

ALEXANDER WILLIAM

EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE: THE
EPISTLES OF ST. JOHN

William Alexander
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William Alexander Expositor's Bible: The Epistles of St. John

Hujus scriptis illustratur,

Illustrata solidatur

Unitas Ecclesiae.

Adam of St. Victor

Seq. xxxi. (S. Johannes Evangelista).

PREFACE

It is now many years ago since I entered upon a study of the Epistles of St. John, as serious and prolonged as was consistent with the often distracting cares of an Irish Bishop. Such fruit as my labours produced enjoyed the advantage of appearing in the last volume of the *Speaker's Commentary* in 1881.

Since that period I have frequently turned again to these Epistles – subsequent reflection or study not seldom filling in gaps in my knowledge, or leading me to modify former interpretations. When invited last year to resume my old work, I therefore embraced willingly the opportunity which was presented to me.

Let me briefly state the method pursued in this book.

I. The First Part contains four Discourses.

(1) In the first Discourse I have tried to place the reader in the historical surroundings from which (unless all early Church history is unreal, a past that never was present) these Epistles emanated.

(2) In the second Discourse I compare the Epistle with the Gospel. This is the true point of orientation for the commentator. Call the connection between the two documents what we may; be the Epistle preface, appendix, moral and devotional commentary, or accompanying encyclical address to the Churches, which were "the nurslings of John"; that connection is constant and

pervasive. Unless this principle is firmly grasped, we not only lose a defence and confirmation of the Gospel, but dissolve the whole consistency of the Epistle, and leave it floating – the thinnest cloud in the whole cloudland of mystic idealism.

(3) The third Discourse deals with the polemical element in these Epistles. Some commentators indeed, like the excellent Henry Hammond, "spy out Gnostics where there are none." They confuse us with uncouth names, and conjure up the ghosts of long-forgotten errors until we seem to hear a theological bedlam, or to see theological scarecrows. Yet Gnosticism, Doketism, Cerinthianism, certainly sprang from the teeming soil of Ephesian thought; and without a recognition of this fact, we shall never understand the Epistle. Undoubtedly, if the Apostle had addressed himself only to contemporary error, his great Epistle would have become completely obsolete for us. To subsequent ages an antiquated polemical treatise is like a fossil scorpion with a sting of stone. But a divinely taught polemic under transitory forms of error finds principles as lasting as human nature.

(4) The object of the fourth Discourse is to bring out the image of St. John's soul – the essentials of the spiritual life to be found in those precious chapters which still continue to be an element of the life of the Church.

Such a view, if at all accurate, will enable the reader to contemplate the whole of the Epistle with the sense of completeness, of remoteness, and of unity which arises from

a general survey apart from particular difficulties. An ancient legend insisted that St. John exercised miraculous power in blending again into one the broken pieces of a precious stone. We may try in an humble way to bring these fragmentary particles of spiritual gem-dust together, and fuse them into one.

II. The plan pursued in the second part is this. The First Epistle (of which only I need now speak) is divided into ten sections.

The sections are thus arranged —

(1) The *text* is given in Greek. In this matter I make no pretence to original research; and have simply adopted Tischendorf's text, with occasional amendments from Dr. Scrivener or Prof. Westcott. At one time I might have been tempted to follow Lachmann; but experience taught me that he is "audacior quàm limiator," and I held my hand. The advantage to every studious reader of having the divine original close by him for comparison is too obvious to need a word more.

With the Greek I have placed in parallel columns the translations most useful for ordinary readers — the Latin, the English A.V. and R.V. The Latin text is that of the "Codex Amiatinus," after Tischendorf's splendid edition of 1854. In this the reader will find the Hieronymian interpretation as it stood not more than a hundred and twenty years after the death of St. Jerome, an interpretation more diligent and more accurate than that which is supplied by the ordinary Vulgate text. The saint felt "the peril of presuming to judge others where he himself would be judged by all; of changing the tongue of the old, and

carrying back a world which was growing hoary to the initial essay of infancy." The Latin is of that form to which ancient Latin Church writers gave the name of "rusticitas." But it is a happy – I had almost said a divine – rusticity. In translating from the Hebrew of the Old Testament, St. Jerome has given a new life, a strange tenderness or awful cadence, to prophets and psalmists. The voice of the fields is the voice of Heaven also. The tongue of the people is for once the tongue of God. This Hebraistic Latin or Latinised Hebrew forms the strongest link in that mysterious yet most real spell wherewith the Latin of the Church enthrals the soul of the world. But to return to our immediate subject. The student can seldom go wrong by more than a hair's breadth when he has before him three such translations. In the first column stands St. Jerome's vigorous Latin. The second contains the English A.V., of which each clause seems to be guarded by the spirits of the holy dead, as well as by the love of the living Church; and to tell the innovator that he "does wrong to show it violence, being so majestic." The third column offers to view the scholarlike – if sometimes just a little pedantic and provoking – accuracy of the R.V. To this comparison of versions I attach much significance. Every translation is an additional commentary, every good translation the best of commentaries.

I have ventured with much hesitation to add upon another column in each section a translation drawn up by myself for my own private use; the greater portion of which was made a year or two before the publication of the R.V. Its right to be here is this,

that it affords the best key to my meaning in any place where the exposition may be imperfectly expressed.¹

(2) One or more Discourses are attached to most of the sections. In these I may have seemed sometimes to have given myself a wide scope, but I have tried to make a sound and careful exegesis the basis of each. And I have throughout considered myself bound to draw out some great leading idea of St. John with conscientious care.

(3) The Discourses (or if there be no Discourse in the section, the text and versions) are followed by short notes, chiefly exegetical, in which I have not willingly passed by any real difficulty.

I have not wished to cumber my pages with constant quotations. But in former years I have read, in some cases with much care, the following commentators – St. Augustine's *Tractatus*, St. John Chrysostom's Homilies on the Gospel (full of hints upon the Epistles), Cornelius à Lapide; of older post-Reformation commentators, the excellent Henry Hammond, the eloquent Dean Hardy, the precious fragments in Pole's *Synopsis*— above all, the inimitable Bengel; of moderns, Düsterdieck, Huther, Ebrard, Neander; more recently, Professor Westcott, whose subtle and exquisite scholarship deserves the gratitude of every student of St. John. Of Haupt I know nothing, with the exception of an analysis of the Epistle, which is stamped with the highest praise of so refined and competent a judge as Archdeacon Farrar. But having read this list fairly in past

years, I am now content to have before me nothing but a Greek Testament, the Grammars of Winer and Donaldson, the New Testament lexicons of Bretschneider, Grimm, and Mintert, with Tromm's "Concordantia LXX." For, on the whole, I really prefer St. John to his commentators. And I hope I am not ungrateful for help which I have received from them, when I say that I now seem to myself to understand him better without the dissonance of their many voices. "Johannem nisi ex Johanne ipso non intellexeris."

III. It only remains to commend this book, such as it is, not only to theological students, but to general readers, who I hope will not be alarmed by a few Greek words here and there.

I began my fuller study of St. John's Epistle in the noonday of life; I am closing it with the sunset in my eyes. I pray God to sanctify this poor attempt to the edification of souls, and the good of the Church. And I ask all who may find it useful, to offer their intercessions for a blessing upon the book, and upon its author.

WILLIAM DERRY AND RAPHOE.

The Palace, Londonderry,
February 6th, 1889.

Merciful God, we beseech Thee to cast Thy bright beams of light upon Thy Church, that it being enlightened by the doctrine of Thy blessed Apostle and Evangelist St. John, may so walk in the light of Thy truth, that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

PART I

*"Johannis Epistolæ, ultimusque primæ versiculus, in
Ephesumimprimis conveniunt."
(Bengelini Act. xix. 21.)*

DISCOURSE I. *THE SURROUNDINGS OF THE FIRST EPISTLE OF ST. JOHN*

**"Little children, keep yourselves
from idols." – i John v. 21**

After the example of a writer of genius, preachers and essayists for the last forty years have constantly applied – or misapplied – some lines from one of the greatest of Christian poems. Dante sings of St. John —

"As he, who looks intent,
And strives with searching ken, how he may see
The sun in his eclipse, and, through decline
Of seeing, loseth power of sight: so I
Gazed on that last resplendence."²

The poet meant to be understood of the Apostle's spiritual splendour of soul, of the absorption of his intellect and heart in his conception of the Person of Christ and of the dogma of the Holy Trinity. By these expositors of Dante the image is transferred to the style and structure of his writings. But confusion of thought is not magnificence, and mere obscurity is never sunlike. A blurred sphere and undecided outline is not characteristic of the sun even in eclipse. Dante never intended us to understand that St. John as a writer was distinguished by a beautiful vagueness of sentiment, by bright but tremulously drawn lines of dogmatic creed. It is indeed certain that round St. John himself, at the time when he wrote, there were many minds affected by this vague mysticism. For them, beyond the scanty region of the known, there was a world of darkness whose shadows they desired to penetrate. For them this little island of life was surrounded by waters into whose depths they affected to gaze. They were drawn by a mystic attraction to things which they themselves called the "shadows," the "depths," the "silences." But for St. John these shadows were a negation of the message which he delivered that "God is light, and darkness in Him is none." These silences were the contradiction of the Word who has once for all interpreted God. These depths were "depths of Satan."³ For the men who were thus enamoured of indefiniteness, of shifting sentiments and flexible creeds, were Gnostic heretics. Now St. John's style, as such, has not the artful

variety, the perfect balance in the masses of composition, the finished logical cohesion of the Greek classical writers. Yet it can be loftily or pathetically impressive. It can touch the problems and processes of the moral and spiritual world with a pencil-tip of deathless light, or compress them into symbols which are solemnly or awfully picturesque.⁴ Above all St. John has the faculty of enshrining dogma in forms of statement which are firm and precise – accurate enough to be envied by philosophers, subtle enough to defy the passage of heresy through their finely drawn yet powerful lines. Thus in the beginning of his Gospel all false thought upon the Person of Him who is the living theology of His Church is refuted by anticipation – that which in itself or in its certain consequences unhumanises or undeifies the God Man; that which denies the singularity of the One Person who was Incarnate, or the reality and entirety of the Manhood of Him who fixed His Tabernacle⁵ of humanity in us.⁶

It is therefore a mistake to look upon the First Epistle of St. John as a creedless composite of miscellaneous sweetnesses, a disconnected rhapsody upon philanthropy. And it will be well to enter upon a serious perusal of it, with a conviction that it did not drop from the sky upon an unknown place, at an unknown time, with an unknown purpose. We can arrive at some definite conclusions as to the circumstances from which it arose, and the sphere in which it was written – at least if we are entitled to say that we have done so in the case of almost any other ancient document of the same nature.

