

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

by

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Note: Author's introduction in *Notes Explanatory and Practical on the General Epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1860). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

1. *The Authenticity of the Epistle*

Little need be said respecting the authenticity of this epistle or the evidence that it was written by the apostle John. There are in general two sources of evidence in regard to ancient writings: the external evidence, or that which may be derived from the testimony of other writers; and the evidence which may be derived from some marks of the authorship in the writing itself, which is called the internal evidence. Both of these are remarkably clear in regard to this epistle.

The *external* evidence.

1. It is quoted or referred to by the early Christian writers as the undoubted production of the apostle John. It is referred to by Polycarp in the beginning of the second century. It is quoted by Papias and also by Irenæus. Origen says: "John, beside the gospel and Revelation, has left us an epistle of a few lines. Grant also a second, and a third, for all do not allow these to be genuine" (see Lardner vi. 275, and Lücke, Einlei. i). Dionysius of Alexandria admitted the genuineness of John's first epistle; so did also Cyprian. All the three epistles were received by Athanasius, by Cyril of Jerusalem, and by Epiphanius. Eusebius says: "Beside his gospel, his first epistle is universally acknowledged by those of the present time, and by the ancients; but the other two are contradicted."

2. It is found in the old Syriac version, probably made in the first century, though the second and third epistles are not there.

3. The genuineness of the first epistle was never extensively called in question, and it was never reckoned among the doubtful or disputed epistles.

4. It was rejected or doubted only by those who rejected his gospel, and for the same reasons. Some small sects of those who were called 'heretics' rejected *all* of the writings of John because they conflicted with their peculiar views. But this was confined to a small number of persons and never affected the general belief of the church (see Lücke, Einlei. 9, seq.).

There is strong *internal* evidence that the same person wrote this epistle who was the author of the gospel which bears the same name. The resemblance in the mode of expression and in the topics referred to are numerous, and at the same time are not such as would be made by one who was *attempting* to imitate the language of another. The allusions of this kind, moreover, are to what is *peculiar* in the gospel of John and not to what is common to that gospel and the other three. There is nothing in the epistle which would particularly remind us of the gospel of Matthew, or Mark, or Luke; but it is impossible to read it and not be reminded constantly of the gospel by John. Among those passages and expressions the following may be referred to:

EPISTLE chapter	compared with	GOSPEL chapter
1:1		1:1,4,14
2:5		14:23
2:6		15:4
2:8; 3:11		13:34
2:8,10		1:5,9; 11:10
2:13,14		17:3
3:1		1:12
3:2		17:24
3:8		8:44
3:13		15:20
4:9		3:16
4:12		1:18
5:13		20:31
5:14		14:14
5:20		17:2

This language in the epistle, as will be easily seen by a comparison, is such as the real author of the gospel by John would be likely to use if he wrote an epistle. The passages referred to are in his style. They show that the mind of the author of both was turned to the same points, and those not such points as might be found in all writers but such as indicated a peculiar mode of thinking. They are not such expressions as Matthew, or Mark, or Luke, or Paul would have used in an epistle, but just such as we should expect from the writer of the gospel of John. It must be clear to anyone that either the author of the gospel was also the author of this epistle, or that the author of the epistle *meant* to imitate the author of the gospel and to leave the impression that the apostle John was the author. But there are several things which make it clear that this is not a forgery:

1. The passages where the resemblance is found are not exact quotations, and are not such as a man would make if he *designed* to imitate another. They are rather such as the same man would use if he were writing twice on the same subject, and should express himself the second time without intending to copy what he had said the first.

