

THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE  
SECOND AND THIRD EPISTLES  
OF ST JOHN.

I.

THE two short Epistles of St John will gain much in interest, if we can discover to whom they were addressed, and for what purpose. The following notes are not intended to do more than suggest partially new solutions of the problems involved, and the reader should mentally insert 'probably', 'possibly', or 'conceivably' in many places where the writer has omitted it to avoid tiresome iteration. It will be best to commence with the Third Epistle<sup>1</sup>.

§ I. *The circumstances of the Third Epistle.*

St John has heard that Gaius was walking in the truth; in other words, that he had been practising St John's favourite virtue of charity. The Apostle congratulates him thereupon:

'The Presbyter unto the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. Beloved, I pray that in all things thou mayest prosper and be in good health, even as thy soul prospereth. For I rejoiced greatly when the brethren came and bare witness to thy truth, even as thou walkest in truth. I have no greater grace than these tidings, that I may hear of mine own children walking in the truth<sup>2</sup>'.

News has been brought, therefore, to St John of what Gaius has

<sup>1</sup> I assume, without offering any proof, that 'the Presbyter' is the Apostle John. I find it easier to suppose Eusebius, and not Irenaeus, to have been mistaken as to the meaning of Papias, and I believe there are cogent reasons against the existence of a second John. Nevertheless, I hold that, if he did exist, Harnack is right (*Chronol.* pp. 675-80) in concluding that he must have been the author of the Johannine Gospel, Epistles, and Apocalypse, that he was the exile of Patmos, the overseer of Asia, and the teacher of Polycarp and of Papias. Those who hold this view will simply understand all that I say, not of the Apostle, but of the Presbyter.

<sup>2</sup> I find it convenient to use Dr. Westcott's careful translations.

been doing. He has received certain brethren, who were strangers in the city where he lived, and has given them hospitality and fellowship.

'Beloved, thou makest sure whatsoever thou doest unto the brethren and strangers withal, who bore witness to thy love before the Church ; whom thou wilt do well to help forward on their way worthily of God ;'

Gaius is praised for having received the strangers once, and he is invited to receive them again. After their first reception by him, they had come to St John, for he says that they bore witness 'before the Church', publicly, in the presence of St John and the Christians of Ephesus, to the brotherly love which Gaius had shewn them. They now return to Gaius, bearing this letter, but they are going further, and he is asked to assist them on their journey.

'for they went out for the Name's sake, taking nothing of the Gentiles.'

'They went out', from some city that is not named, 'for the Name's sake', that is, because they were Christians<sup>1</sup>. We are not told that they were expelled, but that they went out, evidently because a persecution was raging, and their lives were in danger. We are not told that they fled or escaped with difficulty. It would not seem, then, to be a case of sudden riot against the Christians, such as we meet with in St Paul's life on so many occasions, but rather of a definite and lawful persecution of the Name, which did not expel but put to death, and which was not universal but local.

The Neronian persecution at Rome exactly fits this description, and I know of no other place or occasion which is so precisely suitable. It was local at first, and it was legal. It did not exile, it slew. It was a hasty decree, not an uprising of the people, and can hardly have been sudden or complete enough to prevent the withdrawal from the city of teachers who were not marked men.

'They went out for the Name's sake.' There is obviously an intentional vagueness here ; St John will not name the place or the cause. Why is he so wilfully indefinite ? It is possible to

<sup>1</sup> I do not think we can take *ἴρηθω* to mean 'they went forth to preach', since the words 'for the Name's sake' imply some hardship, if not persecution, and could not be the equivalent of 'to preach the Name'.

give a satisfactory reply. In discussing the Second Epistle I hope to shew that it was a regular custom from the time of Nero until the rescript of the Emperor Hadrian to Minucius Fundanus not to mention the Roman Church or its head, so great was the danger of the Christians in the capital. Yet no one would mistake the meaning of the words 'They went out for the Name's sake'. We shall see, in discussing the Second Epistle, that the persecution of Domitian had not yet begun, while that of Nero was written in letters of blood and fire in the memories of the Asian Christians. Gaius knew, of course, the history of the strangers, and would understand the vagueness of the allusion. It was an honour to have been in Rome in those awful days, now many years ago.

