

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO 2 JOHN

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I. Authorship

A. External

The external attestation to 2 John is not so strong as that for 1 John. Absence of citations from the book may have been due to its subject matter. It is significant that the objections to apostolic authorship come from the later Christian writers.

B. Internal

The term “the Elder” (v. 1) is appropriate for any older man of any office, especially since by the time of its writing, the apostle John was probably the only living apostle. “Elder” among the Jews was applied to leaders at (1) the synagogue level, but also at (2) the city level and (3) the national level. By analogy it appears that “elder” could have been applied to local units but also to the whole “nation” (1 Peter 5:1; 2 John 1; cp. Philemon 9?). So it could designate the ultimate leadership within any level (John, Peter, Paul?). The expression “apostles and elders” (Acts 15:2) is significant in this respect. Could it mean elders in general with the apostles as specially marked among them? A slightly different arrangement terminologically would have the apostles as “apostles” of the universal church and at the same time (some of) the “elders” of the Jerusalem church. The passage in Eusebius that contains Papias’ statement (*Ecclesiastical History* 3:39:4) introduces all the apostles as “elders.” So a distinction between the apostle John and an elder John is not necessary in view of Papias’ use of the words. Note also 1 Peter 5:1.

II. Destination: “the Elect Lady”

A. Person (on the analogy of 3 John)

1. Hermeneutical principle of preferring the literal interpretation (? vv. 1, 13)
2. Reference to children is quite intelligible if they are grown.

B. Church (or community)

1. “Lady loved by all who know the truth” implies a rather widespread knowledge of her; this is more likely true of a church than an individual woman.
2. No name is given to her (v. 1) or her nephews (v. 13), detracting from the personal character of the letter if a person is meant.
3. The subject matter is more suitable for a church.
4. Second person plurals predominate.

5. Personification of the church as feminine is compatible with other instances in scripture: Ephesians 5:29ff; 2 Corinthians 11:2ff; 1 Peter 5:13. Compare also the “bride of Christ” imagery in Revelation 18:23; 21:2, 9; 22:17.

6. The greeting in verse 13 is more natural if sent from one church to another than from a group of people to their aunt by means of a third party.

III. Purpose

Same as 1 John. Warns against false teachers. They were traveling among the churches.

IV. Date

There is little to go on except the lifetime of the apostle John and the general time of heretical docetic teaching. The time of writing may compare with that of the gospel, first and third epistles, and Revelation.

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