. 85-90,⁶² then it is at least possible that it was likewise from here that he wrote the epistles as follow-up writings to GJohn.⁶³ Thus, most likely, 1 John was written following GJohn with a long enough interval to allow a controversy to arise.⁶⁴ So, although some have suggested earlier dates,⁶⁵ assuming the epistles were written after GJohn, then a date of A.D. 90-100 for all three letters is appropriate.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Both ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ Β' and Γ' are supported by ⳨, A, B and 048.

⁶¹ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.1.1. “John, the disciples of the Lord, who also leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence in Asia.” *Idem*, 3.3.4, “John remained with them until the time of Trajan.”

⁶² Akin, 27; Brown, 101.

⁶³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxxii. Smalley continues by asserting “I would argue for Ephesus as the geographical center of Johannine Christianity.” cf. Hiebert, 18; Kruse, 28; Ross, 117, 131. Interestingly Brown, 102, suggests a connection between the churches addressed in Revelation 2-3 as reflecting the concern John had for his adopted home region. cf. Hiebert, 18; Ross, 117, 131.

⁶⁴ Brown, 101.

⁶⁵ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 121. Robinson suggests a date as early as A.D. 60-65 for 1 John and a date of 65-68 for the other epistles. However, the argumentation he uses in this writing, especially for the General Epistles, is not convincing. He attempts to date all of the New Testament (and the Didache, Epistle of Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas) prior to the fall of Jerusalem.

⁶⁶ Kruse, 27, 40, 47; Cf. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxxii; Ross, 118, 131; William L. Hendricks, *The Letters of John* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1970), 10.

Occasion, Recipients and Purpose

The occasion for writing 1 John can provide significant insight into the Johannine church and community. If one can discern the prompting of the Apostle to write the epistle, then one can ascertain something of the recipients and the purpose. What was it that prompted John to write 1 John? What seems clear in reading 1 John is that the Apostle was writing to correct an error or possibly some who were living (or teaching) in error.⁶⁷ The identity of this error is elusive from the text of 1 John. The error seems to have tentacles that reached into ethics, Christology and theology. Thus, the error addressed by John required extensive attention and stern words. Who then were these words addressed to? At least four possible options are appear.

The first possible group is Jewish Christians who were committed to the Gospel as they received it. There might simply have been some members of the Johannine church who needed a warning against the false teachings they may have been exposed to. Thus, the occasion was polemical in nature, warning against the falsehood and to admonishing the righteous to stay faithful.⁶⁸

A second potential group is Jewish members of the church who were heretically inclined. These either led or took members of the Johannine church a direction counter to the apostolic teachings. Thus, the Apostle is writing to them to admonish them to return to the Gospel they found in GJohn.

A third conceivable group is unorthodox members of the Johannine church who were influenced by their Hellenistic background. Some believers may have been influenced by Gnostic thought, a Jewish background or one of the mystery religions.⁶⁹ Thus, since these new believers had come from such wide-ranging backgrounds, it is conceivable that their backgrounds were stumbling-blocks in their understanding of GJohn. Hence, it may have been their interpretation of Fourth Gospel that created the most significant problems.⁷⁰

The fourth potential group is a secessionist faction seeking to break entirely from the apostolic church altogether but desiring to maintain a semblance of the theology in order to willfully direct others from the truth. Were these secessionist teachers instructors in the church in the formal sense? If so, then they had permeated deeply into the Johannine church.⁷¹ Thus, their erroneous teachings were all the more dangerous. Their teachings would have been the

⁶⁷ Contra Judith M. Lieu, "Authority to Become Children of God: A Study of 1 John," *Novum Testamentum* 23 (1981), 212. "It was written to confirm the community members in their assurance and to struggle with those aspect of its theology who could have developed in such a way as to produce a schism." Cf. Lieu, *The Second and Third Epistles of John: History and Background*, 212.

⁶⁸ Ellis, 84.

⁶⁹ Klauck, 101.

⁷⁰ Brown, 67.

