

The First Epistle of John

...so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ (1John 1:3)

1John 1:1-4

Background

What literary *genre* (category) does 1John belong to? (Bookstore example)

Epistle – but what features are lacking?

It lacks a greeting and salutation\doxology (e.g., Rm 1:1; Rm 16:25-27)

It is probably best understood as a sermon or tract written to a church or group of churches going through a crisis of faith

What was that crisis?

A group of teachers were advocating an understanding of Christianity very different from that of John and his colleagues.

We have already discussed *docetism* and how its adherents taught that Jesus only **appeared** to come in the flesh.

They had gone so far as to leave the church and presumably established a rival church (or churches – 1John 2:19), but were still in contact with its members.

They were causing considerable uncertainty among them regarding the true character of Christian belief and whether members of the church could truly regard themselves as Christians.

John's responds by clarifying the basics of Christianity.

Where was 1John written?

Probably in Ephesus (see Eph 1:11-17; Rev 2:2-5)

A strong church, but had lost its "first love"

When was 1John written?

It is difficult to say precisely when it was written (as Barry taught last week).

I lean towards an earlier date for GJohn than most scholars, because I'm persuaded that John did not know about the destruction of the Temple in AD70 (at least, when he wrote his Gospel).

But in any case, we simply don't know which came first: GJohn or 1John.

It is tempting to think that 1John is a kind of theological commentary on GJohn, and that it came several years later, but the evidence for this is far from clear.

We know that there is a tradition that GJohn and 1John were sent together and were viewed as a kind of set.

But against this view is the fact that 1John stands in its own right as an eyewitness testimony of the Lord's teaching written to a specific audience at a specific time, addressing specific concerns.

To repeat something I said in another context, we need to make a distinction between John's purpose and the effect of his writing. His purpose may well have been to re-state the Gospel message, but his effect has been to reach generations with what has been taken to be a commentary on GJohn.

Evidence from the early church

There is a strong tradition (recorded in Ireneaus, attributed to Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna) of a certain heretic living with John in Ephesus by the name of Cerinthus.

John is said to have so detested Cerinthus that he once fled a bathhouse when he found out Cerinthus was inside, yelling "Let us flee, lest the building fall down; for Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is inside!"

Ireneaus was a disciple of Polycarp, who was in turn a disciple of the Apostle John. He died circa 200ad.

There are possible allusions to 1John in Ignatius, esp. "God having become in flesh." Compare 1Jn 4:3-4. (Letter to the Ephesians). Ignatius was martyred c. AD110)

And Polycarp quotes these same verses in his Letter to the Philippians:

"For whosoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist;" (Chapter 7)

Papias, Polycarp's contemporary, was said by Eusebius (died in AD339) in his Church History "to have made use of testimonies of the former epistle of John."

Other 2nd Century witnesses are Justin Martyr, the anonymous

writer of Diognetus, (*The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*) and the Gnostic Valentinus.

Interestingly, Mathetes (=”disciple”) used the word “Word” for Christ or Jesus. He was possibly one of John’s disciples.

Late in the 2nd Century, it was included in the Muratorian Canon.

What does “canon” mean?

List or rule – a means of determining what’s in and what’s out.

It is important to note that the church did not pick and choose arbitrarily which books to include and which to exclude. (contra *The Da Vinci Code*).

It merely recognized what was commonly accepted in the church as a whole.

The Muratorian Canon (named after its discoverer and publisher) contained all the NT books, except James, Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter.

Early in the third century, we see frequent use of 1John in the writings of Ireneaus of Lyons and Tertullian or Carthage.

Interestingly, all attribute 1John to the Apostle John, the Beloved Disciple.

So, 1John has a pretty good pedigree from the very beginning of the church, to say the least!

Outline

It is difficult to outline 1John! I give you one example (Stott), but there are almost as many outlines as there are Commentaries.

The Prologue

Someone read 1John 1:1-4

This passage has been termed the Prologue of this Epistle. What other book of the Bible has a Prologue? What verses does it contain?

Read John 1:1-18

What similarities do you see?
Beginning, Word, Life

We've already spent some time discussing "beginning."
We lean towards the beginning in both Prologues being the same, although good arguments have been made that "from the beginning" refers to the Incarnation or the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Word [of life].
Does this phrase refer to the personal Word (The Word which bring eternal life) or to the Christian message?

Do we have to choose?

"The revelation proclaims what it includes; it has, announces, gives life" (Westcott).

What differences?
John the Baptist

Why do you think the Baptizer is not mentioned?
Not important for John to refer to him in this letter
Gospel of John is primarily biographical and polemical in nature; the Epistle is primarily concerned with the assurance of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.