

# The Johannine Epistles (or The Letters of John)

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## Introduction to the Three "Letters" of "Epistles" of John:

### The Three Johannine Letters, as a Group:

1. **Author:** All three are probably by the same author; but who is he?
  - 1 John: no author is named or referred to throughout the text.
  - 2 John and 3 John: the author is self-identified as “the elder.”
  - He is traditionally identified as “John the apostle, son of Zebedee” – but is this correct?
  - He was probably a leader of the “Johannine community” (in Ephesus?) – i.e. the community(-ies) founded by the “beloved disciple” who value the Gospel of John!
2. **Relationship of the Letters to the Gospel according to John?**
  - Many similarities in vocabulary & theology; but some slight differences.
  - Same author of the Gospel and the Letters? If not, at least in/from the same community.
  - Scholars debate whether the letters were written before (maybe) or after (probably) the Gospel.
  - The Letters continue many of the same teachings as the Gospel of John, but also seem to correct some misinterpretations.
3. **Dates of Composition:**
  - The three letters were probably written at about the same time; maybe a few months/years apart.
  - Most likely in the late first century, they were written to communities near the Johannine “mother church.”
  - But scholars debate whether 1 John was written before, after, or together with 2 & 3 John.
4. **Different Genres, to distinct but related recipients, with slightly different purposes:**
  - 1 John is not a letter, but a **theological treatise**, for the *whole* community.
  - 2 John is an **open letter of exhortation**, to a *particular* church community.
  - 3 John is a **personal letter of commendation**, to a named community *leader*.
  - Let’s start with 2 & 3 John – shorter, easier to understand their context and messages.

## 2 JOHN & 3 JOHN: Historical Context and Literary Overviews:

### 1. **Attributed Author:**

- “The Elder” (2 John 1 & 3 John 1)
- Is this the Apostle John? Or the "Beloved Disciple" of the Gospel? Or someone else?

### 2. **Named Recipients:**

- 2 John 1: “to the *elect lady* and *her children*, whom I *love* in the *truth*, and not only I but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever”
  - not to an individual woman, but to personified “church” (feminine), and the “children” (members/believers) of that community
  - similar in conclusion: “The *children* of your *elect sister* send you their greetings.” – i.e. the believers in a “sister church” in a nearby city
- 3 John 1: “to the *beloved Gaius*, whom I *love* in *truth*.”
  - evidently a local church leader, friend of “the elder”
  - 3 John also names an opponent (*Diotrephes*) & a friend (*Demetrius*)

### 3. **Similar Conclusions:** Postscript & Greetings

- 2 John 12-13: “Although *I have much to write to you*, I would rather not use *paper and ink*; instead I hope to come to you and *talk* with you *face to face*, so that our joy may be complete.  
/ The children of your *elect sister* *send you their greetings*.”
- 3 John 13-15: “*I have much to write to you*, but I would rather not write with *pen and ink*; / instead I hope to see you soon, and we will *talk* together *face to face*. / Peace to you.  
The friends (*philoï*) *send you their greetings*. Greet the friends there, each by name.”

### 4. **Outlines:**

- Although 2 John & 3 John are extremely brief, both are clearly structured with an epistolary opening, body, and conclusion, as found in most of the other letters of the New Testament and in the ancient world in general.

## Conflict and Divisions within the Johannine Communities:

1. **Community Ideals:**
  1. Walking in love, remaining/abiding in truth, loving one another, living in joy, showing hospitality to the “friends,” testifying to the truth.
2. **Problems** are not with external “opponents,” but “schismatics” who left the community:
  1. 2 John 4: “I was overjoyed to find *some* of your children walking in the truth.”
  2. 2 John 7a: “Many deceivers have *gone out* into the world...”
3. **Divisions in 2 John** are caused by *doctrinal disagreements*
  1. 2 John 7b: “those who do not confess *that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*; any such person is the *deceiver* and the *antichrist!*”
4. **Divisions in 3 John**, in contrast, sound more like a *leadership struggle*
  1. 3 John gives us the name of a specific opponent: Diotrephes!
    - One side: the **Elder & Gaius & Demetrius**
    - Other side: **Diotrephes** (and his unnamed followers)
  2. 3 John 9-10: “I have written something to the church; but *Diotrephes*, who likes to put himself first, *does not acknowledge our authority*. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing in *spreading false charges against us*. And not content with those charges, *he refuses to welcome the friends*, and even *prevents those who want to do so* and *expels them from the church*.”
  3. Why are Diotrephes and the Elder opposed to each other? No doctrinal differences are mentioned in 3 John, just inhospitality and excommunications (although these may also be due to doctrinal disputes).
5. **Recommendations for dealing with opponents:**
  1. 2 John 10-11: “Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; / for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.”
  2. **Irony:** Diotrephes (in 3 John 10) seems to be doing just what the elder (in 2 John 10) had recommended: *not receiving* those who disagree with your teachings!
6. **Divisions in 1 John** are similarly based on doctrinal disagreements and separation from the community of believers
  1. Opponents are called “liars” (1 John 2:4, 22; 4:20), those who try to “deceive” believers (2:26; 3:7), apostates or deserters (2:19; 4:1), “false prophets” and “antichrists” (4:1, 3).
  2. See below for more details on 1 John.