⁷¹ Marshall, 14-15; Cf. J. Painter, "The Opponents of 1 John," *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986), 48-51.

error John was seeking to eradicate. However, this is not necessarily the case. It could have been that these teachers were not teachers in the technical sense, but rather in the sense of being accepted authorities, a circuit-riding type of instructor teaching heresy as he went.⁷²

These options provide possible insight into the recipients, but a hard and fast conclusion is unlikely and unwise since John himself does not detail the recipients. What does seem clear from the text of 1 John is that the recipients were believers (the *Τεκνία μου* phrases found nine times in 1 John and only twice elsewhere in the other twenty-six books of the New Testament) who had the opportunity to go astray (1 John 2:1). Some type of wrong teaching was present as well as some false teachers (1 John 2: 18-27; 4:1-3; 5:21), but they do not carry the day in terms of the message (1 John 1:1-4, 8-10; 2:7-11; 3:1-3, 11-21; 4:7-21). Therefore, the recipients appear to be members of the Johannine community who have encountered false teachings. John, therefore, writes to them in order for them to not live in confusion. Thus, the purpose of 1 John seems to be assurance and discipleship of those already in Christ with an eye toward evangelism by means of carrying this message of eternal life and light into the world of apostasy and falsehood.

Recipients of 2 and 3 John

The recipients of the 2 John are listed as the *ἐκλεκτῆ κυρία καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις αὐτῆς*. The referent of *ἐκλεκτῆ κυρία* is not made explicitly clear. Is this a specific lady or a figurative one? Clement of Alexandria in *Hypotyposes* suggests that this is a specific lady since either *ἐκλεκτῆ* or *κυρία* may be taken as proper nouns.⁷³ Likewise, the language may be regarded as metaphorical, meaning the church herself.⁷⁴ The latter seems to more likely resulting from the absence of a definite article.⁷⁵ What is clear is that they are the recipients of the love of the elder, thus giving rise to the reason for the writing of the epistle.

As for the occasion of 2 John, Smalley suggests that it is a “*précis*” of 1 John.⁷⁶ In other words, an abbreviation of the previous message for the purpose of emphasis. Some have suggested that 2 John may have been a “rough draft” of 1 John, thus rising from the same circumstances as 1 John.

The recipients of 3 John are listed as *Γαίῳ τῷ ἀγαπητῷ*. Unfortunately, Gaius is not further identified by the author of 3 John. A “Gaius” does appear in four other passages (Acts 19:29; 20:4; Rom. 16:23; 1Cor. 1:14). However, there is no definite connection between the companions of Paul and the recipient of 3 John. Smalley suggests Gaius may have been an elder

⁷² Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxiv.

⁷³ *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius*, ed. Henry Bettenson, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Oxford, 1956), 719.

⁷⁴ Akin, 219-220.

⁷⁵ Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter*, 318.

⁷⁶ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 315.

at a specific church to whom John is writing.⁷⁷ Thus, by addressing Gaius, the Apostle is addressing the church as a whole.

The occasion of the writing of 3 John is similar to that of the previous two epistles. Much more individualistic in nature than either of the first two, 3 John shows a definitive insistence on truth and the open offensive against those who oppose the truth. Specifically, Gaius has apparently encountered opposition from Diotrephes. His lack of hospitality is a concern large enough to warrant the attention of the Apostle. Thus, John writes to Gaius to consider well the goodness received from God and to further this good into the lives of those in his community. Furthermore, hospitality is to be proffered upon missionaries such as men such as Demetrius.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The issue of the authorship of the Johannine epistles is inherently tied to the authorship of GJohn. Despite all of them being anonymous, the implication from tradition ties each of the writings to the Apostle John. Furthermore, the style and vocabulary of each book reflects the strong likelihood that one author wrote all four.

Assuming the epistles were written by John, all of them had to be written prior to the traditional date of his death at *ca.*A.D100. Thus, most all have ascribed to a date following the completion of GJohn (A.D. 85-95). Since John was recorded by Irenaeus to be in Ephesus, the traditional place of origin is there as well.

