

The Authorship of the Johannine Epistles

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### Abstract

The first century church believed Jesus' return would be immediate and as a result, compiling the writings of the apostles was not an immediate priority. In the few hundred years that followed, authentic letters from apostles as well as pseudepigraphical works had begun to circulate.

Therefore, a process began of acceptance and rejection for the writings. The book of 1 John was immediately accepted into the Canon along with the Gospel of John. However, 2 John and 3 John were at first disputed and then later included in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. This thesis will examine the process of canonization and examine the letters attributed to John in order to reveal the authorship of the Johannines.

### The Authorship of the Johannine Epistles

The three Johannine Letters present a number of very difficult problems regarding their authorship and historical background. Many passages are obscurely written and difficult to translate and interpret: “However, they also have important insights to offer regarding the nature of God, the meaning of the incarnation, and the importance and the difficulty of Christian community as a witness to and an expression of divine love.”<sup>1</sup>

It is also important to note that several books were accepted in some quarters but not in others. Some churches had John’s letters earlier than others as they circulated from place to place, but it took time for the Johannine epistles to be distributed and for the evidence of their genuineness to be given and accepted by all.<sup>2</sup> The book of 1 John was immediately accepted into the Canon along with the Gospel of John. However, 2 John and 3 John were at first disputed and then later included in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament we have today. These three epistles originally bore no title and toward the end of the second century the books were given titles based on authorship, made by Christian scholars of that period.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding canonicity, no other books beside the twenty-seven were ever given significant or general acceptance. John’s apostleship and teaching likely played an important role in 2 and 3 John’s entry into the canon. As a result, many scholars today believe that these two letters are original documents from the John the Apostle because of multiple evidences of John’s

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<sup>1</sup>David Rensberger, "Conflict and Community in the Johannine Letters." *Interpretation* 60, no. 3 (2006): 278.

<sup>2</sup>J.D. Douglas, *New International Bible Dictionary*: “Canonicity” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 191.

<sup>3</sup>Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 5.

authorship of the three letters which have come to be known as 1-3 John.<sup>4</sup> This thesis will defend John's authorship based on the apostle's eyewitness account of Jesus, evidence from John's Gospel, similar vocabulary and style found in the writings, affirmation from early church fathers and an understanding of the process of canonization.

### **Authorship**

Doubts about common authorship regarding the Johannines arise from several factors but these problems can be addressed and defended. First, the epistles were received as Scripture at widely different times. This argument does not take away from the credibility of the Apostle John or the spread of the letter from church to church. Since 2 and 3 John were personal letters it would have taken some time for them to spread from place to place. Next, the author of 1 John does not identify himself in any way. Clearly the community respected John and had communication with him so it is possible that John did not feel the need to insert his name into the text. In the personal letters of 2 and 3 John he says that he is the Elder. Thirdly, the clear epistolary format of 2 and 3 John is viewed as lacking in 1 John.<sup>5</sup> This point can be defended by understanding the distinct purpose for the writing of the smaller letters. These letters were important to individuals and were written with a specific purpose. However, 1 John was most likely written to a local church or churches and a similar style and vocabulary is clearly seen. Many believe that "John, the last living apostle, did not write to any supposed single, universal visible church, but to many individual churches scattered throughout Asia Minor."<sup>6</sup> It is

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<sup>4</sup>Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), xxxvii.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>6</sup>Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Church*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2005), 66.

important to note that no person other than John the apostle was ever suggested by the early church as the author of the first epistle but the same cannot be said of 2 and 3 John despite his being the overwhelming choice.<sup>7</sup> Smalley along with many scholars argue that the same author, who refers to himself as the Elder, was responsible for 2 and 3 John, and that based on the similarity of character and style of the three letters the same man composed 1 John.<sup>8</sup> Thompson agrees and states, “the similarities in tone, language, thought and situation are such that we may safely conjecture that all three letters came from the same pen.”<sup>9</sup>

There are two kinds of evidence for assigning the epistles to the Apostle John. First, evidence is taken from the epistles themselves. Some statements within the epistles suggest that they were written by an eyewitness of Jesus’ ministry (1 John 1:1-4). Next, evidence derives from early church tradition. These two types provide internal as well as external support for defending the apostle’s authorship of the Johannines. By the close of the first century, the apostles were clearly called “presbyters” or “Elders.”<sup>10</sup> Eusebius quotes Papias who refers to an “Elder John and this reveals that there is no reason not to designate the author of the epistles by his traditional name, John.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Daniel Akin, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 22.

