Introduction to 1 John

Where is it in the Bible?

First John is the twenty-third book in the New Testament and comes between 2 Peter and 2 John. It is the first of the Johannine Epistles, which have much in common with each other and with the Gospel according to John. Like the Pauline epistles, these letters were arranged in the New Testament according to their length, from longest to shortest. The order does not indicate anything about order of composition.

Who wrote it?

Although its author is not named in the text, the early church came to connect 1 John with the gospel according to John because of similarities in language, style, and themes. Since John, "the beloved disciple", had already been accepted as the author of the Gospel, the conclusion was that he had also written 1 John. While some still hold this view, many have suggested that the Johannine Epistles were written by a different author who was a leader in the community in which the gospel was produced and who was possibly involved in its final editing.

When was it written?

This letter was probably written in the 90s, around the same time or shortly after the Gospel according to John.

What is it about?

The First Letter of John does not have the format of a letter; it seems more like a sermon or essay that was written to address a specific problem. It appears that false teachers have led some members of the community astray and this has caused a split in the community (1 John 2:19). The author is writing to encourage the believers "to have faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made flesh, and … to live a life of love and discipleship in the unity of the Spirit."[1]

How is it structured?

    I.   Introduction (1:1-4)

    II.   God As Light (1:5-3:10)

        a. Light and Darkness (1:5-2:2)

        b. Walking in the Light (2:3-11)

        c. Purpose for Writing (2:12-14)

        d. Warning against Loving the World (2:15-17)

        e. Warning against Antichrists (2:18-27)

        f. Life as Children of God (2:28-3:10)

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1   Alan Padgett at http://www.enterthebible.org/newtestament.aspx?rid=62

III.   Love for One Another (3:11-5:12)

          a. Love Commandment Revisited (3:11-24)

          b. Testing the Spirits (4:1-6)

          c. God Is Love (4:7-21)

          d. Faith Conquers the World (5:1-5)

          e. The Son of God (5:6-12)

IV.   Conclusion (5:13-21)

What are some things to look for?

- **Atoning Sacrifice:** The writer says that Jesus offered himself as a *hilasmos.* "The meaning of this word , used in 1 John 2:2; 2:10, is greatly disputed: it might mean either 'propitiation' (placating an offend God) or 'expiation' (cleansing or removing of defilement). For centuries, exegetes have disagreed as to which meaning is intended, and theologians have worked out different conceptions of atonement theory accordingly."[2]

- **Dualism:** 1 John uses language which depicts choices between strongly opposed alternatives including good or evil, light or darkness, truth or falsehood, and church or world.

- **Incarnation:** 1 John emphasizes the point that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and is fully human. This may be in response to the fact that many religions and philosophies of the time saw the flesh or the body as inherently evil.

- **Love:** Love is the core of God's being, and Christians should imitate God. The necessity for believers to love one another is mentioned or commanded over 10 times in this letter. This love is shown by obeying God's commandments and living as Jesus lived. One concrete example of what this means is caring for those in need (3:17).

- **Sin:** In 1 John, there is "an undeniable tension between the reality of sin and the ideal of sinlessness."[3] For example, in 1:10, it says that if we deny that we are sinners, we are liars. Yet later the author says that those who are born of God and abide in Christ do not sin (3:6,9). Are these things contradictory? And what is meant by "mortal sin" in 5:16-17 (NRS)? These questions have been debated for years, but no clear answers have been found.

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2   Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 501.

3   Powell, 501.