

# INTRODUCTION TO 62<sup>ND</sup>, 63<sup>RD</sup> AND 64<sup>TH</sup> BIBLEBOOK

## 1 JOHN, 2 JOHN AND 3 JOHN (A.D. 70-98)

A. The writer of the First Letter of John	1
B. The recipients of the First Letter of John	1
C. Date and place of writing the First Letter of John	1
D. The occasion and purpose for writing the First Letter of John	2
E. The division of the First Letter of John	3
F. Progressive parallelism in the writings of John	4
G. The Second and Third Letters of John	4

### A. THE WRITER OF THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN.

#### 1. Internal evidence.

Internal evidence shows overwhelming that the apostle John wrote this letter. The writer does not call himself by name, but speaks in the first person, 'I' and 'we' as if everyone knew who he was (1 1:4 and 1 2:1). The writer was an eye-witness of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 1:3). Many words and phrases used in these letters are used nowhere else in the New Testament except in the Gospel of John. For example: 'the Word' in John 1:1 and 1 John 1:1 and Revelation 19:13. Other such words and phrases are: 'joy complete'<sup>1</sup>, 'doing the truth'<sup>2</sup>, 'to have sin'<sup>3</sup>, 'the Paraclete', which in John 14:16 refers to the Holy Spirit (The Counsellor) and in 1 John 2:1 refers to Jesus Christ (The One who speaks in our defence), 'the true light'<sup>4</sup>, 'a new commandment'<sup>5</sup>, 'dear children', 'born of God'<sup>6</sup>, 'no one has ever seen God'<sup>7</sup> and 'to overcome the world'<sup>8</sup>.

#### 2. External evidence.

The earliest Christian writers after the apostolic period quote the first letter of John as written by the apostle John. The almost unanimous opinion of the Early Christian Church is that the Gospel of John, the three letters of John and Revelation were written by the apostle John in his old age to the whole Christian Church.

### B. THE RECIPIENTS OF THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN.

The first letter of John is not addressed to any particular local church. Therefore, along with the letters of James, Peter and Jude, the letters of John have been called from the earliest times "*the General Letters*". This means that these letters were not addressed to any particular local church or individual, but to a group of churches or all the Christian churches.

However, because the apostle John lived and worked in Asia Minor, these letters were probably first sent to the Christian churches scattered throughout Asia Minor, which today is called Turkey<sup>9</sup>.

Evidently John was familiar with the first readers. It is certainly written to Christians, because in 1 John 5:13, it is written to "those who believe in the name of the Son of God". The Christians are distinguished as:

- 'fathers', that is, Christians who are mature in their Christian life
- 'young men', that is, young Christians who have already grown strong, have a good grasp on the Word of God and are overcoming the evil one.
- 'children'<sup>10</sup>, that is, recent converts.

Note that the apostle John calls all of them 'dear children'<sup>11</sup>, not only because he was an old man in relationship to them, but also because he loved them dearly.

### C. DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN.

After the death of the apostles Paul and Peter in about A.D. 64-65, the Lord provided the apostle John as leader for the churches in Asia Minor. Probably shortly after the beginning of the Jewish War against Rome in A.D. 66, when the Christians in Jerusalem moved to Pella, the apostle John and other people who had seen and heard Jesus moved to Ephesus in Asia Minor.

The church father Irenaeus, who lived about A.D. 170, wrote that the apostle John lived and worked permanently in Ephesus until the times of the Roman emperor, Caesar Trajan, who ruled from A.D. 98-117. Thus the apostle John lived and worked in Ephesus from about A.D. 66 to 98.

<sup>1</sup> John 16:24; 1 John 1:4

<sup>2</sup> John 3:21; 1 John 1:6

<sup>3</sup> John 9:41; 1 John 1:8

<sup>4</sup> John 1:9; 1 John 2:8

<sup>5</sup> John 13:34; 1 John 2:8

<sup>6</sup> John 1:13; 1 John 3:9

<sup>7</sup> John 1:18; 1 John 4:12

<sup>8</sup> John 16:33; 1 John 5:5

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 2 and 3

<sup>10</sup> Greek: paidia. Infants. <pais. Literal ref to descent, social position: servant

<sup>11</sup> Greek: teknia, John 13:33; 1 John 2:1 etc. Relationship: figurative (endearment) or spiritual: children

The church father Clement of Alexandria, who lived in A.D. 190, wrote that even after his return from Patmos, an island to which the apostle John was exiled for a period of time, the apostle John carried on a very active ministry as chief administrator of the churches located in the Ephesus district.