'Taking nothing of the Gentiles.' This is clearly also mentioned as a title to honour. Westcott must be right in explaining that the words refer to the Gentile converts to whom the strangers had preached. It was the custom of St Paul to refuse all payment or even gratuitous hospitality in return for his preaching, though he declares that he had the right to receive it. He implies that this prudent avoidance of the very appearance of self-interest was a peculiarity of his own. He and his fellow workers supported themselves by a trade, at all events until St Paul reconciled himself with his family (according to Professor Ramsay's conjecture), and had money of his own.

St John, on the other hand, had begun his apostolic preaching without shoes or scrip or purse, and had lived on the hospitality of his hearers. He had wanted for nothing (Luke xxii 36). We may be certain that the eleven commenced their preaching at the 'dispersion of the Apostles' on something of the same principle. They may not have kept literally to our Lord's original injunctions, but they had probably less luggage than Paul, who had not only a cloak, but books and parchments. At all events it is evident that they lived either on the hospitality of their converts, or on the means supplied by rich women who ministered to their wants (*ἀδελφαὶ γυναικεῖς*, cp. 1 Cor. ix 5), as the women from Galilee had once ministered to their Master during His missionary journeys in Judaea. But this life had no doubt become less heroic than the original mission of the twelve in Palestine, and St John could appreciate the converse method of St Paul, who

practised the virtue of poverty by hard work, instead of by the refusal to possess. He knew that for the highly educated pupil of Gamaliel it was a bitter humiliation to work as a tent-maker, and that for the invalid it was a cruel penance. He is writing probably to a Pauline Church, and it would seem a recommendation that the strangers had 'taken nothing of the Gentiles' to whom they preached.

I think we must necessarily conclude that these strangers were well known to be disciples of St Paul. This is the natural explanation of the fact that it was to Gentiles that they preached, and that they adhered to the Pauline practice of 'going a warfare at their own cost'. The conclusion forces itself upon us that they had been companions and fellow workers of St Paul at Rome, and that they had been obliged to leave the capital owing to the persecution of Nero.

'I wrote a few words to the Church [reading *Ἐγράψα τι* for *Ἐγράψα δι*] ; but he that loveth to have the pre-eminence among them, Diotrephes, doth not receive us.'

'I wrote a few words to the Church' might be understood, as Zahn understands it, 'I have just written another short letter to the Church, which I shall send with this'. But it is more natural to understand a former letter of recommendation given to the strangers on their first visit. They had gone on that occasion with a formal introduction to the hospitality of the Church from the Apostle, but Diotrephes did not 'receive' the Apostle's authority, and rejected the strangers. He does not appear to have had pre-eminence as a right; he was probably only one of several presbyters. But he can hardly have disregarded St John's recommendation of these Christian teachers unless he had something against them personally. We naturally infer that St John had written to the Church about them, to introduce them, precisely because he knew there was a chance of their not being well received. Why should they be looked upon askance? May we not suppose that the praise given to them by the Apostle is intended as an answer to the objection which Diotrephes had raised against them? 'They went out for the Name's sake', not from mere cowardice; their departure from Rome was an exile, a confessorship, a title to honour, though Diotrephes had chosen

to regard it as a shameful dereliction of duty. It is of no use to recommend them to the Church a second time. Now they are only to pass through, and Gaius who received them on their first visit, will entertain them once more, and assist them on their forward journey.

'For this cause, if I come, I will call to remembrance his works which he doeth, prating of us with evil words; and since he is not content therewith, neither doth he receive the brethren himself, and them that would he hindereth and casteth out of the Church.'

Diotrephe was perhaps an elderly man who had been made a presbyter by St Paul, and was inclined to be jealous of the new overseer of the Asian Churches. He first found fault with St John for being deceived, he next refused to receive the strangers recommended by the Apostle, he then tried at least to prevent Gaius from receiving them. When he failed in this, he cast Gaius out of the Church.