Our simplest plan will be, in the first instance, to trace in the briefest outline the career of St. John after the Ascension of our Lord, so far as it can be followed certainly by Scripture, or with the highest probability from early Church history. We shall then be better able to estimate the degree in which the Epistle fits into the framework of local thought and circumstances in which we desire to place it.

Much of this biography can best be drawn out by tracing the contrast between St. John and St. Peter, which is conveyed with such subtle and exquisite beauty in the closing chapter of the fourth Gospel.

The contrast between the two Apostles is one of *history* and of *character*.

Historically the work done by each of them for the Church differs in a remarkable way from the other.

We might have anticipated for one so dear to our Lord a distinguished part in spreading the Gospel among the nations of the world. The tone of thought revealed in parts of his Gospel might even have seemed to indicate a remarkable aptitude for such a task. St. John's peculiar appreciation of the visit of the Greeks to Jesus, and his preservation of words which show such deep insight into Greek religious ideas, would apparently promise a great missionary, at least to men of lofty speculative thought.⁷ But in the Acts of the Apostles St. John is first overshadowed, then effaced, by the heroes of the missionary epic, St. Peter and St. Paul. After the close of the Gospels he

is mentioned five times only. Once his name occurs in a list of the Apostles.⁸ Thrice he passes before us with Peter.⁹ Once again (the first and last time when we hear of St. John in personal relation with St. Paul) he appears in the Epistle to the Galatians with two others, James and Cephas, as reputed to be pillars of the Church.¹⁰ But whilst we read in the Acts of his taking a certain part in miracles, in preaching, in confirmation; while his boldness is acknowledged by adversaries of the faith; not a line of his individual teaching is recorded. He walks in silence by the side of the Apostle who was more fitted to be a missionary pioneer.¹¹

With the materials at our command, it is difficult to say how St. John was employed whilst the first great advance of the cross was in progress. We know for certain that he was at Jerusalem during the second visit of St. Paul. But there is no reason for conjecturing that he was in that city when it was visited by St. Paul on his last voyage¹² (A.D. 60); while we shall presently have occasion to show how markedly the Church tradition connects St. John with Ephesus.

We have next to point out that this contrast in the *history* of the Apostles is the result of a contrast in their *characters*. This contrast is brought out with a marvellous prophetic symbolism in the miraculous draught of fishes after the Resurrection.

First as regards St. Peter.

"When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him (for he was naked), and did cast himself

into the sea."¹³ His was the warm energy, the forward impulse of young life, the free bold plunge of an impetuous and chivalrous nature into the waters which are nations and peoples. *In he must; on he will.* The prophecy which follows the thrice renewed restitution of the fallen Apostle is as follows: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake He, signifying by what death He should glorify God, and when He had spoken this, He saith unto him, Follow Me."¹⁴ This, we are told, is obscure; but it is obscure only as to details. To St. Peter it could have conveyed no other impression than that it foretold his martyrdom. "When thou wast young," points to the tract of years up to old age. It has been said that forty is the old age of youth, fifty the youth of old age. But our Lord does not actually define old age by any precise date. He takes what has occurred as a type of Peter's youthfulness of heart and frame – "girding himself," with rapid action, as he had done shortly before; "walking," as he had walked on the white beach of the lake in the early dawn; "whither thou wouldest," as when he had cried with impetuous half defiant independence, "I go a fishing," invited by the auguries of the morning, and of the water. The form of expression seems to indicate that Simon Peter was not to go far into the dark and frozen land; that he was to be growing old, rather than absolutely old.¹⁵ Then should

he stretch forth his hands, with the dignified resignation of one who yields manfully to that from which nature would willingly escape. "This spake He," adds the evangelist, "signifying by what death he shall glorify God."¹⁶ What fatal temptation leads so many commentators to minimise such a prediction as this? If the prophecy were the product of a later hand added after the martyrdom of St. Peter, it certainly would have wanted its present inimitable impress of distance and reserve.

It is in the context of this passage that we read most fully and truly the contrast of our Apostle's nature with that of St. Peter. St. John, as Chrysostom has told us in deathless words, was loftier, saw more deeply, pierced right into and through spiritual truths,¹⁷ was more the lover of Jesus than of Christ, as Peter was more the lover of Christ than of Jesus. Below the different work of the two men, and determining it, was this essential difference of nature, which they carried with them into the region of grace. St. John was not so much the great missionary with his sacred restlessness; not so much the oratorical expositor of prophecy with his pointed proofs of correspondence between prediction and fulfilment, and his passionate declamation driving in the conviction of guilt like a sting that pricked the conscience. He was the theologian; the quiet master of the secrets of the spiritual life; the calm strong controversialist who excludes error by constructing truth. The work of such a spirit as his was rather like the finest product of venerable and long established Churches. One gentle word of Jesus sums up the biography of long years which apparently were

without the crowded vicissitudes to which other Apostles were exposed. If the old Church history is true, St. John was either not called upon to die for Jesus, or escaped from that death by a miracle. That one word of the Lord was to become a sort of motto of St. John. It occurs some twenty-six times in the brief pages of these Epistles. "If I will that he abide" – abide in the bark, in the Church, in one spot, in life, in spiritual communion with Me. It is to be remembered finally, that not only spiritual, but ecclesiastical consolidation is attributed to St. John by the voice of history. He occupied himself with the visitation of his Churches and the development of Episcopacy.¹⁸ So in the sunset of the Apostolic age stands before us the mitred form of John the Divine. Early Christianity had three successive capitals – Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus. Surely, so long as St. John lived, men looked for a Primate of Christendom not at Rome but at Ephesus.

How different were the two deaths! It was as if in His words our Lord allowed His two Apostles to look into a magic glass, wherein one saw dimly the hurrying feet, the prelude to execution which even the saint wills not; the other the calm life, the gathered disciples, the quiet sinking to rest. In the clear obscure of that prophecy we may discern the outline of Peter's cross, the bowed figure of the saintly old man. Let us be thankful that John "*tarried*." He has left the Church three pictures that can never fade – in the Gospel the picture of Christ, in the Epistles the picture of his own soul, in the Apocalypse the picture of Heaven.

So far we have relied almost exclusively upon indications supplied by Scripture. We now turn to Church history to fill in some particulars of interest.

Ancient tradition unhesitatingly believed that the latter years of St. John's prolonged life, were spent in the city of Ephesus, or province of Asia Minor, with the Virgin-Mother, the sacred legacy from the cross, under his fostering care for a longer or shorter portion of those years. Manifestly he would not have gone to Ephesus during the lifetime of St. Paul. Various circumstances point to the period of his abode there as beginning a little after the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 67). He lived on until towards the close of the first century of the Christian era, possibly two years later (A.D. 102). With the date of the Apocalypse we are not directly concerned, though we refer it to a very late period in St. John's career, believing that the Apostle did not return from Patmos until just after Domitian's death. The date of the Gospel may be placed between A.D. 80 and 90. And the First Epistle accompanied the Gospel, as we shall see in a subsequent discourse.

The Epistle then, like the Gospel, and contemporaneously with it, saw the light in Ephesus, or in its vicinity. This is proved by three pieces of evidence of the most unquestionable solidity.

(1) The opening chapters of the Apocalypse contain an argument, which cannot be explained away, for the connection of St. John with Asia Minor and with Ephesus. And the argument is independent of the authorship of that wonderful book. *Whoever*

wrote the Book of the Revelation must have felt the most absolute conviction of St. John's abode in Ephesus and temporary exile to Patmos. To have written with a special view of acquiring a hold upon the Churches of Asia Minor, while assuming from the very first as *fact* what *they*, more than any other Churches in the world, must have known to be *fiction*, would have been to invite immediate and contemptuous rejection. The three earliest chapters of the Revelation are unintelligible, except as the real or assumed utterance of a Primate (in later language) of the Churches of Asia Minor. To the inhabitants of the barren and remote isle of Patmos, Rome and Ephesus almost represented the world; their rocky nest among the waters was scarcely visited except as a brief resting-place for those who sailed from one of those great cities to the other, or for occasional traders from Corinth.

(2) The second evidence is the fragment of the Epistle of Irenæus to Florinus preserved in the fifth book of the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius. Irenæus mentions no dim tradition, appeals to no past which was never present. He has but to question his own recollections of Polycarp, whom he remembered in early life. "Where he sat to talk, his way, his manner of life, his personal appearance, how he used to tell of his intimacy with John, and with the others who had seen the Lord."¹⁹ Irenæus elsewhere distinctly says that "John himself issued the Gospel while living at Ephesus in Asia Minor, and that he survived in that city until Trajan's time."²⁰

(3) The third great historical evidence which connects St. John with Ephesus is that of Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, who wrote a synodical epistle to Victor and the Roman Church on the quartodeciman question, toward the close of the second century. Polycrates speaks of the great ashes which sleep in Asia Minor until the Advent of the Lord, when He shall raise up His saints. He proceeds to mention Philip who sleeps in Hierapolis; two of his daughters; a third who takes her rest in Ephesus, and "John moreover, who leaned upon the breast of Jesus, who was a high priest bearing the radiant plate of gold upon his forehead."²¹

This threefold evidence would seem to render the sojourn of St. John at Ephesus for many years one of the most solidly attested facts of earlier Church history.

