

2 John - Introduction & Background

Canonicity

The writer of the book is anonymous. It is probably for this and other reasons that the book did not enjoy initial, unanimous canonical status. Factors inhibiting initial canonicity include limited citation of it by the fathers, lack of a wide circulation, lack of introduction of new ideas beyond that presented in 1 John, and its brief and private nature. However, many fathers living closer in time to the original writing had no problem accepting it as divinely authoritative. The book was eventually accepted as canonical at the Council of Carthage in 397 AD.

Authorship

External evidence favors viewing the Apostle John as the book's author. Irenaeus and Polycarp are among these sources of external evidence. These sources are important since Polycarp was a disciple of John and Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp. Other sources of external evidence include Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian, and Dionysius. Interestingly, Eusebius grouped the book with the *antilegomena* rather than the spurious books.

Internal evidence also demonstrates that the Apostle John is the book's author. The word "elder" is used to describe the book's author (v1). The term could refer to an office, such as a bishop, or someone's old age. Both definitions fit John since he was bishop over the churches in Asia Minor (Rev 2–3) and, according to Irenaeus, was in his latter years when he wrote 1 John. In addition, numerous similarities of style and vocabulary are discernible when one compares 2 John with 1 John and John's Gospel. Among them are the following similar phrases: "love in the truth," "have known the truth," "walking in the truth," "new commandment," "love one another," "deceiver," "antichrist," "abideth," and "many antichrists." Also, the moral and doctrinal problems confronted in the letter seem to be nearly identical to those confronted in 1 John. Such similarities include the need to love one another in obedience to Christ's command (v4-6; 1 John 2:7-11), warnings against antichrists (v7; 1 John 2:18,22), and warnings against false teachers who deny the incarnation (v7-11; 1 John 4:1-3).

Some might question why John did not use his name in the book. Perhaps use of his name would have been redundant since he was already well known as the bishop over the churches in that region (Rev 2–3). Others may ask why John referred to himself as "elder" rather than "apostle" if he was the book's author. Use of the term "elder" does not prevent the writer from also being an apostle since Peter referred to himself as both an "elder" (1 Peter 5:1) and an "apostle" (1 Peter 1:1). Perhaps John did not describe himself as an

apostle because, unlike Paul, his apostleship was well accepted and not in dispute. Interestingly, Papias used the term "elder" to depict the apostles.

Recipients

The letter is addressed to the elect lady and her children (v1). Who is the elect lady? Several attempts at identification have been posited. First, many identify her as the universal church. Proponents claim that a woman is often used to portray the church (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25,32; Rev 19:7). Advocates also note that because the word "church" is a feminine noun, it is appropriate to identify her with a woman. The lady's children (v1,4) would then be the Christians associated with the universal church. However, if this is true, then who are the lady's sister, nephews, and nieces (v13)?

Second, some see the elect lady as a personification of some unknown local church. Her children would be Christians within the church. This view explains the use of the second person plural rather than the singular in v8,10,12. Her sister would be another local church. Her nieces and nephews would be those Christians in this other local church. This view is supported by the fact that the Bible often personifies nations and cities with females. For example, Jerusalem is sometimes personified as "Daughter of Zion." Variations of the view would interpret the woman as symbolizing the church in Babylon (1 Peter 5:13) or the church in Rome. However, these views seem to overly complicate a passage that can be understood more simply when interpreted literally.

Third, the best view is to interpret the elect lady as a literal woman. This view understands her children, sister, nephews, and nieces literally as well. This view is buttressed by the fact that a literal woman seems conveyed by both the letter's greeting and conclusion, she is referred to as a literal woman throughout the letter (v4,5,13), and only a literal woman could have a face to face communication with John (v12). Because she is called "the elect lady," some have suggested that the woman's personal name is lady Electra. However, this interpretation seems unlikely since her sister is also referred to as "elect" (v13). All that can really be determined about this lady is that she was an unnamed, saved woman who was loved by all who knew her (v1,2). Other information provided about her includes the obedience of her children (v4), her hospitality to itinerant preachers (v10,11), and that her home was used by a congregation (v10).