2. If it had been an intentional fraud or forgery, there would have been some allusion to the name or authority of the author; or, in other words, the author of the epistle would have endeavored to sustain himself by some distinct reference to the apostle, or to his authority, or to his well-known characteristics as a teller of truth (see John 19:35; 21:24; comp. 3 John 12). But nothing of the kind occurs in this epistle. It is written without disclosing the name of the author, or the place where he lived, or the persons to whom it was addressed, and with no allusions to the gospel except such as show that the author thought in the same manner and had the same things in his eye and was intent on the same object. It is throughout the style and manner of one who felt that his method of expressing himself was so well understood that he did not need even to mention his own name; as if, without anything further, it would be apparent from the very epistle itself who had written it and what right he had to speak. But this would be a device too refined for forgery. It bears all the marks of sincerity and truth.

2. *The time and place of writing the Epistle*

Almost nothing is known of the time and place of writing the epistle, and nearly all that is said on this point is mere conjecture. Some recent critics have supposed that it was in fact a part of the gospel, though in some way it afterwards became detached from it; others that it was sent *as an*

epistle at the same time with the gospel and to the same persons. Some have supposed that it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, and some long after when John was very aged. And these last suppose that they find evidence of the very advanced age of the author in the epistle itself, in such characteristics as commonly mark the conversation and writings of an old man. An examination of these opinions may be found in Lücke, Einlei. Kap. 2; and in Hug, Intro. p. 456, seq., p. 732, seq.

There are *very few* marks of time in the epistle, and none that can determine the time of writing it with any degree of certainty. Nor is it of much importance that we should be able to determine it. The truths which it contains are in the main as applicable to one age as to another, though it cannot be denied (see § 3) that the author had some prevailing forms of error in his eye. The only marks of time in the epistle by which we can form any conjecture as to the period when it was written are the following:

1. It was in what the author calls *the last time* (ἐσχάτη ὥρα), ch. 2:18. From this expression it might perhaps be inferred by some that it was just before the destruction of Jerusalem, or that the writer supposed that the end of the world was near. But nothing can be certainly determined from this expression in regard to the exact period when the epistle was written. This phrase, as used in the Scriptures, denotes no more than the last dispensation or economy of things, the dispensation under which the affairs of the world would be wound up, though that period might be in fact much longer than any one that had preceded it. See Notes on Isa. 2:2; Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2. The object of the writer of this epistle, in the passage referred to (2:18), is merely to show that the closing dispensation of the world had actually come; that is, that there were certain things which it was known would mark that dispensation, which actually existed then, and by which it could be known that they were living under the last or closing period of the world.

2. It is quite evident that the epistle was composed *after* the gospel by John was published. Of this no one can have any doubt who will compare the two together, or even the parallel passages referred to above (§ 1). The gospel is manifestly the original, and it was evidently presumed by the writer of the epistle that the gospel was in the hands of those to whom he wrote. The statements there made are much more full, the circumstances in which many of the peculiar doctrines adverted to were first advanced are detailed, and the writer of the epistle clearly supposed that all that was necessary in order to an understanding of these doctrines was to state them in the briefest manner, and almost by mere allusion. On this point Lücke well remarks, "the more brief and condensed expression of the same sentiment by the same author, especially in regard to peculiarities of idea and language, is always the later one; the more extended statement, the unfolding of the idea, is an evidence of an earlier composition" (Einlei. p. 21).

Yet while this is clear, it determines little or nothing about the time when the epistle was written, for it is a matter of great uncertainty when the gospel itself was composed. Wetstein supposes that it was soon after the ascension of the Saviour; Dr. Lardner that it was about the year 68; and Mill and LeClerc that it was about the year 97. In this uncertainty, therefore, nothing can be determined absolutely from this circumstance in regard to the time of writing the epistle.

3. The only other note of time on which any reliance has been placed is the supposed fact that there were indications in the epistle itself of the *great age* of the author, or evidences that he was an old man, and that consequently it was written near the close of the life of John. There *is* some evidence in the epistle that it was written when the author was an old man, though none that he was in his *dotage*, as Eichhorn and some others have maintained. The evidence that he was even an old man is not positive; but there is a certain air and manner in the epistle, in its repetitions, and its want [lack] of exact order, and especially in the style in which he addresses those to whom he wrote as *little children*--τεκνία--(2:1,12,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21) which would seem to be appropriate

only to an aged man. Comp. Lücke, Einlei. pp. 23,24, and Prof. Stuart in Hug's Intro. pp. 732,733.