We do not know when exactly the apostle John wrote the Gospel of John, the letters of John or the book of Revelation. We also do not know whether the Gospel of John and the letters of John were written before or after his banishment to Patmos and we also do not know whether they were written before or after the book of Revelation was written. We conclude that the apostle John wrote his three letters to Christian churches scattered throughout Asia Minor from Ephesus between A.D. 70 and 98.

## **D. THE OCCASION AND PURPOSE FOR WRITING THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN.**

### **1. The first purpose is to combat false teachings.**

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70, *the influx of Gentiles together with their heritage of philosophical thought* into the Christian Church was beginning to affect doctrinal teaching. John wrote three letters to churches in Asia Minor warning especially against the false teaching of a false teacher called Cerinthus. His false teaching was a particular form of a cult called *Gnosticism*. The *Gnostics* were Christian heretics who claimed that those initiated into their cult possessed spiritual *knowledge* beside what was revealed in the Bible. They added their philosophical knowledge to the Bible and thus twisted the meaning of the Bible.

That is why the apostle John says in Revelation 22:18-19, “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” Thus, people who belong to cults, who add their own knowledge to the Bible or take away parts of the Bible, will not inherit eternal life.

According to 1 John 2:21, John wrote this letter not because the recipients did not know the truth, but to warn them against the false teachings of the antichrists. Towards the end of the first century A.D., a strange heresy (false doctrines) threatened the purity of the Christian faith and the spiritual progress of Christians. Although it is difficult to determine the exact nature of this heresy, a close study of the letters of John together with the writings of the early Christian church fathers help us to describe some false doctrines of this heresy, which was later known as *Gnosticism*. There are basically five false doctrines:

- The first false doctrine. Greek philosophy: a dualism between matter and spirit.

*False teachers taught that matter was regarded as the source of all evil, while spirit was regarded as the only good.* As a consequence, everything consisting of matter, such as the human body or the created world was regarded as evil. Some regarded the good human spirit as imprisoned in the evil human body and therefore must seek to free itself from the human body. This led to extreme asceticism. Others claimed that the evil body could not influence the good spirit and therefore whatever sins one committed in the body had no influence on one’s spirit<sup>12</sup>. This led to extreme worldliness. This false dualism led to the following four false doctrines:

- The second false doctrine. Docetism: the divine Christ was never united to the human Jesus.

This false doctrine was a development of the previous false doctrine. These false teachers taught that because *the flesh* or material body is the source or seat of evil, the divine Christ could never have had any real contact with the human body of Jesus. As a consequence *these false teachers taught that the divine Christ was never united to the human Jesus*. This false teaching was called *Docetism*, which means *appearance*. These false teachers taught that the divine Christ (or Logos, which is the Word of God) during his appearance on earth only *appeared* to have had a human body or a human nature. These false teachers denied the incarnation. They taught that the divine Christ was too pure to become united with the sinful human body. Therefore, a real incarnation or *coming-into-the-flesh* of Christ was impossible. These false teachers also taught that great Christian teachings as suffering, death and resurrection had no real value, because they only concerned a human Jesus, but not the divine Christ.

The following two verses refer to this false teaching: 2 John 7 says, “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as *coming in the flesh*, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.” 1 John 4:2 says, “This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ *has come in the flesh* is from God.” The apostle John clearly teaches that the divine Christ (God) really took on the human nature in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was both fully God and fully man!

- The third false doctrine. Cerinthus: the divine Christ was only temporary united to the human Jesus.

This false doctrine was a development of the previous false doctrine and was originally taught by Cerinthus. These false teachers taught that because a real incarnation of the divine Christ was unthinkable, we must distinguish between a divine or heavenly Christ and a human or earthly Jesus. *These false teachers taught that the divine Christ was only temporary united to the human Jesus*. The divine Christ merely descended onto the human Jesus at his baptism in water and left him again *before* his crucifixion.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Romans 6:1-2

As a consequence they taught that Jesus Christ never suffered<sup>13</sup>.

The following verse refers to this false teaching: 1 John 5:5-6 says, “Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. ‘The Son of God’ is Jesus Christ, the one who *came by water and blood*. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood.” The apostle John clearly teaches that the historical Jesus is the divine Son of God, not only at his baptism (water) but also at and after his death on the cross (blood).

- **The fourth false teaching. Antinomianism: the sins committed in the body of man do not influence the spirit of man.** This false doctrine is also a development of the above mentioned dualism. These false teachers taught that there is no connection between man’s eternal spirit and his temporary body. Therefore the saved spirit or soul of a Christian cannot be influenced by the evil sins committed in his body and can also not be held responsible for the sins committed in his body. These false teachers also taught that people may do what they like in their body and do not have to keep the Ten Commandments. Their false doctrine was called *Antinomianism*, which means *living a life contrary to God’s holy law*. As a consequence, the followers of this cult continued to live in sin, worldliness and immorality, and nobody regarded the sins that they committed in their body as the sin of their spirit. The followers of this cult would live in sin, but deny that they sin.

The following verses refer to this false teaching: 1 John 1:8,10 say, “If we *claim to be without sin*, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ... If we *claim we have not sinned*, we make God out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” 1 John 3:6 says, “No one who lives in Christ keeps on sinning. No one *who continues to sin* has either seen him or known him.” The apostle John implies that what Christians do in their body cannot be separated from what they are in their spirit. He clearly teaches that every human being is a sinner and needs the salvation of Christ. He also teaches that people who continue to live in sin, either in their spirit or body, are definitely not born-again Christians.

- **The fifth false doctrine. Gnosticism: the highest virtue is knowledge and not love.** This false doctrine is in some ways also a development of the above mentioned false doctrines, because these false doctrines are not based on God’s revelation in the Bible, but on the philosophy, opinions or *knowledge* of men. These false teachers taught that *knowledge* is the highest virtue. They therefore exalted human knowledge, but neglected Christian love.

The following verses refer to this false teaching: 1 John 2:3,5 say, “We know that we have *come to know him* if we obey his commands. ... This is how *we know we are in him*: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.” 1 John 2:11 says, “Whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around the darkness; he *does not know* where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.” 1 John 3:14-18 says, “*We know* that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. ... If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth.” The apostle John clearly teaches that *true knowledge* is shown by obedience to God’s commandments, by following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and by loving the Christian brothers. Knowledge without this love for God, love for God’s Word and love for the Christian brothers is the wrong kind of knowledge. It is not knowledge that leads to enlightenment, but in fact is utter darkness!

## **2. The second purpose is to stimulate the true Christian characteristics.**

John wrote the letter with the following purposes in view: 1 John 1:3-4 teaches that the recipients may also have fellowship with God the Father and with Jesus Christ, which is very much connected to light, life and love. Those who have fellowship with God, walk in the light, live the new life and love the Christian brothers. 1 John 2:1 teaches that Christians do not deliberately continue to live in sin. 1 John 2:12-14 teaches that Christians in all stages may grow spiritually, grow in the knowledge of God, in the obedience to God’s Word and in overcoming the evil one.

1 John 5:13-20 teaches that Christians may have assurance that they are saved (1 5:13); have assurance that their prayers are answered (1 5:14-15); have assurance that a sanctified life will never lead to committing a sin that leads to death (1 5:16-18); have assurance that there is an absolute antithesis between Christians and the world (1 5:19); and have assurance that the convictions of Christians correspond with reality (1 5:20).

In summary, we conclude that the purpose of John was to combat false teachings and to stimulate the true Christian characteristics, so that Christians may enjoy fellowship with the living God and Christ.

## **F. THE DIVISION OF THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN.**

The First Letter of John may be given the title: “**The characteristics of those who have fellowship with God.**”

The first letter of John may be divided into three sections with three parts each:

### **1. Section 1 consists of chapter 1:1 to 2:29. God is light. He sheds light on our path.**

- 1 John 1:1-2:6. Therefore, God’s children *walk in the light*; they confess their sins and obey God’s commandments.
- 1 John 2:7-17. Christians love the Christian brothers and not the world. Lack of love is living in darkness.
- 1 John 2:18-29; cf. 5:5. Christians confess that Jesus is the Christ, that is, that the human Jesus is the divine Christ.

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<sup>13</sup> Consequently Islam teaches that Jesus was never crucified (Sura 4:157-158).

## 2. Section 2 consists of 3:1 to 4:6. God is life. He imparts eternal life through rebirth.

- 3:1-10a. Therefore, God's children *live as God's children*; they purify themselves from sin and do what is right.
- 3:10b-24. They love the Christian brothers in response to Christ's love, who laid down his life for them. Lack of love is being dead.
- 4:1-4. They confess that Jesus has come in the flesh, that is, the divine Son of God took on the human nature.

