

Authorship of the Johannine Letters

None of the three books known as the Johannine Letters in our New Testament identifies its author by name. The book called “1 John” is completely anonymous, and the letters called “2 John” and “3 John” are written by someone who calls himself “the elder.”

How the Books Came to Be Ascribed to John the Apostle

The early church came to ascribe these three writings to the apostle John (a disciple of Jesus) through the following process of reasoning:

1. Christians noticed that the language, style, and outlook of the book that is now called “1 John” is remarkably similar to that of the book that we identify as the Gospel of John. They decided that both books must have the same author.
2. The book that we now call the “Gospel of John” is also anonymous, but it indicates that some of its material was put into writing by “the beloved disciple” (John 21:24). Many interpreters in the early church thought that this “beloved disciple” must be the apostle John because he is the only prominent member of Jesus’ twelve disciples who is not otherwise mentioned in that book (except for 21:2).

Thus, it was said that the apostle John wrote that Gospel (a bit of an exaggeration, since this Gospel only claims that he wrote certain things down, not that he wrote the whole book), and that the apostle John also wrote the book that we call “1 John” (because it is so similar to the Gospel that the two books must have the same author).

3. Many interpreters noted that the language, style, and outlook of 2 John and 3 John are also very similar to that of 1 John (and the Gospel of John). Thus, they began saying that those two writings must also be works of the apostle John, though this was affirmed with considerably less confidence.

By the end of the fourth century (e.g., in the writings of Athanasius, ca. 367), it was commonly held that four books of the New Testament had been written by the apostle John, who, for some reason, didn’t like to use his name: he called himself “the beloved disciple” in one book, “the elder” in two others, and left a fourth one completely anonymous.

Modern Support for This Traditional View

A few modern scholars maintain that the construal outlined above holds up to scrutiny: the early church (at least by the time of Athanasius) got the authorship of the Johannine writings almost exactly correct. Proponents of this view include D. A. Carson, *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming); I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

Caveats to the Traditional View

Most scholars would want to amend the traditional view in light of a few observations that have been made regarding these writings over the years:

- Almost all modern scholars think that the Gospel of John was produced in stages; the apostle John (the “beloved disciple”) may have started the process, but others continued it after he was gone. Thus, similarities between the Gospel and the letters do not necessarily mean that the apostle John wrote the letters; the letters might have been written by one of the authors or editors associated with the Gospel at a later stage. This seems much more likely to most modern scholars.
- According to the church historian Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4), Papias, in the second century, claimed that there were two prominent leaders named “John” in the church that produced our Fourth Gospel: John the apostle (the disciple of Jesus) and John the elder (a disciple of the apostle). Thus, many interpreters have speculated that John the elder wrote 2 John and 3 John (which are by someone who calls himself “the elder”). And if all of these works have the same author, wouldn’t that mean that John the elder wrote 1 John and part of the Gospel as well?
- A number of scholars have noted minor differences between the writings and have questioned whether they actually do have the same author: the Gospel says that Jesus is the light (John 1:4–9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46) and calls the Holy Spirit a “Paraclete” (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7), whereas 1 John says that God is light (1:5) and calls Jesus the “Paraclete” (2:1); the Gospel uses words such as *glory* and *glorify* never found in the letters, and 1 John uses words such as *seed* and *anointing* never found in the Gospel; the Gospel rarely mentions the parousia, which figures prominently in 1 John (see 2:28; 3:1–3; 4:17).

Conclusion

The dominant view today is as follows:

- The three letters probably have a common author (though this is not certain).
- Their author was a leader in the community where the Gospel of John was produced.
- Their author probably was one of the people responsible for writing, editing, or refining the Gospel of John (perhaps the person called “John the elder” by Papias).
- The three letters probably were written at about the same time and probably after the Gospel of John (or at least at a time when that Gospel was in its penultimate form).

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