

# INTRODUCTION AND 1 JN. 1:1-4

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2007 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

### I. Authorship

A. 1 John and Hebrews are the only completely anonymous letters in the N.T. 2 John and 3 John at least refer to the writer as "the elder."

B. The conclusion that the apostle John wrote it is based on several things:

1. Early church tradition is unanimous in attributing the work to John the apostle. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (lee-on, modern France) in the last part of the second century, attributed it to John, the disciple of the Lord and author of the fourth Gospel. This view was shared by Tertullian (Carthage, 200), Clement of Alexandria (200), Origen (Alexandria & Palestine, early third century), and Dionysius of Alexandria (Alexandria, mid-third century).

2. The author was an eyewitness of Jesus. In the opening verses of the letter, he says regarding the Word of life that was manifested that we have heard, seen, looked at, and touched it. Though some have tried to spin this to mean something else, most scholars rightly recognize that the author is claiming to be one of a number of the original eyewitnesses to the incarnate Christ.

3. Similarities of subject matter, style, and vocabulary indicate that the author of 1 John is the same person who authored the Gospel of John. So the arguments that the Fourth Gospel was written by the Apostle John are relevant.

a. Here is how John Piper summarizes the case that the Apostle John wrote the Gospel of John:

At the end of John's Gospel (21:24) we are told explicitly that the apostle who wrote it was the "the beloved disciple"—that is, the disciple who had the most intimate personal friendship with Jesus, the one who at the last supper reclined close to Jesus' breast (13:23), the one to whom Jesus entrusted his mother (19:26), the one who outran Peter to the empty tomb (20:2–4). But the beloved disciple is never named. He had to be one of the inner three, Peter, James, or John. He can't have been Peter because he outran Peter! And according to Acts 12:1 James was killed by Herod about ten years after the death of Jesus. It's very unlikely that the gospel of John was written that early. So the most likely conclusion is that the

beloved disciple and the author of the gospel and the epistles was the apostle John.<sup>1</sup>

b. Two highly regarded New Testament scholars, D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo conclude in their recent book *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (p. 253), "In short, the most straightforward reading of the evidence is still the traditional one: it is highly probable that John the son of Zebedee wrote the fourth gospel." (Carson's commentary on the Letters of John in the NIGTC series is forthcoming.)

4. And finally, the author of 1 John is conscious of his authority, which is consistent with his being an apostle, being one through whom Christ continued to teach and command (see, Jn. 14:26, 16:12-13).

## II. Nature of the Document

A. 1 John does not open like a normal, first-century Greek letter, but that doesn't mean it was a general tract written to all Christians everywhere. On the contrary, it clearly was addressed to a specific group of Christians. The personal references, the common ties the author shares with his readers, and the explicit historical referents (e.g., 2:19) show that it was meant to be read as a letter of instruction, warning, and encouragement to one or more specific congregations. Carson and Moo, 669. But, of course, the message of this letter written for specific circumstances is intended ultimately for the entire church.

B. Perhaps it is atypical in form because it was meant to be circulated to several congregations in an area with delivery to each being accompanied by a short personal note. Some think that 2 John may be just such a note.

## III. Where It Was Written and Circulated

A. 1 John most likely was written from Ephesus. Eusebius (early fourth century) says that Asia, meaning Asia Minor, the western third of modern Turkey, was allotted to John when the apostles were dispersed at the outbreak of the Jewish War (A.D. 66-70). Carson and Moo, 254. This fits with some earlier sources, which lends credence to Eusebius's report.

B. Those earlier sources include Polycrates, who was bishop of Ephesus in the late second century, and Irenaeus, who was bishop of Lyons in the late second century. Irenaeus knew Polycarp of Smyrna, who had had direct contact with the apostle John. See Carson and Moo, 675-676.

---

<sup>1</sup> From

[http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/46/475\\_Eternal\\_Life\\_Has\\_Appeared\\_in\\_Christ/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/46/475_Eternal_Life_Has_Appeared_in_Christ/)

C. If 1 John was indeed written from Ephesus, then it probably was sent to churches somewhere in that region, perhaps including the territory of the seven churches of Revelation 2-3.

