
A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

unrepentant souls. The three important views are —eternal punishment, conditional immortality, and restorationism. That there are grave difficulties arising from the frank acceptance of any one of the three we are all aware, and Dr. BAILLIE gives lucid expression to the perplexities we feel. On the whole he inclines, we gather, to universalism. For if God be love and forgiveness be somehow greater than retributive justice, eternal punishment is surely most difficult to believe. Conditional immortality is too facile in its presupposition that there are, or can be, some souls of so little value that nothing will be lost with their annihilation. But if Dr. BAILLIE, as we think, cherishes the 'larger hope' to which Tennyson gave memorable expression, he does so fully conscious of the difficulties here too, and is careful to impress them and emphasize them. 'If we decide for universalism, it must be for a form of it which does nothing to decrease the urgency of immediate repentance and which makes no promises to the procrastinating sinner. It is doubtful whether such a form of the doctrine has yet been found. But one has the feeling that in this whole question of the fate of the unrepentant we are touching one of the growing points of Christian thought at the present time.'

The Message of the Epistles.

The Letters of the Presbyter.

BY THE VERY REVEREND J. G. SIMPSON, D.D., DEAN OF PETERBOROUGH.

THE three epistles of John are a series of letters addressed to a community, to a family group, and to an individual. The first, though it has no epistolary introduction, and has in consequence created a doubt in some minds whether it is a letter at all, is described in the title, like the epistles of James and Peter preceding it in the canon, as a general or catholic epistle, probably because the contents suggest a more universal application than the circumstances of any particular community would supply, and a more extended and less closely defined circle of readers, like that which is implied in the introductions to the three documents which it immediately follows. The other two letters are obviously intended only for the eye of those to whom they are addressed.

The latter is a strictly personal letter, to be destroyed or (as the event proved) to be preserved by the recipient at his discretion, but in any case a privileged communication. The former belongs to the same category, though in this case the privilege is extended to a group, 'the elect lady and her children.' The designation is so curious, so entirely wanting in precision, not even a name being mentioned, that the question has been raised whether the document is not, like the first epistle, addressed to a community, described under a figure, familiar to all readers of the New Testament and particularly of the Apocalypse, which represents the Church as the Bride of Christ. In that case 'The Elect Lady' is the Church in a particular town, or a group of Churches in a particular area, let us say, of the province of Asia, or even the Church at large, and 'her children' the members of that body. The precise reference of the phrase we can, in any case, scarcely hope to recover. But it seems to me far more natural to suppose that the obvious suggestion of the letter itself, that it was addressed to a household, is correct, and that there were reasons why the writer, while no doubt providing his messenger with definite directions for its delivery to the proper persons, should have refrained from compromising the intended recipients, if the letter should fall into other hands, by indicating who they were.

My suggestion is that, if we take the three documents, that is, the two brief notes and the relatively long letter, to which they may be regarded as pendants, as three communications addressed by the Presbyter, as he calls himself in the two last, and as he probably also called himself in a lost introduction to the first, to 'The Church in such and such a place,' to a household within that Church described as the 'elect lady and her children,' and to Gaius, who was a member of the same church, we shall be able to view them in a perspective which reveals their relation one to another.

That all three are the work of one hand may almost be taken for granted. So close is the resemblance of the two short notes that we can almost see Demetrius, for whom the second would appear to be given as a letter of commendation, waiting to receive them both before he sets out from Ephesus, or wherever 'The Presbyter' resided, to the Asian town, whither he was passing, and where the Elect Lady and Gaius both lived. If there is not sufficient evidence in the second note to establish the identity of the writer with the author of the First Epistle, there can be no doubt about the other. The turns of phrase, the forms of thought, the very words make it evident, even in the short compass of thirteen of our verses, that the First Epistle was vividly present to the mind of the writer. The object with which he writes is to underline, as it were, one of the leading injunctions of that Epistle. This household is bidden earnestly to fulfil the commandment, 'Love one another,' the meaning, scope, and object of which is set forth in 1 Jn 4^{7-21}. Let them maintain sympathetic contact between the members of the brotherhood, of those who, confessing Jesus as Christ coming in Flesh, abide as a consequence of their faith in the Father and the Son. *Per contra*, let them show no hospitality to those who come to them, bringing not this teaching, but denying that Jesus is Christ, while claiming fellowship with those whose common Christianity is based on this affirmation, and thereby showing themselves to be deceivers and Antichrist. Once recognise this correspondence between the two letters, and not only unity of authorship but a real connexion becomes apparent.

