

THE BOOK OF 1 JOHN

ORIENTING DATA FOR 1 JOHN

- **Content:** a treatise that offers assurance to some specific believers, encouraging their loyalty to Christian faith and practice—in response to some false prophets who have left the community
- **Author:** the same author who wrote 2 and 3 John, who there calls himself “the elder”; a solid historical tradition equated him with the apostle John
- **Date:** unknown; probably toward the end of the first Christian century (late 80s, early 90s).
- **Recipients:** a Christian community (or communities) well known to the author (whom he calls “dear children” and “dear friends”; the false prophets defected “from us,” 2:19); it has traditionally been thought to be located in or around Ephesus
- **Occasion:** the defection of the false prophets and their followers, who have called into question the orthodoxy—both teaching and practice—of those who have remained loyal to what goes back to “the beginning”
- **Emphases:** that Jesus who came in the flesh is the Son of God; that Jesus showed God’s love for us through his incarnation and crucifixion; that true believers love one another as God loved them in Christ; that God’s children do not habitually sin, but when we do sin, we receive forgiveness; that believers can have full confidence in the God who loves them; that by trusting in Christ we now have eternal life

OVERVIEW OF 1 JOHN

You can experience some real ambivalence in reading 1 John. On the one hand, John’s writing style is very simple, with a very limited and basic vocabulary (so much so that this is usually the first book beginning Greek students learn to read). It also has a large number of memorable—as well as some profound—moments. On the other hand, you may experience real difficulty trying to follow John’s train of thought. Not only is it hard at times to see how some ideas connect with others, but certain, obviously significant, themes are repeated several times along the way.

Although, like most of Paul’s letters, the aim of 1 John is to persuade, it nonetheless does not come in the form of a letter (notice that there is no salutation or final greeting). Most likely this is because John is writing to communities where he has direct oversight. What he writes includes teaching that “you have heard from the beginning” (2:24) about “the Word of life” who “was from the beginning” (1:1; cf. 2:13).

The primary concerns are three: the Incarnation; love for the brothers and sisters, especially those in need; and the relationship between sin and being God's children. The first two of these are the more urgent and are expressed together in 3:23: "This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another."

The Incarnation is touched on in 1:1–4 and 2:20–25, then specifically taken up in 4:1–6 and 5:1–12. The saving significance of Christ's death—the ultimate expression of God's love for us—is tied directly to one's belief that he "came in the flesh."

The concern about believers' loving one another is spoken to in a preliminary way in 2:7–11, then specifically in 3:11–24 and 4:7–21. The obvious tie between these two themes is that God's love for us, which we in turn are to have for one another, is fully revealed in the Incarnation, when the Son of God died for us (see 2:5–6; 3:16; 4:8–12).

The concern about sin is tied to the theme "Who are the true children of God?" This issue is first taken up in 1:5–2:2; it is picked up again in 2:28–3:10 and forms the concluding matter in 5:13–21. God's true children do not continue to live in sin, but neither are they sinlessly perfect; what matters is whether their obedience expresses itself in love for the brothers and sisters. The true children of God have already been given eternal life (= entered into the life of God, and thus are tasting the life of the age to come).

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING 1 JOHN

As you read, be especially on the lookout for what John says about the false prophets, since they are the key to everything. Note that they have recently left the community (2:19), but only after trying to lead the whole church astray (2:26; 3:7; 4:1). These prophets apparently considered their teaching to come from the Spirit (cf. 4:1), which is why John urges that the believers' own anointing of the Spirit is sufficient for them (2:20, 27; 3:24). Indeed, in a marvelous wordplay on the language of "anointing" (*chrisma*), he calls the false prophets "antichrists" (*anti-christos* = against the Anointed One). There has been much speculation about who these false prophets are, or what heresy they represent, but in the end these things cannot be known for certain, except that they deny the Incarnation, fail to love those in need, and (perhaps) argue that they are sinless.

The wonder of this little treatise is how much John can say, and say so profoundly, while using a notably limited vocabulary. But it is the very repetition of words, plus the use of stark contrasts, that is so effective. His special vocabulary tells the whole story: To remain/continue/abide (24x) in the truth (9x) means to believe in (9x) or confess (5x) the Son (22x), to whom the Father (14x) and Spirit (8x) bear witness (12x); it means further to be born of God (10x), so as to walk (5x) in the light (6x), to hear (14x) and to know (40x) God, to keep (7x) the commandment (14x) to love (46x) the brothers and sisters (15x), and thus to have life (13x), which is from the beginning (8x), and finally to overcome (6x) the world. All of this is in contrast to the lie (7x), deceit (4x), denying Christ (3x), having a false spirit (4x), thus being antichrist (4x), walking in darkness (6x), hating (5x) one's brothers and sisters but loving the world (23x), thus being in sin (27x), which leads to death (6x).

In putting all of this together for the reading of 1 John, it may help you to think in terms of a musical composition rather than a Pauline argument. A prelude anticipates the first theme, then the next two main themes are struck, or at least hinted at, followed by an interlude and

then another prelude—this time to the major theme of the false prophets and their denial of the Incarnation. With all the major themes now in place, John works them over two more times each, adding and clarifying as he builds with powerful crescendo to the finale.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 411–413.