

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

1 JOHN

THEME

Author and Title

Manuscript evidence is unanimous that someone named “John” wrote this little treatise, which is consistently labeled the “first” of his extant letters in titles found in ancient copies. But who is this “John”? For a number of reasons, John the son of Zebedee, author of the Fourth Gospel, is the most likely candidate (see [Introduction to John: Author and Title](#)).

First, the style and vocabulary of John’s Gospel and 1 John are so similar that a common author is extremely likely. This is particularly evident in the opening verses of the respective writings, but the language of the Gospel echoes across the whole epistle. For example, only verbal forms of “believe” occur (about a hundred times) in John’s Gospel; the noun “faith” never appears. First John follows suit, with nine occurrences of a verbal form of “believe” and just one use of the word “faith” ([5:4](#)). Second, major themes and emphases of the writings overlap. These include Christ’s simultaneous full humanity and divinity, the close relationship between believing (faith, doctrine) and obeying God’s commandments (ethics), and the primacy of love as marking authentic knowledge of the true God through trust in his Son.

While John is not mentioned by name in the Fourth Gospel, he is likely to have been “the beloved disciple” who reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper ([John 13:23](#); arguments that he was Lazarus, an “elder” John, or a fictional creation are unconvincing). He stood at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified; Jesus entrusted his mother Mary to John’s care ([John 19:26–27](#)). Along with Peter he witnessed the empty tomb on the first Easter morning ([John 20:2–10](#)). He also saw, spoke with, and ate breakfast at a lakeside fire kindled by the resurrected Jesus ([John 21:7, 20](#)). He was therefore highly qualified to write of what he and others had heard, seen, gazed upon, and touched ([1 John 1:1](#)). As Jesus’ “beloved disciple,” he was also well suited to plumb the depths of the meaning of Jesus’ coming ([1:2; 4:9](#)), life ([2:6; 4:14](#)), death ([1:7](#)), resurrection ([5:11](#); “eternal life ... in his Son” implies his death was not final), intercessory ministry at the Father’s right hand ([2:1](#)), and eventual return ([2:28](#))—all matters playing a role in the witness, instruction, and admonition of this rich and highly concentrated letter.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Date

Early post-apostolic figures like Polycarp and Papias (c. A.D. 100) presuppose or cite 1 John in their writings. This suggests a date of composition no later than the 90s A.D. This dovetails with the testimony of church fathers that, shortly before A.D. 67, John joined other Christians in departing from Jerusalem prior to the destruction of the city by Rome. John reportedly resumed his apostolic ministry in the vicinity of the great but highly idolatrous city of Ephesus (in modern western Turkey). He likely wrote 1 John as an elder statesman of the faith in the last third of the first century, perhaps to churches in the surrounding region. This might have included towns like those mentioned alongside Ephesus in the opening chapters of Revelation: Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea ([Rev. 2:8–3:22](#)).

2

Genre

First John lacks certain earmarks of a typical Hellenistic letter. For example, the writer does not name himself at the outset (as Paul always does), and the book is somewhat sermonic in tone. Yet on several counts it is highly letter-like, as seen from the expressed motive of shared joy ([1:4](#)), the repeated mentions of the act and purpose of writing to his recipients (13 uses of the Gk. verb “I write”), and the many instances of direct address to the readers. First John was judged to be in the form of a letter by ancient writers such as Irenaeus, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Eusebius, who would have understood the prevailing conventions of letter writing.

Style and Substance

The rhetoric of 1 John is challenging. John rarely sustains a clear line of argument for more than a few lines or verses. He wanders from subject to subject, unencumbered by any discernible outline. Yet if he has no plan, he does follow a pattern: after leaving a subject he often returns to it. His style of thought has been termed circular rather than linear. It has also been termed symphonic, in that he states themes, moves away from them, and then revisits them with variations (see [chart](#)).

While the rhetoric of 1 John poses difficulties, his content is rich in doctrinal substance, ethical challenge, and devotional fervor. John is insistent that no one has ever seen God the Father in his unmediated glory ([4:12](#); see [John 1:18](#)), yet just as insistent that to know Jesus is to know “the true God and eternal life” ([1 John 5:20](#)). The mystery of this dialectic suffuses the letter from start to finish and moves John to write with insight, consistency, intensity, and depth. Yet his language is for the most part simple and his vocabulary modest. Line for line there are few biblical writings that surpass 1

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

John in the imposing demands made on the reader along with the rich rewards that studied interpretation will yield.

Theme

In 1 John the author calls readers back to the three basics of Christian life: true doctrine, obedient living, and fervent devotion. Because “God is light” (1:5), Christ’s followers overcome evildoers who seek to subvert them. The one who lives in and among them—God’s Son—is greater than the spirit of “the antichrist” now in the world (4:3–4). To believe in the name of the Son of God is to know the assurance of eternal life (5:13).