As little is known about the *place* where the epistle was written as about the *time*. There are no local references in it, no allusions to persons or opinions which can help us to determine where it was written. As John spent the latter part of his life, however, in Ephesus and its vicinity, there is no impropriety in supposing that it was written there. Nothing in the interpretation of the epistle depends on our being able to ascertain the place of its composition. Hug supposes that it was written in Patmos and was sent as a letter accompanying his gospel to the church at Ephesus. Lücke supposes that it was a circular epistle addressed to the churches in Asia Minor and sent from Ephesus (Einlei, p. 27).

To *whom* the epistle was written is also unknown. It bears no inscription, as many of the other epistles of the New Testament do, and as even the second and third of John do; and there is no reference to any particular class of persons by which it can be determined for whom it was designed. Nor is it known why the name of the author was not attached to it or why the persons for whom it was designed were not designated. All that can be determined on this subject from the epistle itself is the following:

1. It seems to have been addressed to no particular church but rather to have been of a circular character, designed for the church in a region of country where certain dangerous opinions prevailed.
2. The author presumed that it would be known who wrote it--either by the style, or by the sentiments, or by its resemblance to his other writings, or by the messenger who bore it--so that it was unnecessary to affix his name to it.
3. It appears to have been so composed as to be adapted to *any* people where those errors prevailed, and hence it was thought better to give it a *general* direction that all might feel themselves to be addressed than to designate any particular place or church. There is, indeed, an ancient tradition that it was written to the *Parthians*. Since the time of Augustine this has been the uniform opinion in the Latin church. Venerable Bede remarks that "many of the ecclesiastical writers, among whom is St. Athanasius, testify that the first epistle of John was written to the Parthians."

Various conjectures have been made as to the origin of this opinion and of the title which the epistle bears in many of the Latin MSS. (*ad Parthos*), but none of them are satisfactory. No such title is found in the epistle itself, nor is there any intimation in it to whom it was directed. Those who are disposed to examine the conjectures which have been made in regard to the origin of the title may consult Lücke, Einlei. p. 28, seq. No reason can be assigned why it should have been sent to the Parthians, nor is there any sufficient evidence to suppose that it was.

3. *The object of the Epistle*

It is evident from the epistle itself that there were some prevailing errors among those to whom it was written, and that one design of the writer was to counteract those errors. Yet very various opinions have been entertained in regard to the nature of the errors that were opposed and the persons whom the writer had in his eye. Loeffler supposes that *Jews* and *Judaizers* are the persons opposed. Semler, Tittman, Knapp, and Lange suppose that they were *Judaizing Christians*, and especially *Ebionites*, or apostate Christians. Michaelis, Kleuker, Paulus and others suppose that the *Gnostics* are referred to. Others, as Schmidt, Lücke, Vitranga, Bertholdt, Prof. Stuart, suppose that the *Docetæ* was the sect that was principally opposed.

It is impossible now to determine with accuracy to whom particularly the writer referred, nor could it be well done without a more accurate knowledge than we now have of the peculiarities of the errors which prevailed in the time of the author and among the people to whom he wrote. All that we can learn on the subject that is certain is to be derived from the epistle itself; and there the intimations are few, but they are so clear that we may obtain some knowledge to guide us.

1. The persons referred to had been professing Christians and were now apostates from the faith. This is clear from 2:19: "they went out from us, but they were not of us." They had been members of the church, but they had now become teachers of error.

