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THE JOHANNINE WRITINGS: AN OLD MAN'S SPECULATIONS

THERE are five writings in the New Testament which are attributed to John, the son of Zebedee: the three Epistles, the Revelation, and the Fourth Gospel. They are anonymous except one, the Revelation, which claims to be the work of John. Tradition ascribes them all to him. It is a fair question how far that can be accepted. There is this in its favour. There is a strong similarity in spirit: they are intensely personal. There is further a marked similarity of style between the Epistles and the Gospel, while the difference of style in the Revelation is due to what was evidently the deliberate intention of its writer to adopt that mode of composition. Still more all five writings are obviously the work of an old man, as the signs come home to an old man. The writer of this article is an old man, who has a great liking for the old Scottish saying, "There's aye some water whaur the stirkie's drooned". Truth is often found at the bottom of a deep well. He is accordingly inclined to attach more weight to the tradition than to the speculations of critics, based on ignorance, 1900 years after the events.

To begin with the last point raised, the age of the author: when John first met Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus was about thirty years of age, and John was probably an enthusiastic young man of about twenty. If he lived to the end of the first Christian century, he would still be just ninety years of age, and therefore may easily have been the author of all five writings. These may have appeared in the following order—first the Epistles; then the Revelation; and then the Gospel.

The three Epistles form a very interesting group, closely connected with each other. The main writing among them, of course, is the first Epistle. The second is an accompanying covering letter. The third is a private letter to see that the main letter reaches the community for whom it is intended. Is there not something startling and arresting in the very last sentence of the first Epistle, "little children, keep yourselves from idols"? He has never mentioned idols in the course of the letter. What is he talking about? Antichrists! Ah, he says, "there are many

antichrists. He is Antichrist who denieth the Father and the Son." So it is not idols of gold or silver, wood or stone, but the ideologies that took many forms professedly Christian, but essentially pagan, against the insidious effect of which his whole Epistle is written.

But to whom was this letter sent and by whom? To judge from the second Epistle, it was from one church to another. The phrases, "elect lady", "elect sister", can best be explained in this way. But which churches were they? There is a possible suggestion in the third Epistle. It is addressed "to the well-beloved Gaius". Gaius admittedly was a common name, but apparently among the relatively small Christian communities there was a well known and much respected hospitable man of that name at Corinth, and Corinth may well have been the Church to which the first Epistle was written. Wherever the writer of the first Epistle was, he knew the situation in the Church to which he was writing. He knew the risks that the letter, distasteful to Diotrephes, a domineering character, might never reach the church, and he writes privately to Gaius to let him know what he has done, and asks him to see that it reaches its destination.

As for himself, the writer speaks as one of a favoured group, whose experiences gave them a special right to speak. The opening verses of the letter ring the changes on what "we"—he and these who had been with him—had seen, and heard, and handled of the Word of life. These were unforgettable experiences, which it was his privilege to make known, and to show the bearing of all they had seen and heard on God's way of salvation for mankind. He speaks, too, as an old man, and with the authority and affection of an old man. Those to whom he writes are all his children, "his little children". There were fathers among them, and young men among them, but to him they were all just "his little children". The letter is from their trusted old friend.

These three letters were probably written after John's release from Patmos. He had been banished by a local authority to this lonely island, because he was a Christian. From the first, Christians had been suspect even in the person of their Lord. Witness His death on the Cross. The form the persecution might take depended largely on the temper of the local authority. The magistrates at Philippi cast Paul and Silas into prison. At Corinth Gallio cared for none of these things. At Ephesus the

town clerk read the riot act, and dismissed the assembly. When it came to John's turn, he was banished to Patmos. Had he lived in Pergamos, like Antipas, he might have been slain. But his exile was over. He was back from Patmos. And after he had written the three Epistles, he was impelled to put in writing something of what had been his spiritual experience on Patmos. He first recalled an arresting vision he had one Lord's day with commissions to write to the seven churches of Asia; and that he had done. These occupy the first three chapters of the Revelation. But this was more than a set of messages to those seven congregations. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the spirit saith unto the Churches." The numbers—seven, the symbolism, and the arresting presence of the Lord in the midst of the golden candlesticks, all make it plain that the message is for the whole church, and the seven messages deal with the more serious situations which the Church anywhere has to face.