In addressing Gaius the Presbyter claims to have written something already to the Church, and to be now writing to an individual, of whose loyalty he is assured, in consequence of the reception with which that letter had met. The letter in question is, I suggest, none other than the First Epistle. This is not inconsistent with a theory, widely prevalent, that 1 John is a circular letter, like that which is known to us as St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. It was designed, it is supposed, to meet the situation of many churches, to any one of which it might become a special Epistle, by inserting the name of the particular church in the formula of introduction. What I suggest is that we know of it as the epistle addressed to the community of which Gaius and the family of the Elect Lady were members, and that it was its equivocal, if not generally hostile, reception that led to the two subsequent notes.

Can we arrive at the reason for this attitude? To begin with, there is the direct evidence of 3 John. 'Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence among them, receiveth us not.' What is alleged against this man is not heresy, but a moral temper, which has been the fruitful parent of heresy, an arrogant self-sufficiency, resenting any claim to authority tending to curb his own advancing influence. The author of the letter writes as 'The Presbyter,' which is evidently not the mere designation of the rank which he holds in the Christian community, but of a special and accepted relation in which he stands to his readers. It would be understood by them in much the same way as 'From the Bishop,' or 'From the Moderator,' surmounting a modern communication, would be recognized by those whom in virtue of his office the person in question was authorized to address. But there is something more. It is a moral, and not an official claim which expresses itself in the Presbyter's language. It is a claim, like that which Paul sometimes makes, to speak with the authority of a father in Christ, addressing his children, his little children. It does not require much imagination to see how a man like Diotrephes, aware of the influence he was manifestly exercising upon the destinies of a community to which he was becoming something of a little tin god, would react to the intervention from without of what from his point of view was the dead hand of an antiquated generation. What had he to do with an old presbyter, not even resident among the people with whom he was vexatiously interfering? It is the familiar story of the young bloods impatient of the restraining hand of 'the old gang.'

Further light is thrown upon the situation by the letter to the Elect Lady. The Presbyter had been in touch with certain members of this family, and what he had seen of them had assured him that they, at any rate, were 'walking in truth,' in the old paths of that 'teaching of Christ,' which was the true bond of the common fellowship. So, as we saw, he reiterates to them those injunctions and warnings of the First Epistle, for which it was now clear from the reception accorded to it he could no longer count upon a whole-hearted acceptance on the part of the community at large. They are to be diligent in 'loving one another,' to beware of 'the deceiver and the Antichrist'; and neither to receive into their home nor give greeting to any who, claiming to be a brother, brought not 'the teaching.' Take this—the refusal of hospitality—in connexion with what is said to Gaius on the subject of the attitude of Diotrephes towards 'the brethren,' who, apparently with a commendation from the Presbyter like that which he now gives to Demetrius, had offered themselves as guests of the Church, and the

position becomes still more plain. 'Neither doth he receive them, and them that would he forbiddeth, and casteth them out of the Church.' This cannot be wholly explained by personal antagonism to the Presbyter himself. A prejudice was already created against the view of Christianity for which he stood and in favour of the very influences which he regarded, whether they still continued within the community or had gone forth from it, as definitely antichristian and fatal to its continuance.

The influences tending to carry the membership of the Church in contrary directions are well indicated in 2 John 9. The Presbyter warns his readers against 'Whosoever goeth forward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ.' There was the party whose watchword was 'Forward,' and the party whose motto, at least as it would appear to many ardent spirits, was 'Stay where you are'; in other words the Modernists and the Traditionalists.

The external conditions of the period were those of the closing years of the first century A.D. and the dawn of the second. The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was as sharp a dividing line in the experience of the Christian community as is the Great War in the history of European civilization. All the writings of the New Testament which bear the name of John are as certainly on one side of the chasm as the letters of St. Paul and the Acts of the Apostles are on the other. There is nothing in such a document as 1 John to remind us of the controversial atmosphere in which Paul's work both in action and on paper was constantly carried out, and which has always to be discounted by the modern critic, who attempts to disengage and to appraise the essential factors of his theology. The very name of Christ is now spoken as by ourselves without any sense of the Hebrew associations that in a previous generation mentally attached to it. The Hebrew Church of Jerusalem was little more than a memory, and in name only a mother of churches. The Christian community, or rather network of communities, throughout the Empire was a self-existent institution with its own way of life, its own system of ideas, its own outlook. To the younger men and women among its members, the beginnings of Christianity would often seem to belong to a world as unrelated to real life as the scenes and stories in Bible picture-books appear to children brought up in the Christian homes of later days. The conventional language of the common worship would often be as little examined as the creeds and prayers, not to say hymns, which Christians still recite or sing in their places of worship. Thought and feeling everywhere would tend to be hospitable to current thought, to new movements, to the general atmosphere of surrounding society. The eye of those who aspired to leadership in the community would be fixed on future developments, on possible adjustments, or the opportunities of extended influence resulting to the Christian fellowship from sympathetic contact between Christian thought and the contemporary mind. No doubt the Presbyter indicates the spirit of a Diotrephes in the phrase 'He that would go forward.'

