

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND 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 Second and Third Epistles of John*

The authenticity of these two epistles was doubted by many in the early Christian church, and it was not before a considerable time had elapsed that their canonical authority was fully admitted. The first of the three epistles was always received as the undoubted production of the apostle John; but, though not positively and absolutely rejected, there were many doubts entertained in regard to the authorship of the second and third. Their exceeding brevity, and the fact that they were addressed to individuals and seemed not designed for general circulation, made them less frequently referred to by the early Christian writers and renders it more difficult to establish their genuineness.

The *evidence* of their genuineness is of two kinds--external and internal. Though from their brevity the proof on these points must be less full and clear than it is in regard to the first epistle, yet it is such as to satisfy the mind, on the whole, that they are the production of the apostle John and are entitled to a place in the canon of Scripture.

1. *External.* The evidence of this kind, either for or against the authenticity of these epistles, is found in the following testimonies respecting them in the writings of the Fathers, and the following facts in regard to their admission into the canon.

(a) In the church and school at Alexandria they were both well known and were received as a part of the sacred writings. Clement of Alexandria, and Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, quote them or refer to them as the writings of the apostle John (Lardner, vi. 275; Lücke, p. 328). Origen, the successor of Clement, says, "John left behind him an epistle of very few *stichoi*; perhaps also a second and third, though some do not consider these genuine. Both these together, however, contain only an hundred *stichoi*." Dionysius of Alexandria shows that he was acquainted with all of them, but calls the two last *φερόμεναι* -- writings alleged to be genuine. For the import of this word as used by Dionysius, see Lücke, pp. 330,331.

(b) These epistles were known and received in the Western churches in the second and third centuries. Of this fact an important witness is found in Irenæus, who, on account of the place where he resided during his youth and the school in which he was educated, deserves especial regard as a witness respecting the works of John (*Hug*). He was born at Smyrna and lived not long after the times of the apostles. He was a disciple of Polycarp, who was acquainted with the apostle John, and having passed his early years in Asia Minor must, in the circumstances in which he was placed, have been familiar with the writings of John and have known well what writings were attributed to him. He quotes the second epistle (ver. 11), and with express reference to John as the author under the name of "John, the disciple of our Lord." In another place also he refers to this epistle. After quoting from the first epistle he continues, "And John, the disciple of Jesus, in

the epistle before mentioned, commanded that they (the heretics) should be shunned, saying," &c. He then quotes word for word the seventh and eighth verses of the epistle.

(c) The African church in the third century regarded the second epistle, at least, as the production of John. At a Synod in Carthage under Cyprian, Aurelius (bishop of Chullabi) in giving his vote on the question of baptizing heretics quotes the tenth verse of the second epistle as authority, saying, "John, in his epistle, declares," &c.

(d) There is some doubt in regard to the Syrian church whether these epistles were at first received as genuine or not. The manuscripts of the Peschito, or old Syriac version, at least since the sixth century, do not contain the Epistle of Jude, the Second Epistle of Peter, or the Second and Third of John. Yet Ephrem the Syrian in the fourth century quotes the Epistle of Jude, the Second Epistle of Peter, and the Second of John as genuine and canonical. As this father in the Syrian church was not acquainted with the Greek language (*Lücke*), it is clear that he must have read these epistles in a translation, and as would seem most probable in some Syriac version. The probability would seem to be, as these epistles are not in the oldest Syriac version, that there was some doubt about their authenticity when that version was made, but that before the time of Ephrem they had come to be regarded as genuine and were translated by some other persons. Their use in the time of Ephrem would at least show that they were then regarded as genuine. They may have been, indeed, at some period attached to the ancient version; but at a later period, as they did not originally belong to that version, they may have been separated from it (*Lücke*). At all events, it is clear that at an early period in the Syrian church they were regarded as genuine.

(e) Though there were doubts among many of the Fathers respecting the genuineness of these epistles, yet they were admitted in several councils of the church to be genuine. In the 85th of the apostolic canons (so called); in the 60th canon of the Synod of Laodicea; the council at Hippo (A.D. 393), and the third council of Carthage (A.D. 397), they were reckoned as undoubtedly pertaining to the inspired canon of Scripture.

(f) All doubts on the subject of the genuineness of these epistles were, however, subsequently removed in the view of Christian writers, and in the middle ages they were universally received as the writings of the apostle John. Some of the Reformers again had doubts of their genuineness. Erasmus quoted the sentiment of Jerome that it was not the *apostle* John who wrote these epistles but a *presbyter* of the same name. And Calvin seems to have entertained some doubt of their genuineness, for he has omitted them in his commentaries. But these doubts have also disappeared and the conviction has again become general, and indeed almost universal, that they are to be ranked among the genuine writings of the apostle John.

It may be added here that the doubts which have been entertained on the subject, and the investigations to which they have given rise, show the care which has been evinced in forming the canon of the New Testament, and demonstrate that the Christian world has not been *disposed* to receive books as of sacred authority without evidence of their genuineness.