Diotrephe was evidently very angry, and we shall see presently that he took the action of St John to be nothing less than a slight to the memory of St Paul. I have little doubt that it was in reality by the special wish of St Paul that St John had come to live in Asia after the death of the Apostle of the Gentiles. The Asian Churches were in sore want of a Patriarch; *πρεσβύτερος* they said in those days, for the words *πατριάρχης, μητροπολίτης, ἀρχιεπίσκοπος* had yet to be developed. St Paul was more of the thinker than of the administrator. He had apparently never instituted any diocesan, local, 'monarchical' bishop. In the Church of Diotrephe and Gaius there was no head, any more than at Corinth. The Apostle had governed all his foundations in person, sending prefects apostolic with full faculties from time to time, to act in his place when he was unable to come himself. The unseemly dispute between Diotrephe and Gaius is but a faint reflexion of the disorders of the Corinthian Church on an earlier and more famous occasion, to be repeated again in that still bishopless Church before the end of the century. Naturally Diotrephe did not like acknowledging a new overlord in St John. The Apostle of love was also the son of Thunder, and a vigorous organizer. Before his exile to Patmos seven of the Asian Churches had a complete ecclesiastical hierarchy<sup>1</sup>, though he

<sup>1</sup> For a justification of this statement see the *Expositor*, April, 1904.

was not yet satisfied with them all. After his return from exile we are told by Clement of Alexandria<sup>1</sup> that he went about even to the borders of the barbarian world, setting up bishops, putting the Churches to rights and ordaining.

There is now no difficulty in understanding why the strangers had come back to St John. They had found that they had become unwilling causes of dissension, and their generous host had suffered on their account. They therefore returned to Ephesus, where they bore testimony 'before the Church' to the kindness of Gaius, and informed St John of the 'prating words' of the disrespectful Diotrephe. St John now sends them on other work, and as they must pass again through the town of Diotrephe and Gaius, they take with them the present letter, to act both as a renewed passport and as a well-deserved commendation of Gaius.

'Beloved, imitate not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God; he that doeth evil hath not seen God.'

The moral of these words is to be applied to Gaius and to Diotrephe respectively. St John knew human nature well enough to be sure that Gaius would not fail to let Diotrephe know the contents of the letter.

'Demetrius hath witness borne to him by all, and by the Truth itself; yea, we also bear witness; and thou knowest that our witness is true.'

It does not seem to have been commonly recognized that this emphatic sentence is not set down *à propos de boute*, but is in the closest connexion with the rest of the Epistle. Demetrius is one of the strangers; he is, in fact, the one whose character has been called in question by Diotrephe. St John had recommended him once before, and his recommendation had been disregarded. He now repeats that very testimony to Demetrius, against which Diotrephe had prated, and with extraordinary emphasis: 'Diotrephe does not accept our testimony to Demetrius', he seems to say, 'he would not receive him, and he turned Gaius out of the

<sup>1</sup> *Quis dives 42*, and ap. Eus. H. E. iii 23 ἐπειδὴ γὰρ τοῦ τυράνου τελευτῆσας ἀπὸ τῆς Πάτμου τῆς νήσου μετῆλθεν εἰς τὴν Ἐφέσον, διῆγει παρακαλούμενος καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ πλησίωντα τῶν ἔθνων, διου μὲν ἐπισκόπους καταστήσας, διου δὲ διάς ἐκκλησίας ἀρμέσας, διου δὲ κλήρον ἦν γέ τινα κληρώσαν τῶν ἀπὸ τοῦ Πνεύματος σημανομένων.

Church, because he did so in obedience to my former letter. But I repeat my approval of him in the most solemn terms that I can employ. The Truth, the Christian religion, bears witness to him, for he went out from Rome for the Name's sake. I also bear witness, for I have seen enough of him at Ephesus for that. And you, Gaius, can bear witness, for you also know him.'<sup>1</sup>

One hardly feels that the hospitality accorded to Demetrius for a few days at most would be sufficient to justify this appeal to Gaius for his testimony. It is more likely that he had been acquainted with Demetrius on some previous occasion and in another place, and that he was thus able to bear witness to his character. Demetrius was well known by reputation at least—too well known—to the Church of Gaius and Diotrephees, and the word *ξένοις* does not, like 'strangers' in English, imply that the visitors were unknown, but simply that they stood in need of the hospitality given by Gaius. They presumably had little money, for it was their custom to 'take nothing of the Gentiles'. Hence their gratitude to Gaius, and hence St John's anger with Diotrephees.