#### IV. Occasion

A. 1 John was a response to a crisis in the church caused by the rise and influence of certain false teachers. John refers to these false teachers as antichrists (2:18, 4:3, 2 Jn. 7), as liars (2:4, 22, 4:20), as false prophets (4:1), as being of the world (4:5), and as deceivers (2 Jn. 7, also 2:26, 3:7).

B. These false teachers had arisen from within the church. They started out as orthodox believers but went beyond apostolic doctrine into heresy. John says in 2:19, "They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they were of us they would have remained with us. But [this happened] that they might be exposed, for all [of them] are not of us." In 2 Jn. 9 he refers to them as those "who go ahead and do not remain in the teaching of Christ." Paul's prophecy to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-30 and to Timothy in 2 Tim. 4:3-4 was coming true: "savage wolves" were arising from within the church and ripping the flock.

C. As you see from 2:19, by the time of 1 John these false teachers and their followers had actually separated or seceded from the faithful churches, the churches that were abiding in the truth of John's gospel. The false teachers saw themselves as more enlightened than the faithful. In their minds, they had "transcended" the gospel; they had gone beyond what they had been taught and gained a deeper knowledge than what they thought was possessed by the faithful. You see hints of this in 2:20-21 where John assures the faithful that they have knowledge and know the truth and in 2:27 where he tells them that they do not need anyone to teach them (contrary to what the false teachers were claiming).

D. Having separated from the faithful Christians, the false teachers and their followers showed little, if any, brotherly love toward them. That is why there is such an emphasis in this letter on brotherly love. In failing to love those who were abiding in the apostolic message, abiding in John's gospel, those who boasted about their spirituality, insight, and relationship with God revealed the truth of their condition. As John says in 4:20b, "the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen is not able to love God whom he has not seen" (see also, 2:9, 3:10, 3:17).

E. Though the false teachers had separated from the faithful, some of them still traveled among the churches trying to recruit Christians to their heretical teaching. It is clear from 2:26, 3:7, and 4:1 that they were actively trying to deceive those to whom John is writing. That's why he urges his readers in 2:24 to hold onto what they heard from the beginning and urges them in 4:1 to test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

F. All of this apparently was making some of the faithful insecure about their salvation, worried that they may have missed the boat. So John in a number of places assures them of their

standing with God. They have Christ as their advocate (2:1-2), they are forgiven (2:12), they know the Father (2:13), they have overcome the evil one (2:13), they know the truth (2:21), they are God's children (3:2), they have eternal life (5:13), etc.

G. Given these circumstances, John felt compelled to write a careful statement of the apostolic faith for his friends, showing them where it was being distorted by the false teachers.

## V. Particulars of the False Teaching

A. We can glean some particulars of the false teaching by inference from what John writes in the letter. The false doctrine seems to center in two areas: the nature of Christ (Christology) and Christian behavior (ethics).

### B. Christological errors

1. John makes the following affirmations or confessions: Jesus is the Christ (5:1), Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh (4:2; 2 Jn. 7), Jesus is the Son (2:23, 3:23, 5:11-12), Jesus is the Son of God (1:3, 1:7; 3:8, 3:23; 4:9-10, 4:15; 5:5, 5:9-13, 5:20), and Jesus Christ is the one who came by water *and* blood (5:6). On the other hand, he criticizes any who: deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:22), deny the Son (2:23), and do not confess Jesus Christ coming in the flesh (4:2-3; 2 Jn. 7).

2. So it seems pretty clear that the false teachers denied that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, come in the flesh, and come by water *and* blood. In other words, they in some sense denied the incarnation, the truth that the eternal Christ, the Son of God, actually became flesh, became a human being, and marginalized the significance of the man Jesus. (The term "Christ" is used with implications of his divine sonship [Christ = Son in 2:23 & 4:15 with 2 Jn. 9; 5:1 with 5:5], so even the denial that Jesus is the Christ is a denial of the incarnation.)

### C. Ethical errors

1. John says: those who claim to have fellowship with God while walking in darkness are lying (1:6); those who claim to know God but do not keep his commandments are lying (2:4); whoever claims communion with God must walk as Jesus did (2:6); if anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him (2:15-17); no one who lives in Christ sins habitually (3:6); he who practices sin is of the devil (3:8); anyone who does not practice righteousness is not a child of God (3:10); those born of God do not sin habitually (5:18). John also says: whoever hates his brother is still in darkness (2:9); those who do not love their brothers are not of God (3:10); whoever does not love does not know God (4:8); anyone who does not love his brother does not love God (4:20).