While the recipients of the epistles are not entirely clear, all three groups seem to be facing some sort of teaching which is contrary to the Word of God. Thus, John admonishes, they are to stand for the truth. The “elect lady” mentioned by John as the designated recipient is a metaphor for the church at large and not a specific female.

Only in 3 John are the recipients listed personally. Its sharp epistolary form lists Gaius as the designated recipient. He is advised to abide in the truth and be hospitable to all those who are likewise in Christ.

⁷⁷ Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter*, 342.

⁷⁸ Brown, 699.

CHAPTER THREE

EARLIEST WITNESS TO THE EXISTENCE OF FIRST JOHN
AND USE BY THE CHURCHIntroduction

The inclusion of first John has some of the earliest and best attested canonical background found anywhere in the New Testament. Few other books can claim such a close affiliation with an apostle or such early dates of usage within the church.

First John appears in the earliest citations of the Fathers as well as in the earliest lists of the New Testament. It is also in the early manuscripts and in many versions and translations, further suggesting its role in the canon and securing the element of usage, the second element of canonicity.

First John is in many major lists of accepted books, such as the Muratonian list, Eusebius's canon, Athanasius list and the list of Gregory of Nazianzus. Because its position was so secure, it was in the list of the Third Synod of Carthage. Furthermore, it appears in the early versions and translations of the New Testament.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of 1 John is based more than on external logic. The intrinsic worth of the text with the rest of the New Testament makes it a book of eminent distinction. Thus, as shall be demonstrated, the inclusion of 1 John in the canon is by no means coincidental.

Second and Third John are examples of canonical books included somewhat later in the process. They were accepted into the canon largely on the merits of their connection to GJohn and 1 John. Thus, while 1 John is an exemplary case of early inclusion, 2 and 3 John are not. However, the use of the latter epistles of John by the early church, combined with its close affinity of authorship to GJohn, as well as its orthodox nature paved the way for their inclusion into the canon.

Early Attestation of the Johannine Epistles
in the Patristics

Quoted from the earliest of sources,⁷⁹ 1 John stands as a prototype of early attestation. One of the earliest references to 1 John appears in Polycarp's letter to the Philippians.⁸⁰ In his letter,

⁷⁹ Strecker, xxxv.

⁸⁰ Polycarp, VII.1. Further, Kruse, 14. Kruse gives credit for the earliest undeniable reference to 1 John to Irenaeus. Regardless of who used it first, the reality of 1 John's familiarity at the beginning of the second century seems inevitable. Cf. A.E. Brooke, *The Johannine Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912), lviii.

Polycarp quotes from 1 John 4:2-3 and 24 although he does not specifically ascribe it to John. Although its appearance in Polycarp's writings does not guarantee its inclusion in a larger "canon", it does reflect usage and acceptance of the epistle at a date before A.D. 120.

In *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius notes that Irenaeus (ca. AD 120-200), traditionally believed to be a disciple (or at least a hearer) of Polycarp, uses 1 John in his work. Irenaeus goes further than Polycarp expressly does as he quotes from John, the author of the gospel and 1 John.⁸¹ In *Adversus Haereses* 3.16.5, Irenaeus cites 1 John 2:18-19 and 21-22 as part of his anti-Gnostic polemic.⁸²

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (martyred ca. 110), has at least one and possibly two allusions to 1 John. Specifically, in *To the Ephesians*⁸³ Ignatius speaks of "God having come in the flesh."⁸⁴ Thus, in a work that may predate that of Polycarp, a familiarity, and presumably, an authority associated with 1 John is blatant.

Papias of Hierapolis (ca. 140), according to Eusebius used testimonies drawn from 1 John.⁸⁵ Clement of Alexandria also knew and used 1 John. In *Stromatica*, Clement quotes from 1 John 1:6, 2:4, 18-19, 3:3, 18-19 4:16, 18, 5:3, 16-17. In *Qias Diva Salvateur* 37 and 38, he quotes 1 John 3:15 and 4:18. Tertullian makes considerable use of the first epistle of John, employing it fifty times in his polemical writings against Marcion, Praxeas and Gnostics.

