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Paul Anderson
George Fox University

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Second John and Women by Paul Anderson

Q. *The commentators say that the "elect lady" in 2John 1 is either a church or a woman. Could it be that it is to a female leader and her congregation? And could the elect lady be Mary, the mother of Jesus, who lived with John?*

A. This is an excellent question, followed by the posing of a number of fascinating possibilities. Thanks for asking! Indeed, 2 John is written to "the elect lady and her children" by John the Elder, and it seems that the community to which this short letter is written was led by a woman. Of course, it is impossible to know who that person might have been, but by the 80s and 90s of the first century, it is unlikely that Mary, the mother of Jesus, would still have been alive.

More likely is that the greeting sent from "the children of your chosen sister" (2John 1:13) refers to the community from which John the Elder is writing. Of course, if that is a reference to the Elder's church community, then "the elect lady" in v. 1 may be a female reference to the church community to which he is writing, rather than to a person. In first-century Christianity, believers met in house churches. Given that men of good standing would exercise leadership in the public sphere, and married women would exert leadership in the home, women played important roles in the worship life of the early Christian movement. So, it is indeed plausible that the recipient of this letter would have been a female leader of that church—the recipient of the Elder's letter and one who would convey those concerns to the community gathered in her home.

Then again, the elect sister reference in the last verse of the letter could refer to a community. Another possibility is that "the children of your elect sister" refers to congregants of another female leader in John the Elder's church—whichever she might have been. If that were the case, it would imply two female leaders among the Johannine churches, although their identities remain unknown.

The Gospel of John presents a high view of women in leadership—connected directly with Jesus and his ministry—making it unsurprising that women might have been involved in ministry among the Johannine churches. Over and against the development of male leadership models in the second and third Christian generations, John's presentation of women in leadership around Jesus might have been going against the grain in the name of a more primitive memory of Jesus and his ministry. Within that context, references to "the elect lady" and "your elect sister" 2John 1 and 2John 1:13 support this likelihood.