

First Epistle of John - Introduction

by Arno Clemens Gaebelein

The First Epistle of John is a witness to Christ as the Son of God and the eternal life He imparts to believers, and it exhorts believers to manifest the same characteristics as Christ in their lives.

Scripture: John 20:31, 1 John 1:1, 1 John 2:18, 1 John 3:2, 1 John 4:1, 1 John 5:13

Topics: "Biblical Authorship", "Eternal Life"

Description

Arno Clemens Gaebelein delves into the authorship, historical evidence, and purpose of the Epistle of John, emphasizing the strong internal and external testimonies that confirm John the Apostle as the writer. The Epistle, closely related to the Gospel of John, was likely written around 90 A.D. to believers in various assemblies, possibly in Ephesus or the churches in the province of Asia. Its purpose is to bring fullness of joy to believers and to assure them of eternal life in Christ, countering false teachings and exposing antichristian ideologies prevalent even in John's time.

Transcript

Introduction

This Epistle is not addressed to any one church nor does it mention, like the other New Testament Epistles, the author of the document; it is anonymous. We are not left in doubt who penned this Epistle in spite of its anonymous character. There can be no question that the author of the fourth Gospel is also the author of this Epistle. Its opening statement is linked with the opening of the Gospel and throughout it is written in the thought and language of the fourth Gospel. Inasmuch, then, as that Gospel is indisputably the work of John the Apostle, this Epistle is also the work of his inspired pen. "The internal testimony furnished by this Epistle to its author being the same with the author of the fourth Gospel is, it may well be thought, incontrovertible. To maintain a diversity of authorship would betray the very perverseness and exaggeration of that school of criticism which refuses to believe, be evidence never so strong" (Alford).

Historical Evidence

While the internal testimony confirms conclusively the Johannine authorship of the Epistle there is also a mass of historical evidence which attributes the Epistle to the beloved disciple. The oldest testimony is that of Polycarp, who was personally acquainted with the Apostle John. We refer to the introduction of the Gospel of John where we give fuller information on Polycarp and his testimony to the fourth Gospel. He makes, in one of his writings, a direct reference to 1 John 4:3, in fact, he quotes this verse almost

verbatim. It is, therefore, a testimony to the genuineness and the authorship of this Epistle. Irenaeus, the disciple of Polycarp, frequently quotes the Epistle of John and states that it is John's. Notable is the reference in his work against heresies as quoted by Eusebius. He cites John 20:31 and connects it with 1 John 2:18 and 4:1-3 and 1 John 5:1. After these two witnesses, Polycarp, who knew John, and Irenaeus, the disciple of Polycarp, every authority among the church fathers mentions this Epistle as being the work of John the Apostle.

It is not necessary to quote all these references--by Clement of Alexandria , Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria , Eusebius, Jerome, and many others. We mention but one more of the ancient testimonies, that which is found in the Muratorian fragment. This old and very reliable source of the second century has in it the following paragraph: "What wonder is it, then, that John brings forward each detail with so much emphasis, even in this Epistle, saying of himself, "What we have seen with our eyes, and heard with our ears, and our hands have handled, these things have we written to you. For so he professes that he was not only an eye-witness, but a hearer, and, moreover, a historian of all the wonderful works of the Lord in order.

In harmony with this evidence is the testimony of the oldest fourth century Greek manuscripts, which give the title of the Epistle as "Joannou-A"--that is--"John 1." Its rejection by the gnostic Marcion is of no importance, for he excluded from the Scriptures all the writings of the Apostle because they deal a death-blow to his anti-Christian inventions. Lucke, one of the great scholars of bygone days, states that the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John are the genuine works of the apostle, and he adds, "Incontestably, then, our Epistle must be numbered among those canonical books which are most strongly upheld by ecclesiastical tradition."

It is, therefore, not necessary in face of such internal and external evidences to state the objections of destructive critics like Scaliger, S.G. Lange, Bretschneider and the Tubingen school. As it is with other portions of Scripture they have no case at all in attacking the authorship of this Epistle.

When And Where It Was Written

The Epistle itself gives no definite answer to these questions. Some have attempted to fix the date as being before the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. They base their assumption on chapter 2:18 and claim that "the last time" means the closing days for Jerusalem , which is incorrect. The term, "the last time," has in this Epistle the same meaning as in 1 Timothy 4:1 and 2 Timothy 3:1, and therefore does not mean the last days before the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. But it is clear that John wrote the fourth Gospel record first and his Epistle was written after the Gospel, so that the Epistle was written possibly about the year 90, preceding the Revelation, which was written about the year 96.

Irenaeus states that the Gospel was written by John in Ephesus ; an ancient tradition states that the Epistle was written from the same place.