<sup>8</sup>Stephen Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John Word Biblical Commentary Revised*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007), xx.

<sup>9</sup>Marianne Thompson, *1-3 John*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 20.

<sup>10</sup>Brown, 5.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

### Style and Vocabulary

The vocabulary of the Fourth Gospel is instantly identifiable wherever it is quoted. John's vocabulary is distinct but limited. The words that express the main concepts of spiritual truth are relatively few in number compared to the synoptics. Out of seventy-five terms that are used most frequently in John, not more than thirty-five occur so often that they are important and this number may be reduced if roots rather than words are counted. John's vocabulary was in common use and provided meaning during the first century.<sup>12</sup> Because these words were constantly used, the vocabulary in the Gospel is repetitious. Consequently the emphasis of thought is raised for the recurring nouns and verbs that produce a similar style. "It has been claimed that 2 and 3 John cannot be by the author of 1 John since the concept of 'truth' in the two sets of writings is not the same, but this argument is without force and the common authorship of all three epistles remains the overwhelming probable hypothesis."<sup>13</sup>

In comparison to Pauline vocabulary the Johannine vocabulary is small. "It omits words of temporary interest and rings the changes on a small number of elementary words and their synonyms."<sup>14</sup> The richness of the New Testament vocabulary for sin is a clear example. Forty-eight words are used to express ideas relating to sin, and of these words, we may note that thirty-five occur in the Pauline corpus. However, John only uses thirteen words for sin.<sup>15</sup> It is

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<sup>12</sup>Merrill Tenney, *John the Gospel of Belief*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 303.

<sup>13</sup>Howard Marshall, *The New International Commentary On The New Testament: The Epistles of John*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 31.

<sup>14</sup>Inman, "Distinctive Johannine Vocabulary and the Interpretation of I John 3:9," *Westminster Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (1977), 136.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

recognized that although these figures show the Johannine vocabulary to be smaller, there are other variables affecting the figures. These words for sin differ in the Johannine corpus but this should not be an argument for different authors of the epistles. Paul uses twenty-two more words for sin than John does, yet his writings are still confirmed to be his own. Why should the Johannine epistles be put under such questioning when he clearly has a more concise set of vocabulary in his writings? Despite the Johannine vocabulary possessing a finite amount of words, the value of these words in the Gospel and the epistles is not diminished and should strengthen John's authorship not put it into question.<sup>16</sup>

### **Gospel of John**

The Gospel of John is attributed to the Apostle John by many scholars and an initial understanding of the Gospel will allow one to move forward into each of the epistles, an understanding of their chronology and then hints from a possible Johannine community before looking at affirmation from the early church fathers as well as the canonization process for the epistles. Comparing specifically the Gospel of John with 1 John reveals a tremendous amount of similarity between the two writings:

Even a superficial reading of the Gospel and the First Epistle reveals a striking similarity between the two in both subject matter and syntax. It has often been pointed out that the author of each has the same love of opposites set in stark contrast to one another, light and darkness, life and death, love and hate, truth and falsehood and they clearly have the same monotonous simplicity of construction and the same Hebraic love of parallelism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 137.

<sup>17</sup>J.R. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introductory and Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 17.



The message of the Gospel of John is underlined by the use of two key words, 'believe' used ninety-eight times and 'life' used thirty-six times, and the symbols found in the Gospel can also be found in the text of 1 John.<sup>18</sup>

An argument that has been refuted is based on the absence of various words and word groups, which are characteristic of the Gospel, from the Epistle. Many bring up the various themes such as salvation, destruction, glory, and judgment that are clearly not found in both writings, asking could they be by the same author? However, there are differences of emphasis between the Gospel and Epistles. The same argument could be made for remarkable omissions and differences that are found when the writings of Paul are compared to each other. These include the absence of the word 'church' in Romans 1-15 and the absence of 'faith' in Romans 5:3- 9:30 except for 6:8, but the dispute over Pauline material is minimal."<sup>19</sup>

As a result, many scholars believe the writings of John cannot be considered anonymous or credited to another John. The public for whom the writings were first designed must have known the identity of the author and his authority must have been centered on his apostleship. The incidental allusions to the writer which appear in the fourth Gospel may be regarded as evidence that the authorship was no mystery to the generation in which it was produced, but that it was merely taken for granted.<sup>20</sup> The Gospel of John provides a solid foundation from which to build the argument on for defending John's authorship of the Johannine Epistles.