## Outline and Contents of 1 John:

### 1. Overall Literary Structure:

- Prologue (1:1-4)
- Body (1:4—5:12)
- Epilogue (5:13-21)

### 2. The Body is hard to subdivide, since its theological instructions and practical admonitions are very mixed; scholars debate whether the body has two or three main parts:

- Two-part division (R. Brown):
  1. Walk in the Light of God (1:5—3:10)
  2. Walk as Children of the God of Love (3:11—5:12)
- Two-part division (D.M. Smith):
  1. The true message of Jesus (1:5—3:24)
  2. Testing the claims of those who testify (4:1—5:12)
- Three-part division (C. H. Dodd):
  1. What is Christianity? (1:5—2:28)
  2. Life in the Family of God (2:29—4:12)
  3. The Certainty of Faith (4:13—5:13)
- Other three-part divisions:
  1. First part ends at 2:11 or 2:14 or 2:17 or 2:27
  2. Second part ends at 3:10 or 3:17 or 3:24 or 4:6
  3. Third part ends at 5:12 or 5:13

## Literary Features of 1 John:

### 1. Genre:

- 1 John is usually called "The First Letter of John," but it does not follow the standard format or conventions of ancient letter-writing.
  - It lacks the usual letter opening (no identification of author or recipients; no formulaic greeting)
  - It lacks the expected epistolary closing (no concluding greetings, blessings, or prayer)
- Its form/genre is actually more like a "homily" or "sermon" or "theological treatise."

### 2. Author:

- The writer starts with "we" (1:1), but later also says "I" (2:1), although he never identifies himself more specifically.
- Thus, he is both a representative leader of the community and an individual eyewitness of Jesus.

### 3. Similarities between 1 John and the Gospel according to John:

- The *openings* or Prologues are very similar; compare John 1:1-18 and 1 John 1:1-4.
- The *conclusions* are very similar; compare John 20:30-31 and 1 John 5:13.
- A *core teaching*, called "*a new commandment*," is that believers must "love one another" (see John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17 and 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7-12).
- The *result* of believing/abiding in Jesus is for believers to become *children of God* (John 1:12 and 1 John 3:1-2, 10; 5:2) and to receive *eternal life* (John 3:15-16; 17:2-3; etc. and 1 John 1:2; 2:25; etc.).
- The *worldview* is very *dualistic*, with sharp contrasts between light vs. darkness, truth vs. lies, love vs. hate, belonging to God vs. belonging to the world, children of God vs. children of the devil, etc.
- There are many other obvious similarities in *vocabulary and concepts*:
  - *Nouns*: beginning, love, life, eternal life, light, darkness, truth, communion/fellowship, Word, world, joy, Father & Son, Spirit of Truth, brother/sister, etc.
  - *Verbs*: see, hear, look, touch, believe, testify, walk/live, remain/abide, being born of God, etc.
  - *Expressions*: "to be of..." or "to belong to..."; to "do the truth"; Jesus as the "only son (*monogenēs*) of God"; "becoming flesh" (incarnation); a "new commandment"; "passing from death to life"; etc.
  - It would be a good exercise to make your own longer list of similar words and expressions.

### 4. Differences from the Gospel according to John:

- Despite the many strong similarities, there are also some subtle differences in *vocabulary*; for example:
- "*Paraclete*" in John's Gospel (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) always refers to the Holy Spirit, while "Paraclete" in 1 Jn 2:1 refers to Jesus.
- "*Walk*" in John's Gospel is mostly literal physical movement, and only sometimes used metaphorically for how one "lives"; on the other hand, in all three Johannine letters "walk" usually refers metaphorically to one's conduct ("walk in darkness," "walk in the light," "walk in the truth," etc.)
- "*Sin*" in John's Gospel usually refers to unbelief or opposition to Jesus, while "sin" in 1 John refers more often to individual wrongdoings.
- There are also some subtle *grammatical and stylistic differences* in the Greek text of the Epistles, in contrast to the Fourth Gospel.

## Theological Issues in 1 John:

### 1. Teachings about Jesus

- 1:1-4 – The Prologue already calls him the "*Word of life*," "*eternal life*," the Father's "*Son*," and "*Jesus Christ*"
- 2:1 – "We have an *Advocate* (Gk. Paraclete/*Parakletos*) with the Father, Jesus Christ *the righteous one*."
- Emphasis throughout this letter on Jesus' relationship with the Father, and on his relationship with believers.

### 2. Teachings about God

- God is **light** (1 John 1:5).
- God is **love** (1 John 4:8, 16).

### 3. Implications for Discipleship

- Since God is *light*, believers must "*walk/live in the light*" (1:7) and "*remain in the light*" (2:9-10).
- Since God is *love*, believers must not only "*love God*" (4:10, 20-21; 5:2), but also "*love one another*" (3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12).

### 4. Opponents and Opposing Teachings

- Some people who are opposed to Jesus, or at least opposed to the correct teachings about Jesus, are called "**antichrists**":  
"Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that *the antichrist* was coming, so now *many antichrists* have appeared. Thus we know this is the last hour." (1 John 2:18)
- They are *apostates* who have left the community:  
"They *went out from us*, but they were not really of our number; if they had been, they would have *remained* with us. Their *desertion* shows that none of them was of our number" (2:19).
- They are also called "**liars**":  
"Who is the *liar*? Whoever *denies that Jesus is the Christ*. Whoever *denies* the Father and the Son, this is the *antichrist*." (2:22)
- They are also called "**false prophets**":  
"Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because *many false prophets* have gone out into the world. / This is how you can know the Spirit of God: every spirit that *acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh* belongs to God, / and every spirit that *does not acknowledge Jesus* does not belong to God. This is the spirit of the *antichrist* that, as you heard, is to come, but in fact is already in the world" (4:1-3).
- All this is very different from the "Antichrist" of popular imagination! There is not just one "antichrist," but *many "antichrists"* (see 1 John 2:18-22; 4:3; also 2 John 7)