It will be necessary for our purpose to sketch the general condition of Ephesus in St. John's time.

A traveller coming from Antioch of Pisidia (as St. Paul did A.D. 54) descended from the mountain chain which separates the Meander from the Cayster. He passed down by a narrow ravine to the "Asian meadow" celebrated by Homer. There, rising from the valley, partly running up the slope of Mount Coressus, and again higher along the shoulder of Mount Prion, the traveller saw the great city of Ephesus towering upon the hills, with widely scattered suburbs. In the first century the population was immense, and included a strange mixture of races and religions. Large numbers of Jews were settled there, and seem to have possessed a full religious organisation under a High Priest or

Chief Rabbi. But the prevailing superstition was the worship of the Ephesian Artemis. The great temple, the priesthood whose chief seems to have enjoyed a royal or quasi-royal rank, the affluence of pilgrims at certain seasons of the year, the industries connected with objects of devotion, supported a swarm of devotees, whose fanaticism was intensified by their material interest in a vast religious establishment. Ephesus boasted of being a theocratic city, the possessor and keeper of a temple glorified by art as well as by devotion. It had a civic calendar marked by a round of splendid festivities associated with the cultus of the goddess. Yet the moral reputation of the city stood at the lowest point, even in the estimation of Greeks. The Greek character was effeminated in Ionia by Asiatic manners, and Ephesus was the most dissolute city of Ionia. Its once superb schools of art became infected by the ostentatious vulgarity of an ever-increasing parvenu opulence. The place was chiefly divided between dissipation and a degrading form of literature. Dancing and music were heard day and night; a protracted revel was visible in the streets. Lascivious romances whose infamy was proverbial were largely sold and passed from hand to hand. Yet there were not a few of a different character. In that divine climate, the very lassitude, which was the reaction from excessive amusement and perpetual sunshine, disposed many minds to seek for refuge in the shadows of a visionary world. Some who had received or inherited Christianity from Aquila and Priscilla, or from St. Paul himself, thirty or forty

years before, had contaminated the purity of the faith with inferior elements derived from the contagion of local heresy, or from the infiltration of pagan thought. The Ionian intellect seems to have delighted in imaginative metaphysics; and for minds undisciplined by true logic or the training of severe science imaginative metaphysics is a dangerous form of mental recreation. The adept becomes the slave of his own formulæ, and drifts into partial insanity by a process which seems to himself to be one of indisputable reasoning. Other influences outside Christianity ran in the same direction. Amulets were bought by trembling believers. Astrological calculations were received with the irresistible fascination of terror. Systems of magic, incantations, forms of exorcism, traditions of theosophy, communications with demons – all that we should now sum up under the head of spiritualism – laid their spell upon thousands. No Christian reader of the nineteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles will be inclined to doubt that beneath all this mass of superstition and imposture there lay some dark reality of evil power. At all events the extent of these practices, these "curious arts" in Ephesus at the time of St. Paul's visit, is clearly proved by the extent of the local literature which spiritualism put forth. The value of the books of magic which were burned by penitents of this class, is estimated by St. Luke at fifty thousand pieces of silver – probably about thirteen hundred and fifty pounds of our money!²²

Let us now consider what ideas or allusions in the Epistles of

St. John coincide with, and fit into, this Ephesian contexture of life and thought.

We shall have occasion in the third discourse to refer to forms of Christian heresy or of semi-Christian speculation indisputably pointed to by St. John, and prevalent in Asia Minor when the Apostle wrote. But besides this, several other points of contact with Ephesus can be detected in the Epistles before us. (1) The first Epistle closes with a sharp decisive warning, expressed in a form which could only have been employed when those who were addressed habitually lived in an atmosphere saturated with idolatry, where the social temptations to come to terms with idolatrous practices were powerful and ubiquitous. This was no doubt true of many other places at the time, but it was pre-eminently true of Ephesus. Certain of the Gnostic Christian sects in Ionia held lax views about "eating things sacrificed unto idols," although fornication was a general accompaniment of such a compliance. Two of the angels of the Seven Churches of Asia within the Ephesian group – the angels of Pergamum and of Thyatira – receive especial admonition from the Lord upon this subject. These considerations prove that the command, "Children, guard yourselves from the idols," had a very special suitability to the conditions of life in Ephesus. (2) The population of Ephesus was of a very composite kind. Many were attracted to the capital of Ionia by its reputation as the capital of the pleasures of the world. It was also the centre of an enormous trade by land and sea. Ephesus, Alexandria, Antioch and Corinth were the four

cities where at that period all races and all religions of civilised men were most largely represented. Now the First Epistle of St. John has a peculiar breadth in its representation of the purposes of God. Christ is not merely the fulfilment of the hopes of one particular people. The Church is not merely destined to be the home of a handful of spiritual citizens. The Atonement is as wide as the race of man. "He is the propitiation for the whole world;" "we have seen, and bear witness that the Father sent the Son as Saviour of the world."²³ A cosmopolitan population is addressed in a cosmopolitan epistle. (3) We have seen that the gaiety and sunshine of Ephesus was sometimes darkened by the shadows of a world of magic, that for some natures Ionia was a land haunted by spiritual terrors. He must be a hasty student who fails to connect the extraordinary narrative in the nineteenth chapter of the Acts with the ample and awful recognition in the Epistle to the Ephesians of the mysterious conflict in the Christian life against evil intelligences, real, though unseen.²⁴ The brilliant rationalist may dispose of such things by the convenient and compendious method of a sneer. "Such narratives as that" (of St. Paul's struggle with the exorcists at Ephesus) "are disagreeable little spots in everything that is done by the people. Though we cannot do a thousandth part of what St. Paul did, we have a system of physiology and of medicine very superior to his."²⁵ Perhaps *he* had a system of spiritual diagnosis very superior to ours. In the epistle to the Angel of the Church of Thyatira, mention is made of "the woman Jezebel, which calleth

herself a prophetess,"²⁶ who led astray the servants of Christ. St. John surely addresses himself to a community where influences precisely of this kind exist, and are recognised when he writes, – "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world... Every spirit that confesseth not Jesus is not of God."²⁷ The Church or Churches, which the First Epistle directly contemplates, did not consist of men just converted. Its whole language supposes Christians, some of whom had grown old and were "fathers" in the faith, while others who were younger enjoyed the privilege of having been born and brought up in a Christian atmosphere. They are reminded again and again, with a reiteration which would be unaccountable if it had no special significance, that the commandment "that which they heard," "the word," "the message," is the same which they "had from the *beginning*."²⁸ Now this will exactly suit the circumstances of a Church like the Ephesian, to which another Apostle had originally preached the Gospel many years before.²⁹

On the whole, we have in favour of assigning these Epistles to Ionian and Ephesian surroundings a considerable amount of external evidence. The general characteristics of the First Epistle consonant with the view of their origin which we have advocated are briefly these. (1) It is addressed to readers who were encompassed by peculiar temptations to make a compromise with idolatry. (2) It has an amplitude and generality of tone which befitted one who wrote to a Church which embraced members

from many countries, and was thus in contact with men of many races and religions. (3) It has a peculiar solemnity of reference to the invisible world of spiritual evil and to its terrible influence upon the human mind. (4) The Epistle is pervaded by a desire to have it recognised that the creed and law of practice which it asserts is absolutely one with that which had been proclaimed by earlier heralds of the cross to the same community. Every one of these characteristics is consistent with the destination of the Epistle for the Christians of Ephesus in the first instance. Its polemical element, which we are presently to discuss, adds to an accumulation of coincidences which no ingenuity can volatilise away. The Epistle meets Ephesian circumstances; it also strikes at Ionian heresies.

Aïa-so-Louk,³⁰ the modern name of Ephesus, appears to be derived from two Greek words which speak of St. John the divine, the theologian of the Church. As the memory of the Apostle haunts the city where he so long lived, even in its fall and long decay under its Turkish conquerors, – and the fatal spread of the malaria from the marshes of the Cayster – so a memory of the place seems to rest in turn upon the Epistle, and we read it more satisfactorily while we assign to it the origin attributed to it by Christian antiquity, and keep that memory before our minds.

DISCOURSE II.
THE CONNECTION OF THE EPISTLE
WITH THE GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN

Συναδουσι μεν γαρ αλληλοις το ευαγγελιον και η
επιστολη. *Dionys. Alexandr. ap Euseb., H. E., vii., 25*

**"And these things write we unto you,
that your joy may be full." – 1 John i. 4**

From the wholesale burning of books at Ephesus, as a consequence of awakened convictions, the most pregnant of all commentators upon the New Testament has drawn a powerful lesson. "True religion," says the writer, "puts bad books out of the way." Ephesus at great expense burnt curious and evil volumes, and the "word of God grew and prevailed." And he proceeds to show how just in the very matter where Ephesus had manifested such costly penitence, she was rewarded by being made a sort of depository of the most precious books which ever came from human pens. St. Paul addresses a letter to the Ephesians. Timothy was Bishop of Ephesus when the two great pastoral Epistles were

sent to him.³¹ All St. John's writings point to the same place. The Gospel and Epistles were written there, or with primary reference to the capital of Ionia.³² The Apocalypse was in all probability first read at Ephesus.

Of this group of Ephesian books we select two of primary importance – the Gospel and First Epistle of St. John. Let us dwell upon the close and thorough connection of the two documents, upon the interpenetration of the Epistle by the Gospel, by whatever name we may prefer to designate the connection.

It is said indeed by a very high authority, that while the "whole Epistle is permeated with thoughts of the person and work of Christ," yet "direct references to facts of the Gospel are singularly rare." More particularly it is stated that "we find here none of the foundation and (so to speak) crucial events summarised in the earliest Christian confession as we still find them in the Apostles' creed." And among these events are placed, "the Birth of the Virgin Mary, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Session, the Coming to Judgment."