'I had many things to write to thee, howbeit I will not write to thee with ink and pen; but I hope to see thee shortly, and we will speak face to face. Peace be to thee; the friends salute thee: salute the friends by name.'

Gaius has many friends at Ephesus, and St John has friends in

<sup>1</sup> 'Thou knowest that our witness is true.' This might mean either 'Thou knowest that I am not in the habit of telling lies', or else 'Thou thyself knowest that Demetrius is a good man'. The latter is undoubtedly the right meaning. St John used the same expressions elsewhere on two very solemn occasions, when he saw the blood and water issuing from the side of Christ, and when at the end of his Gospel he made a solemn protestation of its accuracy: 'And he that saw it hath given testimony; and his testimony is true. And he knoweth that he saith true; that you also may believe' (John xix 35). Here 'he knoweth that he saith true' does not mean 'he knoweth that he is not a liar', but 'he knoweth that the facts were just as he has written them'. 'This is that disciple who giveth testimony of these things and hath written these things: and we know that his testimony is true' (xxi 24). Lightfoot is no doubt right (*Essays on Supernat. Relig.* p. 187) in calling this verse 'the endorsement of the elders'. But they did not write the words, which are in St John's own unmistakeable style; he wrote them in their name, to express the assent they gave. 'We know that his testimony is true' means 'we know the facts from our own memory, and he has stated them accurately'. Similarly here St John says that Gaius could himself confirm the testimony by his own knowledge of Demetrius.

the Church where Gaius lives. St John is coming shortly; he will give Diotrephes a piece of his mind, and he has important and secret matters to communicate to Gaius. Thus, though Diotrephes put himself forward, Gaius is yet signalized as a person of some importance.

We may guess what it was that St John would not write. He meant to put an end to the self-sought pre-eminence of Diotrephes and to his high-handed proceedings. He would appoint a bishop, and perhaps he had even thought of Gaius as the person best fitted to receive the charge. But he would probably wait for the opinion of the Church, that he might know for certain whether Gaius was indeed 'designated by the Spirit'. The matter must not be mentioned in the letter, for the letter was intended to be shewn to Diotrephes.

### *§ 2. The sin of Demetrius.*

St John has done all he can to make his 'testimony' to Demetrius impressive. He had used the same words on two occasions of extraordinary solemnity. Why does he again employ this imposing formula?

'Demetrius' is the full name of the stranger; a long name which St John would have shortened into 'Demas', had he been speaking in a less stately manner.

We have seen that the stranger was apparently a Christian teacher, a disciple of St Paul, who had been with St Paul at Rome during the Neronian persecution, and who had been accused of cowardice for deserting the city at that moment. The remarkable 'testimony' given by St John seems to imply that a stigma, more difficult of removal than a mere dislike or misrepresentation on the part of Diotrephes, had been laid upon Demetrius, a stigma which the word of an Apostle could barely suffice to erase, when tendered in the most solemn manner.

If it were no less a person than St Paul himself who had complained of the desertion of Demetrius, the whole difficulty is cleared up. We understand the anger of Diotrephes—St John is slighting the great Doctor of the nations. We understand also the necessity on St John's part for speaking in the gravest tones when he is consciously contradicting an opinion put forth by so eminent a personage.

Now in the Second Epistle to Timothy we find St Paul writing in the expectation of approaching martyrdom, and complaining that he is left alone in Rome at such a moment. All his disciples have left him except Luke. One only is blamed for this desertion, and his name is Demas, the same who had been with him in his former Roman imprisonment (*Col. iv 14* and *Philem. 24*)<sup>1</sup>.

