

# *That You May Know*

## A STUDY IN 1 JOHN

### **AUTHORSHIP:**

Although 1,2,3 John are written anonymously, the almost universal attestation of the early church and the early church Fathers is that 'John the disciple of the Lord' authored these letters. Due to the close connections between 1 John and 2 John, and then the close connections between 2 John and 3 John, there is a solid case for saying that all three letters were penned by the same person. In addition, the Gospel of John remains the most important source of comparison for the interpretation of these three letters, making a strong case for what has been believed by most scholars since the third century—that John is the author of the fourth Gospel and these three epistles. It is also highly likely that John is the one to whom Christ appeared in the book of Revelation—making him the author of that book as well.

Reliable ecclesiastical history tells us that John lived to an old age, until the time came when he was the sole survivor of those who had been in close contact with Jesus during his earthly ministry. John was part of Jesus' "inner circle" (Peter, James and John). He was a brother to James, the first of the disciples of Jesus to be martyred (Acts 12:2). It is likely that John left Jerusalem prior to the destruction of the city by the Romans in AD 70 and lived out the remainder of his life in and around Ephesus, in Asia Minor. The early church Father named Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was a disciple of John and wrote of his "relationship with John and the others who had seen the Lord." Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, wrote that he gained far more from listening to John himself than from reading all the books he had read. He called John "a living and abiding voice" in his day. The testimony that John wrote the Gospel that bears his name, along with 1,2,3 John, has a solid footing (e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.2, Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1.1).

### **DATE OF COMPOSITION:**

Somewhere in the 90's AD, it is likely that 1 John was written as a circular letter (a letter to be read in multiple congregations of believers) to address theological issues that were causing trouble and dissent in local churches and was followed by 2 and 3 John—to one of these particular churches and to an individual (Gaius) respectively. The Gospel of John was likely written prior to these letters and Revelation, dating it somewhere around AD 85.

### **THE OCCASION FOR WRITING 1 JOHN:**

1. Christians were dealing with people who had seceded from the church and were propagating an aberrant form of the gospel.
2. Early heresies were impacting the church—in particular, Docetism, Gnosticism and Cerinthianism.
3. The churches of Asia Minor were not (consistently) practicing love, hospitality, and discernment concerning the claims of those who called themselves "Christian."

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### EARLY HERESIES IMPACTING JOHN'S COMMUNITY:

1. **Gnosticism:** This heresy took on many forms, but a primary principle of its philosophy was that material matter (including our own bodies) was essentially evil, only the spirit was good. Gnostics despised the body, but in the body was a spirit, trapped like a seed in dirty soil. Gnostics sought to grow the seed of the spirit while ridding themselves of the body through either extreme ascetism (treating the body harshly through fasting, beatings, and self-denial) or by libertarianism (using the body for any pleasures since it was dirty anyway and would soon be destroyed).
2. **Docetism:** Considered the incarnation impossible since God could not unite himself with anything as evil as a human body. Therefore, Jesus only seemed (Greek *dokeo* = 'to appear' or 'to seem') to have a body, but it was an illusion—in reality he did not. For example, Docetism taught that when Jesus walked he left no footprints. Docetism was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451.
3. **Cerinthiansim:** Cerinthus, a man trained in Egypt but a resident of Asia Minor, proposed a novel Christianity. He declared that there was both a human and a divine Jesus. Divinity "came upon" Jesus at his baptism, empowering him to do miracles and to display great wisdom, but then left him prior to his death on the cross. Hence, only Jesus the man suffered and died. Jesus the divine spirit remained free of suffering and all entanglements with the flesh.

### PURPOSE OF 1 JOHN:

1. To combat early heresies.
2. To renew fellowship between genuine believers.
3. To renew the joy of living for Jesus among his true followers.
4. To help believers understand their struggle with sin (and God's forgiveness).
5. To denounce the idea of "walking in darkness" while claiming to be in the light.
6. To boost true believers' confidence in eternal life.
7. That his readers might place hope and confidence in Jesus—the Son of God.

### ASIA MINOR IN JOHN'S DAY:



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