

2JOHN

The Second Letter of John

Introduction

All are agreed that the Gospel of John and the three letters of John are written from within the one community, well described as ‘the community of the Beloved Disciple’. However, the information given us in the various writings and the witness of tradition are insufficient to provide certainty as to exactly how the Gospel and the three letters are related. This letter and the so-called Third Letter of John are written by someone who introduces himself simply as ‘the elder’ (‘the presbyter’). In his *History of the Church*, Eusebius quotes from ‘the Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord’, written by Papias of Hierapolis c.130AD in which he speaks of two different men called John, both buried in Ephesus, one the apostle (whom Eusebius assumes is the writer of the Gospel) and the other a presbyter (*History of the Church*, 3.39).

Early tradition is unanimous in giving John as the name of the Beloved Disciple, the author of the Gospel. Irenaeus, writing towards the end of the second century, identifies the author of the Gospel as ‘John, the disciple of the Lord, who had leant back on his breast’ (*Against the Heresies* 3.1.2, quoted by Eusebius, *History of the Church* 5.8). Likewise Origen in his commentary on the Gospel (c.240AD) writes: ‘It is likely that the one reclining on Jesus’ breast, one of the disciples whom Jesus loved, was John, who wrote the Gospel’ (32.260). Augustine in his First Tractate on John preached c.410AD says: ‘John reclined upon the breast of the Lord and drank that which he might give to us to drink’ (1.7.2). Though most assume that the Gospel was written by John the Apostle, Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, writing c.190AD, identifies the Beloved Disciple as John the Presbyter (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.24).

It is clear that the Gospel received its final form after the death of the Beloved Disciple, and the letters would appear to be dealing with a situation which belongs to a period that also comes after the writing of the bulk of the Gospel, if not after its final editing. Like 1John, this letter is written by someone of recognised authority. It is concerned with the same problems as 1John and offers the same solutions, using the same terms. It is reasonable to work on the hypothesis that both documents were composed by the one person, one of the early disciples of the Beloved Disciple himself. He may also be the one who was responsible for the final editing of the Gospel.

The author of 2John exercises the authority of an elder in the area and seems to be addressing a network of local house churches. It is quite possible that this was a covering letter accompanying the treatise which we know as 1John. It accents the importance of not offering hospitality to the false teachers, offering hospitality would allow them to continue influencing those who are struggling to remain faithful to the traditional gospel and community. It is a brief letter, fitting onto one papyrus sheet. Eusebius follows Origen in listing this letter as among the ‘disputed writings’ (HE 3.25), which indicates that in the fourth century it still lacked solid recognition as an inspired work of the New Testament. Verses 1-9 are preserved on a parchment sheet from c.300AD (0232), and it is preserved in its entirety in the fourth century parchment codexes, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, and the fifth century parchment codex, Alexandrinus.

2John appears only once in the official church lectionary, when the first part of verse one and verses three to nine are read on Friday of Week 32 of Ordinary Time, Year II.

The author must have had a certain authority and also must have been well known to be able to identify himself simply as ‘the elder’ (Greek: □□□□□□□□□□). He may be the famous ‘John the Presbyter’ mentioned by Papias (see the Introduction). He is writing to a Christian community that he addresses as ‘the elect lady’, since it has been chosen for a special relationship of love by the Lord, its bridegroom. He hopes that his letter will be read also by the house churches founded from this community – called here ‘her children’. As will become clear from verse thirteen, he is writing to this community as one ‘sister’ to another (compare 1 Peter 5:13).

Four times in this short greeting, the author speaks of the ‘truth’ (Greek: *alētheia*) – a favourite word in the Johannine community. He loves them ‘in the truth’, because the love he has for them flows from their shared communion in the only true love which is the love of God. This is the love of the heart of Jesus which binds him to the Father, the living and true God, and which Jesus shares with all who believe in him. He speaks of those who ‘know the truth’ – another favourite expression in this community. He is using the word ‘know’ in its richest sense of knowledge that comes only through intimate communion. It is this shared communion that is the source of a shared knowledge of the true God revealed by Jesus.