Occasion, Opponents, Date, Place of Writing, Destination

It seems that false teachers denying Christ's incarnation and return⁴ were seeking to spread their false doctrine in the area where the elect lady's house church met. Thus, John wrote to her to warn her of this encroachment so she would not give these heretics a pulpit to disseminate their views (v8-11). As in 1 John, the audience here seems to be a believing audience. When the writer warns them, he does so by warning them of a loss of reward (2:28; 2 John 8) and joy (1 John 1:4; 2 John 12) rather than threatening them with eternal

retribution. See my 1 John argument for further discussion of opponents, date, place of writing, and destination.

Purpose and Message

The two dominant words in the letter are "truth" and "love." Therefore, the purpose and message of the book must be built upon these two words. Thus, the *purpose* of the letter is to exhort the elect lady and those within her sphere of influence to continue their walk of truth and love by resisting the allurements of the Gnostics so that their joy may be made full. The *message* of the book is that believers can protect their joy by continuing their walk of love and truth and by not associating with or assisting false teachers who do not acknowledge the truth.

Sub purposes

In addition to this overarching purpose, John wrote the letter to accomplish several sub purposes. First, he wanted to commend the elect lady and her children for their walk of truth and love (v1-4). Second, he wrote to encourage them to continue this walk (v5-6). Third, he wrote to warn of the encroachment of false teachers and advise them regarding how to react to those who deny the truth (v7-11). Fourth, John wrote to inform the elect lady of his plans to visit her (v12). Fifth, John wrote to extend the elect lady greeting from her sister, nephews, and nieces (v13).

Unique Characteristics

John's second letter boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, it depicts how believers should react toward false teachers. Such reactions encompass both the believers' attitudes and actions. Rather than exhibiting tolerance under the banner of "academic freedom," believers should react strongly against those who pervert the truth. Second, the letter adds clarity to the concept of biblical love. Love should not be misunderstood as blind sentimentality that embraces everything and everyone. Rather, love must be discerning. Third, the letter emphasizes the importance of the incarnation. To deny this is tantamount to heresy. Fourth, the book continues the theme of fellowship found in John's other letters yet with a different emphasis. For example, while 1 John pertains to fellowship with God, 2 John deals with fellowship with heretics.

Fifth, the letter presumes a knowledge of 1 John and actually summarizes some of its teaching. Sixth, the letter is similar to 3 John and Philemon in that it is personal and brief. Seventh, the letter is the second shortest book in the entire Bible. It probably fit on a single sheet of papyrus. Eighth, the book is the only biblical book addressed to a woman. Ninth, unlike 3 John, which contains personal names of three individuals, 2 John contains no personal names.

Structure

The book has two major sections (1-6, 7-13). The different focus in these sections is summarized in the following chart:

1-6	7-13
Behavior	Belief
Love for the brethren	Person of Christ
Positive	Negative

Truth is mentioned five times, love is mentioned four times	Neither word is mentioned
Remain in God's commandments	Remain not with false teachers
Walk in God's commandments	Watch out for antichrists
Practice the truth	Protect the truth

Outline

I. Walk in truth and love (2 John 1-6)

- (1) Greeting (1-3)
 - (A) Sender (1a)
 - (B) Recipient (1b-2)
 - (a) Elect lady (1b)
 - (b) Basis of John's relationship with the elect lady (1c-2)
 - (i) Love (1c-d)
 - (a) Love from John (1c)
 - (b) Love from all (1d)
 - (ii) Truth (2)
 - (C) Trinitarian benediction (3)
 - (a) Threefold benediction (3a)
 - (b) Members of the Trinity enumerated (3b)
 - (c) Basis of benediction: truth and love (3c)
- (2) Exhortation to walk in love and truth (4-6)
 - (A) John rejoices because elect lady's children were walking in the truth (4)
 - (B) Walk in love (5-6)
 - (a) Basis for the exhortation: old commandment (5)
 - (b) Request articulated (6)

II. Watch for Antichrists (2 John 7-13)

- (1) Warning against false teachers (7-11)
 - (A) Identification and doctrine of Antichrists (7)
 - (a) Many (7a)
 - (b) Deny incarnation (7b)
 - (c) Deceivers (7c)
 - (d) Like Antichrist (7d)
 - (B) Incentives for rejecting Antichrists (8-9)
 - (a) Loss of reward (8)
 - (b) Denial of God (9)