To us there seems to be some exaggeration in this way of putting the matter. A writing which accompanied a sacred history, and which was a spiritual comment upon that very history, was not likely to repeat the history upon which it commented, just in the same shape. Surely the Birth is the necessary condition of having come in the flesh. The incident of the piercing of the side, and the water and blood which

flowed from it, is distinctly spoken of; and in that the Crucifixion is implied. Shrinking with shame from Jesus at His Coming, which is spoken of in another verse, has no meaning unless that Coming be to Judgment.³³ The sixth chapter is, if we may so say, the section of "the Blood," in the fourth Gospel. That section standing in the Gospel, standing in the great Sacrament of the Church, standing in the perpetually cleansing and purifying efficacy of the Atonement – ever present as a witness, which becomes personal, because identified with a Living Personality³⁴— finds its echo and counterpart in the Epistle towards the beginning and near the close.³⁵

We now turn to that which is the most conclusive evidence of connection between two documents – one historical, the other moral and spiritual – of which literary composition is capable. Let us suppose that a writer of profound thoughtfulness has finished, after long elaboration, the historical record of an eventful and many-sided life – a life of supreme importance to a nation, or to the general thought and progress of humanity. The book is sent to the representatives of some community or school. The ideas which its subject has uttered to the world, from their breadth and from the occasional obscurity of expression incident to all great spiritual utterances, need some elucidation. The plan is really exhaustive, and combines the facts of the life with a full insight into their relations; but it may be missed by any but thoughtful readers. The author will accompany this main work by something which in modern language we

might call an introduction, or appendix, or advertisement, or explanatory pamphlet, or encyclical letter. Now the ancient form of literary composition rendered books packed with thought doubly difficult both to read and write; for they did not admit foot-notes, or marginal analyses, or abstracts. St. John then practically says, first to his readers in Asia Minor, then to the Church for ever – "with this life of Jesus I send you not only thoughts for your spiritual benefit, moulded round His teaching, but something more; I send you an *abstract*, a compendium of contents, at the beginning of this letter; I also send you at its close a key to the plan on which my Gospel is conceived." And surely a careful reader of the Gospel at its first publication would have desired assistance exactly of this nature. He would have wished to have a synopsis of contents, short but comprehensive, and a synoptical view of the author's plan – of the idea which guided him in his choice of incidents so momentous and of teaching so varied.

We have in the First Epistle two synopses of the Gospel which correspond with a perfect precision to these claims.³⁶ We have: (1) a synopsis of the *contents* of the Gospel; (2) a synoptical view of the *conception* from which it was written.

1. We find in the Epistle at the very outset a synopsis of the contents of the Gospel.

"That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we gazed upon, and our hands handled — *I speak* concerning the

Word who is the Life – that which we have seen and heard, declare we unto you also."

What are the contents of the Gospel? (1) A lofty and dogmatic *proœmium*, which tells us of "the Word who was in the beginning with God – in Whom was life." (2) *Discourses* and utterances, sometimes running on through pages, sometimes brief and broken. (3) *Works*, sometimes miraculous, sometimes wrought into the common contexture of human life – looks, influences, seen by the very eyes of St. John and others, gazed upon with ever deepening joy and wonder. (4) *Incidents* which proved that all this issued from One who was intensely human; that it was as real as life and humanity – historical not visionary; the doing and the effluence of a Manhood which could be, and which was, grasped by human hands.

Such is a synopsis of the Gospel precisely as it is given in the beginning of the First Epistle. (1) The Epistle mentions *first*, "that which was from the beginning." There is the compendium of the *proœmium* of the Gospel. (2) One of the most important constituent parts of the Gospel is to be found in its ample preservation of dialogues, in which the Saviour is one interlocutor; of monologues spoken to the hushed hearts of the disciples, or to the listening Heart of the Father, yet not in tones so low that their love did not find it audible. This element of the narrative is summed up by the writer of the Epistle in two words – "That which we heard."³⁷ (3) The *works* of benevolence or power, the doings and sufferings; the pathos or joy which spring

up from them in the souls of the disciples, occupy a large portion of the Gospel. All these come under the heading, "that which we have seen with our eyes,³⁸ that which we gazed upon,"³⁹ with one unbroken gaze of wonder as so beautiful, and of awe as so divine.⁴⁰ (4) The assertion of the *reality of the Manhood*⁴¹ of Him who was yet the Life manifested – a reality through all His words, works, sufferings – finds its strong, bold summary in this compendium of the contents of the Gospel, "and our hands have handled." Nay, a still shorter compendium follows: (1) The Life with the Father. (2) The Life manifested.⁴²

2. But we have more than a synopsis which embraces the contents of the Gospel at the beginning of the Epistle. We have towards its close a *second* synopsis of the whole framework of the Gospel; not now the theory of the Person of Christ, which in such a life was necessarily placed at its beginning, but of the human conception which pervaded the Evangelist's composition.

The second synopsis, not of the contents of the Gospel, but of the aim and conception which it assumed in the form into which it was moulded by St. John, is given by the Epistle with a fulness which omits scarcely a paragraph of the Gospel. In the space of six verses of the fifth chapter the word *witness*, as verb or substantive, is repeated *ten* times.⁴³ The simplicity of St. John's artless rhetoric can make no more emphatic claim on our attention. The Gospel is indeed a tissue woven out of many lines of evidence human and divine. Compress its purpose into one single word. No doubt it is supremely the Gospel of the

Divinity of Jesus. But, next to that, it may best be defined as the Gospel of *Witness*. These witnesses we may take in the order of the Epistle. St. John feels that his Gospel is more than a book; it is a past made everlastingly present. Such as the great Life was in history, so it stands for ever. Jesus *is* "the propitiation, *is* righteous," "*is here*."⁴⁴ So the great influences round His Person, the manifold witnesses of His Life, stand witnessing for ever in the Gospel and in the Church. What are these? (1) The Spirit is ever *witnessing*. So our Lord in the Gospel – "when the Comforter is come, He shall witness of Me."⁴⁵ No one can doubt that the Spirit is one pre-eminent subject of the Gospel. Indeed, teaching about Him, above all as the witness to Christ, occupies three unbroken chapters in one place.⁴⁶ (2) The *water* is ever witnessing. So long as St. John's Gospel lasts, and permeates the Church with its influence, the water must so testify. There is scarcely a paragraph of it where water is not; almost always with some relation to Christ. The witness of the Baptist⁴⁷ is, "I baptize with water." The Jordan itself bears witness that all its waters cannot give that which He bestows who is "preferred before" John.⁴⁸ Is not the water of Cana that was made wine a witness to His glory?⁴⁹ The birth of "water and of the Spirit,"⁵⁰ is another witness. And so in the Gospel section after section. The water of Jacob's well; the water of the pool of Bethesda; the waters of the sea of Galilee, with their stormy waves upon which He walked; the water outpoured at the feast of tabernacles, with its application to the river of living water; the water of

Siloam; the water poured into the basin, when Jesus washed the disciples' feet; the water which, with the blood, streamed from the riven side upon the cross; the water of the sea of Galilee in its gentler mood, when Jesus showed Himself on its beach to the seven; as long as all this is recorded in the Gospel, as long as the sacrament of Baptism, with its visible water and its invisible grace working in the regenerate, abides among the faithful; – so long is the water ever witnessing.⁵¹ (3) The Blood is ever "witnessing." Expiation once for all; purification continually from the blood outpoured; drinking the blood of the Son of Man by participation in the sacrament of His love, with the grace and strength that it gives day by day to innumerable souls; the Gospel concentrated into that great sacrifice; the Church's gifts of benediction summarised in the unspeakable Gift; this is the unceasing witness of the *Blood*. (4) Men are ever witnessing. "The witness of men" fills the Gospel from beginning to end. The glorious series of confessions wrung from willing and unwilling hearts form the points of division round which the whole narrative may be grouped. Let us think of all those attestations which lie between the Baptist's precious testimony with the sweet yet fainter utterances of Andrew, Philip, Nathanael, and the perfect creed of Christendom condensed into the burning words of Thomas – "my Lord and my God."⁵² What a range of feeling and faith; what a variety of attestation coming from human souls, sometimes wrung from them half unwillingly, sometimes uttered at crisis-moments with an impulse that could not be resisted!

The witness of men in the Gospel, and the assurance of one testimony that was to be given by the Apostles individually and collectively,⁵³ besides the evidences already named includes the following – the witness of Nicodemus, of the Samaritan woman, of the Samaritans, of the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda, of Simon Peter, of the officers of the Jewish authorities, of the blind man, of Pilate.⁵⁴ (5) The witness of God occupies also a great position in the fourth Gospel. That witness may be said to be given in five forms: the witness of the Father,⁵⁵ of Christ Himself,⁵⁶ of the Holy Spirit,⁵⁷ of Scripture,⁵⁸ of miracles.⁵⁹ This great cloud of witnesses, human and divine, finds its appropriate completion in another subjective witness.⁶⁰ The whole body of evidence passes from the region of the intellectual to that of the moral and spiritual life. The *evidence* acquires that *evidentness* which is to all our knowledge what the sap is to the tree. The faithful carries it in his heart; it goes about with him, rests with him day and night, is close to him in life and death. He, the principle of whose being is belief ever going out of itself and resting its acts of faith on the Son of God, has all that manifold witness in him.⁶¹

It would be easy to enlarge upon the verbal connection between the Epistle before us and the Gospel which it accompanied. We might draw out (as has often been done) a list of quotations from the Gospel, a whole common treasury of mystic language; but we prefer to leave an undivided impression upon the mind. A document which gives us a synopsis of the

contents of another document at the beginning, and a synoptical analysis of its predominant idea at the close, covering the entire work, and capable of absorbing every part of it (except some necessary adjuncts of a rich and crowded narrative), has a connection with it which is vital and absorbing. The Epistle is at once an abstract of the contents of the Gospel, and a key to its purport. To the Gospel, at least to it and the Epistle considered as integrally one, the Apostle refers when he says: "these things write we unto you."⁶²

St. John had asserted that one end of his declaration was to make his readers hold fast "fellowship with us," *i. e.*, with the Church as the Apostolic Church; aye, and that fellowship of ours is "with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ;" "and these things," he continues (with special reference to his Gospel, as spoken of in his opening words), "we write unto you, that your joy may be fulfilled."