2. There is strong *internal* evidence that they are genuine. This is found in their style, sentiment, and manner. It is true that one who was familiar with the writings of the apostle John *might* compose two short epistles like these, that should be mistaken for the real productions of the apostle. There are, even in these brief epistles, not a few passages which seem to be a mere repetition of what John has elsewhere said. But there are some things in regard to the internal evidence that they are the writings of the apostle John, and were not designedly forged, which deserve a more particular notice. They are such as these:

(a) As already said, the style, sentiment, and manner are such as are appropriate to John. There is nothing in the epistles which we might not suppose he would write. There is much that accords

with what he has written. There is much in the style which would not be likely to be found in the writings of another man, and there is nothing in the sentiments which would lead us to suppose that the manner of apostle John had been *assumed* for the purpose of palming upon the world productions which were not his. Resemblances between these epistles will strike every reader, and it is unnecessary to specify them. The following passages, however, are so decidedly in the manner of John that it may be presumed that they were either written by him or by one who designed to copy from him: second epistle--vs. 5, 6, 7, 9; third epistle--vs. 11, 12.

(b) The fact that the *name* of the writer is not affixed to the epistles is much in the manner of John. Paul, in every case except in the epistle to the Hebrews, affixed his name to his epistles. Peter, James, and Jude did the same thing. John, however, has never done it in any of his writings except the Apocalypse. He seems to have supposed that there was something about his style and manner which would commend his writings as genuine, or that in some other way they would be so well understood to be his that it was not necessary to specify it. Yet the omission of his name, or of something that would lay claim to his authority as an apostle, would not be likely to occur if these epistles were fabricated with a design of palming them upon the world as his. The artifice would be too refined, and would be too likely to defeat itself, to be adopted by one who should form such a plan.

(c) The apparently severe and harsh remarks made in the epistle in regard to heretics may be adverted to as an evidence that these epistles are the genuine writings of John the apostle. Thus, in the second epistle ver. 10 he says, "If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed." So in the third epistle ver. 10, "If I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words," &c. It has been made an objection to the genuineness of these epistles that this is not in the spirit of the mild and amiable "disciple whom Jesus loved"; that it breathes a temper of uncharitableness and severity which could not have existed in him at any time, and especially when, as an old man, he is said to have preached nothing but "love one another."

But two circumstances will show that this, so far from being an objection, is rather a proof of their genuineness. One is, that, in fact, these expressions accord with what we *know* to have been the character of John. They are *not* inappropriate to one who was named by the master himself "Boanerges--a son of thunder" (Mark 3:17); or to one who was disposed to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritan who would not receive the Lord Jesus (Luke 9:54); or to one who, when he saw another casting out devils in the name of Jesus, took upon himself the authority to forbid him (Mark 9:38). The truth is, that there was a remarkable mixture of *gentleness* and *severity* in the character of John; and though the former was the most prominent, and may be supposed to have increased as he grew old, yet the other also often manifested itself. There was that in the character of John which, under some circumstances and under other teaching than that of the Lord Jesus, *might* have been developed in the form of great exclusiveness, bigotry, and sternness--perhaps in the form of open persecution. Under the teaching of the Saviour, and through his example, his milder and better nature prevailed, and so decidedly acquired the ascendancy that we almost never think of the harsher traits of his character.

The other circumstance is that it would never have occurred to one who should have attempted to forge an epistle in the name of John to have *introduced* a passage of this kind. The artifice would have been too little likely to have accomplished the end, to have occurred to the mind, or to have been adopted. The public character of John was so amiable. He was so uniformly spoken of as the "disciple whom Jesus loved." Gentleness and kindness seemed to be such pervading traits in his nature that no one would have thought of introducing sentiments which *seemed* to be at variance with these traits, even though, on a close analysis, it could be made out that they were *not* contrary to his natural character.

(d) Perhaps, also, the appellation which the writer gives himself in these two epistles (*ὁ πρεσβύτερος*) *the elder*, may be regarded as some evidence that they are the writings of the apostle John; that is, it is more probable that he would use this appellation than that any other writer would. It has, indeed, been made a ground of objection that the use of this term proves that they are *not* the productions of John. See Lücke, p. 340. But, as we have seen, John was not accustomed to prefix his own name to his writings; and if these epistles were written by him when he was at Ephesus, nothing is more probable than that he should use this term. It can hardly be regarded as an appellation pertaining to *office*, for as there were many *elders* or *presbyters* in the church (Acts 20:17), the use of the term "*the elder*" would not be sufficiently distinctive to designate the writer. It may be presumed, therefore, to have a particular respect to age; and, under the circumstances supposed, it would apply to no one with so much propriety as to the apostle John--one who would be well-known as *the* aged and venerable disciple of the Saviour. Comp., however, Lücke on the use of this word, pp. 340-343.