- (C) What to withhold from Antichrists (10-11)
 - (a) Platform (10a)
 - (b) Greeting (10b)
 - (c) Assistance (11)
 - (2) Conclusion (12-13)
 - (A) Reasons for John's imminent visit (12)
 - (a) Too many things to write (12a)
 - (b) Desire for a personal visit (12b)
 - (c) Complete elect lady's joy (12c)
 - (B) Extension of greeting from elect lady's nephews and nieces (13)
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Introduction

The early Church in the 1st century was under attack from both the inside and the outside. So what has changed? It should not surprise us that the Holy Spirit has anticipated every conceivable form of attack and diversion, and these three epistles are full of insights that are timely for each of us—at the personal level as well as at the corporate.

Background: Ephesus

Ephesus was the capital of proconsular Asia, which was the western part of Asia Minor. It was colonized principally from Athens; in the time of the Romans it bore the title of "the first and greatest metropolis of Asia."

It was distinguished by the Temple of Diana, whose chief shrine was there; and for its open-air theater which was the largest in the world, capable of containing 50,000 spectators. Many Jews took up their residence in this city, and here the seeds of the Gospel were sown immediately after Pentecost (Acts 2:9; 6:9).

Paul's Ministry

Paul first visited Ephesus at the close of his second missionary journey (about 51 AD) when he was returning from Greece to Syria (Acts 18:18-21). He remained, however, for only a short time, as he was hastening to keep the feast, probably of Pentecost, at Jerusalem; but he left Aquila and Priscilla behind him to carry on the work of spreading the Gospel. During his third missionary journey Paul reached Ephesus from the inland parts of Asia Minor, and tarried there for about three years (Acts 19:1).

So successful and abundant were his labours that "all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). On his return from his journey, Paul touched at Miletus, some 30 miles south of Ephesus (Acts 20:15). Sending for the presbyters of Ephesus to meet him there, he delivered to them that touching farewell charge which is recorded, and in which he warned them in Acts 20:18-35:

Acts 20:29-31 -

29 For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

30 Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

31 Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.

- Indeed, there was a rise of false teachers (the "Gnostics") that emerged subsequently.

John's Ministry

This is the very situation that John is dealing with in his letters. (Ephesus was also prominent as the first of the seven churches in Revelation, which John had received while in exile on Patmos. They, by then, however, were apparently quite diligent regarding doctrine, but had "lost their first love.") The apostle John, according to tradition, spent many years in Ephesus, where he died and was buried.

Gnosticism

This letter is a response to the Gnostics (Greek: *Gnosis* = knowledge). A mixture of mysticism, Eastern speculations and Jewish legalism. Alexandria was a major headquarters. Huxley coined the term "agnostic" = "without knowledge" (Latin = ignoramus) Paul: *Epignosis*, "superknowledge"! (Col 1:9).

- Eastern speculations + mysticism:
 - Man-made traditions and philosophy (Col 2:8)
 - Matter was evil (Col 1:16)
 - Astrology: angelic beings associated with heavenly bodies (Col 2:10,15)
- Plus, a form of Jewish legalism:
 - Good and evil were derived from rules (Col 2:21)
 - Circumcision (Col 2:11)
 - OT dietary laws (Col 2:14-17)

These heresies promised people "spiritual perfection" if they entered into the teachings and ceremonies prescribed. This "depth" and "full knowledge" could only be enjoyed by those initiated, etc. These were all based on man-made traditions and philosophy, not on divine Truth (Col 2:8).

The gnostics came to the false conclusion that matter was evil; that a powerful spirit world used material things to attack mankind. They held to a form of astrology, believing that angelic beings associated with heavenly bodies influenced affairs on earth (Col 1:16; 2:10,15). Added to these Eastern speculations was a form of Jewish legalism: the idea that the rite of circumcision was helpful in spiritual development (Col 2:11); and the OT dietary laws were also helpful in attaining spiritual perfection (Col 2:14-17). Good and evil were derived from rules and regulations (Col 2:21).