2. They were probably of the sect of the *Docetæ*; or if that sect had not then formally sprung up and was not organized, they held the opinions which they afterwards embraced. This sect was a branch of the great Gnostic family, and the peculiarity of the opinion which they held was that Christ was only in appearance and seemingly, but not in reality, a man; that though he seemed to converse, to eat, to suffer and to die, yet this was merely an *appearance* assumed by the Son of God for important purposes in regard to man. He had, according to this view, no *real humanity*; but though the Son of God had actually appeared in the world, yet all this was only an assumed form for the purpose of a manifestation to men.

The opinions of the *Docetes* are thus represented by Gibbon:

They denied the truth and authenticity of the gospels, as far as they relate the conception of Mary, the birth of Christ, and the thirty years which preceded the first exercise of his ministry. He first appeared on the banks of the Jordan in the form of perfect manhood; but it was a form only, and not a substance; a human figure created by the hand of Omnipotence to imitate the faculties and actions of a man, and to impose a perpetual illusion on the senses of his friends and enemies. Articulate sounds vibrated on the ears of his disciples; but the image which was impressed on their optic nerve, eluded the more stubborn evidence of the touch, and they enjoyed the spiritual, but not the corporeal presence of the Son of God. The rage of the Jews was idly wasted against an impassive phantom, and the mystic scenes of the passion and death, the resurrection and ascension of Christ were represented on the theatre of Jerusalem for the benefit of mankind.¹

That these views began to prevail in the latter part of the first century there can be no reason to doubt. And there can be as little doubt that the author of this epistle had this doctrine in his eye, and that he deemed it to be of special importance in this epistle (as he had done in his gospel) to show that the Son of God had actually *come in the flesh*; that he was truly and properly a man, that he lived and died in reality and not in appearance only.

Hence the allusion to these views in such passages as the following: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and *our hands have handled*, of the Word of life--that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you" (1:1,3). "Many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know we the spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ *is come in the flesh* is of God; and every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God; and this is that spirit of Antichrist whereof ye have heard that it should come (4:1-3; comp. vs. 9,14,15; 5:1,6,10,11,12).

John had written his gospel to show that Jesus was the Christ (20:31). He had furnished ample proof that he was divine, or was equal with the Father (1:1-14), and also that he was truly a man (15:25-28). But still it seemed proper to furnish a more unequivocal statement that he had actually

¹ Dic. L. Fall, vol. iii. p. 245, Ed. N. York, 1829 Comp. vol. i. 440.

appeared *in the flesh*, not in appearance only but in reality, and this purpose evidently was a leading design of this epistle.

The main scope of the epistle the author has himself stated in 5:13: "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God." That is, that you may have just views of him and exercise an intelligent faith.

In connection with this general design, and keeping in view the errors to which they to whom the epistle was written were exposed, there are two leading trains of thought, though often intermingled, in the epistle: (1) The author treats of the doctrine that Jesus is the Christ, and (2) the importance of *love* as an evidence of being united to him, or of being true Christians. Both these things are characteristic of John. They agree with the design for which he wrote his gospel; and they were in accordance with his peculiarity of mind as "the *beloved* disciple," the disciple whose heart was full of love and who made religion consist much in that.

The main characteristics of this epistle are these:

1. It is full of love. The writer dwells on it, places it in a variety of attitudes, enforces the duty of loving one another by a great variety of considerations, and shows that it is essential to the very nature of religion.
2. The epistle abounds with statements on the evidences of piety, or the characteristics of true religion. The author seems to have felt that those to whom he wrote were in danger of embracing false notions of religion and of being seduced by the abettors of error. He is therefore careful to lay down the characteristics of real piety and to show in what it essentially consists. A large part of the epistle is occupied with this, and there is perhaps no portion of the New Testament which one could study to more advantage who is desirous of ascertaining whether he himself is a true Christian. An anxious inquirer, a man who wishes to know that true religion is, could be directed to no portion of the New Testament where he would more readily find the instruction that he needs, than to this portion of the writings of the aged and experienced disciple whom Jesus loved. A true Christian can find nowhere else a more clear statement of the nature of his religion and of the evidence of real piety than in this epistle.