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<sup>18</sup>Elmer Towns, *The Gospel of John: Believe and Live*, (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2002), xi.

<sup>19</sup>Marshall, 34.

<sup>20</sup>Merrill Tenney, *John the Gospel of Belief*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 297.

## 1 John

After looking at the Gospel of John, the book of 1 John will provide more evidence for John's authorship of the book. First John is clearly intended for a specific audience and directed to a particular situation: "It is possible that 1 John was sent to more than one congregation in the author's proximity or that he belonged specifically to that congregation."<sup>21</sup> This letter very well could have circled between the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation:

During the last one hundred years or so a small but persistent minority of scholars have held that the evident similarity between Epistle and Gospel is due rather to imitation than to identity or authorship. The similarities of subject matter, style and vocabulary in the Gospel and First Epistle supply very strong evidence for identity of authorship, which is not materially weakened by the peculiarities of each or the differences of emphasis in the treatment of common themes.<sup>22</sup>

The Gospel and 1 John are overwhelmingly similar and reveal similar Johannine style: "It can be noted that the Epistles of John stand closer to the Gospel in style and content than do any other writings to one another in the New Testament; the close stylistic similarities are quite sufficient to outweigh the differences that have been discovered."<sup>23</sup> Many scholars have examined multiple writings from other authors in the New Testament and this has revealed the similarity of the Johannines. Stott agrees with Marshall and states, "the similarity between the Gospel and Epistle is considerably greater than that between the Third Gospel and Acts, which are known to have come from the same pen and between the Pastoral Epistles to Timothy and

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<sup>21</sup>Thompson, 18.

<sup>22</sup>Stott, 24.

<sup>23</sup>Marshall, 33.

Titus.”<sup>24</sup> These books are clearly attributed to Luke and the latter to Paul, and Johannine writings should be attributed to John the Apostle as well.

Central to the whole of 1 John is the understanding that "God is light," which is revealed in the Gospel of John.<sup>25</sup> A few scholars believe the author of the Epistles never imagined his encouragement to his readers against adversaries to be read apart from his community's tradition. Not only did the author presuppose this tradition but referred to it over and over again as what was "from the beginning" in 1 John 1:1; 2:13,14,24 and "the word you already heard" in 1 John 2:7. The magnificent specimen of that tradition can be found in the Gospel of John. The Johannine Epistles must be understood, therefore, not by themselves but in relation to the Gospel.<sup>26</sup>

## **2 John and 3 John**

In addition to the Gospel of John and 1 John, these smaller letters provide more valuable evidence to defend John's authorship of the Johannines. "While John's first epistle has a fairly general audience, his last two are very specific: 2 John is to the "elect lady and her children" and 3 John, to "the beloved Gaius" refers to "the church" in which Diotrephes was a member of a local congregation."<sup>27</sup> The structure of 2 John as a whole is relatively simple and clear-cut. The letter begins with opening matters in verses one through three, the body in verses four through eleven, and closing conventions in the final section. The body of 2 John is formally and materially unbroken from beginning to end. The author expresses his desire for face-to-face

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<sup>24</sup>Stott, 24.

<sup>25</sup>Wayne Brouwer, "1-3 John." *Calvin Theological Journal* 44, no. 2 (2009): 419.

<sup>26</sup>Brown, xi.

<sup>27</sup>Geisler, 66.

conversation in the closing of the letter.<sup>28</sup> This demonstrates his acceptance and authority over the community. Second John was clearly better known as evidenced by the early church fathers. The letter's direct opposition to false teachers was no doubt useful in the church's confrontations with Gnostic groups.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of the difference in the addressees in 2 and 3 John, the two letters are remarkably similar based on similar Johannine language and style. The striking resemblances are astounding considering they were written to different groups and for different intentions. Both letters express joy in the spiritual progress of those to whom he writes in almost the same amount of words.<sup>30</sup> The same terms and phrases appear and even the same word for false teachers is used in both letters. The addressees are encouraged to "walk in truth" and the activity of preachers is presumed, both for the false teachers in 2 John 7 and the "brothers and sisters" who are sent out.<sup>31</sup> Also, to strengthen the point, there are identical correspondences in the prescripts in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1. Likewise, the conclusions in 2 John 12 and 3 John 13-14 are nearly identical.