There is as truly a joy as a "patience and comfort of the Scriptures." The Apostle here speaks of "your joy," but that implied *his* also.

All great literature, like all else that is beautiful, is a "joy for ever." To the true student his books are this. But this is so only with a few really great books. We are not speaking of works of exact science. Butler, Pascal, Bacon, Shakespeare, Homer, Scott, theirs is work of which congenial spirits never grow quite tired. But to be capable of giving out joy, books must have been written with it. The Scotch poet tells us, that no poet ever found the

Muse, until he had learned to walk beside the brook, and "no think long." That which is not thought over with pleasure; that which, as it gradually rises before the author in its unity, does not fill him with delight; will never permanently give pleasure to readers. He must know joy before he can say – "these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full."

The book that is to give joy must be a part of a man's self. That is just what most books are not. They are laborious, diligent, useful perhaps; they are not interesting or delightful. How touching it is, when the poor old stiff hand must write, and the overworked brain think, for bread! Is there anything so pathetic in literature as Scott setting his back bravely to the wall, and forcing from his imagination the reluctant creations which used to issue with such splendid profusion from its haunted chambers?

Of the conditions under which an inspired writer pursued his labours we know but little. But some conditions are apparent in the books of St. John with which we are now concerned. The fourth Gospel is a book written without *arrière pensée*, without literary conceit, without the paralysing dread of criticism. What verdict the polished society of Ephesus would pronounce; what sneers would circulate in philosophic quarters; what the numerous heretics would murmur in their conventicles; what critics within the Church might venture to whisper, missing perhaps favourite thoughts and catch-words;⁶³ St. John cared no more than if he were dead. He communed with the memories

of the past; he listened for the music of the Voice which had been the teacher of his life. To be faithful to these memories, to recall these words, to be true to Jesus, was his one aim. No one can doubt that the Gospel was written with a full delight. No one who is capable of feeling, ever has doubted that it was written as if with "a feather dropped from an angel's wing;" that without aiming at anything but truth, it attains in parts at least a transcendent beauty. At the close of the proœmium, after the completest theological *formula* which the Church has ever possessed – the still, even pressure of a tide of thought – we have a parenthetic sentence, like the splendid unexpected rush and swell of a sudden wave ("we beheld the glory, the glory as of the Only-Begotten of the Father"); then after the parenthesis a soft and murmuring fall of the whole great tide ("full of grace and truth"). Can we suppose that the Apostle hung over his sentence with literary zest? The number of writers is small who can give us an everlasting truth by a single word, a single pencil touch; who, having their mind loaded with thought, are wise enough to keep that strong and eloquent silence which is the prerogative only of the highest genius. St. John gives us one of these everlasting pictures, of these inexhaustible symbols, in three little words – "He then having received the sop, went immediately out, and *it was night*."⁶⁴ Do we suppose that he admired the perfect effect of that powerful self-restraint? Just before the crucifixion he writes – "Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe, and Pilate saith unto them, Behold the Man!"⁶⁵ The

pathos, the majesty, the royalty of sorrow, the admiration and pity of Pilate, have been for centuries the inspiration of Christian art. Did St. John congratulate himself upon the image of sorrow and of beauty which stands for ever in these lines? With St. John as a writer it is as with St. John delineated in the fresco at Padua by the genius of Giotto. The form of the ascending saint is made visible through a reticulation of rays of light in colours as splendid as ever came from mortal pencil; but the rays issue entirely from the Saviour, whose face and form are full before him.

The feeling of the Church has always been that the Gospel of St. John was a solemn work of faith and prayer. The oldest extant fragment upon the canon of the New Testament tells us that the Gospel was undertaken after earnest invitations from the brethren and the bishops, with solemn united fasting; not without special revelation to Andrew the Apostle that John was to do the work.⁶⁶ A later and much less important document connected in its origin with Patmos embodies one beautiful legend about the composition of the Gospel. It tells how the Apostle was about to leave Patmos for Ephesus; how the Christians of the island besought him to leave in writing an account of the Incarnation, and mysterious life of the Son of God; how St. John and his chosen friends went forth from the haunts of men about a mile, and halted in a quiet spot called the gorge of Rest,⁶⁷ and then ascended the mountain which overhung it. There they remained three days. "Then," writes Prochorus, "he ordered me to go down to the town for paper and ink. And after two days I found him

standing rapt in prayer. Said he to me – 'take the ink and paper, and stand on my right hand.' And I did so. And there was a great lightning and thunder, so that the mountain shook. And I fell on the ground as if dead. Whereupon John stretched forth his hand and took hold of me, and said – 'stand up at this spot at my right hand.' After which he prayed again, and after his prayer said unto me – 'son Prochorus, what thou hearest from my mouth, write upon the sheets.' And having opened his mouth as he was standing praying, and looking up to heaven, he began to say – 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' And so following on, he spake in order, standing as he was, and I wrote sitting."⁶⁸

True instinct which tells us that the Gospel of St. John was the fruit of prayer as well as of memory; that it was thought out in some valley of rest, some hush among the hills; that it came from a solemn joy which it breathed forth upon others! "These things write I unto you, that your joy may be fulfilled." Generation after generation it has been so. In the numbers numberless of the Redeemed, there can be very few who have not been brightened by the joy of that book. Still, at one funeral after another, hearts are soothed by the word in it which says – "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Still the sorrowful and the dying ask to hear again and again – "let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." A brave young officer sent to the war in Africa, from a regiment at home, where he had caused grief by his extravagance, penitent, and dying in his tent, during the fatal day of Isandula,

scrawled in pencil – "dying, dear father and mother – happy – for Jesus says, 'He that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.'" Our English Communion Office, with its divine beauty, is a texture shot through and through with golden threads from the discourse at Capernaum. Still are the disciples glad when they see the Lord in that record. It is the book of the Church's smiles; it is the gladness of the saints; it is the purest fountain of joy in all the literature of earth.

Note A

The thorough connection of the Epistle with the Gospel may be made more clear by the following tabulated analysis: —

The (A) *beginning* and (B) the *close* of the Epistle contain *two* abstracts, longer and shorter, of the contents and bearing of the Gospel.

A

***i.*– 1 John i. 1**

1. "That which was from the beginning – concerning the Word of Life" = John i. 1-15.
2. (*a*) "Which we have *heard*" = John i. 38, 39, 42, 47, 50, 51,

ii. 4, 7, 8, 16, 19, iii. 3, 22, iv. 7, 39, 48, 50, v. 6, 47, vi. 5, 70, vii. 6, 39, viii. 7, 58, ix. 3, 41, x. 1, 39, xi. 4, 45, xii. 7, 50, xiii. 6, 38, xiv., xvii., xviii. 14, 37, xix. 11, 26, 27, 28, 30, xx. 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 23, 27, 29, xxi. 5, 6, 10, 12, 22.

(b) "Which we have seen *with our eyes*" = John i. 29, 36, 39, ii. 11, vi. 2, 14, 19, ix., xi. 44, xiii. 4, 5, xvii. 1, xviii. 6, xix. 5, 17, 18, 34, 38, xx. 5, 14, 20, 25, 29, xxi. 1, 14.

(c) "Which we gazed upon" = *ibid.*

(d) "Which we have handled" = John xx. 27 (refers also to a synoptical Gospel, Luke xxiv. 39, 40).

***ii.*– 1 John i. 2**

1. "The Life was manifested" = John i. 29 – xxi. 25.

2. (a) "We have seen" = (A. i. 2 (b)).

(b) "And bear witness" = John i. 7, 19, 37, iii. 2, 27, 33, iv. 39, vi. 69, xx. 28, 30, 31, xxi. 24.

(c) "And declare unto you" = John *passim*.

"The Life, the Eternal Life, which"

⌘ "Was with the Father" = John i. 1-4.

⊃ "And was manifested unto us" = John *passim*.

B

i.— 1 John v. 6-10

Summary of the Gospel as a Gospel of *witness*.

1. "The Spirit beareth witness" = John i. 32, xiv., xv., xx. 22.

2. "The water beareth witness" = John i. 28, ii. 9, iii. 5, iv. 13, 14, v. 1, 9, vi. 19, vii. 37, ix. 7, xiii. 5, xix. 34, xxi. 1.

3. "The blood beareth witness" = John vi. 53, 54, 55, 56, xix. 34.

4. "The witness of men" = (A. *ii.* 1 (*b*)) Also John i. 45, 49, iii. 2, iv. 39, vii. 46, xii. 12, 13, 17, 19, 20, 21, xviii. 38, xix. 35, xx. 28.

5. "The witness of God" =

(*a*) Scripture = John i. 45, v. 39, 46, xix. 36, 37.

(*b*) Christ's own = John viii. 17, 18, 46, xv. 30, xviii. 37.

(*c*) His Father's = John v. 37, viii. 18, xii. 28.

(*d*) His works = John v. 36, x. 25, xv. 24.

ii.— 1 John v. 20

We know (*i. e.*, by the Gospel) that —

1. "The Son of God is come" (ἦκεν), "has come and is here."

Note. — יְהִי־עִמָּךְ = ἦκω, LXX. Psalm xl. 7. "*Venio symbolum quasi Domini Jesu fuit.*" (Bengel on Heb. x. 7), the *Ich Dien* of the Son of the Father — εγω γαρ εκ του θεου εξηλθον και ἦκω. "I came forth from God, and am here" (John viii. 4) = John i. 29 — xxi. 23 (John xiv. 18, 21, 23, xvi. 16, 22, form part of the thought "is here").

2. "And hath given us an understanding" = gift of the Spirit, John xiv., xv., xvi. (especially 13, 16).