Justin Martyr (ca 150) demonstrated a familiarity with 1 John echoing it in *Dialogue* 123.9: "We who observe the commandments of Christ are called genuine children of God - and that is what we really are". While not a direct quote (and perhaps not intended to be) this passage demonstrates at least a parallel with 1 John's theme of keeping God's commands to be "God's children - and that is what we really are!" (1 John 3:1).

In the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus*,⁸⁶ the author states "God loved human beings . . .to whom he sent His only Son . . .How greatly will you love Him who first loved you? (10:2-3)". This passage is strikingly close to 1 John 4:9 (and 19) which states "This is how God showed his

⁸¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, iii.39. cf. Irenaeus, 3.16, 18.

⁸² Although not clear, it appears that a Gnostic may have taken 1 John as well! Many assert that Valentinus used 1 John in the *Gospel of Truth*, part of the Nag Hammadi Group. Cf. L. M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 140.

⁸³ *To the Ephesians* 7.2. cf. 14.2. cf. Brown, 6-7. Brown cites no less than three similarities. He cites *To the Ephesians* (hereafter *To Eph.*) 11:1 as echoing 1 John 2:18, *To Eph.* 15:3 in accordance with 1 John 3:2 and the example above. However, he stops short of attributing these as direct quotations since each of these deal with "common Jewish themes".

⁸⁴ Bruce, *Epistles*, 18.

⁸⁵ Eusebius, III.x.39.

⁸⁶ Brown, 8. Brown states this document is of uncertain date with guesses ranging from 125-225 AD.

love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” While a solid date for this epistle is not available, the use of 1 John is clear.

The author of *1 Clement* also makes use of 1 John, although not citing it directly. In *1 Clement* 49:1, the author states: “Let one who has love in Christ perform the commandments of Christ” appearing to parallel 1 John 5:3. *1 Clement* 49:5 and 50:3 describe the people of God as “perfected in love”, a statement that seems to recall 1 John 2:5, 4:12, 17-18. However, as Brown remarks, these themes are too common to attach a concept of interdependence.⁸⁷

The *Epistle of Barnabus* (ca 130?) has passages that seem to parallel passages in first John. In *Barnabus* 5:9-11 (as well as 12:10), “the Son of God [has] come in the flesh” which is a quotation close to the wording of 1 John 4:2. Thus, while the date of this epistle is not definitely certain, including it in the second century demonstrates its usage and authority.

The *Shepherd of Hermas* (pre 150) also has ties to 1 John. *Shepherd Man.* 12.3.5 reads “you will easily observe the commandments for they are not hard” which closely resembles 1 John 5:3 “We keep his commandments and His commandments are not burdensome”. Thus, the author of the *Shepherd* demonstrates at least some measure of familiarity with 1 John.

As for 2 and 3 John in the patristics, their presence is not as noteworthy, but present nonetheless. Didymus the Blind quotes from all of the books of the New Testament except for Philemon, 2 and 3 John. Cyril of Jerusalem does include them as does also the Synod of Laodicea.

The Appearance of the Johannine Epistles in the Early Canons

The Muratonian Canon (ca. 190-210 AD) cites 1 John as part of its canon (1 John 1:3).⁸⁸ In fact, the author of the Muratonian canon (whether Hippolytus⁸⁹ or Caius⁹⁰ or someone else) cites from the 1 John. Despite the somewhat uncertain nature of the quotations, it is clear that the author describes how he believes John wrote both the first epistle and the Gospel, citing 1 John 1:1 and 1 John 1:4. While some would seek to place the dating of the Muratonian list in the fourth century,⁹¹ it is much more in keeping with recent scholarship to place it closer to the end of the second century or early third century.⁹²

⁸⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁸ Bruce Manning Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 306. Cf. Smith, 152. Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*, Studies in Theology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), 208-211. Caspar Rene Gregory, *The Canon and Text of the New Testament*, ed. Charles Briggs and Stewart D.F. Salmund, International Theological Library (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 132.

