

SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

Approximate date: 70-90 C.E.

Time period: period of transition in the *ekklēsia* from Apostolic to post-Apostolic

Author: the Apostle John

Location of author: Ephesus or Asia Minor (conservative), Syria (liberal)

Target audience and their location: a congregation of Believers (a “lady”)

People:

John the Apostle, “chosen lady” or Kyria (debated)

People mentioned:

Yeshua the Messiah

Key Themes:

remembering the command to love one another / warning about deceivers / warning about false teachers

Key Scriptures: 2 John 6 / **Greeting** (vs. 1-3); **Walking in the Truth** (vs. 4-6);

Erroneous Teachers (vs. 7-11); **Conclusion** (vs. 12-13)¹

Theological Summary: The authorship and date issues surrounding the letter of 2 John are generally tied to that of 1 John (authorship issues of the **Epistles of John** are summarized at the beginning of the entry for **1 John**). Many conservative theologians accept genuine Johannine authorship of the letter of 2 John, whereas most liberals do not. Some conservatives do, however, think that a separate John the Elder, rather than the Apostle John, was the author of this epistle. But, they still may assign authorship of the Gospel of John and letter of 1 John to the Apostle. Generally, all are agreed that 2 & 3 John have the same author,² given the familiar language and vocabulary of each text. The challenge with believing that a John the Elder wrote 2 John is the fact that we have no definite, external tradition describing who this John the Elder was.³ The most we may see is that the Fourth Century Christian historian Eusebius, writing about the Second Century Papias, said that Papias distinguished John the Apostle and another John, called the Presbyter/Elder:

¹ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 899.

² Barabas, “John, Letters of,” in *NIDB*, 537.

³ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 884.

“It is also proper to observe that the name of John was twice mentioned, the former of which he mentioned with Peter, James, Matthew, and the other apostles, evidently meaning the evangelist. But in a separate point in his discourse, he ranked the other John with the rest not included in the number of apostles, placing Aristion before him. He distinguished him plainly by the name of presbyter” (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.5).⁴

For sure, the author of 2 John addresses himself as “the elder” (v. 1; *ho presbuteros*, ὁ πρεσβύτερος), but does this require him to be anyone other than the Apostle John, son of Zebedee? A liberal resource like *IDB* notes how, “Both II and III John claim to be written by the presbyter [elder], a man so important and well known that he needs no further indication.”⁵ It is interesting that while largely doubting that the Apostle John wrote 2 John, liberals are forced to point out, “The presbyter writes to warn the church against a vigorous missionary campaign launched by heretics who have denied the reality of the Incarnation, and presumably they are representatives of the same heresy as denounced in the first letter” (*IDB*).⁶ Comparison with the Gospel of John and 1 John, easily indicates that 2 John is a letter addressing the same general problems that have erupted in the faith community, yet include some personal guidance for a particular person and/or group.

Genuine Johannine authorship is the default position for the composition of 2 John, but conservatives are aware of how seeing a John the Elder being the author of 2 John is a legitimate option that has to be weighed. Guthrie details, “Although there is no strong reason to question the possibility that ‘the elder’ means the apostle John, as it has been generally interpreted in the tradition of the church, some serious consideration must be given to the alternative view that another writer known as John the elder was the real author and that he was later confused with the apostle.”⁷ There is nothing historically impossible about someone else named “John” (*Yochanan* or *Iōannēs*), who was originally within the Apostle John’s sphere of influence in Asia Minor, writing a letter as “the Elder”—while reflecting the Apostle’s genuine theology as possibly contained in his works of the Gospel of John and letter of 1 John. Still, a large number of today’s conservative examiners still accept the Apostle John as being the author of 2 John, and think that a good case can be made against a separate John the Elder being the author.⁸ We likewise should find no considerable reason to doubt genuine Johannine involvement in the composition of 2 John.