2. So it seems pretty clear that the false teachers were morally indifferent. How they lived was of little concern to them, even when it came to something as fundamental as practicing Christian love and generosity.

3. And yet, paradoxically, the false teachers also claimed to be sinless. John refers to that claim when he writes in 1:8, "If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us," and in 1:10, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

#### D. Source of This Mix of Errors

1. These false teachers appear to have been influenced by the same kind of ideas that gave rise to the second-century Gnostics. They seem to share the Gnostic distinction between matter and spirit. In Gnosticism, which is an ill-defined collection of various theological and philosophical views, the spiritual was regarded as divine and good, the material as created and evil; no lasting union was possible between them. Thus, a real incarnation of God in human flesh was impossible; it only could be either apparent (i.e., Christ *seemed* to be a human but really was not, as was claimed in that branch of Gnosticism known as Docetism) or temporary (i.e., the spirit temporarily inhabited, not became, the flesh, as was claimed by a heretic named Cerinthus).

2. Cerinthus was a heretical teacher in Asia Minor at the beginning of the second century. Irenaeus, who wrote in the latter part of the second century, tells a story reported by Polycarp, who was bishop of Smyrna for the first half of the second century, that John was once in the public baths at Ephesus and when he discovered Cerinthus was there he cried out, "Let us save ourselves; the bath house may fall down, for inside is Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth." According to Irenaeus, Cerinthus taught that Jesus was the product of a natural union between Joseph and Mary. After his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and then he proclaimed God and performed miracles. Christ departed from Jesus before his suffering, and only the man Jesus suffered and rose again.

3. A radical dualism that regarded matter and physicality as inferior to spirit and a hindrance to it not only would create resistance to the incarnation but easily could lead to devaluing the life and death of the Jesus of human flesh. What mattered was the divine Christ, the heavenly Son of God, the spirit being. The divine Christ was the bearer of revelation and salvation, the one who brought enlightenment so that human spirits might be liberated from the prison of this evil material world. The life and death of the Jesus of human flesh was insignificant in terms of salvation.

4. In addition, if liberation of the spirit through knowledge was the only important thing and if matter itself was evil, it is not a great leap to the view that how one behaved when in the evil material state, especially after the liberation of one's spirit, was spiritually trivial or irrelevant. That would explain how the false teachers could be morally indifferent but claim to be sinless; they had a different definition of sin. Indeed, we see this in the later, full-blown Gnosticism of the second century. As Johannine scholar Gary Burge notes ("John, Letter of" in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, 592):

In that system, "[b]elievers were 'reborn,' creating a unique union with God that literally brought about a state of sinless perfection. 'Sin' belongs to another nature, our material nature, which no longer matters in God's economy. Hence, enlightened spiritual experiences validated spirituality, while at the same time practical questions of moral conduct were deemed irrelevant.

That may be why John defined sin as "lawlessness" (3:4).

5. Whether the Nicolaitans mentioned in Revelation 2 could be related to the heresy dealt with in 1 John is an interesting question, especially since Revelation is addressed to churches in Asia Minor.

a. I think the reason the Nicolaitans usually are not considered in the context of 1 John is that the error associated with them in Revelation involves participation in religious feasts in pagan temples (described as eating meat offered to idols), which probably included sexual immorality. Though John closes the letter with "keep yourselves from idols," he doesn't identify that danger with the false teachers, and he nowhere mentions eating food sacrificed to idols or sexual immorality.

b. On the other hand, Irenaeus, writing in the late second century, said the Nicolaitans promoted a doctrine similar in kind to the Gnostic heresy of Cerinthus. Duane Watson says that the Nicolaitans' "teaching could have been based on a dualism claiming that what was done in the body had no bearing on the soul" (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:1107). So, if nothing else, the Nicolaitans of Revelation may be further evidence of the kind of intellectual climate in which the heresy of 1 John arose.