In 2 and 3 John, the author begins his letter not by announcing his personal name but by his title, the Elder. This described not age but official position and identified him with his readers immediately as they recognized his authority<sup>32</sup>: "The term Elder originally meant an old man but

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<sup>28</sup>Robert Funk, "Form and Structure of 2 and 3 John." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86, no. 4 (December 1, 1967): 429.

<sup>29</sup>Strecker, xxxiv.

<sup>30</sup>Douglas, 537.

<sup>31</sup>Strecker, 253.

<sup>32</sup>J.R. Stott, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of John*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 200.

it came to be used quite naturally for a person exercising oversight and leadership.”<sup>33</sup> It was used for leaders in Jewish communities, and then it was used for groups of leaders in early Christian churches. Second John reveals that the community did not only recognize the Elder, but that his authority was effective in other communities as well. In addition to this, the Elder was active in spreading Christian teaching and making the love commandment a reality among Christians.

The author of 3 John claims the designation "the Elder" as a means of "affirming his pastoral self-understanding and probably public identity."<sup>34</sup> It is clear that, “the Elder would like to visit the church so that he can call attention to what Diotrephes is doing which suggests that the Elder has legitimate authority in the congregation.”<sup>35</sup> As a result, the reader understands the authority of John and the respect the community has for the Apostle. The private letter of the Elder, aimed at the controversy with Diotrephes, was therefore difficult to adapt to the theological tasks of the church. As a result, 3 John shared a fate similar to the letter to Philemon. Philemon, the most personal of Paul’s letters, is also not attested in the literature of the church before Tertullian.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, the Elder’s missionary activity is also expressed in 3 John to Gaius, who is among the followers of the Elder seen in 3 John 4. The Elder clearly sends out believers who are active in spreading the truth to others. This is characteristic of someone who had been with Jesus and witnessed his resurrection first hand. These brothers and sisters obviously found support among the Elder’s followers, but were rejected by his opponents among whom was Diotrephes

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<sup>33</sup>Marshall, 42.

<sup>34</sup>James Sweeney, "1-3 John." *Trinity Journal* 31, no. 1 (2010): 148.

<sup>35</sup>Thompson, 19.

<sup>36</sup>Strecker, xxxiv.

found in 3 John 5-8. As a result, a few scholars believe this conflict had not ended at the time 2 and 3 John were completed because the Elder announces his own arrival in 3 John 14. This visit would be to Gaius, but would also affect the church community including Diotrephes.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, it is clear that he had a relationship with the community and that he was highly respected. However, the differences that appear in these two letters also clarify that John carefully shaped his concluding words to the situation being dealt with.<sup>38</sup> These evidences contribute to John's authorship of the Johannines in addition to the Gospel of John and 1 John.

### **Chronology of the Epistles**

The letters' chronological relationship to each other is not obvious. Scholars have variously argued that 1 John precedes 2 John, that 2 John precedes 1 John, that 3 John precedes 1 and 2 John, and even that the epistles were written at the same time. Some scholars have also questioned whether there is enough evidence to conclude anything about the chronological order of the epistles.<sup>39</sup> Their canonical order is not necessarily chronological, but there is evidence it very well could be. Since 1 John was accepted into the canon before the others, this might explain why it appears before the other two. In addition, many scholars believe that because 1 John and 2 John are so similar in subject, it seems likely that they must also be close in date.<sup>40</sup>

Strecker believes that if both the shorter writings are genuine, then 2 John preceded 3 John,

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<sup>37</sup>Strecker xxxix.

<sup>38</sup>Edmond Hiebert, "Studies in 3 John, Part 1: An Exposition of 3 John 1-4; pt 2: An Exposition of 3 John 5-10; pt 3: An Exposition of 3 John 11-14," *Bibliotheca sacra* 144, no. 575 (July 1, 1987): 300.

<sup>39</sup>Strecker, xl.