⁸⁹ Ross, 56.

⁹⁰ George Salmon, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of the Books of the New Testament* (London: John Murray, 1888), 50.

⁹¹ Albert Sundberg, "Canon Muratori: A Fourth Century List," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973), 1.

Origen includes 1 John in his writings, referring to it as “a letter of a few lines”, recorded in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*.⁹³ Of significance is that he cites the other two epistles of John as known, but disputed.⁹⁴

First John is also included in the Clermont List. Codex Claramontanus, known as D^P, is a Graeco-Latin bilingual manuscript, primarily composed of the Pauline Letters and Hebrews of uncertain date.⁹⁵ Its importance to the study of 1 John rests on the stichometric list it contains between Philemon and Hebrews. This Latin list has the number of lines of each book of the New Testament apparently based on the Old Latin version of text.⁹⁶

First John appears in the Cheltenham List (also called Mommsen List).⁹⁷ Probably originating in North Africa,⁹⁸ this list is usually dated in the mid-fourth century.⁹⁹ Discovered by Theodor Mommsen, this list was a part of the Phillips Collection at Cheltenham, England. Like Claramontanus, it is a stichometric list, citing books in terms of their length in lines. It cites “three epistles of John [containing] 350 lines” followed by the difficult remark “only one”. What this means is open for interpretation. Some, such as Jülicher,¹⁰⁰ suggest that either this term implies the incorporation of the epistle of Jude or James since both are absent from this list. This suggestion, as enticing as it may be, is not probable. It is more likely that this was the author’s subtle attempt to pronounce the authority and reliability of the 1 John and the non-authoritative status of 2 and 3 John.¹⁰¹

⁹² Everett Ferguson, "Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance," *Studia Patristica* 18 (1982), 677. Cf. Bruce, *Canon*, 158. Metzger, 194. Brooke F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (New York: MacMillan, 1889), 211. Gregory, 129. Brown, 10. J.G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church: The History of the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), 81. Adolf Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of the New Creation*, trans. J. R. Wilkinson, Crown Theological Library, vol. XLV (London: Williams and Norgate, 1925), 106.

⁹³ Eusebius, VI.xxv.3-14.

⁹⁴ Bruce, *Canon*, 193. Cf. Stott, 19; Gregory, 224-227.

⁹⁵ Metzger, 210; Gregory, 351.

⁹⁶ Bruce, *Canon*, 218. Cf. Westcott, *Survey of NT*, 563-5; McDonald, 224.

⁹⁷ Metzger, 231ff, 310-311. Cf. Bruce, *Canon*, 220.

⁹⁸ Metzger, 231.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* Gregory, 271; Souter, 220-1, who dates it slightly later, placing it at the conclusion of the fourth century.

¹⁰⁰ Adolf Jülicher, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (London: 1904), 538.

¹⁰¹ Metzger, 235. Gregory, 271-2.

The Thirty-Ninth Festal Epistle of 367 AD, written by Athanasius, included a list of books which contained 1 John. One of the forty-five festal epistles written by Athanasius, this letter is particularly valuable since it contains a list of the received books of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Contained in this list are the books considered canonical today, although in a slightly different order. It concludes with remarks regarding the sacred and inviolate nature of these texts. Nothing is to be removed or added.¹⁰²

Second and 3 John do not appear in some of the early lists. They are conspicuously absent from the Muratorian Canon.¹⁰³ Eusebius is acquainted with the letters, but lists them under the category of known, but disputed.¹⁰⁴ The Cheltenham Canon has the title “The Three Epistles of John” but adds the mysterious phrase “Only one”.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the ancient evidence for the inclusion of 2 and 3 John is not as firm as that for 1 John, their use in the early church is evidence of acceptance by the church, a necessity for inclusion in the canon.