It is not difficult to detect what, quite apart from the implication of deference due to the writer, would be resented in the First Epistle. The suggestion that outside the circle of light in which the Brotherhood lived and moved the whole world lay in the evil one, that 'modernism' was Antichrist, that willingness to accept the theological definitions of the Epistle was a criterion of loyalty to truth and a test of fellowship in the Christian body, could not but be displeasing to the 'liberal' section.

The real fact was that the Church, by the condition under which it found itself when the Fall of Jerusalem had put an end to the initial period of controversy, had been brought up against the fundamental question, *What is Christianity?* That is answered by the Presbyter in the very terms in which he introduces the First Epistle, and which fix his own relation not only to those whom he more immediately calls his children, but to the whole community of Christians at all times and in all places. His authority rests ultimately, not upon an office conferred upon him, nor yet upon the natural obligations of those who owe to him all that they have and are, but upon his unique position as a witness.

The essential Christian thing, as the Presbyter saw it, was not the doctrine, in which it formulated its idea of God or of the moral order of the universe, but a concrete and distinctive experience. This experience was the response to a message apprehended through faith, and creating a common fellowship with God—with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ—among all who share it. When he says that God is light or that God is love, he is not affirming propositions that, once announced, might be left to stand upon their own merits, in which the predicate might just as well be the subject and the subject the predicate, as when he says that sin is lawlessness, and which are identical in quality with a proposition verbally proclaimed, say, by a Zarathustrian or a Theosophist.

No, says the Presbyter; the Christian affirmation that God is love not only arises out of, but stands

or falls with the facts out of which the Christian experience springs, and out of that Christian experience which itself becomes part of the facts, which are the subject of Christian witness and the content of the message declared as 'the teaching of Christ.' Love, which has its origin in God and not in man, is only known for what it 'may be, hath been indeed and is,' in the creative personality of Jesus and His life-giving work on behalf of and within the spirit of man. The knowledge of God is given in the experience, apart from which it disappears. Thus we see that the emphasis rests not upon the philosophic, but upon the historical element in Christianity. 'That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled . . . declare we unto you.' Every effort is made to make it clear that the content of the message is sensible, concrete reality. 'We,' he writes, associating himself with those who have the same credentials as himself, the same competence as witness of the facts indicated—'we declare,' not now, but generally, in that ministry of the Word which embraces all our relations with you, our 'children'—'we declare what we' ourselves 'have heard.' But then you who receive the message heard too. Well, then, let us be more precise. 'We declare what we have seen with our eyes.' If it be objected that men's eyes often deceive them, let it be made plain that what we report are facts that were constantly and steadily before us like the familiar things of daily experience—'what we have beheld, that we declare.' And if this is still not enough, let us bring in that other sense, which is usually taken for an irrefragable pledge of the reality of sensible impressions—'What our hands have handled.'

So much for the assurance that the message concerned what had actually taken place. But it was not the mere attestation of facts, the meaning and relations of which might still remain wholly unintelligible, and of which, at any rate, those to whom the witness was given were left to make what they could, to discover the value, the coherence, the application to themselves. It was a genuine message. It concerned the Word of Life; the Life, the Eternal Life which was with the Father, which in the facts forming the content of the message was manifested to man; and the effect of which was to bring into fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, those who heard, believed, and knew its redeeming, renewing and reconciling power.

In this opening statement of the First Epistle, the writer so far reveals his identity as to enable us to place him among those who forty years before the Fall of Jerusalem were what St. Luke calls 'eye-witnesses and ministers of the word,' and were thus able to connect the Christian community with its origins. They carried it back to that beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ which comprised all that Jesus 'began both to do and to teach until the day in which he was received up,' focused in the Resurrection, and expressly linked with the ensuing life and history of His society by none other than the risen Lord Himself in the commandment given by Him to the Apostles whom He had chosen. Whether the Presbyter were himself an Apostle there is nothing to show, but that he possessed what appears to have been regarded as the essential qualification for this office, namely, membership of the company of the original disciples, seems to be beyond doubt on any hypothesis of the authorship of these letters other than that they put forward a claim which they have no right to make. The claim is, of course, precisely that which is made in the Fourth Gospel for 'the disciple whom Jesus loved,' who certainly appears as one of the Twelve, and who by a process of exhaustion, the conclusion of which it is difficult to evade, may be identified with John the Son of Zebedee. 'This is the disciple which beareth witness of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his witness is true' (Jn 21^{24}; cf. 3 Jn ^{12}).

The identification of the Presbyter with 'the disciple' of the Fourth Gospel does not foreclose the question of the authorship of that Gospel. It does not even demand that the Gospel, in the form in which we have it, was in existence at the time when the Letters were written. Neither is there any direct reference to the Gospel, nor is there any citation from it. On the contrary, there is just that subtle difference in expression which we should naturally expect from a mind which was not consciously seeking formal consistency between statements made at different times, the fundamental thought of which was essentially the same. In the Gospel, for example, it is the Word become Flesh which is the subject of witness; in the First Epistle it is 'that which we have seen concerning the Word.' But what does appear from a comparison of the Gospel with the Letters is that the former incorporates not merely the facts of the evangelical narrative as testified by the Beloved Disciple, but the very forms in which through his teaching, not only oral but written, he unfolded their significance. 'This is he who *wrote* these things,' is the attestation

included in John 21. We are thus abundantly justified in regarding the Fourth Gospel as amplifying and expanding the witness, which the Presbyter impresses upon his readers as the claim which he can rightly make upon the dutiful attention of the Church. His credentials were those not of official authority but of irrefutable and faithful testimony. 'This is he that bare record, and we know that his record is true.'

The importance of this witness lies in the fact that the historical Jesus is vital to Christianity. The whole edifice collapses if it is denied that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. His relation to the society which bears His name is not that of the teacher who, having communicated certain ideas about God believed to be true—that He is Love, Light, Life, or even more concretely that He is the Father—has no vital, permanent, and necessary connexion with the community to the formation of which He gave the impulse. The message—what Paul would have called his gospel—was the communication of the means whereby believers might have the Father, might be begotten of Him, through fellowship with the Son who was manifested to take away our sins, and whose blood cleanses from all sin. The Presbyter is not concerned to argue the truth of the message; that is not his object. He assumes that its contents will not be disputed. He appeals to what his readers know, to the experience which the acceptance of the message produced, to the witness of the Spirit, to the conquest of sin, to the new life of the children of God, and to the likeness of Christ reproduced in those whose fellowship is with the Father and the Son. The great Christian ideas are relative to the primary Christian gospel. 'Herein was the love of God manifested in us, that God hath sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.' In Jesus Christ Divine Love is expressed, communicated, and experienced.

There is, therefore, no 'was' or 'was not' about the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. It is.

Literature.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

It is characteristic of the modern approach to the Old Testament that scholars no longer consider it as an isolated phenomenon. It is generally recognized that it is one item in a great body of literature, and that the life and thought of Israel can be appreciated only when seen as a single element in the general *ensemble* of the ancient East. The result has been, not merely a better understanding of Hebrew Scripture, but a greatly enhanced appreciation of its value; and anything which helps us to a clearer picture of the world in which it was produced, deserves a warm welcome.

Two contributions to this type of study come to us from America. In the first, *The Assyrian and Hebrew Hymns of Praise* (Milford; 15s. net), Professor Charles Gordon Cumming, of Bangor, discusses one type of religious poetry as it appears in Mesopotamia and in Israel. Most of us tend to apply the word 'hymn' to any poem which may be used in worship, but, strictly speaking, it should be confined to songs of praise, and the studies in the present volume are concerned only with that particular kind of poem. The author emphasizes the limitation by prefixing a short chapter on Hebrew Psalms which are not 'hymns.'

The last decade has seen a complete change in the technical discussion of the Psalter. The newer criticism is primarily due to Gunkel, but he has been ably followed by almost every scholar of repute who has dealt with the subject. Dr. Cumming's first chapter will give readers a rough outline of the modern approach, which is based on a new classification of the Psalms according to their actual place in worship, and on a scientific study of the form used for each type.

It has long been recognized that Hebrew religious poetry can be paralleled in striking fashion from the sacred literature of Egypt and of Mesopotamia. But Dr. Cumming has done the English-speaking world good service in demonstrating to us the similarity between the Mesopotamian 'hymns' and those of Israel. First he describes the Hebrew type, then the Mesopotamian, and, finally, compares the two. The heart of the book is to be found in the first chapter of this third section—'The literary form of the Assyrian and the Hebrew Hymns.' The parallels in thought which he notes in later chapters are not confined to 'hymns,' but may be found in all the sacred literature of the two peoples.