3. "This is the very God and eternal Life" = John i. 1, 4.

The whole Gospel of St. John brings out these primary principles of the Faith, —

That the Son of God has come. That He is now and ever present with His people. That the Holy Spirit gives them a new faculty of spiritual discernment. That Christ is the very God and the Life of men.

DISCOURSE III.
THE POLEMICAL ELEMENT IN
THE FIRST EPISTLE OF ST. JOHN

"Dum Magistri super pectus
Fontem haurit intellectûs
Et doctrinæ flumina,
Fiunt, ipso situ loci,
Verbo fides, auris voci,
Mens Deo contermina.

"Unde mentis per excessus,
Carnis, sensûs super gressus,
Errorumque nubila,
Contra veri solis lumen
Visum cordis et acumen
Figit velut aquila."

Adam of St. Victor, Seq. xxxii.

"Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God. Every spirit that confesseth not [that] Jesus Christ [is come in the flesh] is not of God." – 1 John iv. 2, 3.

A discussion (however far from technical completeness) of the polemical element in St. John's Epistle, probably seems likely to be destitute of interest or of instruction, except to ecclesiastical

or philosophical antiquarians. Those who believe the Epistle to be a *divine* book must, however, take a different view of the matter. St. John was not merely dealing with forms of human error which were local and fortuitous. In refuting *them* he was enunciating principles of universal import, of almost illimitable application. Let us pass by those obscure sects, those subtle curiosities of error, which the diligence of minute research has excavated from the masses of erudition under which they have been buried; which theologians, like other antiquarians, have sometimes labelled with names at once uncouth and imaginative. Let us fix our attention upon such broad and well-defined features of heresy as credible witnesses have indelibly fixed upon the contemporaneous heretical thought of Asia Minor; and we shall see not only a great precision in St. John's words, but a radiant image of truth, which is equally adapted to enlighten us in the peculiar dangers of our age.

Controversy is the condition under which all truth must be held, which is not in necessary subject-matter – which is not either mathematical or physical. In the case of the second, controversy is active, until the fact of the physical law is established beyond the possibility of rational discussion; until self-consistent thought can only think upon the postulate of its admission. Now in these departments all the argument is on one side. We are not in a state of suspended speculation, leaning neither to affirmation nor denial, which is *doubt*. We are not in the position of inclining either to one side or the other, by an

almost impalpable overplus of evidence, which is *suspicion*; or by those additions to this slender stock, which convert suspicion into *opinion*. We are not merely yielding a strong adhesion to one side, while we must yet admit, to ourselves at least, that our knowledge is not perfect, nor absolutely manifest – which is the mental and moral position of *belief*. In necessary subject-matter, we know and see with that perfect intellectual vision for which controversy is impossible.⁶⁹

The region of belief must therefore, in our present condition, be a region from which controversy cannot be excluded.

Religious controversialists may be divided into three classes, for each of which we may find an emblem in the animal creation. The first are the nuisances, at times the numerous nuisances, of Churches. These controversialists delight in showing that the convictions of persons whom they happen to dislike, can, more or less plausibly, be pressed to unpopular conclusions. They are incessant fault-finders. Some of them, if they had an opportunity, might delight in finding the sun guilty in his daily worship of the many-coloured ritualism of the western clouds. Controversialists of this class, if minute are venomous, and capable of inflicting a degree of pain quite out of proportion to their strength. Their emblem may be found somewhere in the range of "every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." The second class of controversialists is of a much higher nature. Their emblem is the hawk with his bright eye, with the forward throw of his pinions, his rushing flight along the woodland skirt, his unerring stroke.

Such hawks of the Churches, whose delight is in pouncing upon fallacies, fulfil an important function. They rid us of tribes of mischievous winged errors. The third class of controversialists is that which embraces St. John supremely – such minds also as Augustine's in his loftiest and most inspired moments, such as those which have endowed the Church with the Nicene Creed. Of such the eagle is the emblem. Over the grosser atmosphere of earthly anger or imperfect motives, over the clouds of error, poised in the light of the True Sun, with the eagle's upward wing and the eagle's sunward eye, St. John looks upon the truth. He is indeed the eagle of the four Evangelists, the eagle of God. If the eagle could speak with our language, his style would have something of the purity of the sky and of the brightness of the light. He would warn his nestlings against losing their way in the banks of clouds that lie below him so far. At times he might show that there is a danger or an error whose position he might indicate by the sweep of his wing, or by descending for a moment to strike.

There are then *polemics* in the Epistle and in the Gospel of St. John. But we refuse to hunt down some obscure heresy in every sentence. It will be enough to indicate the master heresy of Asia Minor, to which St. John undoubtedly refers, with its intellectual and moral perils. In so doing, we shall find the very truth which our own generation especially needs.

The prophetic words addressed by St. Paul to the Church of Ephesus thirty years before the date of this Epistle had found

only too complete a fulfilment. "From among their own selves," at Ephesus in particular, through the Churches of Asia Minor in general, men *had* arisen "speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them."⁷⁰ The prediction began to justify itself when Timothy was Bishop of Ephesus only five or six years later. A few significant words in the First Epistle to Timothy let us see the heretical influences that were at work. St. Paul speaks with the solemnity of a closing charge when he warns Timothy against what were at once⁷¹ "profane babblings," and "antitheses of the Gnosis which is falsely so called." In an earlier portion of the same Epistle the young Bishop is exhorted to charge certain men not to teach a "different doctrine," neither to give "heed to myths and genealogies," out of whose endless mazes no intellect entangled in them can ever find its way.⁷² Those commentators put us on a false scent who would have us look after Judaizing error, Jewish "stemmata." The reference is not to Judaistic ritualism, but to semi-Pagan philosophical speculation. The "genealogies" are systems of divine potencies which the Gnostics (and probably some Jewish Rabbis of Gnosticising tendency) called "æons,"⁷³ and so the earliest Christian writers understood the word.

Now without entering into the details of Gnosticism, this may be said of its general method and purpose. It aspired at once to accept and to transform the Christian creed; to elevate its faith into a philosophy, a *knowledge*—and then to make this knowledge cashier and supersede faith, love, holiness, redemption itself.

This system was strangely eclectic, and amalgamated certain elements not only of Greek and Egyptian, but of Persian and Indian Pantheistic thought. It was infected throughout with dualism and doketism. Dualism held that all good and evil in the universe proceeded from two first principles, good and evil. Matter was the power of evil whose home is in the region of darkness. Minds which started from this fundamental view could only accept the Incarnation provisionally and with reserve, and must at once proceed to explain it away. "The Word was made flesh;" but the Word of God, the True Light, could not be personally united to an actual material system called a human body, plunged in the world of matter, darkened and contaminated by its immersion. The human flesh in which Jesus appeared to be seen was fictitious. Redemption was a drama with a shadow for its hero. The phantom of a redeemer was nailed to the phantom of a cross. Philosophical dualism logically became theological *doketism*. *Doketism* logically evaporated dogmas, sacraments, duties, redemption.⁷⁴

It may be objected that this doketism has been a mere temporary and local aberration of the human intellect; a metaphysical curiosity, with no real roots in human nature. If so, its refutation is an obsolete piece of an obsolete controversy; and the Epistle in some of its most vital portions is a dead letter.

Now of course literal doketism is past and gone, dead and buried. The progress of the human mind, the slow and resistless influence of the logic of common sense, the wholesome

influence of the sciences of observation in correcting visionary metaphysics, have swept away æons, emanations, dualism,⁷⁵ and the rest. But a subtler, and to modern minds infinitely more attractive, doketism is round us, and accepted, as far as words go, with a passionate enthusiasm.

What is this doketism?

Let us refer to the history and to the language of a mind of singular subtlety and power.

In George Eliot's early career she was induced to prepare for the press a translation of Strauss's mythical explanation of *the Life of Jesus*. It is no disrespect to so great a memory to say, that at that period of her career, at least, Miss Evans must have been unequal to grapple with such a work, if she desired to do so from a Christian point of view. She had not apparently studied the history or the structure of the Gospels. What she knew of their meaning she had imbibed from an antiquated and unscientific school of theologians. The faith of a sciolist engaged in a struggle for its life with the fatal strength of a critical giant instructed in the negative lore of all ages, and sharpened by hatred of the Christian religion, met with the result which was to be expected. Her faith expired, not without some painful throes. She fell a victim to the fallacy of youthful conceit – I cannot answer this or that objection, *therefore* it is unanswerable. She wrote at first that she was "Strauss-sick." It made her ill to dissect the beautiful story of the crucifixion. She took to herself a consolation singular in the circumstances. The sight of an ivory crucifix, and of a

pathetic picture of the Passion, made her capable of enduring the first shock of the loss which her heart had sustained. That is, she found comfort in looking at tangible reminders of a scene which had ceased to be an historical reality, of a sufferer who had faded from a living Redeemer into the spectre of a visionary past. After a time, however, she feels able to propose to herself and others "a new starting point. We can never have a satisfactory basis for the history of the man Jesus, but that negation does not affect the Idea of the Christ, either in its historical influence, or its great symbolic meanings."⁷⁶ Yes! a Christ who has no history, of whom we do not possess one undoubted word, of whom we know, and can know, nothing; who has no flesh of fact, no blood of life; an idea, not a man; this is the Christ of modern doketism. The method of this widely diffused school is to separate the *sentiments* of admiration which the history inspires from the *history* itself; to sever the *ideas* of the faith from the *facts* of the faith, and then to present the *ideas* thus surviving the dissolvents of criticism, as at once the refutation of the facts and the substitute for them.

This may be pretty writing, though false and illogical writing is rarely even *that*; but a little consideration will show that this new starting point is not even a plausible substitute for the old belief.