The letter found Timothy at Ephesus, where he was acting as Apostolic delegate to put the Church in order and to ordain priests and deacons, just as Titus had for a time superintended the Churches of Crete. He is to come to Rome at once before winter, passing through Troas, and bringing with him the luggage which St Paul had left there. We can easily imagine the lamentations at Ephesus on the arrival of this last message from the beloved Master<sup>2</sup>. And what indignation at those who had deserted him in the hour of trial! ‘At my first answer no man stood with me’, the Apostle complains. And it is Demetrius who is singled out for special blame—he loved this world—he was not anxious for martyrdom, nor to receive the ‘beautiful crown from the Lord’s hand’ which the Scriptures promise to the just, and to which St Paul so confidently looked forward (*Wisdom v 17*). On the contrary, he conveniently remembered the saying of our Lord on which St Athanasius at a later date rested his defence—‘When they persecute you in one city, flee to another’; he did not flee, but he departed (or, as St John puts it, he went forth) to Thessalonica. It was a disappointment to St Paul, and he felt it, though perhaps he did not mean his words to imply any grave guilt on the part of Demas. St Peter himself had fled from Rome (so says a legend which was at least not invented in St Peter’s honour), and turned back only in obedience to a vision. The story has become famous through a clever novel. It is difficult to account for its origin, unless it contains an element of truth.

<sup>1</sup> ‘I am even now ready to be sacrificed : and the time of my dissolution is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the Faith. As to the rest, there is laid up for me a crown of justice, which the Lord the just judge will render to me in that day : and not only to me but to them also that love his appearing. Make haste to come to me quickly, for Demas hath left me, loving this world, and is gone to Thessalonica, Crescens into Galatia, Titus into Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me’ (*2 Tim. iv 6, 7*).

<sup>2</sup> We know how the Ephesian presbyters wept when they took leave of St Paul at Miletus (*Acts xx 37*).

But in Asia the Churches of Pauline foundation were inclined to take a harsh view of Demetrius. It appears that they interpreted his 'love of this world' in the worst sense. They represented him as a half-apostate, a *lapsus*, just as St Cyprian's enemies decried him for hiding during the Decian persecution. The recommendation given to him by St John (and a good many years must now have passed since St Paul's martyrdom) merely embittered Diotrephe against his new chief; Demas had deserted their Apostle, and this doting old man, John, didn't care; perhaps he had still a grudge against the teacher of the Gentiles, whom he had been obliged to recognize as an equal!

The identity of the Demas of 2 Timothy with the Demas of 3 John seems thus to be established. The coincidence of circumstances is too remarkable to be put down to chance.

### § 3. *The Hospitality of Gaius.*

When St Paul wrote from Rome to the Colossians and to Philemon, his companions were (*a*) Tychicus and Onesimus, who took his letter to Asia, (*b*) three brethren 'of the circumcision', Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus, (*c*) Epaphras, Demas, and Luke, who are evidently Gentiles, and whose full names were Epaphroditus, Demetrius, and Lucanus. Of these, Aristarchus and Luke had come with St Paul, sharing his shipwreck. Mark he had probably found at Rome. Epaphroditus, who had been a teacher of the Colossians, and seems to have been a Colossian himself, had come bringing messages from Philippi. Possibly Demas had come with him, and he may very likely have been a Macedonian, for when he left Rome, it was to Thessalonica that he directed his steps.

Who then was Gaius? He seems to have been well acquainted with Demas in old days, and we are therefore inclined to identify him with one or other of St Paul's companions of that name, Gaius the Macedonian (Acts xix 29), Gaius the Derbaean (Acts xx 4), or Gaius the Corinthian (Rom. xvi 23; 1 Cor. i 14). This last was St Paul's host at Corinth. Is it possible that he is the same kindly individual who became after many years the host of Demetrius, and whose hospitality is thus commended for ever by the voice of two Apostles?

If so, it is hardly likely that he was still living at Corinth, which would seem too far from Asia. Now Origen<sup>1</sup> tells us that this same Gaius of Corinth became the first bishop of Thessalonica. Corinth must have received a bishop soon after the letter of St Clement, so that Thessalonica may well have had one a few years earlier<sup>2</sup>.