3

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

It is customary to understand 1 John as a response to the rise of an early form of Gnosticism. This was a religious mysticism that pirated Christian motifs to propagate an understanding of salvation based on esoteric “knowledge” (Gk. *gnōsis*). According to this view, redemption is through affirming the divine light already in the human soul, not through repentance of sin and faith in Christ’s death to bring about spiritual rebirth. Writings widely publicized in recent years, like the Gospel of Thomas and Gospel of Judas, for example, were products of Gnostic writers. But the heyday of Gnostic thought was the second through fifth centuries, well after the time the NT books were written. It can neither be proven nor ruled out that John had this movement in mind as he wrote.

The study notes for this book will focus on what seems definite in 1 John rather than what can be imagined. John wrote to Christians who had witnessed an exodus from their ranks (2:19). This does not mean that all John wrote should be interpreted as a response to schism—John is neither anti-Gnostic nor anti-schismatic. John’s focus is positive, not polemical. His aim is redemptive, not reactionary. He urges readers to refine their theological understanding, sharpen their ethical rigor, and heighten their devotional intensity. That is, they must grow in faith, obedience, and love. Yet the letter is not a list of dos and don’ts. It is rather a manifesto of “Done!”—Jesus’ words “It is finished” (John 19:30) come to mind. First John highlights what God the Father has “done” in sending Christ the Son, offering him up as a sacrifice for sins, and sending forth “the word of life” (1 John 1:1) that is causing this world’s darkness to pass away and the true light of the coming age to shine (2:8).

God’s action becomes the mandate of those who believe in his Son. “Whoever does the will of God abides forever” (2:17). God’s will is for readers to receive the saving

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

message of Christ's coming, rejoice in the commands of Christ's teaching, and revel in the love of the Father as it continually translates into Christian love for one another and ministry to the world. This is "not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" ([3:18](#)).

Key Themes

1. The one eternal God became incarnate in his Son, Jesus the Christ, who is "the true God and eternal life."	1:1–3 ; 4:2 ; 5:20
2. All humans are sinful, but Christians have joyful fellowship with the Father, with the Son, and with each other through repentance and faith in Christ.	1:3–10
3. Christ is our advocate with the Father and the propitiation for our sins.	2:1–2 ; 4:10
4. Those who know Christ forsake sin and keep God's commandments—in particular the love commandment.	2:3–11 ; 3:4–24 ; 4:7–21
5. Denial of Jesus Christ as God's Son in the flesh is denial of God the Father.	2:22–23 ; 4:2–3 ; 5:10–12
6. Faith in Christ results in forgiveness of sins, eternal life, confidence in prayer, protection from the evil one, and understanding and knowing the true God.	5:12–21

Theological Themes of 1 John

As noted in [Style and Substance](#), the letter's themes are presented, moved away from, then resumed. Though a linear progression is not presented in 1 John, many of the themes that are repeated may be set forth as follows.

God is light and love. Those who are now Christians have passed out of death into life. Christians did not do this on their own ability; God loved them and sent Jesus to be the propitiation for their sins. God then caused those who were dead to be born again, giving them life. With life, God gave the Spirit and spiritual understanding, with the result that believers are no longer "of the world" or "of the devil" but are "from/of God" and "of the truth." God now abides in his people, his Word abides in them, and they abide in God; thus they abide in the light, for God is light. Another way of describing this relationship is to say that Christians know and love God. Being made alive, receiving the Spirit, and knowing God naturally results in transformed

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

behavior, which John describes in terms of loving God, obeying God, and loving one another.

God is light (1:5; 2:8)	God is love (4:8, 16, 19)
Christians were spiritually dead: they have “passed out of death into life” (3:14)	
God loved his people and sent Jesus to die for them (3:16; 4:10, 14, 19; 5:11)	
Christians have been born of God (2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18)	
God gave them life (3:14; 4:9; 5:11, 16)	
God gave Christians the Spirit (2:20, 27; 3:24; 4:13) along with understanding (5:20)	
Christians are of/from God/the truth (3:10, 19; 4:4, 6; 5:19)	
God abides in Christians, and his Word abides in them (2:14, 24, 27; 3:9, 24; 4:12, 13, 15, 16)	Christians abide in God, and thus abide in the light (2:5, 6, 27, 28; 3:6, 24; 4:13, 16)
Christians know God (2:13, 14; 4:6, 7), they know the Father (2:13; 5:20), they know Jesus (1:3; 2:3), and they know the Spirit (4:2, 6)	Christians love God (2:5; 4:21; 5:2, 3)
<p>Being born again, having received the Spirit, abiding in God and God abiding in them, and knowing and loving God, Christians bear observable fruit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice truth/righteousness (1:6; 2:29; 3:7, 10) • Walk in the light/as he walked (1:7; 2:6) • Confess sins and have forgiveness (1:9; 2:12) • Keep/obey his commandments/Word (2:3, 5; 3:22, 24; 5:2, 3) • Love one another/the brothers (2:10; 3:10, 11, 14, 16, 18, 23; 4:7, 11, 21) • Overcome the evil one/them/the world (2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4) • Do the will of God/cannot keep on sinning (2:17; 3:9, 22) • Confess the Son/believe in Jesus (2:23; 3:23; 4:2, 15; 5:1, 4, 13) 	

