

Theories which attack this tradition are usually based on the assumption that John did not write the fourth Gospel and have little following today (especially as more information appears to support Johannine authorship of the gospel). Based on an obscure passage from Papias (quoted by Eusebius in his HISTORY OF THE CHURCH), the most common alternative theory to Johannine authorship suggests that an other wise unknown "John the Elder" wrote the epistles. They say that an apostle writing against a heresy would appeal to his apostolic authority. This theory and others which deny 1 John to the apostle fail to explain the unanimous testimony of the early church, and often involve more problems than they seek to solve.

First John was probably written at the same time as the gospel. Arguments that one preceded the other are so subjective that no certainty can be reached on this point. The parallels of thought and language suggest that the author may have been working on both at the same time or laid aside the larger work to write 1 John when a particular situation arose in the churches. If this is true then 1 John was written c. AD 95-100. If the traditions of the early church are trustworthy John spent the last years of his life in Ephesus and this letter was probably written from there.

John wrote to combat a heresy the heart of which was a denial of the incarnation (2:22-23), which in turn resulted in wrong practice. This included antinomianism, a natural tendency when Christian freedom is emphasized to the detriment of obedience (3:4-6). John's attack on this heresy was positive; he teaches truth rather than attacking the error directly (although he does deal with the heretics in stern language) (2:18). He seeks to encourage his readers and to equip them to distinguish truth from error.

First John is commonly called an epistle even though it lacks some of the normal components: salutation, thanksgiving, personal names, concluding greetings. It was probably written as a circular to a group of people or churches for which he felt particularly responsible and with whom he had a close relationship (2:1, 21, 26). There is now no way of knowing where that group of churches may have been, although somewhere in the province of Asia seems reasonable, given John's long ministry in Ephesus.

Second and Third John are less well attested than 1 John probably due to their brevity and rather narrow concerns. Irenaeus quoted 2 John and attributed it to John. It was known to other writers -- some mention that its genuineness was not admitted by the entire church. A theory that arose after several centuries claimed that "the Elder" was not the apostle but another "John the Elder" mentioned by Papias. This seems based on a misunderstanding of Papias' statement. Both 2 and 3 John share phrases and ideas with 1 John. It seems more likely that these common aspects arise out of common authorship than that they are the work of an imitator. Some scholars also claim that passages in 2 and 3 John are only