2. Of the Person to whom John addressed his Second Epistle

This epistle purports to be addressed, as it is in our translation, to "the elect lady" (*ἐκλεκτῇ κυρίᾳ*). There has been great diversity of opinion in regard to the person here referred to, and there are questions respecting it which it is impossible to determine with absolute certainty. The different opinions which have been entertained are the following:

(a) Some have supposed that a Christian matron is referred to, a friend of John, whose name was either *Ἐκλεκτῇ (Eclecte)*, or *Κυρία (Cyria)*. Œcumenius and Theophyluct supposed that the proper name of the female referred to was *Eclecte*; others have adopted the other opinion that the name was *Cyria*.

(b) Others among the ancients, and particularly Clement, supposed that the *church* was denoted by this name under the delicate image of an elect lady, either some particular church to whom the epistle was sent or to the church at large. This opinion has been held by some of the modern writers also.

(c) Others have supposed, as is implied in our common version, that it was addressed to some Christian matron whose name is not mentioned, but who was well-known to John, and perhaps to many others, for her piety and her acts of kindness to Christians. The reason why her name was suppressed, it has been supposed, was that if it had been mentioned it might have exposed her to trouble in some way, perhaps to persecution.

(d) Recently, Knauer (*Studien und Kritik.*, 1833, Heft 2. s. 452, ff.), has endeavoured to show that it was addressed to the Virgin Mary, who is supposed then to have resided in Galilee. The improbability of this opinion is shown in Lücke, pp. 352,353.

These questions are not very important to be determined, even if they could be with accuracy. And at this period of time and with the few data which we have for forming a correct judgment on the subject, it is not possible to settle them with entire certainty. The probable truth in regard to this point, and all which it seems now possible to ascertain with any degree of certainty, may be expressed in the following specifications:

1. The letter was addressed to an individual and not to a church. If it had been to a particular church it would have been specified, for this is the uniform mode in the New Testament. If it were addressed to the church at large, it is in the highest degree improbable that John should have departed from the style of address in his first epistle; improbable in every way that he should have

adopted another style so mystical and unusual in a plain prose composition. It is only in poetry, in prophecy, in compositions where figurative language abounds that the church is represented as a female at all. And it is wholly improbable that John, at the outset of a brief epistle, should have adopted this appellation. The fact that it was addressed to an individual female is further apparent from the mention of her children, vs. 1:4: "Unto the elect lady and *her children*"; "I found of *thy children* walking in truth." This is not such language as one would use in addressing a church.

2. It is probable that the *name* of this lady was designed to be specified, and that it was *Cyria* (Κυρία). This, indeed, is not absolutely certain. But the Greek will readily bear this, and it accords best with apostolic usage to suppose that the name of the person to whom the letter was addressed would be designated. This occurs in the third epistle of John, the epistles of Paul to Philemon, to Timothy, and to Titus, and, so far as appears, there is no reason why it should not have been done in the case before us. The Syriac and Arabic translators so understand it, for both have retained the name *Cyria*. It may do something to confirm this view to remark that the name *Cyria* was not uncommon, in subsequent times, at least, among Christian females. See Corp. Inscript. Gruter, p. 1127, Num. 11 . . . Comp. Lex. Hagiologic. Lips. 1710, p. 448, where two female martyrs of that name are mentioned. See also other instances referred to in Lücke, com. p. 351. If these views are correct, then the true rendering of the passage would be "The presbyter unto the elect *Cyria*."

3. Of this pious female, however, nothing more is known than what is mentioned in this epistle. From that we learn that John was warmly attached to her, ver. 5; that she was a mother and that her children were pious, vs. 1, 4; and that she was of a hospitable character and would be likely to entertain those who came professedly as religious teachers, vs. 10, 11. Where or when she lived, or when she died, we have no information whatever. At the time of writing this epistle, John had strong hopes that he would be permitted to come soon and see her; but whether he ever did so we are not informed (v. 12).

3. *The Canonical Authority of the Second and Third Epistles*

The canonical authority of these epistles depends on the following things:

1. On the evidence that they are the writings of the apostle John. In proportion as that evidence is clear, their canonical authority is of course established.
2. Though brief and though addressed to individuals, they are admitted into the canon of Scripture with the same propriety as the epistles to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon, for those were addressed also to individuals.
3. Like those epistles, also, these contain things of general interest to the church. There is nothing in either that is inconsistent with what John has elsewhere written or that conflicts with any other part of the New Testament. There is much in them that is in the manner of John and that breathes his spirit. There is enough in them to tell us of the way of salvation.

Of the time when these epistles were written and the place where, nothing is known, and conjecture would be useless as there are no marks of time or place in either; and there is no historical statement that gives the information. It has been the common opinion that they were written at Ephesus, and when John was old. The appellation which he gives of himself, "*the elder*," accords with this supposition, though it does not make it absolutely certain.