<sup>40</sup>Rensberger, 279.

since the sending and reception of 2 John seems to be reflected in 3 John.<sup>41</sup> Second and 3 John might also reveal the last canonical evidence of the Johannine community's existence. He believes that 2 John was written prior to the community being torn with the strife of false teaching. Then assumes that 3 John was written shortly after the outbreak of the false teaching: "The letter's general tone and its somewhat radical admonitions regarding those who bear the false teaching sound much more like an initial attempt to respond to the 'heresy' than a final desperate attempt to save the community."<sup>42</sup> As a result, first John was likely written first as the letter sought to expose the faulty interpretation of the Johannine tradition by the false teachers as well as to uplift the church and encourage the believers to remain faithful to that "which was received from the beginning."<sup>43</sup> This larger epistle was then followed by 2 and 3 John based on Strecker's chronological understanding.

It seems probable that the Gospel of John existed prior to the writing of any of the Johannine Letters. The language of 1 John along with the historical context found in 1 and 2 John can be understood alongside the Gospel of John. The statement "Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you" in 1 John 2:24 acknowledges that the writer is taking a look back into a tradition that has existed for some time. Whether this tradition was something that Paul laid a foundation of or a reference to the Gospel of John is unknown. However, this statement reveals that this community had no doubt heard the Good News of Jesus Christ. The date of the Gospel is far from fixed; it was written in the nineties or a few years prior to that date. This urges

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<sup>41</sup>Strecker, xl.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>John Thomas, "The Order of the Composition of the Johannine Epistles," *Novum Testamentum* 37, no. 1:68, (1995): 74.

some scholars to a date of around 100-110 for the Epistles, but there is really no way of being absolute<sup>44</sup>: “Many scholars believe the epistles should assigned to the end of the first century because of their relationship to the Gospel of John and because they dealt with a new set of problems that had arisen with the church.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Johannine Community**

In addition to examining the Gospel and the Epistles, examining the Johannine community in the first century is valuable to defending John’s authorship. Understanding the Johannine community will also aid the reader in seeing the similarity in style of the epistles: “Johannine Christianity is complex and this must be taken into account when one investigates individual concepts and themes, such as glory, miracles, witness, faith, Christology, and eschatology.”<sup>46</sup> The Johannine community functioned under the authority of John on the basis of love:

To understand the Johannine community we should envision a network of smaller congregations or house churches, sharing a theological heritage and historical roots. The Elder who has pastoral responsibility for the larger community is now writing both to interpret the split that has torn the church and to warn other congregations about the problem.<sup>47</sup>

The Gospel of John and the Johannine Letters are so similar in their language and in the scope of their ideas that scholars speak of a “Johannine Circle.”<sup>48</sup> This concept is useful for

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<sup>44</sup>Rensberger, 280.

<sup>45</sup>Thompson, 21.

<sup>46</sup>Andrew Mattill, "Johannine Communities Behind the Fourth Gospel: Georg Richter's Analysis," *Theological Studies* 38, no. 2 (June 1, 1977): 311.

<sup>47</sup>Marianne Thompson, *1-3 John*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.



explaining the close relation among the Johannine writings as well as comprehending their independence from each other. Some scholars speak of a “school of John,” saying that the differences and agreements among John’s writings point to school traditions and presume teacher-pupil relationships.<sup>49</sup> Many also claim that through the combination of the Gospel of John and the Epistles, one can discover more about the history of the Johannine Community than any other New Testament churches, except the Pauline ones.<sup>50</sup> This “Johannine tradition” does not merely refer to a style of writing or speaking but also to a way of thinking with distinctive Johannine vocabulary that reflects a distinctive worldview and provides for an understanding of the coming of Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup>

One starting point for approaching the question about the history of a “Johannine school” could be the self-designation by the sender of 2 John and 3 John. The name could be understood as a reference or as an official title. The name reveals that the community in 2 John as well as Gaius, the recipient of 3 John, was distinctly familiar with the person and they acknowledged his authority in their community.

The Johannine Christians specifically emphasized and expanded the use of the term “friend” to include the entire community. John’s epistles reveal that friendship for him is grounded firmly in love because the word *φίλος* means lover. John understood that the disciples did not choose Jesus to be their friend, for the choice was his and his alone. Jesus did not honor

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<sup>49</sup>Strecker, xxxv.

