

1. Author, date, and setting of John's letters

- A. Author. In much Western scholarship since the 1800s, the author of John's Gospel and letters has been cast in doubt. But informed studies¹ show that there is no compelling reason to doubt that John the son of Zebedee authored the Gospel and letters associated with him throughout church history, along with Revelation.
- B. Date. The precise temporal location of John's letters cannot be determined due to limited evidence. There is reason to think that he wrote them later in his life. Ancient reports place John in the region of Ephesus after the fall of Jerusalem (late AD 60s) until his death in the AD 90s. This comports with the picture assumed in Revelation 1–3: John in exile on Patmos (an island off the coast of Ephesus) writes to the seven churches of "Asia," the Roman province of which Ephesus was the capital. John writes as a pastoral leader to these seven churches.
- John's letters may be understood as arising in the time leading up to John's banishment to Patmos. It is not impossible that he wrote them while in exile there, hoping for his release (2 John 12; 3 John 14).
- C. Setting. 1 John: First John 2:19 refers to a church split: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."

We may understand 1 John as an epistle meant to stabilize congregations who knew of this split and may have been tempted to break away from John's church or churches too. Some theorize that 3 John may have been a cover letter to a man named Gaius who was an ally of John. Possibly John was on exile in Patmos, or in hiding on the mainland due to opposition, or was simply too aged to travel, and could not distribute 1 John to churches himself.

Possibly Demetrius (3 John 12) was the person who delivers John's three letters to Gaius, John's friend and ally. Diotrephes (3 John 9) was someone who opposed John and the gospel message he stood for. When John writes, "I have written something to the church" (3 John 9) he could have meant 2 John, 1 John, or both.

Second John may have been a letter to Gaius' church encouraging them to receive 1 John for their own strengthening and then to assist Gaius in distributing it to other churches.

The three letters together may be viewed as a unified apostolic statement to a person (Gaius, 3 John), to an individual church ("the elect lady and her children" [2 John 1], meaning a congregation and its members), and then to all the churches who receive 1 John. Perhaps this would have been the church at Ephesus and the surrounding churches of Asia who were later addressed in Revelation 1–3, starting with the Ephesian church (Rev. 2:1–7).

¹ See chapters on John's letters in Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1990); D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2005); Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016).

D. The Ephesian church: characteristics and challenges

Rev 2:1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Rev 2:2 “ ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

Observations:

1. V. 2: Churches with commitment and discernment
2. V. 3: Churches with stamina
3. V. 4: Churches losing touch with *agape*.
4. V. 5: Churches needing to remember, repent, and return.
5. V. 6: Churches retaining necessary zeal for God’s redemptive commands—they were not giving in to the antinomian impulse
6. V. 7: Churches with promise, in this life and the next