There is little attestation in the Church Fathers of the Second Century that 2 John was a well-circulated letter, which made it contested as Scripture among some groups. Gundry speculates that this is the case because of the “brevity” of the letter and how short it is,⁹ at only thirteen verses. However, the letter’s clear directives regarding heretics who deny the Divinity of the Messiah, as an extension of 1 John, gave rise to its being canonically accepted in the majority of Third and Fourth Century Christian communities.¹⁰

⁴ *Ecclesiastical History*, 104.

⁵ Caird, “John, Letters of,” in *IDB*, 2:951.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:949.

⁷ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 883.

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp 883-886.

⁹ Gundry, “The Catholic, or General, Epistles,” in, in *A Survey of the New Testament*, 451.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, “2 and 3 John,” in *NBCR*, 1271.

Interpreters are not agreed as to whether or not the author writes from the home of a personal family to another personal family, or if this is a cryptic way for him to write from one congregation of Believers to another congregation of Believers, to possibly avoid detection by Roman authorities. As the letter opens, “The elder to the chosen lady and her children...” (v. 1). Was this letter written to an actual “lady” named *Kuria* (κυρία), or was it written to a congregation of Believers? Conservatives are in broad agreement that “lady” was probably a cryptic term used to keep the exact location of this assembly secret.¹¹ Concurrent with the composition of 1 John, conservatives often hold to 2 John being written from Ephesus or Asia Minor, but various liberal opinions (that do not hold to Johannine authorship) lean toward 2 John being composed closer to Syria.¹²

No Hebrew or Aramaic origin for 2 John has ever been proposed by scholars, conservative or liberal. The text was written on a single piece of parchment, as is consistent with most Greek letters of the First Century B.C.E.-Second Century C.E.¹³ In fact, 2 John was actually excluded from the canon of the Syriac Peshitta, the Fourth-Fifth Century Aramaic New Testament of the Syrian church.¹⁴

The author of 2 John is quite clear regarding his admonitions. He instructs his readers to love one another (v. 5), to obey God’s commandments (v. 6), but also avoid those who teach against the existence of Messiah Yeshua (v. 7). This is a strong indication that 2 John was a personal extension of the more detailed letter of 1 John. “2 John seems to reflect something of the same false teaching that lies behind 1 John. The letter then will be written to put its readers on their guard against it” (Morris, *NBCR*; cf. vs. 5-9).¹⁵ Within the letter of 2 John, the general situation of 1 John could be addressed to those who have yet to encounter whatever problems have occurred. Unlike 1 John, 2 John is written more in the form of an actual letter, bearing more of a personal tone to it, with Carson and Moo thinking that 2 John could have been a personal note attached to 1 John, when the contents arrived at a particular assembly.¹⁶ A main thrust of 2 John is for the recipients to not show any hospitality to false teachers, the opponents of the author’s true message (vs. 10-11).

2 John, while a very short text of Scripture, is a piece of personal correspondence from which Messianic Believers today can glean much insight for handling controversy. The personal directives that the Apostle John issues to the “lady,” largely relate to some kind of traveling teachers. John urged the First Century Believers to use discernment and great caution, as many of them were bringing in gross error. We have some of the same traveling teachers in the broad Messianic community today, who go from congregation to congregation not to encourage them, but to bring in their “new teachings”—which are nothing less than total error. We should learn from the text of 2 John regarding how to deal with teachers and aspiring leaders, who bring in questionable concepts and spurn discipline.

¹¹ Marshall, “John, Epistles of,” in *ISBE*, 2:1095; cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 887-889 for a useful discussion of the options.

¹² Cf. Kysar, “John, Epistles of,” in *ABD*, 3:909.

¹³ Marshall, “John, Epistles of,” in *ISBE*, 2:1091; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 880.

¹⁴ Kysar, “John, Epistles of,” in *ABD*, 3:901.

¹⁵ Morris, in *NBCR*, 1271.

¹⁶ Carson and Moo, 669.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 2 JOHN:

1. Why do you think John is cryptic in his language in this letter? Why is he unclear about the lady or in specifying who the false teachers are? Why do you think John has much more to say that he is unwilling to write (v. 12)?

2. Do you see any present applications of John's warnings today in the emerging Messianic movement?

REFLECTION ON 2 JOHN'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Epistle of 2 John: