

## A bit of background: reading the first Epistle of John



Today we start a new series of TFTD focusing on the first Epistle of John (1 John). You'll find it towards the end of your Bible, after the letters of Paul, James and Peter. Rod's Thought for today follows in the next email.

Here's a bit of background to get us going. And a question: Who wrote this famous fragment of Greek papyrus, and where is it?

### **A bit of background**

One Sunday, during the morning service, I asked Evelyn if she wouldn't mind coming to the front of the church for a few moments. I knew exactly who I meant and who it was that I expected to be making her way down the aisle. Imagine my surprise then, when not one, but three, women stood up and started to come to the front, all of them called Evelyn!

Ever since the fourth century there has been debate in the church about the authorship of the three letters attributed in the New Testament to John. It was once pretty universally accepted that the gospel, the three letters and the Revelation carrying the name of John came from the same person, but that is certainly not the universally accepted view now, though many do still hold it to be most likely. It simply does not follow that they come from the same person, or even from the same 'school of thought' merely because they bear the name of John, we need more evidence than that.

Although the issue of authorship will not likely ever be known with certainty, the author of these letters clearly claims to be a bearer of the apostolic teaching about Jesus that was based on eyewitness testimony about his public ministry, [death](#), and resurrection.

The relationship between the three letters and between them and the gospel indicates that the same author likely wrote all three letters, and he was also either the author of

the gospel or a close associate. These letters insist that this apostolic testimony trumps any reinterpretation of Jesus by those who were not commissioned by him and who were far removed from personal knowledge of him.

### **When were 1, 2, and 3 John written?**

All books of the New Testament refer to events that happened in the first century, such as the life of Jesus, the spread of the gospel, and issues that arose in the infant churches. The New Testament books were themselves written in the second half of that century. The New Testament as a whole is focused on one person who lived in the early third of the first century, Jesus of Nazareth, and the significance of his life, death, and resurrection.

The Gospels telling that story were written some decades later and so are concerned, first, with the events of Jesus' lifetime recorded but, second, with what was happening in the churches to which each gospel was addressed, and which shaped their content. Thus, it is appropriate to consider what was happening in the churches that were the original recipients of John's gospel, most likely the last gospel to be written.

The New Testament letters are different from these narrative accounts of the life of Jesus because each letter addressed pressing issues of the moment rather than recounting events from a previous time period. The authors of the letters are addressing real questions, issues, and circumstances that are pressing at that moment of time.

Consequently, they allow us to distinguish three periods of the first century and place the events and the origin of the books within each period:

1. Jesus' lifetime, during which no New Testament books were written;
2. a period of great expansion of the gospel throughout the Roman empire (AD 33 – 60); and
3. a period of doctrinal and ecclesial unification (c. AD 60 – 100).

The gospel and letters of John were written within this last period, when the church at large faced huge issues, such as organized persecution of Christians by the Roman government, heresy infiltrating the church (especially from the various Greek philosophies), and a crisis of church leadership, especially as the apostles died and the Lord had not returned.

John's letters reflect the second and third issues: heresy and a crisis of leadership. We assume that 1 John is a letter, even though in many ways it looks more like a treatise, tract, or sermon. It lacks the stereotypical forms characteristic of a first-century letter, forms comparable to our salutations ("Dear Friends") and closings ("Warm regards"). By contrast, 2 and 3 John begin as ancient letters should begin, with the identification of the writer (2 Jn 1; 3 Jn 1) and the recipients (2 Jn 2; 3 Jn 1),

a greeting (2 Jn 3) and a thanksgiving (2 Jn 4; 3 Jn 2-4). First John, however, does not present itself as a typical letter.

Whether a letter or not, it's clear that false teachers had emerged from the elder's own church(es), and their beliefs were challenging his apostolic leadership. If the elder was John son of Zebedee, he was likely elderly and the last living apostle. As the church stood on the brink of an uncertain future in the midst of a transition to church leaders who were not apostles, there was no more critical issue than where the truth about Jesus Christ was to be found. The elder argues that Christian leadership is essentially conservative, preserving and passing to the next generation the teaching of the apostles whom the Lord himself had chosen. Innovation in Christian belief and practice had to be bounded by apostolic orthodoxy. This is relevant in every generation of the church until the Lord returns.

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