

Introduction to the Epistles of John

Authorship

Many Bible scholars have questioned whether the author of the epistles of John is the same as the author of the gospel of John. This is particularly true of 2 and 3 John, which were not included in the earliest bound Bibles, called codices, as described under the caption "Canon" below.

The epistles frequently reflect verbiage and themes found in the gospel of John—themes missing from the synoptic gospels and that particularly influenced the author of the gospel to such an extent that I am led to believe that he heard them from the lips of Jesus Christ. Consequently, while I am open to other ideas, I am inclined to believe that these epistles were written by the apostle whose name is attached to them.

Manuscript History

1 John:

The earliest manuscript dates to the third century. The earliest manuscript is:

P9, or P. Oxy. 402, housed at Cambridge, Massachusetts, contains 1 John 4:11-12; 4:14-17. This manuscript has been dated paleographically to the third century AD.

Many other Greek manuscripts have survived, but all date later than the time of Constantine. The first three chapters and the last chapter is not preserved before the fourth century.

2 John:

No manuscripts of this epistle predate the reign of Constantine. The earliest manuscripts date to the fourth century. The fourth century manuscripts preserving 2 John are:

ℵ, or Sinaiticus, now housed in London, contains all of the New Testament. It is traditionally said to have been prepared especially for the emperor Constantine. The manuscript is calligraphically beautiful but textually sloppy and has had a number of correcting hands. This manuscript has been dated paleographically to the fourth century.

B, or Vaticanus, now housed in the Vatican, contains the gospels, the acts of the apostles and most of the epistles. It is traditionally said to have been prepared especially for the emperor Constantine. The manuscript is calligraphically beautiful but textually corrupt. This manuscript has been paleographically dated to the fourth century.

All the other Greek manuscripts date even later than these two.

3 John:

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Canon

While 1 John had found universal acceptance by the second century AD, the Muratorian Canon, a list of canonical books prepared about AD 170, excludes 3 John. In the canonical list included in his book *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon (AD 140-202), names only the first of John's epistles. The Christian theologian Origen (AD 185-253) prepared a list of writings he believed to be generally accepted by Christians, along with a list of others acknowledged in only some places.¹ He included 1 John in the former list, but relegated 2 and 3 John to the latter. Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine (died AD 340) placed 1 John in his list of "received books" and considered the other two epistles to be among the "disputed books."² The Peshitta, the Bible of the Aramaic-speaking Christians of the Middle East, was prepared in the fourth century AD, at which time it included 1 John, but 2-3 John were added later in an assimilation to the Greek New Testament. Martin Luther had doubts about the authenticity of 2-3 John.

Setting

If as I suggest above John was indeed the author of these letters, then they were composed late in the first century AD, probably while John was living in Ephesus. All three epistles have love as a common theme, and the first epistle includes warnings about

¹ The list appears in both his *Homilies (Commentary) on the Gospel of Matthew* and his *Homilies (Commentary) on the Gospel of John*.

² *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.

false doctrines that began creeping into the early Church (see especially 1 John 2:18-19, 22, 26; 3:7; 4:1, 3).

Outline

- I. Prologue: The Reality of the Incarnation (1:1-4)
- II. Christian Fellowship (1:5–2:17)
- III. False Teachers (2:18-27)
- IV. The Children of God (2:28–3:10)
- V. Love as Basis for Assurance (3:11-24)
- VI. Discernment of False Spirits (4:1-6)
- VII. Sanctification (4:7-21)
- VIII. Faith as Victory over the World (5:1-12)
- IX. The Knowledge of Eternal Life (5:13-21)
- X. 2 John
- XI. 3 John

Further Readings

Non-LDS Sources

Brown, Raymond E. *The Epistles of John: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1982.

LDS Sources

Mackay, Thomas W. "The Epistles of John." Pages 236-43 in *Studies in Scripture Vol. 6: Acts to Revelation*. Ed. by Robert L. Millet. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987.

Perkins, Keith W. "John the Beloved and His Epistles." Pages 64-67 in *A Symposium on the New Testament*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1984.

Taylor, J. Lewis. "New Testament Backgrounds: The Epistles of John." *Ensign* 6 (July 1976): 58-59.

Wilcox, S. Michael. *The Writings of John: St. John, the Epistles, the Revelation*. Orem, Utah: Randall Book, 1987.