To Whom Was It Written

The fact that this Epistle starts, unlike the other Epistles, without any address, introductory greeting or closing salutation, has led some to call it a treatise and not an Epistle. But the personal address and appeal, the style throughout fully sustains the epistolary character. Others, again, have termed the Epistle a second part of the Gospel (Michaelis), while others speak of it as an introduction to the Gospel. That the Epistle is closely related to the Gospel is very true, but that does not necessitate a closer external

relationship.

Dr. Bullinger, in the Companion Bible, suggests that this Epistle also was originally addressed to believing Hebrews in the dispersion. This view was held by others before him (Benson and others); but there is nothing whatever in the Epistle to warrant such a conclusion. On account of a remark by Augustinus on 1 John 3:2 that John wrote "to the Parthians many commentators have adopted this view, which is, however, without any foundation whatever. The Epistle was evidently not addressed to any one church but to believers in a number of assemblies. John was acquainted with these believers, who seemed to have been mostly Gentile converts. (See Chapter 5:21). If the tradition is true that the Epistle was written in Ephesus, it is not improbable that it was sent to the seven churches in the province of Asia, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, the churches to whom the Lord sent the messages a few years later when John was in Patmos.

The Purpose of the Epistle

The purpose of the Epistle is stated by the writer in two places; "These things write we unto you that your joy may be full" (1:4). "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God" (5:13). According to the Gospel of John (chapter 20:31), this also is the purpose of the Gospel. He writes to those who believe on the Son of God and who have that eternal life which was manifested in the Lord Jesus, and which is imparted to all who believe on the Son of God and which establishes fellowship with the Father and the Son. The Epistle has been rightly called a family letter, that is, believers are viewed as the family of God, hence the repeated use of the word *teknia*, children. The Gospel of John was written on account of the false teachings concerning the Person of Christ, which began in the second half of the first century. (See Introduction to John's Gospel.)

The Epistle of John is very outspoken against those errors touching the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ and His sacrificial work. They flourished later under the name of Gnosticism, Docetism, Montanism and others. Marcion, a Gnostic leader, when Polycarp, the disciple of John met him, was addressed by Polycarp with these words, "I know thee, thou firstborn of Satan." While these evil doctrines and denials were not yet fully developed in John's day, they existed and increased, hence the warnings in chapter 2:18-25 and 4:1-6. What antichristianity is will be learned from these passages. All the evil systems of today, which are sweeping with increasing force through Christendom towards their divinely appointed and revealed doom are exposed in this Epistle in their true character. Christian Science, falsely so called; the liberal theology, which denies that Christ is the virgin-born Son of God, the modern religion, the destructive criticism and other systems and cults are all branded by John as antichrists. These many antichrists are finally to be merged into a personal antichrist, the man of sin. Our annotations will enlarge upon all this.

The Message of the Epistle

The Epistle has a deep spiritual message for the children of God. As already stated, the Epistle, like the Gospel of John, witnesses to Christ as the Son of God and the eternal life which He is Himself and which He imparts to the believer. Thus the Epistle opens, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled, of the Word of life. (And the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us.) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the

Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."

The great truth which is developed by the Holy Spirit is not so much the life which the believer has in Christ, that is, the eternal life imparted unto him, but it is that life which is in the believer, and the manifestation of that life, a manifestation of the same characteristics as manifested by the Lord Jesus Christ in His blessed life. As born of God, believers have God as their Father, they are children of God. God is light and God is love and, therefore, those who are born of God, in whom there is eternal life, must also manifest light and love, walk in righteousness and in love. This is the message of the First Epistle of John. All the blessed things which cluster around it we shall discover in our analysis and annotations.

The Division of The First Epistle of John

The divisions of the First Epistle of John have always been considered a difficulty, so that leading expositors of the past have expressed the belief that there is no contextual connection at all in the Epistle. Calvin shares this belief as well as others. Bengel in his great work "The Gnomon" maintained that there is a logical and contextual arrangement. He divided the Epistle in three parts, naming them in Latin as follows:

- I. Exordium--Introduction 1:1-4.
- II. Tractatio--Treatment and discussion 1:5-5:12
- III. Conclusio--Conclusion 5:13-21.

The Numerical Bible gives also a three-fold division.

- I. God as Light and in the light and the light in us: 1-2:11.
- II. Growth by the truth, which is nothing else but the light manifested: 2:12-27.
- III. The manifestation of the children of God by the fruit found: 2:28-5.

This is a helpful arrangement. The Scofield Bible gives two main divisions.

- I. The Family with the Father: 1-3:24.
- II. The Family and the world: 4-5.

We divide the Epistle into six sections as follows:

- I. THE LIFE MANIFESTED (1:1-4)
- II. LIGHT AND DARKNESS AND THE TESTS (1:5-2:17)
- III. ERROR AND TRUTH (2:18-27)
- IV. RIGHTEOUSNESS AND LOVE AS MANIFESTED BY THE CHILDREN OF GOD (2:28-3:18)
- V. HEREBY WE KNOW (3:19-5:13)
- VI. THE CONCLUSION (5:14-21)

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