<sup>50</sup>Brown, xii.

<sup>51</sup>Judith Lieu, *I, II, & III John: A Commentary*, (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 18.

the disciples with friendship because of their loyalty and faithfulness but rather it was an act of grace on his behalf that was revealed during his ministry. His revelation to them bound their friendship with him and also with each other. That freed them from the bondage of slavery and elevated them to being Jesus' friends and followers.

As a result of all that Jesus had said and done in his earthly ministry, Christians saw themselves as a community of friends who were rooted in the love of Christ. This friendship was to be grounded in the love of Jesus that was seen in his own love for his disciples. Therefore, the community sought after discipleship, which meant walking in love, loving one another as Jesus had loved them found in John 15:12, even if it meant death. The community clearly respected John's authority and as he addressed their problems they respected him. Clearly they could see that "without discipleship, without abiding in love, friendship with Jesus and with one another was simply impossible."<sup>52</sup> The Johannine Community further strengthens the defense of John's authorship of the Johannines.

### **Early Church Fathers**

Evidence from the early church fathers testifies of the Apostle John and his authorship of the Epistles. Athanasius of Alexandria was the first to list the twenty-seven books that now comprise the Canon, though he also included several of the apocryphal books in his Old Testament Canon.<sup>53</sup> Eusebius offers the first datable listing of books that belong to the "recognized (ομολογουμένα) books;" among the doubted books (αντιλεγόμενα), he lists James,

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<sup>52</sup>John Fitzgerald, "Christian Friendship: John, Paul, and the Philippians," *Interpretation* 61, no. 3 (July 1, 2007): 285.

<sup>53</sup>Evans, 208.

Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation.<sup>54</sup> From the time of Irenaeus, the early church emphasized the importance of an apostolic witness and accepted materials into its Scripture collection that were believed to be contemporary with them.<sup>55</sup>

During the period of 95-118 A.D., Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp quoted or made clear allusions to all of our New Testament books except Luke, Colossians, Philemon, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation.<sup>56</sup> Irenaeus clearly understood that the Apostle John had written the book as is evidenced by the early church fathers: “When we come to Irenaeus, toward the end of the second century, we find that he accepted 1 John as the work of John the disciple of the Lord, and this view was shared by such authorities as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and the Muratorian Canon and Eusebius states that its authenticity was never questioned.”<sup>57</sup>

A passage from a treatise entitled *Interpretation of the Oracles of the Lord* by Papias says, “If ever anyone came who had followed the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the presbyters, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or Matthew, or any other of the Lord’s disciples had said, and what Aristion and the presbyter John, the Lord’s disciples were saying.”<sup>58</sup>

Here Papias refers to a number of disciples of the Lord, revealing the names of the Twelve, and describes them as elders. His use of the past tense to describe what they “had said”

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 222.

<sup>56</sup>Douglas, 191.

<sup>57</sup>Marshall, 48.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

suggests that they possibly were dead at the time when he sought information from them. Then he mentions two living disciples, Aristion and the presbyter John. This reveals that “the elder John” would be a title for John the apostle, a usage which is perhaps paralleled in Peter’s description of himself as “your fellow elder” in 1 Peter 5:1<sup>59</sup>: “Since the most plausible interpretation of 1 John 1:1-4 is that the author claimed to be an eyewitness of the earthly life of Jesus, and since we know that the Gospel of John was attributed to one of Jesus’ earthly disciples, it is fitting to say that John, ‘the elder,’ was the author of the Epistles.”<sup>60</sup>

First John specifically was one of the earliest books besides the Gospels and Epistles of Paul to be acknowledged as Scripture as part of the Christian Canon. As noted, both Eusebius and Origen accepted it as part of the sacred collection of Christian Scriptures by the end of the third century. First John is specifically cited by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian, and scholars agree that few were opposed to the authenticity of this letter as most writers of antiquity agreed that the Apostle John had written it. By the very end of the second century 1 John was being cited both in the West and in the East. Tertullian cites and testifies of 1 John forty or fifty times as he refers to the book as the work of John. Clement of Alexandria not only cites 1 John but also speaks of it as “the greater epistle,” revealing he knew of at least one other Johannine Epistle.<sup>61</sup> Eusebius confirms that in the early fourth century very few in the church ever questioned its authenticity.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>61</sup>Brown, 10.

