

# A LOOK AT A BOOK: 1 John

## November 11, 2012

### **Authorship**

In one sense the authorship is not the most important issue, for the exegesis of the letter is not greatly affected by our conclusions regarding authorship.

*External evidence.* Irenaeus cited the epistle as by the Lord's disciple John, the writer of the fourth gospel. Both Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian similarly cite it as John's. Origen frequently cites the epistle and refers to it as by John. From very early times the epistle was not only treated as Scripture but was assumed to be Johannine, in spite of the fact that no specific claim to this effect is made by the writer himself. This strong tradition cannot easily be set aside, especially as no alternative theory of authorship was suggested in the early church.

### *Internal evidence.*

*The writer's own claims.* This epistle and the Epistle to the Hebrews are the only New Testament epistles in which no author's name is given, but in I John, unlike Hebrews, the introduction is clearly intended to tell us something about the author. He is writing about what he (or rather "we") had heard, seen, looked at and touched (I John 1:1). In no more vivid way could the writer indicate that he was an eyewitness. When he says further that "the life appeared, we have seen it", he draws attention at once to the times when he companied with Christ. We can confidently proceed on the assumption that he intended his readers to understand that he was one of the original eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus. It narrows the field of possible authors. It is clearly in complete harmony with the traditional ascription to John, the apostle.

*General impression of the epistle.* The epistle contains an unmistakable air of authority. The much repeated address to "dear children" could have been written only by someone of considerable authority to those who would at once acknowledge his right to address them in this manner – a veritable father in God. He clearly expects not only to be heard, but to be obeyed.

*The relationship to Johannine thought.* Similarities of thought and even expression are so striking that it is a fair assumption, disputed by only a minority of critics, that the author of this epistle was the author of the fourth gospel.

## **Occasion and Background**

The main feature in the form of heresy being contested was, therefore, a denial of the incarnation. This was true of all Gnostics (using the term in its broadest sense of those who sought salvation by illumination). The idea of an incarnate deity was unintelligible and, therefore, rejected. The dangerous character of this heresy is at once apparent, for it was an attempt to preserve Christ's deity at the expense of his humanity, and all in the interests of a higher intellectualism. One of the movements which may lie behind this epistle was that of Cerinthus. Whatever truth there may be in Polycarp's story of the apostle John's encounter with Cerinthus at the baths of Ephesus, from which the apostle is said to have fled when Cerinthus entered lest judgment should fall upon him, it is not improbable that Cerinthus was spreading his doctrines when John resided in Ephesus. According to 4:1, it would appear that the false prophets had belonged to the Christian community, but had now gone out into the world. In this case the probability is that they are still harassing the believers from an outside position, possibly by appealing to the intellectual attractions of their system.

## **Purpose**

It was a critical period for the church, and the apostle recognizes this. He will write a letter, somewhat in the form of a tract, to warn and instruct the believers in his own district about the seriousness of the peril. But his approach is to be wholly positive. He will present a wholesome picture of true Christian life, and only incidentally denounce the error. He believes that truth is the best answer to false teaching.

## **Form and Destination**

This epistle does not conform to the general characteristics of contemporary letters. It has no introductory material, no author's greeting, no thanksgiving and no concluding salutations. It mentions no one's name throughout. It reads more like a homily than an epistle. The addressees are many times called "children" and many times addressed as "dear," which indicates a personal relationship. The most satisfactory explanation is that I John was written to a group of people, possibly in more than one Asiatic community, with whom the author was personally acquainted and who were threatened with the same infiltration of false teaching.

## **Relation to the Fourth Gospel**

Similarities occur in the same use in both of such abstract ideas as "light," "life," and "love," the same occurrence of "eternal life" as the believer's possession, and the same description of Christ as Logos. Some parallels are found in the following comparisons:

I John 1:2-3 : John 3:11  
I John 1:4 : John 16:24  
I John 2:11 : John 12:35  
I John 2:14 : John 5:38  
I John 3:5 : John 8:46  
I John 3:8 : John 8:14  
I John 3:13 : John 15:18  
I John 3:14 : John 5:24

I John 3:16 : John 10:15  
I John 3:22 : John 8:29  
I John 3:23 : John 13:34  
I John 4:6 : John 8:47  
I John 4:16 : John 6:69  
I John 5:9 : John 5:32  
I John 5:20 : John 17:3

Both books belong to the same background of thought, with their emphasis on the importance of the incarnation, on the new birth as the method of entering upon the spiritual benefits of Christ's work, and on the overthrow of the devil, who is conceived as exercising a powerful influence on the present world order.

### **Themes from 1 John**

1. We saw Him, heard Him, and touched Him (1:1-3)
2. Light vs. darkness (1:5-7; 2:8-12)
3. You sin, so confess! (1:8-10; 2:1-2; 3:4-10; 5:14-18)
4. Love: keep His commandments (2:3-6; 2:29; 3:24; 5:1-3)
5. Love your brother (2:9-12; 3:11-12; 3:14-16; 4:7-11; 4:20-21)
6. Don't love the world (2:15-17; 3:13; 4:4-5; 5:4-5)
7. Do not deny the Son (2:22-24; 4:3; 5:12)
8. Christ has flesh (1:1; 4:2)