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

History of Salvation Summary

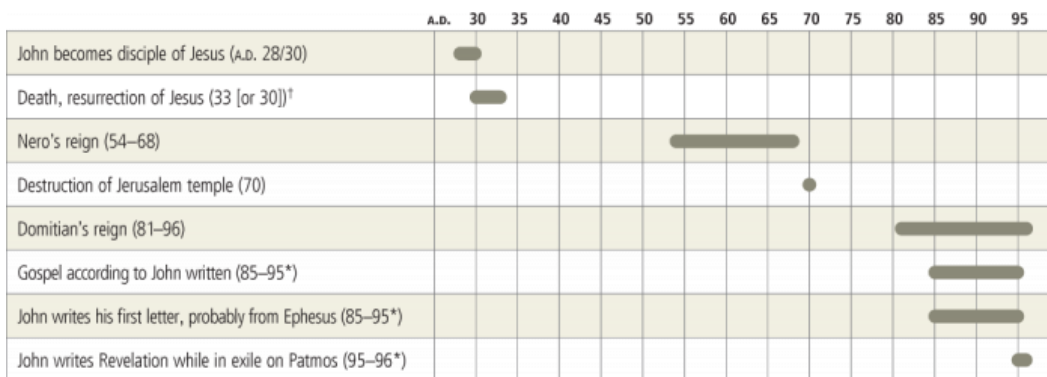
Christians are to live in love, as Christ loved us (see note on [John 13:34–35](#)). (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the [Overview of the Bible](#).)

Literary Features

First John is ostensibly an epistle, but its content is more fluid than what is found in most NT epistles. There is no epistolary salutation, nor is there a conventional epistolary conclusion. A more accurate designation is to call this book a treatise or pamphlet. Alternately, it can be read as an address or loosely structured sermon. The topic changes with virtually every paragraph, so the best advice for reading the book is to “think paragraphs.”

Nonetheless, even though the structure of 1 John is not strictly linear, the author keeps coming back to topics that have been introduced earlier, so that readers can profitably think of the book as being arranged like a musical symphony. The main theme is *tests by which we can know if we are in Christ*—beliefs and attitudes that authenticate one’s claims to be a Christian. Under that umbrella, subordinate themes appear: Christology (doctrine about the person and work of Christ); walking in the light; love; and the need to reject fallen, worldly culture. These topics weave in and out of the book. The book is structured on an implied dialectical principle in which John continuously seeks to oppose viewpoints that are contrary to his assertions. For example, John’s assertions that Christ has come in the flesh ([1:1–3](#) and [4:2](#)) are an implied refutation of those who deny the incarnation. Finally, there is an incipient poetry and mysticism about John’s writing, so that, for example, a lot of what John asserts about the Christian life is embodied in great symbols like light and darkness, or walking and abiding in Christ.

Timeline



* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. 1809–1810

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

The Setting of 1 John

c. A.D. 85

John likely wrote 1 John from Ephesus, where apparently he had relocated near the time of the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in A.D. 70. The letter was probably intended to be read by the church in Ephesus and perhaps also by other churches in the surrounding cities. Ephesus was a wealthy and highly influential port city in the Roman province of Asia, and it was renowned for its temple of Artemis (Diana).

7



Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Outline

- I. God Is Light and Christ Is the Way ([1:1-2:6](#))
 - A. Prologue ([1:1-4](#))
 - B. God's nature and human sin ([1:5-10](#))
 - C. Jesus Christ in everyday life ([2:1-6](#))
- II. The Abiding Commandment in a Transient World ([2:7-17](#))
 - A. The primacy of love ([2:7-11](#))
 - B. The confidence of God's people ([2:12-14](#))
 - C. The lure of this fleeting age ([2:15-17](#))
- III. Overcoming Antichrist by Confession of the Son ([2:18-3:10](#))
 - A. Warning and assurance ([2:18-27](#))
 - B. Christians as children of God ([2:28-3:3](#))
 - C. Children of God and the forsaking of sin ([3:4-10](#))
- IV. Overcoming Evil by Listening to the Apostle ([3:11-4:6](#))
 - A. Overcoming Cain's malice ([3:11-24](#))
 - B. Overcoming the Antichrist's deception ([4:1-6](#))
- V. The Assurance of God through the Love of God ([4:7-21](#))
 - A. The perfecting of God's love ([4:7-12](#))
 - B. The assurance of God's Spirit ([4:13-21](#))
- VI. Faith in the Son as the Way to Life ([5:1-12](#))
 - A. Faith keeps the commandments of God ([5:1-5](#))
 - B. Faith receives the testimony of God ([5:6-12](#))
- VII. Final Call to Faith and Understanding ([5:13-21](#))
 - A. The confidence that faith furnishes ([5:13](#))
 - B. The prayer that faith enables ([5:14-17](#))
 - C. The understanding that faith grants ([5:18-21](#))¹

¹ Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 2425-2429). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.