<sup>62</sup>McDonald, 396.

The smaller epistles took time to gain acceptance into the Canon. The first specific reference to 3 John came during the time of Jerome and Augustine. Some scholars argue that 2 John and 3 John circulated at first as one letter stemming from the belief that the letters were under one name.<sup>63</sup> A handful of scholars believe this because 1 John as well as an additional letter were known but the writing in the second letter was not revealed by ancient manuscripts. At this time 1-3 John appear in the Scriptures and in theological treatises as their authority and reception were both questioned and accepted.<sup>64</sup> The works of Eusebius and Jerome led the early church fathers to conclude that the two smaller Johannine letters were clearly written by the same author. The great similarity in the form of the letters and the thought that the two are to be quite close in time as well results in the belief that the letter is 2 John.<sup>65</sup>

According to church tradition, John spent his final years in Ephesus, which was the most important city of the district.<sup>66</sup> Scholars believe it is very likely that the seven churches of Asia enjoyed John's ministry in the closing years of his life. Many scholars believe that John wrote his Gospel in Asia at the request of Christian friends.<sup>67</sup> This may have been the very community that was addressed later on in John's ministry in order to rid the church of false teaching. Many believe John died in Ephesus about the end of the century. This tradition can be traced from Eusebius back to Theophilus who flourished at the end of the second century in Antioch. Irenaeus, one of the earliest of these witnesses was a disciple of Polycarp who had been a

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 397.

<sup>65</sup>Strecker, 254.

<sup>66</sup>Charles Pfeiffer, *Baker's Bible Atlas*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 242.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

disciple of the apostle John and he testifies of John's death as well.<sup>68</sup> Eusebius reports in *Ecclesiastical History* the testimony of Irenaeus about his time with Polycarp. He mentions Polycarp's contact with John: "I am able to describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat as he discoursed, and his goings out and comings in, and the manner of his life, and physical appearance and his discourses with people, and the accounts which he gave of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord."<sup>69</sup> This source is obviously very valuable to determining the authorship of the Johannine Epistles based on Polycarp, the disciple of John. The church fathers clearly believed John the Apostle to be the author of the Gospel as well as the Epistles. The testimony of his disciples as well as evidence from the community contributes to the strengthening of John's authorship.

### Canonicity

The previous section demonstrates the early church fathers beliefs about John's authorship and many of these men were vital as they were led by God in the collection and decision-making behind the New Testament Canon. It is important to realize that while the definition of a biblical canon deals more with the end of a complex process, with a set list of twenty-seven books, the authority ascribed to the writings was acknowledged much sooner, while they were still being used to meet the rising needs of the community.<sup>70</sup> The word canon is often used in literary scholarship to speak of the "classics" or the basis of literary productions

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<sup>68</sup>Douglas, 534.

<sup>69</sup>Darrell Bock, *Jesus in Context: Background Readings for Gospel Study*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 33.

<sup>70</sup>Lee McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Incorporated, 1995), 18.

that became a prototype for writers to follow. However, in the Christian community, it refers to the writings or Scriptures that comprise the Bible. The term was first used in the fourth century to refer to the books that Christians believed came from God, which were divinely inspired books that clarify both who God is and what the will of God is for the people of God in the world, and as a result of their beliefs about Scripture, both Jews and Christians became known as “People of the Book.”<sup>71</sup>

The word canon comes from a form of the Greek word ‘κανον,’ which is derived from ‘κανε,’ a word that has a parallel meaning with the Semitic term ‘*kanah*.’ Initially this term referred to a “measuring rod” or “measuring stick.”<sup>72</sup> “Among the Greeks, the word came to refer to a standard or norm by which all things are judged or evaluated, whether the perfect form to follow in architecture or sculpture or the infallible criterion by which things are to be measured.”<sup>73</sup> The early church fathers used the term canon in reference to a “canon of faith,” or a “*regula fidei*,” that formed the essence of their belief in Christ.<sup>74</sup> In the New Testament, the Greek word ‘κανον,’ is found only in Paul’s letters, where it speaks of guidelines established by God, along with the limits of Paul’s ministry or boundaries of a similar ministry (2 Corinthians 10:13, 15, 16) and once as the standard or norm of true Christianity (Galatians 6:16).<sup>75</sup> It