We thus reach a consistent history. Demas was a Thessalonian. He perhaps accompanied Epaphroditus from Macedonia to Rome; on leaving Rome he went to Thessalonica because it was his home. He must have found that city too hot for him as soon as St Paul's second letter to Timothy became known there. This will have been almost immediately, as Timothy no doubt went at once to Rome by Troas, and must consequently have passed through Thessalonica on his way to Italy by the Egnatian road. Many years later Demas, now an elderly man, • desires to end his days in his native place. He obtains a letter of recommendation from St John to the Church of Thessalonica (*ἔγραψά τι τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ*), and if that document had come down to us it would have thrown some light on the life of Demas during the years which had elapsed since the Neronian persecution, and it must have contained the apology for Demas to which the Apostle obscurely refers in the words 'they went out for the Name's sake'. The hospitable Gaius accepted

<sup>1</sup> *Comm. in Ep. ad Rom.* I x 41 'Videtur ergo indicare de eo quod vir fuerit hospitalis, qui non solum Paulum ac singulos quosque aduentantes Corinthum hospitio receperit sed ecclesiae uniuersae in domo sua conuenticulum ipse praebeuerit. Fertur sane traditione maiorum, quod hic Gaius primus episcopus fuerit Thessalonicensis ecclesiae'. The information is early, and there is no apparent reason for its having been invented. The Apostolic Constitutions (vii 47) inform us that Gaius was the first bishop of Pergamum, Demetrius of Philadelphia. It does not seem very probable that any tradition underlies this statement. The Roman martyrology states that Aristarchus was the first bishop of Thessalonica. This is a mediaeval figment, unknown to Ado, Usuard, or the Hieronymian martyrology.

<sup>2</sup> Thessalonica was later the ecclesiastical as well as civil head of Achaia and Illyricum, and was the seat of a Papal vicar from Siricius onwards. The case of Perigenes and Rufus well illustrates its superiority to Corinth, the metropolis of Greece. At Corinth Hegesippus (ap. Eus. *H. E.* iv 22) seems to imply a 'succession' before Primus, c. 160, the predecessor of Dionysius. In the letter of Dionysius to the Athenians (c. 170, *ibid.* iv 23), Dionysius the Areopagite was said to have been their first bishop. If so, it must have been some time after St. Paul's death. The first bishop of a see at the end of the first century might well sometimes be the oldest surviving disciple of the Apostles.

St John's assurance<sup>1</sup>, but Diotrephes prated against him, in the belief that the silver streak secured him from the jurisdiction of the Apostle, whose attention was principally given to Asia<sup>2</sup>. But he was mistaken. St John came to Thessalonica in person, and appointed Gaius bishop over the head of the ambitious Diotrephes.

We have seen that the Epistle is a recommendation to help Demas forward on his journey. Demas would certainly not have gone again to the same city immediately after having been obliged to leave it, unless it were unavoidable to pass through it on his way to a new destination. Now Thessalonica is precisely a place which Demas must pass through if he were going either to Italy or to Greece, except by preferring a long and hazardous voyage by sea. As he did not stop with St John, we may conjecture that he intended to avoid Pauline foundations for the future. Not Greece, therefore, but the West was probably his destination.

It is noticeable that St Paul mentions Demas and Luke each thrice, and always together. We might find in this a confirmation of Ramsay's conjecture that St Luke was a Macedonian, although tradition makes him an Antiochene<sup>3</sup>.

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*(To be continued.)*

<sup>1</sup> Gaius may have known Demas at Corinth. For Demas would hardly have joined St Paul at Rome if he had not formerly been his companion. He had been with him at Colossae, for his greeting is sent to that Church and to Philemon.

<sup>2</sup> St John took no notice, we may suppose, of the contemporary disorders at Corinth.

<sup>3</sup> So the 'Monarchian' Prologue. Luke is first mentioned at Antioch (Acts xi 27) in Cod. Bezae.