

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO 1 JOHN

Virgil Warren, PhD

I. Authorship

A. External

1. Earliest allusion in Polycarp (*Ad Phil.* 7)
2. Perhaps Papias (Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 3:39:3, 17)
3. Coincidences of language in Justin, Barnabas, Hermas, Clement of Rome
4. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tertullian cite it as John's.

B. Internal evidence

1. 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Hebrews are the four anonymous New Testament epistles. The opening of I John, like the close of Hebrews, tells something of the author.
2. An eyewitness: "*What we have seen with our own eyes*" (1:1)
3. Authoritative condemnation of error
4. Only a minority of critics deny that the similarity of thought and expression suffice to establish common authorship between 1 John and the Gospel of John.

II. Date of writing

- A. Current with an incipient state of Docetism such as the kind preached by Cerinthus
- B. The *ad quem* is fixed by Ignatius' letter (c. 35-c. 107).
- C. The *a quo* is fixed by Domitian's persecutions since the epistle reflects tension but not persecution. We could say the same of a time before Domitian's persecutions.

III. Destination

The best explanation is that 1 John addressed a specific Asiatic community since

- A. the readers are contrasted with false teachers in such a way as to suggest that the writer was personally acquainted with the situation.
- B. the readers are addressed as beloved and children.
- C. the book does not identify the author.

IV. Purpose

- A. stated in 1:3; 2:1; 5:13: to instruct in true knowledge those who already believe

- B. to exhort not to be drawn aside into current doctrinal and practical heresies:
antinomianism and Docetism

V. Relation to the Fourth Gospel

A. Similar verses

1. 1 John **1:1-3**; John **3:11**; cp. **1:14, 20; 20:27** (note also Luke **24:30**)
2. 1 John **1:4**; John **16:24**
3. 1 John **2:11**; John **12:35**
4. 1 John **2:14**; John **5:38**
5. 1 John **3:5**; John **8:46**
6. 1 John **3:8**; John **8:14**
7. 1 John **3:13**; John **15:18**
8. 1 John **3:14**; John **5:24**
9. 1 John **3:16**; John **10:15**
10. 1 John **3:22**; John **8:29**
11. 1 John **3:23**; John **13:34**
12. 1 John **4:6**; John **8:47**
13. 1 John **5:9**; John **5:32**
14. 1 John **5:20**; John **17:3**

B. Differences

1. Stylistic differences

- a. The language of the epistle is not so “intense” as that of the gospel.
- b. Supposedly, the language of the epistle more closely approximates the language of Hellenistic philosophy.
- c. Certain expressions (about forty) occur in the epistle and not in the gospel, and many that are characteristic of the gospel do not occur in 1 John.
- d. The epistle, in contrast to the gospel, has no Semitic solecisms.

2. Supposed theological differences

- a. There is a more primitive eschatology in the epistle (no “realized eschatology”); yet the anti-Christ concept is not different, but a new way of expressing the same doctrine.
- b. The death of Christ is more primitively viewed as expiation (**2:2; 4:10**). However, the many-faceted death of Christ is not limited by what one document presents. Critics would do well to pay more attention to the sacrificial language of the epistle.
- c. In the epistle the doctrine of the Spirit is confined to popular belief (?).