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 50.

designated a set of core beliefs that distinguished the Christian community along with its understanding of the will of God and mission of the Church.<sup>76</sup>

The books of Scripture are not canonical based solely on the determination of the community, authority, or tradition, but rather based on the intrinsic merits of the books and divine revelation from God.<sup>77</sup> The books of the Bible are canonical, even if they were not always universally recognized (similarly, Jesus was the Messiah despite some who did not recognize him as such).<sup>78</sup> Twenty years before the close of the second century the four gospels were widely accepted. The Pauline Corpus was deemed worthy of a distinct place in the life of the Church by the same period of time. The story of the acceptance of other books into canonization is quite a different story as many went through an extensive process. The early church fathers provide insight into this process. Eusebius said that around 330 A.D. the books finding the greatest difficulty were the Gospel according to the Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.<sup>79</sup> By this point, it was left for various synods and councils over the next few hundred years to make the final distinctions between accepted and rejected writings of the canon.<sup>80</sup>

In order to understand how canonical material and practices were developed and constituted, one must examine what communities actually labeled as canonical. The most important matters regarding canonization are discovering the form or various forms that

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>John C. Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canonicity," *Trinity Journal* 28, no. 2 (2007): 231.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 234.

<sup>79</sup>William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 34.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.



canonical material, persons, and practices would take, how they would be received, and what their fundamental functions would be.<sup>81</sup> Prior to this process there was not a rational or known divine plan regarding the collection of the Scriptures known separately from the canonical material itself to which one can appeal to settle the matter. The historical record provides the only way one can piece the process together. Theologically speaking, one has to respect the freedom of the Holy Spirit to guide the Church into those canonical traditions that have proven useful for the entire community.<sup>82</sup>

The first reference we have to the list of the books currently found in the New Testament is located in the famous Easter Letter of Athanasius in 367.<sup>83</sup> It was the community led by the sovereignty of God who ultimately decided the final list of books completing the process of canonization: “The fact that the process was initially informal, that it took centuries to be brought to completion, and that the formal decisions were not altogether tidy does nothing to falsify this claim.”<sup>84</sup>

In order to understand the process, it is important to realize how and when specific biblical manuscripts were recognized as Scripture by the early church, as well as understanding the sacredness of the texts in the church.<sup>85</sup> God ordained each and every word of Scripture and at this moment they became part of the canon but in the sense of the books as a whole, the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>85</sup> Craig Evans and Emmanuel Tov, *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 204.

collection and compiling took time and effort. One can conclude that establishing a fixed biblical canon was not of as much concern in the earlier development of the church as it became later. Realizing the social context in which the issue emerged is vital to understanding canon development properly.<sup>86</sup> Strong evidence dealing with canonicity and the early church fathers further encourages the belief the John the Apostle was the author of the Johannine epistles.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the evidence from the apostle's eyewitness account of Jesus, evidence from John's Gospel and internal evidence in the epistles, similar vocabulary and style found in the writings, and affirmation from early church fathers as well as in the canonization process, I believe John the Apostle wrote the Gospel and each of the three Johannine Epistles. These epistles were clearly written to believers and addressed different issues in the church including love, rejecting false teachers and encouraging true teachers. The authority of the Elder and his recognition by the community is clearly seen in each of the epistles. Evidence from the early church fathers regarding the authorship of 1 John and minimal sound evidence for alternate authorship of the smaller epistles points to John the Apostle as the author. With little evidence regarding chronology I believe the Gospel of John was completed prior to the Epistles around a date of 90 A.D. and the three epistles followed after. I believe that 1 John was written prior to the smaller letters to address and confirm the communities receiving of the Gospel and then the smaller letters followed to rid the church of false teaching and encourage them to press on in their faith. More specifically, 2 John was written to warn against entertaining false teachers while 3 John was written to encourage entertaining true teachers, the apostolic delegates. This reveals

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 209.

the two-part nature of the epistles and how they fit as a whole together with the other Johannine writings. John's authorship, style and vocabulary has been shown to be even more consistent than the writings of the Gospel of Luke and Acts as well as some of the writings of Paul and as a result I see no other confirmation needed to attest for Johannine authorship of all three epistles.

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