

The First Epistle of John

Author

From the earliest years of the Church until the first third of the 19th century it was believed, without question, that John - Apostle and Evangelist wrote this Epistle. German theologians, from around 1830, began to question John's authorship, defying Church tradition and history, and replacing that, certain and known historical source, with an unprovable hypothesis and in so doing sowed the seed of doubt into the authenticity of the whole of the New Testament.

Historical Evidence

From the early years of the second century there is evidence of the existence of this epistle and of its authorship.

1. **Polycarp**, - a disciple of John, wrote in his letter to the Philippians - 3 καὶ πᾶν πνεῦμα ὃ μὴ ὁμολογεῖ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἐστίν· καὶ τοῦτο ἐστὶν τὸ τοῦ ἀντίχριστου, ὃ ἀκηκόατε ὅτι ἔρχεται, καὶ νῦν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν ἤδη. '*and this is the (spirit) of the antichrist,*' Polycarp wrote this in about 115 and although he does not name the source of his quotation the word 'ἀντίχριστου' is so specifically John he did not need to. 'ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα' – '*in flesh having come*' appears also in the Epistle of Barnabas.
2. **Papias** – also a disciple of John and associate of Polycarp regularly quoted from the work (c. 145-160).
3. **Irenaeus** (181-189) makes extensive use of quotations from the epistle and specifically designates 2:18 and 5:1 to John - * Παιδιά, ἐσχάτη ὥρα ἐστίν, καὶ καθὼς ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἀντίχριστος ἔρχεται, καὶ νῦν ἀντίχριστοι πολλοὶ γεγόνασιν, ὅθεν γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐσχάτη ὥρα ἐστίν. '*Young children, it is a last hour, and that, just as you heard, the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have risen up, from this we know that it is a last hour.*' 5:1 Πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ Χριστὸς, ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται, καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀγάπων τὸν γεννήσαντα ἀγαπᾷ τὸν γεγεννημένον ἐξ αὐτοῦ. '*Everyone believing that Jesus is the Christ born from God, and everyone loving the begetter loves the one having been born out of Him.*'
4. **The Muratorian Canon** (195-205) Indicates that John's Gospel and our epistle were closely associated and points out that it is no wonder that there are so many references to the 4th Gospel and quotes 1:1 **†** "Ὁ ἦν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, ὃ ἀκηκόαμεν, ὃ ἐώρακαμεν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἡμῶν, ὃ ἐθεασάμεθα καὶ αἱ χεῖρες ἡμῶν ἐψηλάφησαν περὶ τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς — '*Which was from beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with the eyes of us, which we beheld and the hands of us touched concerning the Word of the Life* -'
5. **Clement of Alexandria** (c 190-203) describes 5:16 as '*the work of John in his larger epistle*' ¹⁶ 'Ἐάν τις ἴδῃ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἀμαρτάνοντα ἀμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον, αἰτήσῃ, καὶ δώσει αὐτῷ ζωὴν, τοῖς ἀμαρτάνουσιν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον. ἐστὶν ἀμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον· οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης λέγω ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ.' '*If any one sees the brother of him sinning, a sin not unto death, he shall intercede, and He will give him life (to those not sinning unto death).*'
6. **Tertullian** (c 194 – 221) says that the words of 1:1 are those of the Apostle John.
7. **Origen** (c.185 – 232) confirms that the words of 3:8 are by John '*in his catholic epistle*'.
8. **The Greek Texts** – All the major uncial manuscripts of the 4th and 5th centuries contain the Epistle, however, the 'three witnesses' of 5:7b & 8a do not appear in any Greek text until medieval times and must therefore be regarded as spurious (see note in chapter 5).
9. **The Syriac Texts** – similarly the Epistle appears in all the Syriac/Peshitta texts of the 5th & 6th centuries.

10. **Old Latin Texts** – these pre-date Jerome's Latin version of the 5th century and reflect the Greek texts from which they were copied from the later 2nd century onwards. Our Epistle appears in these also.

Internal Evidence

There is such a close similarity between the style and ideas of the 4th Gospel and our Epistle that mere coincidence cannot be a likely possibility. The two works are written in simple, highly repetitive Greek (one would not develop a substantial Greek vocabulary by reading these compositions). Such words as life, love, truth and darkness used in a typically Johannine way - very often emphasising the polarisation of life on earth – one clause asserting a virtue while the next clause negating the opposite. - 3:6 *Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.* So often words such as 'love' and 'hate', 'light' and 'darkness', 'truth and lies' are set in opposition. There are certain golden sayings which appear in the two works – 'to be of truth', 'of the devil', 'knowing God' and 'conquering (overcoming) the world'. The two use the two words for 'to know' or 'to perceive' (εἶδω and γινώσκω) relatively more frequently than any of the Synoptic Gospel writers (γινώσκω - 70 times in the Gospel & 1st Epistle and 61 times in the Synoptics). While 'oida', the perfect of 'eidō', is usually translated as present tense, (in fact in most instances the perfect can be translated as present) John appears to use γινώσκω when he wants an unequivocal present, and to underline that I have used the perfect translation of εἶδω throughout, also, as Christians, we have known, know now, and will continue to know and so it appears to be preferable to translate 'oida' in the perfect form.

Place and Date of Writing

There is no certain evidence either of the date of writing nor the place, however, the date is conjectured to be late 1st or early 2nd centuries (not later than the death of Trajan in 117) and the place – the Ephesus area.