6. It is difficult, if not impossible, to be confident about the origin of the errors promoted by the false teachers. The set of errors doesn't fit squarely with any early heretical teachers mentioned by writers of the early church. In his commentary on the Letters of John, Colin Kruse says the following assessment of German scholar Rudolf Schnackenburg is hard to improve on:

The heresy which occasioned 1 and 2 John cannot be parallel with any other manifestation of heresy known from that era. Yet it has affinities with more than one such movement. They all play down the historic person of Jesus Christ as the unique and true savior. They all deny the way of salvation through his flesh and blood. In their precise christological interpretation of the figure of Jesus, these dangerous heretics, dissolving as they did the substance of the Christian faith, evidently went off in different directions. This can be seen by comparing the views of Cerinthus with those of the docetists in the letters of Ignatius, whose precise teaching, however, remains obscure. The christology of the antichrists in the Johannine epistles also can no longer be described with certainty or precision. But it is one example of that pseudo-Christian tendency which manifested itself in gnosticism and was such a threat to the church.

## VI. Date

A. Most scholars are convinced that 1 John was written after the Gospel of John (Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 389-390), and most date 1 John to the last decade of the first century (Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 879). For example, Carson and Moo date it to the early 90s.

B. The errors of the false teachers fit most comfortably in the intellectual climate of the late first century. The ideas that yielded full-blown Gnosticism in the second century were on the rise at the end of the first century.

C. Indeed, many scholars believe that misinterpretations of the Gospel of John were a source of some of these false ideas. With the passage of time and the increase in Gentile membership in the church, some of the ideas in the Gospel were given new (and incorrect) connotations. We know the later Gnostics were attracted to that Gospel, as they wrote the earliest commentaries on it (*Dictionary of the Later New Testament*, 590).

### **Jn. 1:1-4**

#### I. 1 Jn. 1:1-4 – Prologue

*What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked at and our hands touched, concerning the Word of life – <sup>2</sup>the life was manifested, and we have seen [it] and we give testimony and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us – <sup>3</sup>what we have seen and we have heard we proclaim also to you, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And indeed our fellowship [is] with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>And we write these things so that our joy may be complete.*

A. John's Greek usually is rather simple, but that's not true of these four verses. The Catholic scholar Raymond Brown states in his commentary (p. 152), "The initial four verses of 1 John have a good claim to being the most complicated Greek in the Johannine corpus." Many English translations smooth out the difficulties by essentially paraphrasing John's meaning. I think they are accurate, but I wanted you to see a more literal reading of the text. My rendering is closer to what you will find in the ASV, NASU, and ESV.

B. It should jump out at you that John is stressing his firsthand, personal association with the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. In v. 1 John refers to what they heard, what they saw, what they looked at and what they touched concerning the Word of life. In v. 2 he twice says the life was manifested and says they saw it. In v. 3 he again refers to what they saw and what they heard. By my count, that is nine references to sense perception.

2. John does this to assure his readers that, in contrast to the false teachers, his message is the authentic, original message. It does not rest on lofty speculation but on concrete, firsthand knowledge. This was important for the authority of his message. In that regard, these verses function similarly to Gal. 1:11-12.

3. He uses plural pronouns (we, our, us) because he was one of a group of apostles, those who were eyewitnesses of Christ's life and teachings (see, Acts 1:21-22). He is "declaring the one, common apostolic message based upon the one, common apostolic eyewitness experience" (Stott, 31).

C. The phrase "from the beginning" in v. 1 probably refers to the beginning of Jesus' ministry and his first association with his disciples, not to Christ's eternal existence (see Mk. 1:1; Lk. 3:23; Acts 1:22; Jn. 6:64, 15:27, 16:4). John certainly believes in Christ's eternal existence, as shown by the next verse, but here he is authenticating his own teaching about Jesus in contrast to the message of the false teachers. He's saying that the gospel he preaches is the foundational message that was both embodied by Jesus and preached by him. Jesus is both the preacher of God's message and the message itself. In him God's message was both seen and heard.

D. In v. 2 John affirms the incarnation, the fact the eternal life that was with the Father was manifested in the historical person Jesus of Nazareth. He will make this point several times throughout the letter. This certainly echoes John 1 where he says that the "Word" was with God in the beginning and became flesh and dwelt among us.

1. The incarnation is a profound truth and one over which people have stumbled from John's day to the present. People are constantly resisting and even railing against the truth that Jesus is not merely a great man but God in the flesh.