The ‘truth that abides in us and will be with us forever’ is Christ himself, ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (John 14:6). At the Last Supper Jesus promised to send from the Father ‘the Spirit of truth’ (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). Through the gift of his Spirit, Jesus enables the members of the Christian community to share the love which he himself enjoys with the Father in the Spirit. Thus they share in God’s own life.

His prayer is for ‘grace, mercy and peace’ (compare 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2). In a way that is typical of the Johannine writings he adds ‘in truth and love’. There are some similarities here with the greeting offered by Jude in his letter in which he writes: ‘May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance’ (Jude 1:2).

John speaks of God as ‘Father’ (see commentary on James 1:17) and of Jesus as ‘the Father’s Son’, already in this way underlining the intimacy of love which is central to his concern in this letter.

¹The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth,

²because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:

³Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, in truth and love.

⁴I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father.

⁵But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another.

⁶And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it.

There is nothing in this short letter to indicate any criticism of the community, so we should probably read the word ‘some’ in verse four to refer to those with whom the elder has had contact, rather than as implying that others in the community are not ‘walking in the truth’. He is ‘overjoyed’ that they are living according to the will of God, living the life given to them by ‘the Father’.

Verse five and six indicate that the command which he especially has in mind is the command given them by Jesus to ‘love one another as I have loved you’ (John 15:12; see John 13:34; 15:17). We find this command referred to again and again in 1John: ‘This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us’ (1John 3:23; see also 3:11; 4:7,11,12). It can be called a command of the Father because, as Jesus said: ‘What I speak, I speak just as the Father has told me’ (John 12:50). As we would expect, we find this command also in other writings of the New Testament:

Concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.

– 1Thessalonians 4:9

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

– Romans 13:8

Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.

– 1Peter 1:22

The connection between love and obedience is an essential one. How could we truly be in the love of God and not be part of God’s reaching out in love to others? The expression ‘from the beginning’ recalls his statement in 1John:

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

– 1John 2:7-8

The author's concern is the same as in 1John. He is forewarning them against former members of the Christian community who have 'gone out into the world' (also 1John 4:1). The essence of the teaching of those who have broken from the community is that they deny the salvific relevance of Jesus' humanity, and so of his death. We find the same message in 1John:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.

– 1John 4:2-3

1John, too, calls them 'antichrists' (2:18,22; 4:3) and 'deceivers' (2:26; 3:7). As in verse two, he includes himself in speaking of what 'we have worked for'. If they fall for the deception of the breakaway teachers they are jeopardising nothing less than the eternal life promised them. As Jesus said: 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you ... This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent' (John 6:27,29). In speaking of their receiving a 'full reward', the elder is echoing the words of the Gospel Prologue: 'From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace' (John 1:16). Their full reward is the fullness of eternal life in the communion of divine love enjoyed by the exalted Jesus.

In warning them against going beyond the teaching of Christ, he has in mind the words of Jesus: 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears' (John 16:12-13). They will discover new truths, but under the inspiration of the Spirit and so from Jesus. What they discover will not contradict the revelation already received from him.

To deny Jesus is to deny his Father. To live one's life within the revelation given by Jesus and in the communion of love which he gives to those who believe in him is to know him as Son and to know God as Father: 'No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also' (1John 2:23). 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them' (John 14:23).

⁷Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist!

⁸Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive a full reward.

⁹Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

¹⁰Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching;

¹¹for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.

¹²Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

¹³The children of your elect sister send you their greetings.

The elder judges the ideas and the methods of the schismatic teachers so dangerous that he advises the church not to offer them the hospitality which they would normally give to travelling missionaries. This is a way of telling them that they are not teaching with the blessing of the mother church, and that they are not to be received as Christians in good faith. To offer them hospitality is to welcome their teaching, and to give them another platform, in the house church, for disseminating their erroneous and dangerous ideas.