(1) We question simple believers in the first instance. We ask them what is the great religious power in Christianity for themselves, and for others like-minded? What makes people pure, good, self-denying, nurses of the sick, missionaries to the

heathen? They will tell us that the power lies, not in any doketic idea of a Christ-life which was never lived, but in "the conviction that that idea was really and perfectly incarnated in an actual career,"⁷⁷ of which we have a record literally and absolutely true in all essential particulars. When we turn to the past of the Church, we find that as it is with these persons, so it has ever been with the saints. For instance, we hear St. Paul speaking of his whole life. He tells us that "whether we went out of ourselves it was unto God, or whether we be sober, it is for you;" that is to say, such a life has two aspects, one God-ward, one man-ward. Its God-ward aspect is a noble insanity, its man-ward aspect a noble sanity; the first with its beautiful enthusiasm, the second with its saving common sense. What is the source of this? "*For the love of Christ constraineth us,*" – forces the whole stream of life to flow between these two banks without the deviations of selfishness – "because we thus judge, that He died for all, that they which live should no longer live unto themselves, but to Him who for their sakes died and rose again."⁷⁸ It was the real unselfish life of a real unselfish Man which made such a life as that of St. Paul a possibility. Or we may think of the first beginning of St. John's love for our Lord. When he turned to the past, he remembered one bright day about ten in the morning, when the real Jesus turned to him and to another with a real look, and said with a human voice, "what seek ye?" and then – "come, and ye shall see."⁷⁹ It was the real living love that won the only kind of love which could enable the old man to write as he did

in this Epistle so many years afterwards – "we love because He first loved us."⁸⁰

(2) We address ourselves next to those who look at Christ simply as an ideal. We venture to put to them a definite question. You believe that there is no solid basis for the history of the man Jesus; that His life as an historical reality is lost in a dazzling mist of legend and adoration. Has the idea of a Christ, divorced from all accompaniment of authentic fact, unfixed in a definite historical form, uncontinued in an abiding existence, been operative or inoperative for yourselves? Has it been a practical power and motive, or an occasional and evanescent sentiment? There can be no doubt about the answer. It is not a make-belief but a belief which gives purity and power. It is not an ideal of Jesus but the blood of Jesus which cleanseth us from all sin.

There are other lessons of abiding practical importance to be drawn from the polemical elements in St. John's Epistle. These, however, we can only briefly indicate because we wish to leave an undivided impression of that which seems to be St. John's chief object *controversially*. There were Gnostics in Asia Minor for whom the mere *knowledge* of certain supposed spiritual truths was all in all, as there are those amongst ourselves who care for little but what are called clear views. For such St. John writes – "and hereby we do *know* that we *know* Him, if we keep His commandments."⁸¹ There were heretics in and about Ephesus who conceived that the special favour of God, or the illumination

which they obtained by junction with the sect to which they had "gone out" from the Church, neutralised the poison of sin, and made innocuous for *them* that which might have been deadly for others. They suffered, as they thought, no more contamination by it, than "gold by lying upon the dunghill" (to use a favourite metaphor of their own). St. John utters a principle which cleaves through every fallacy in every age, which says or insinuates that sin subjective can in any case cease to be sin objective. "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law, for sin is the transgression of the law. All unrighteousness is sin."⁸² Possibly within the Church itself, certainly among the sectarians without it, there was a disposition to lessen the glory of the Incarnation, by looking upon the Atonement as narrow and partial in its aim. St. John's unhesitating statement is that "He is the propitiation for the whole world." Thus does the eagle of the Church ever fix his gaze above the clouds of error, upon the Sun of universal truth.

Above all, over and through his negation of temporary and local errors about the person of Christ, St. John leads the Church in all ages to the true Christ. Cerinthus, in a form which seems to us eccentric and revolting, proclaimed a Jesus not born of a virgin, temporarily endowed with the sovereign power of the Christ, deprived of Him before his passion and resurrection, while the Christ remained spiritual and impassible. He taught a *commonplace* Jesus. At the beginning of his Epistle and Gospel, John "wings his soul, and leads his readers onward and upward."

He is like a man who stands upon the shore and looks upon town and coast and bay. Then another takes the man off with him far to sea. All that he surveyed before is now lost to him; and as he gazes ever oceanward, he does not stay his eye upon any intervening object, but lets it range over the infinite azure. So the Apostle leads us above all creation, and transports us to the ages before it; makes us raise our eyes, not suffering us to find any end in the stretch above, since end is none.⁸³ That "in the beginning," "from the beginning," of the Epistle and Gospel, includes nothing short of the eternal God. The doketics of many shades proclaimed an ideological, a misty Christ. "Every spirit which confesseth Jesus Christ as in flesh having come is of God, and every spirit which confesseth not Jesus, is not of God." "Many deceivers have gone out into the world, they who confess not Jesus Christ coming in flesh."⁸⁴ Such a Christ of mist as these words warn us against is again shaped by more powerful intellects and touched with tenderer lights. But the shadowy Christ of George Eliot and of Mill is equally arraigned by the hand of St. John. Each believer may well think within himself – I must die, and that, it may be, very soon; I must be alone with God, and my own soul; with that which I am, and have been; with my memories, and with my sins. In that hour the weird desolate language of the Psalmist will find its realisation: "lover and friend hast thou put from me, and mine acquaintance are —*darkness*."⁸⁵ Then we want, and then we may find, a real Saviour. Then we shall know that if we have only a doketic Christ, we shall indeed be alone – for "except ye eat the

flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you."⁸⁶

NOTE

The two following extracts, in addition to what has been already said in this discourse, will supply the reader with that which it is most necessary for him to know upon the heresies of Asia Minor. 1. "Two principal heresies upon the nature of Christ then prevailed, each diametrically opposite to the other, as well as to the Catholic faith. One was the heresy of the Doketæ, which destroyed the verity of the *Human Nature* in Christ; the other was the heresy of the Ebionites, who denied the *Divine Nature*, and the eternal Generation, and inclined to press the observation of the ceremonial law. Ancient writers allow these as heresies of the first century; all admit that they were powerful in the age of Ignatius. Hence Theodoret (*Proæm.*) divided the books of these heresies into two categories. In the first he included those who put forward the idea of a second Creator, and asserted that the Lord had appeared illusively. In the second he placed those who maintained that the Lord was merely a man. Of the first, Jerome observed (*Adv. Lucifer. xxiii.*) 'that while the Apostles yet remained upon the earth, while the blood of Christ was almost smoking upon the sod of Judæa, some asserted that the body of the Lord was a phantom.' Of the second, the same writer remarked that 'St. John, at the invitation of the bishops of Asia

Minor, wrote his Gospel against Cerinthus and other heretics – and especially against the dogma of the Ebionites then rising into existence, who asserted that Christ did not exist before Mary.' Epiphanius notes that these heresies were mainly of Asia Minor (φημι δε εν τη' Ασια). *Hæres. lvi.*" (Pearson, *Vindic. Ignat.*, ii., c. i., p. 351.)

2. "Two of these sects or schools are very ancient, and seem to have been referred to by St. John. The first is that of the Naassenians or Ophites. The antiquity of this sect is guaranteed to us by the author of the *Philosophumena*, who represents them as the real founders of Gnosticism. "Later," he says, "they were called *Gnostics*, pretending that they only *knew the depths*." (To this allusion is made Apoc. ii. 24, which would identify these sectaries with the Balaamites and Nicolaitans.) The second of these great heresies of Asia Minor is the doketic. The publication of the *Philosophumena* has furnished us with much more precise information about their tenets. We need not say much about the divine emanation – the fall of souls into matter, their corporeal captivity, their final rehabilitation (these are merely the ordinary Gnostic ideas). But we may follow what they assert about the Saviour and His manifestation in the world. They admit in Him the only Son of the Father (ὁ μονογενης παις ανωθεν αιωνιος), who descended to the reign of shadows and the Virgin's womb, where He clothed Himself in a gross, human material body. But this was a vestment of no integrally personal and permanent character; it was, indeed, a sort of masquerade, an artifice or

fiction imagined to deceive the prince of this world. The Saviour at His baptism received a second birth, and clad Himself with a subtler texture of body, formed in the bosom of the waters – if that can be termed a body which was but a fantastic texture woven or framed upon the model of His earthly body. During the hours of the Passion, the flesh formed in Mary's womb, and it alone, was nailed to the tree. The great Archon or Demiurgus, whose work that flesh was, was played upon and deceived, in pouring His wrath only upon the work of His hands. For the soul, or spiritual substance, which had been wounded in the flesh of the Saviour, extricated itself from this as from an unmeet and hateful vesture; and itself contributing to nailing it to the cross, triumphed by that very flesh over principalities and powers. It did not, however, remain naked, but clad in the subtler form which it had assumed in its baptismal second birth (*Philosoph.*, viii. 10). What is remarkable in this theory is, first, the admission of the reality of the terrestrial body, formed in the Virgin's womb, and then nailed to the cross. The *negation* is only of the *real* and permanent union of this body with the heavenly spirit which inhabits it. We shall, further, note the importance which it attaches to the Saviour's baptism, and the part played by water, as if an intermediate element between flesh and spirit. This may bear upon 1 John v. 8."

[This passage is from a *Dissertation – les Trois Témoins Célestes*, in a collection of religious and literary papers by French scholars (Tom. ii., Sept. 1868, pp. 388-392). The author, since

deceased, was the Abbé Le Hir, M. Renan's instructor in Hebrew at Saint Sulpice, and pronounced by his pupil one of the first of European Hebraists and scientific theologians.]

DISCOURSE IV.
THE IMAGE OF ST. JOHN'S
SOUL IN HIS EPISTLE

"He that loveth pureness of heart, for the grace of his lips the king shall be his friend." – Prov. xxii. 11

ὁ θεμελιος... ὁ δευτερος σαπφειρος. – Αποκ. xxi. 19

"We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not. And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." – 1 John v. 18-20.