## 3. Section 3 consists of 4:7 to 5:21. God is love. He shows his love through Christ.

- 4:7 to 5:3. Therefore, God's children *love the Christian brothers* in response to the love of God the Father and the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.
- 5:4-12; cf. 5:5-6. They confess that Jesus is the Son of God, that is, the human Jesus is the divine Son of God not only at his baptism in water, but also in his crucifixion in blood.
- 5:13-21. Conclusion: The certainties of the Christian faith, expressed in the words: "*we know*". Christians have certainty of eternal life (5:13); certainty of answered prayer (5:14-15); certainty of the Christian's life of sanctification (5:16-18); certainty of the absolute antithesis between Christians and the world (5:19); and certainty of the fact that the convictions of Christians correspond with reality (5:20).

## G. PROGRESSIVE PARALLELISM IN THE WRITINGS OF JOHN.

### 1. Parallelism.

The first letter of John has three parallel sections all dealing with light, life and love.

- God is light and Christians walk in the light (I 1:5-7).
- Jesus took the sins of Christians away (I 3:5) and they do not continue to walk in sin (I 3:9).
- God is love (I 4:8,16) and Christians love with actions (I 3:18).

### 2. Progressive development.

Within each section there is a progressive development of the contents.

With regard to sin, Christians:

- confess sins (I 1:9).
- purify themselves from all sin (I 3:3)
- keep themselves (I 5:17,21) and others (I 5:16) away from all sin.

Or with regard to what Christians confess about Jesus, they confess that:

- the human Jesus is the divine Christ (I 2:22-23).
- the divine Christ took on the human nature in Jesus (I 4:2).
- the human Jesus is the divine Christ not only at his baptism with water, but also at his crucifixion in blood (I 5:5-6).

Thus Christians confess that *the historical Jesus* is "God who took on the human nature" at birth and kept his human nature throughout his life on earth, died in his weakened human nature, but was resurrected in his exalted and glorified human nature and ascended into heaven in this glorified human nature. He will continue to have this glorified human nature forever!

### 3. In the first letter of John and the book of Revelation.

Likewise, the book of Revelation has seven sections. Each section covers the same ground: from the first to the second coming of Jesus Christ. The seven sections are thus *parallel*. But each section develops the contents a little further.

There is thus *a progressive development* within each section.

## H. THE SECOND AND THIRD LETTERS OF JOHN.

### 1. The Second Letter of John.

The Second Letter was written by *the elder*. Both the Christian tradition and the internal style show that it was written by the apostle John. Like Peter, John was also an elder of the local church<sup>14</sup>. He wrote to *the chosen lady and her children*, which seem to indicate a particular local church and its members in Asia Minor. At the end of the letter, the members of the local church of John are called *the children of your chosen sister*, showing that the local churches related to one another as complete equals and did not lord it over one another.

John probably wrote from Ephesus between A.D. 70-98. His purpose was to warn them against false teachers. These false teachers denied that the divine Christ took on the human nature (II 1:7). Therefore the apostle John commands Christians not to show hospitality to those who deny the truth. In 2 John 10-11, he commands, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work."

The Second Letter of John may be given the title, "**Do not show hospitality to those who reject the truth.**"

### 2. The Third Letter of John.

The Third Letter was written by *the elder*. Again both the Christian tradition and the internal style show that it was written by the apostle John. John probably wrote from Ephesus between A.D. 70-98. His purpose was to encourage

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Peter 5:1

Christians to show hospitality to those who proclaim the truth. He wrote to “my dear friend Gaius”, a person with whom the apostle John was acquainted.

However, in this local church there was a certain person called Diotrephes, who regarded himself as the ‘boss’ of the church. He was a wicked church leader, because instead of refusing hospitality to false teachers, he refused hospitality to John’s own fellow workers and messengers. This local church leader was *authoritarian*, something which both the Lord Jesus in Matthew 20:25-28 and the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 5:1-4 prohibited! This man resisted the authority of the apostle John, desired to be the first in the church and tried to secure his position by gossiping maliciously about the apostle John and his fellow workers. He stopped members of his local church from welcoming John’s fellow workers and even put them out of the church!

In contrast, Gaius received John’s fellow workers and showed them every kind of hospitality. John expressed his hope that Demetrius, the bearer of the letter, would receive the same kind of hospitality.

The Third Letter of John may be given the title, “**Show hospitality to those who proclaim the truth.**”