Docetic Gnostics

The Docetic (from *dokew*, "to seem") Gnostics held that Jesus did not have a real human body, but only a phantom body. He was, in fact, an aeon and had no real humanity. These views were increasingly prevalent in Ephesus (and elsewhere) and form the challenges that John was dealing with in this letter, and in his sermon known as "1 John."

Cerinithian Gnostics

The Cerinithian (followers of Cerinthus) Gnostics admitted the humanity of the man Jesus, but claimed that the Christ was an aeon that came on Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove and left him on the Cross so that only the man Jesus died.

Some thought that Jesus was "just a man"—similar to Christian Science and other phases of "New Thought." Paul deals with this heresy directly. [Others held that Jesus was only spiritual, not material; John also deals with these in his three epistles.]

At once this heresy sharpened the issue concerning the Person of Christ already set forth in Phil 2:5-11. Paul met the issue squarely and powerfully portrayed his full-length portrait of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Son of Man (both deity and humanity) in opposition to both types of Gnostics. So then Colossians seems written expressly for our own day when so many are trying to rob Jesus Christ of his deity.

These errors are important to understand since these attacks on the deity of Christ are just as prevalent today as then. Each cult group involves a strategy to misrepresent some aspect of revealed truth in regards to Christ and His redemptive work.

These views undermined the very foundations of the Christian faith, and attacked the person and work of Jesus Christ. To them, He was but one of God's many "emanations" and not the very Son of God, come in the flesh. The Incarnation means "God with us" (Matt 1:23), but these false teachers claimed that God was keeping His distance from us! When we trust the Son of God, there is no need for any intermediary beings between us and heaven!

The Age of Syncretism

These false teachings were a combination of many things: Jewish legalism, Oriental philosophies, pagan astrology, mysticism, asceticism, with a touch of Christianity. Here was "something for everybody"—an attempt to harmonize and unite many different schools of thought into a composite religion. These teachers claimed that they were not denying the Christian faith, but only lifting it to a "higher level." Do we have any of these heresies today? Indeed, and they are ever more dangerous!

Nothing "New" in the "New Age"!

Every modern erroneous cult is some ancient Satanic heresy revived. Every "new" heresy has been anticipated by the Holy Spirit. Satan has nothing new to offer. We live in a day when religious toleration is interpreted to mean "one religion is as good as another." Many people try to take the best from various religions and fabricate their own. To them Christ is

only one of several great religious teachers, with no more authority than they have. He may be prominent, but certainly not preeminent.

When we make Jesus Christ and the Bible only a part of a total religious system or philosophy, we cease to give Him preeminence. When we strive for "spiritual perfection" or "fullness" by means of formulas, disciplines, or rituals, we go backward rather than forward.

We must beware of mixing our Christian faith with such alluring things as yoga, transcendental meditation, Oriental mysticism, and the like. We must also beware of the "deeper life" teachers who offer a system for victory and fullness that bypasses devotion to Jesus Christ. In all things, He must have preeminence!

The Epistles of John

- 1st John written to the church at large
- 2nd John written to "the Elect Lady"
- 3rd John written to Gaius

Introduction to 2 John

First John is more of a sermon than the typical letter. We are leaving it to the last as the climax of the series. The message of John's second epistle is essential to having a proper perspective of what he has said in his first epistle.

It is rather remarkable how timely these letters are for today: The cultural war being waged in our country has deep spiritual significance—far beyond simply cultural or political philosophies.

Both 2 John and 3 John are short, individual, personal letters. We don't know the order that the three were written; many assume they were written after John's exile at Patmos. It would seem that 2 John was written to the same community as 1 John, but at an earlier date (since the false teachers evidently still had access to the church in 2 John, but had seceded from it in 1 John 2:19).

Furthermore, by the time of Patmos, Ephesus was diligent in doctrine, but had "lost their first love" (Rev 2:1-7). False teachers not only invaded the churches, they also tried to influence Christian homes. It is significant that the pagan left continually embarks on a militant campaign against the family. As goes the home, so goes the Church and the nation. The family is an important target in Satan's war against truth.

The Second Epistle of John may also be the most neglected book of the NT. (And if one of my suspicions proves correct, it may also harbor one of the biggest surprises!)