2. I think John Piper's remarks on this are insightful:

Many are willing to believe in Christ if he remains a merely spiritual reality. But when we preach that Christ has become a particular man in a particular place issuing particular commands and dying on a particular cross exposing the particular sins of our particular lives, then the preaching ceases to be acceptable for many.

I don't think it is so much the mystery of a divine and human nature in one person that causes most people to stumble over the doctrine of the incarnation. The stumbling block is that if the doctrine is true, every single person in the world must obey this one particular Jewish man. Everything he says is law. Everything he did is perfect. And the particularity of his work and word flow out into history in the form of a particular inspired book (written in the particular languages of Greek and Hebrew) that claims a universal authority over every other book that has ever been written.

This is the stumbling block of the incarnation—when God becomes a man, he strips away every pretense of man to be God. We can no longer do our own thing; we must do what this one Jewish man wants us to do. We can no longer pose as self-sufficient, because this one Jewish man says we are all sick with sin and must come to him for healing. We can no longer depend on our own wisdom to find life, because this one Jewish man who lived for 30 obscure years in a little country in the Middle East says, "I am the way the truth and the life."

When God becomes a man, man ceases to be the measure of all things, and this man becomes the measure of all things. This is simply intolerable to the rebellious heart of men and women. The incarnation is a violation of the bill of human rights written by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It is totalitarian. It's authoritarian! Imperialism! Despotism! Usurpation! Absolutism! Who does he think he is!

GOD!<sup>2</sup>

E. John says in v. 3 that the reason the apostles, as represented by John, proclaim to the readers what they have seen and heard is so that the readers may have fellowship with them, may share in the spiritual bond of the family of God.

1. If John's readers accept his proclamation of the original message, that true message based on firsthand knowledge, as opposed to the twisted message of the false teachers, they will remain (or return to being) his partners in the faith. If they do not accept his message, they will not have fellowship with the apostle.

2. John's notion that fellowship is a product of accepting or abiding in the correct message about Jesus Christ is significant for the modern church.

a. When John wanted to cultivate and preserve the fellowship of his readers, he got theological. In other words, he called people to fellowship in the truth; he didn't try to cultivate and preserve fellowship by reducing theology to the lowest common denominator, by jettisoning every doctrine about which there was disagreement.

b. There are those who use the noble desire of Christian unity to push for extending Christian fellowship to any person who utters the name Jesus, but there cannot be fellowship between persons who differ on central affirmations of the faith. No doubt there will be disagreements over what is in fact central or essential, but that is different from suggesting there are no essential tenets of faith and criticizing every denial of fellowship as "sectarian" or "exclusivist."

---

<sup>2</sup> From [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/46/475\\_Eternal\\_Life\\_Has\\_Appeared\\_in\\_Christ/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/46/475_Eternal_Life_Has_Appeared_in_Christ/)

c. As British scholar (a Methodist) I. Howard Marshall states (NICNT, 107):

[I]t is not true that there can be fellowship between persons who disagree on the central affirmations of the faith. There cannot be unity between denominations which differ in their understanding of the way of salvation, and there cannot be unity between those who accept and those who do not accept Jesus Christ – crucified for our sins and raised for our justification – as Savior. There is no common ground in such cases.

d. Here's what the Baptist scholar Norman Geisler says in his book *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992) 171:

[W]hat about those who insist that drawing lines will divide Christians? In response it must be lovingly but firmly maintained that *it is better to be divided by truth than united by error*. There is an unhealthy tendency in evangelical Christianity to hide under the banner of Christian charity while sacrificing doctrinal purity. While we must always manifest love toward those with whom we disagree, there is no necessity to sacrifice orthodoxy on the altar of unity. If push comes to shove, it is better to be divided by a true understanding of [a fundamental truth] than to be united on a false understanding of it. Otherwise, we will be corrupted by compromise.

3. John makes clear that his fellowship is with God, i.e., he is reconciled to and in harmony with God and with God's Son Jesus Christ. He thus affirms Jesus' divinity and implies that there cannot be a distinction between God the Father and Jesus the Son in the matter of fellowship. As he puts it directly in 2:23, "No one who denies the Son has the Father." And as Jesus put it in Jn. 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me."

F. John says in v. 4 that his joy would be diminished if they should wander from the faith, out of salvation and out of fellowship. 3 Jn. 3-4: "I was overjoyed when some of the brothers arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely how you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth."