The Johannine Letters

FIRST JOHN

a. Authorship

1. External evidence.
   The earliest clear allusion to the content of this epistle is found in Polycarp (Adv Phil, 7; cf 1 Jn 4:2) Probably Papias may also be cited in support (Eusebius 3.39.3, 17). Irenaeus cited the epistle as by the Lord's disciple John, the writer of the fourth Gospel (De Haer 3.16, 5, 8). Both Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian similarly cite it as John's. The Muratorian fragment is somewhat confused on the Johannine epistles, although it cites 1 John as authoritative. Origen frequently cites the epistle and refers as by John. Dionysius, Origen's pupil, regarded the epistle as written by the author of the gospel, but distinguished its style from that of the Apocalypse, which he consequently attributed to a different author. The evidence is sufficient to show that from very early times the epistle was not only treated as Scripture but was assumed to be Johannine, in spite of the fact that no specific claim to this effect is made by the writer himself.

2. Internal evidence.
   This epistle and the epistle to the Hebrews are the only New Testament epistles in which no author's name is given, but in 1 John, unlike in Hebrews, the introduction is clearly intended to tell us something about the author. He is writing about what he (or rather "we") had heard, seen looked at, and touched (1:1). In no more vivid a fashion could the writer indicate that he was an eyewitness. When he says further that "the life appeared; we have seen it", he draws attention at once to the times when he companied Christ. If this indication is taken at its face value and is not regarded as a literary device to create the impression of authenticity, it narrows the field of possible authors. It is clearly in complete harmony with the traditional ascription to John the apostle.

b. Occasion and background

Although the data from the epistle itself is very slight, there are just enough indications of false teachings being combated to enable a general comparison to be made with the earliest Gnostic tendencies, particularly with Docetism. The main feature in the form of heresy being contested was a denial of the incarnation (see 2:22; 4:3). This was true of all Gnostics. The idea of an incarnate deity was unintelligible and thus rejected. Docetism evolved a means of getting over the intellectual difficulty by making a distinction between the human Jesus and the heavenly Christ, the latter only appearing to take a human form. The incarnation was not, therefore, a reality. This solution, which had a wide appeal, had the added advantage, so it was thought, of avoiding the anomaly of Christ sharing in such an inherently evil thing as matter. As these Gnostics believed that all matter was evil there was nothing for it but to deny that Christ had contact with flesh. The dangerous character of this heresy is at once apparent, for it was an attempt to preserve Christ's deity at the expense of his humanity.
c. **Purpose**

In an atmosphere of rising interest in a merging of Christianity with the higher forms of paganism to the detriment of the former, there was a pressing need for the presentation of an adequate Christian antidote to combat the danger. It was a critical period for the church, and the apostle recognizes this. He will write a letter, somewhat in the form of a tract, to warn and instruct the believers in his own district about the seriousness of the peril. But his approach is to be wholly positive. He will present a wholesome picture of true Christian life, and only incidentally denounce the error. He believes that truth is the best answer to false teaching, although he makes perfectly plain what his own estimate of the teaching is. He refers to these prophets as antichrists (2:18) because they possess the spirit of *the* antichrist (2:18, 22; 4:3). Fortunately the author has stated his own purpose in clear terms: "so that you also may have fellowship with us".

e. **Date**

There is little specific internal evidence to which to appeal in fixing a date. Most scholars would agree that no great interval could have separated John's gospel and his epistles. Some have therefore dated the epistles in the early 60's. But the majority of scholars would still date the letters in the last decade of the first century. The latest date is fixed by Ignatius' writings.

d. **Destination**

The most satisfactory explanation is that 1 John was written to a group of people, possibly in more than one Asiatic community, with whom the author was personally acquainted and who were threatened with the same infiltration of false teaching.
SECOND JOHN

a. **Authorship**

Although this epistle is known as an epistle of John, the author’s name appears nowhere in the text. The author describes himself as “the elder” (v1) (prebuteros). Regarding external evidence, it is clear that Irenaeus not only knew 2 John but assumed it to be by the apostle John. The Muratorian fragment is ambiguous in its witness to the Johannine epistles, since it specifies only two, while in the earlier part of the list dealing with John’s gospel a quotation is made from 1 John. All agree that if only two epistles were known by the fragment, they must have been 1 and 2 John. Clement of Alexandria knew of more than one Johannine letter and in a Latin fragment he refers to the second epistle. Origen cites neither 2 or 3 John, although he knew of their existence. He mentions that all do not admit their genuineness. One the whole, there are no conclusive external reasons for denying the authenticity of 2 and 3 John.

b. **Destination**

The writer of 2 John addresses his letter the the “chosen lady”. But who was the chosen lady? To this two quite different answers have been given. Either she was an individual acquaintance of the writer, or she was a community under his general supervision. The majority of scholars prefer the latter for the following reasons:

1. The lady is loved not only by the writer but by all who know the truth, which could mean “she” was known universally by Christians.
2. Neither she herself nor any of her children, etc. are mentioned in the text, which detracts from the personal character theory.
3. The subject matter is probably more suitable for a community than an individual, with its warnings of false teachers.
4. The predominance of the second person plural rather than the singular suggests a composite understanding of the addressee.
5. “the new command” of the Lord, referred to in v.5, has more point if applied to a community rather than the narrower limits of an individual.
6. The personification of the church in a feminine form is in harmony with other New testament usage.
7. The greeting in v.13 is more natural if sent from one church to another.

c. **Occasion**

It would seem that John is desiring to forewarn his readers against the infiltration of the same error he mentions in 1 John (ie: Docetic Gnosticism) and his primary purpose in writing is to put them on their guard and to stress in no uncertain way the serious character of the false teaching. He makes quite clear that the doctrine is not the doctrine of Christ and that these people are not of God (v.9). They are in fact opposed to Christ. The readers are challenged to self-examination, lest they should lose what they have gained.
THIRD JOHN

a. **Authorship**

   As in 2 John the writer introduced himself as the "elder" and so the decision reached with respect to 2 John should apply here also.

b. **Destination**

   3 John has one advantage over 2 John in that the recipient is named. Who "my dear friend Gaius" was, however, is anyone's guess. It is unlikely, with so common a name, that he is to be identified with any other Gaius mentioned in the New Testament. He is clearly well known to the author, who warmly commends him not only for his consistent Christian life, but also for generous hospitality.

c. **Occasion**

   John has apparently sent out some itinerant representatives, who have returned and reported to him their experiences (v.3). They speak highly of Gaius who entertained the strangers (vv.3,5). But one man, Diotrephes, was not prepared to receive these men and even banned the members of his church who were prepared to do so. John thus seems to be commending Gaius for his stand against Diotrephes and assures him that he will deal with Diotrephes as soon as he visits the church.