When he had recorded that, he was led on to describe other visions which had come to him in Patmos. It is noteworthy how the scenery from this lonely island of the sea colours the form of the visions. You have the sun rising in all its glory in a cloudless heaven, shining on a crystal sea without a ripple, from its emerald depths reflecting the glory of the sky. You have the sea lashed into fury by a tornado; water-spouts rising from its gloomy depths; strange creatures in strife amid its waters. And what is the meaning of all the visions with roar of trumpet blasts, thunders, voices, lightning and earthquake, war and victory? The true view, as one has said, is that it is a prophecy of the end of an age and the triumph of Christ. Men and women have ranged themselves on the side of Christ or against Him, and it is stated in terms that applied to the circumstances of the Church at the time in Asia Minor. The visions were messages of comfort and encouragement to that persecuted community. As Dr. Charles says, "gifted with an insight that the pessimist wholly lacks, the seer can recognise the full horror of the evils that are threatening to engulf the world, and yet he never yields to one despairing thought of the ultimate victory of God's cause in earth".

Turn now to the Gospel. Here again is the work of an old man. As Browning has imagined it so arrestingly in his *Death in the Desert*, his Gospel is the testimony of the last survivor of the twelve apostles to Him in whom they had found the Saviour of

the World. There are things like these that betray the old man. When he heard from his friend Nicodemus of his interview with Jesus, he was struck with the half-bantering way in which he received the assurance of the need of a new birth: "how can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?" "When he is OLD?" Or the result of Christ's answer to the accusers of the woman taken in adultery: "they went out, one by one beginning at the OLDEST". Old John understood that order, and remembered that so it happened. So other things crop up, that give the same impression. But perhaps some one objects, says the pericope on adultery is not by John, is an irrelevant interruption of the subject under discussion which is taken up again after the pericope. On the contrary, is it not just a very apt illustration of what the men sent to arrest Jesus say in explanation of why they returned empty-handed? "Never man spake like this man." What marvellous power in the few words with which he disposed of the accusers!

Of what does John's Gospel consist? It is a series of events and sayings which he specially remembered as having led him to recognise in Jesus, what John the Baptist said of him, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the World". "We have found the Messiah", "the Son of God". There is no attempt at chronological order in this gospel. It is like the talk of an old man at a Highland *ceilidh*. Here is how Colin MacDonald describes him in *Croft and Ceilidh*: "Ask Donull [an old *seanachaidh*] where was the clachan . . . and in what year Rory Drover was robbed, or Mac Eachin was murdered, I cannot tell you; for Donull had a lordly disregard for such finicky exactitude; he was concerned only with incidents and human characteristics and motives". That is John's attitude in his Gospel. It was as events or sayings recurred to his memory, without regard to when they occurred, by which he himself had been led to believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God; and he wrote them down, so that those who read might believe, and believing might have life through His name.

He begins by sweeping aside what he felt was the pernicious influence of Greek philosophising on Christian truth, says all he has to say about the Word in the first fourteen verses where he finishes with the significant fact that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among men, and men saw His Glory, as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth; after that he

never mentions the Word again. His whole interest is in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Of course he can never forget that first evening which, along with Andrew, he spent with Jesus. Then he remembers what a man who later became his intimate friend, Nicodemus, told him of his interview with Jesus. Then he remembers an event which he does not attempt to date, the cleansing of the temple; the time did not matter. In the main his memory is of personal interviews as of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus and the blind beggar, Jesus and the washing of Peter's feet, Jesus and Pontius Pilate, Jesus and the Bethany family. And these are all given in terms that suggest he was himself present at them. In connection with the Bethany family there is one of those curious statements which illustrate old John's indifference to dates. In the beginning of the eleventh chapter, when he mentions Mary, he proceeds to explain that she is the Mary who anointed the feet of Jesus, and it is not till the beginning of the next chapter that he tells about the anointing.

It is remarkable how intimate one becomes with John, when his gospel is read just as a collection of the old man's reminiscences of his intimacies with Jesus. How close to us it brings the Lord Himself. It makes Him even more human, and at the same time more graciously and gloriously divine—"full of grace and truth".

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EDITORIAL FOOTNOTE

We cannot refrain from quoting and echoing a tribute in *The British Weekly* of June 2, 1949: "Congratulations to Dr. Robert J. Drummond, who was 91 yesterday, and whose vigour and vision might well be envied by many men of half his age."