The Orthodox Nature of 1-3 John

First John stands as an excellent example of a book received largely because of its direct connection with the apostolic faith and John. Since, as is evidenced above, the author of the Gospel and the author of 1 John are almost certainly the same and since each has been historically attributed to the Apostle John, the orthodoxy of the book stands firmly. Furthermore, the themes and issues addressed within its few lines demonstrate an inherent and intimate connection, not only with the Gospel of John, but with the balance of the canonical books. Thus, this book stands as received almost unanimously.¹⁰⁶

Second and Third John also were accepted early on due to their highly orthodox nature and their prominence in the connection with the Apostle John and the other Johannine writings. Their intimate connection and inherent similarities paved the way for their inclusion into the canon. Furthermore, their themes of truth and commandment to ethical lives implicates their connection to orthodoxy and, thereby, canonicity.

Conclusion

In accordance with the traditional standards of canonicity, the first epistle of John is a prime example of a received book. From apostolic origin to early usage and attestation by the Father, to its inclusion in the earliest of lists to its inclusion in early documents containing the New Testament, 1 John has some of the best pedigree in the New Testament. Thus, from earliest

¹⁰² Souter, 208-211. Cf. Metzger, 312. McDonald, 194, 220-222.; Westcott, *Survey of NT*, 554-5. containing the original text.

¹⁰³ Metzger, 307.

¹⁰⁴ Eusebius, III.xxv.3.

¹⁰⁵ Metzger, 311.

¹⁰⁶ Bruce, *Canon*, 255.

days, shortly after the end of the apostolic period, 1 John stands as an accepted book, fulfilling each of the three major categories for canonicity: Apostolic origin, orthodoxy and usage. The same might be said for the latter Johannine epistles. Their traditional connection with 1 John and GJohn enabled them to be included in the canon of the New Testament at an early date.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the structure of 1 John, there is no single best choice. Rather, the suggested outline on pages 9-10 is representative of a eclectic approach combining the traditional approach and the discourse analysis approach.

As for genre of 1 John, it seems likely that this was a pastoral letter or a homily. The use of “dear children” and “beloved” indicate a relationship closer than a simple acquaintance. They demonstrate a compassion for the people receiving this letter. However, there is also room to view this letter as a pastoral homily with a corrective tone combating the heresy which is attempting to seep into the Johannine church. John warns them to vigilantly stand guard for the truth.

The structure of 2 and 3 John is much understandable than 1 John. The centralized purpose and brevity of the epistle make it easy to grasp the message. Application of the message, however, is that which John seeks for the early church.

The latter epistles of John represent some of the best examples of ancient epistolary format found anywhere in the Bible. They include all of the formulaic elements expected in such writings. Therefore, their status as epistles, regardless of the lack of epistolary form in 1 John, is definitive.

The authorship of all three epistles is inherently connected with the authorship of GJohn. The common vocabulary, sentence structure, and thematic expressions make such a conclusion hard to escape. Thus, Johannine authorship, in accordance with tradition of the early church, is secure.

The recipients of 1 John are unclear. There is definitely a group teaching incorrect doctrine. Whether they are official teachers or roving teachers, their presence is undeniable. The recipients of 1 John seem to be, therefore, members of the Johannine church who are facing opposition. John writes to admonish this church to stand strong in the truth, secure in the eternal life given to them through Christ who showed the love of God for mankind.

In 2 John, the recipient is listed as the “elect lady.” This is a metaphor meant to imply the church as a whole. Despite the arguments of some to the contrary, this is not a specific lady in the church to whom John writes. Only 3 John lists the recipient personally. Its sharp epistolary form lists Gaius as the designated recipient. He is advised to abide in the truth and be hospitable to all those who are likewise in Christ.

First John is a textbook example of early acceptance in the canon of the church. It has early attestation in the canonical list, use in the early church and is a standard for orthodoxy. While 2 and 3 John do not enjoy the same status, their acceptance and use in the early church is clear.

The Johannine Epistles are a wealth of doctrine and direct pastoral speech directed at the church for the means of assurance, discipleship, correction and reproof. Their obvious compassion and emotive nature (esp. 1 John) make it easy to see why they are so highly regarded. Thus, despite the struggles of critical problems and unanswered questions, their place in Christianity is one of great strength.

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