Much has been said in the last few years of a series of subtle and delicate experiments in sound. Means have been devised of doing for the ear something analogous to that which glasses do for another sense, and of making the results palpable by a system of notation. We are told that every tree for instance, according

to its foliage, its position, and the direction of the winds, has its own prevalent note or tone, which can be marked down, and its *timbre* made first visible by this notation, and then audible. So is it with the souls of the saints of God, and chiefly of the Apostles. Each has its own note, the prevalent key on which its peculiar music is set. Or we may employ another image which possibly has St. John's own authority. Each of the twelve has his peculiar emblem among the twelve vast and precious foundation stones which underlie the whole wall of the Church. St. John may thus differ from St. Peter, as the sapphire's azure differs from the jasper's strength and radiance. Each is beautiful, but with its own characteristic tint of beauty.⁸⁷

We propose to examine the peculiarities of St. John's spiritual nature which may be traced in this Epistle. We try to form some conception of the key on which it is set, of the colour which it reflects in the light of heaven, of the image of a soul which it presents. In this attempt we cannot be deceived. St. John is so transparently honest; he takes such a deep, almost terribly severe view of truth. We find him using an expression about truth which is perhaps without a parallel in any other writer. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and walk in darkness we lie, and are not *doing the truth*."⁸⁸ The truth then for him is something co-extensive with our whole nature and whole life. Truth is not only to be *spoken*— that is but a fragmentary manifestation of it. It is to be *done*. It would have been for him the darkest of lies to have put forth a spiritual commentary on his Gospel which

was not realised in himself. In the Epistle, no doubt, he uses the first person singular sparingly, modestly including himself in the simple *we* of Christian association. Yet we are as sure of the perfect accuracy of the picture of his soul, of the music in his heart which he makes visible and audible in his letter, as we are that he heard the voice of many waters, and saw the city coming down from God out of heaven; as sure, as if at the close of this fifth chapter he had added with the triumphant emphasis of truth, in his simple and stately way, "I John heard these things and saw them."⁸⁹ He closes this letter with a threefold affirmation of certain primary postulates of the Christian life; of its *purity*,⁹⁰ of its *privilege*⁹¹, of its *Presence*,⁹²— "we know," "we know," "we know." In each case the plural might be exchanged for the singular. He says "*we* know," because he is sure "*I* know."

In studying the Epistles of St. John we may well ask what we see and hear therein of St. John's character, (1) as a sacred writer, (2) as a saintly soul.

I

We consider first the indications in the Epistle of the Apostle's character as a sacred writer.

For help in this direction we do not turn with much satisfaction to essays or annotations pervaded by the modern spirit. The textual criticism of minute scholarship is no doubt much, but it is not all. Aorists are made for man, not man for the aorist.

He indeed who has not traced every fibre of the sacred text with grammar and lexicon cannot quite honestly claim to be an *expositor* of it. But in the case of a book like Scripture this, after all, is but an important preliminary. The frigid subtlety of the commentator who always seems to have the questions for a divinity examination before his eyes, fails in the glow and elevation necessary to bring us into communion with the spirit of St. John. Led by such guides, the Apostle passes under our review as a third-rate writer of a magnificent language in decadence, not as the greatest of theologians and masters of the spiritual life – with whatever defects of literary style, at once the Plato of the twelve in one region, and the Aristotle in the other; the first by his "lofty inspiration," the second by his "judicious utilitarianism." The deepest thought of the Church has been brooding for seventeen centuries over these pregnant and many-sided words, so many of which are the very words of Christ. To separate ourselves from this vast and beautiful commentary is to place ourselves out of the atmosphere in which we can best feel the influence of St. John.

Let us read Chrysostom's description of the style and thought of the author of the fourth Gospel. "The son of thunder, the loved of Christ, the pillar of the Churches, who leaned on Jesus' bosom, makes his entrance. He plays no drama, he covers his head with no mask. Yet he wears array of inimitable beauty. For he comes having his feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace, and his loins girt, not with fleece dyed in purple, or

bedropped with gold, but woven through and through with, and composed of, the truth itself. He will now appear before us, not dramatically, for with him there is no theatrical effect or fiction, but with his head bared he tells the bare truth. All these things he will speak with absolute accuracy, being the friend of the King Himself – aye, having the King speaking within him, and hearing all things from Him which He heareth from the Father; as He saith – 'you I have called friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father, I have made known unto you.' Wherefore, as if we all at once saw one stooping down from yonder heaven, and promising to tell us truly of things there, we should all flock to listen to him, so let us now dispose ourselves. For it is from up there that this man speaks down to us. And the fisherman is not carried away by the whirling current of his own exuberant verbosity; but all that he utters is with the steadfast accuracy of truth, and as if he stood upon a rock he budes not. All time is his witness. Seest thou the boldness, and the great authority of his words! how he utters nothing by way of doubtful conjecture, but all demonstratively, as if passing sentence. Very lofty is this Apostle, and full of dogmas, and lingers over them more than over other things!"⁹³ This admirable passage, with its fresh and noble enthusiasm, nowhere reminds us of the glacial subtleties of the schools. It is the utterance of an expositor who spoke the language in which his master wrote, and breathed the same spiritual atmosphere. It is scarcely less true of the Epistle than of the Gospel of St. John.

Here also "he is full of dogmas," here again he is the theologian of the Church. But we are not to estimate the amount of dogma merely by the number of words in which it is expressed. Dogma, indeed, is not really composed of isolated texts – as pollen showered from conifers and germs scattered from mosses, accidentally brought together and compacted, are found upon chemical analysis to make up certain lumps of coal. It is primary and structural. The Divinity and Incarnation of Jesus pervade the First Epistle. Its whole structure is *Trinitarian*.⁹⁴ It contains two of the three great three-word dogmatic utterances of the New Testament about the nature of God (the first being in the fourth Gospel) – "God is Spirit," "God is light," "God is love." The chief dogmatic statements of the Atonement are found in these few chapters. "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin." "We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous." "He is the propitiation for the whole world." "God loved us, and sent His Son the propitiation for our sins." Where the Apostle passes on to deal with the spiritual life, he once more "is full of dogmas," *i. e.*, of eternal self-evidenced oracular sentences, spoken as if "down from heaven," or by one "whose foot is upon a rock," – apparently identical propositions, all-inclusive, the dogmas of moral and spiritual life, as those upon the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, are of strictly theological truth. A further characteristic of St. John as a sacred writer in his Epistle is, that he appears to indicate throughout the moral and spiritual conditions which were necessary for

receiving the Gospel with which he endowed the Church as the life of their life. These conditions are three. The first is *spirituality*, submission to the teaching of the Spirit, that they may know by it the meaning of the words of Jesus – the "anointing" of the Holy Ghost, which is ever "teaching all things" that He said.⁹⁵ The second condition is *purity*, at least, the continuing effort after self-purification which is incumbent even upon those who have received the great pardon.⁹⁶ This involves the following in life's daily walk of the One perfect life-walk,⁹⁷ the imitation of that which is supremely good,⁹⁸ "incarnated in an actual earthly career." All must be purity, or effort after purity, on the side of those who would read aright the Gospel of the immaculate Lamb of God. The third condition for such readers is love — *charity*. When he comes to deal fully with that great theme, the eagle of God wheels far out of sight. In the depths of His Eternal Being, "God is love."⁹⁹ Then this truth comes closer to us as believers. It stands completely and for ever *manifested* in its work *in us*,¹⁰⁰ because "God *hath sent*" (a mission in the past, but with abiding consequences)¹⁰¹ "His Son, His only-begotten Son into the world, that we may live through Him." Yet again, he rises higher from the *manifestation* of this love to the eternal and essential principle in which it stands present for ever. "In this *is* the love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us, and once for all sent His Son a propitiation for our sins."¹⁰² Then follows the manifestation of *our* love. "If God so loved us, we also are bound to love one another." Do we think it strange that St. John does not first draw

the lesson – "if God so loved us, we also are bound to love God"? It has been in his heart all along, but he utters it in his own way, in the solemn pathetic question – "he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, God whom he hath not seen how can he love?"¹⁰³ Yet once more he sums up the creed in a few short words. "We have believed the love that God hath in us."¹⁰⁴ Truly and deeply has it been said that this creed of the heart, suffused with the softest tints and sweetest colours, goes to the root of all heresies upon the Incarnation, whether in St. John's time or later. That God should give up His Son by sending Him forth in humanity; that the Word made flesh should humble Himself to the death upon the cross, the Sinless offer Himself for sinners, this is what heresy cannot bring itself to understand. It is the excess of such love which makes it incredible. "We have believed the love" is the whole faith of a Christian man. It is St. John's creed in three words.¹⁰⁵

Such are the chief characteristics of St. John as a sacred writer, which may be traced in his Epistle. These characteristics of the author imply corresponding characteristics of the man. He who states with such inevitable precision, with such noble and self-contained enthusiasm, the great dogmas of the Christian faith, the great laws of the Christian life, must himself have entirely believed them. He who insists upon these conditions in the readers of his Gospel, must himself have aimed at, and possessed, spirituality, purity, and love.

II

We proceed to look at the First Epistle as a picture of the soul of its author.

(1) His was a life free from the dominion of wilful and habitual sin of any kind. "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin, and he cannot continue sinning." "Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not; whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, neither known Him." A man so entirely true, if conscious to himself of any reigning sin, dare not have deliberately written these words.

(2) But if St. John's was a life free from subjection to any form of the power of sin, he shows us that sanctity is not sinlessness, in language which it is alike unwise and unsafe to attempt to explain away. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." "If we say that we have not sinned and are not sinners, we make Him a liar." But so long as we do not fall back into darkness, the blood of Jesus is ever purifying us from all sin. This he has written that the fulness of the Christian life may be realised in believers; that each step of their walk may follow the blessed footprints of the most holy life; that each successive act of a consecrated existence may be free from sin.¹⁰⁶ And yet, if any fail in some such single act,¹⁰⁷ if he swerve, for a moment, from the "true tenour" of the course which he is shaping, there is no reason to despair. Beautiful humility of this pure and lofty soul! How tenderly, with what lowly graciousness he places himself

among those who have and who need an Advocate. "Mark John's humility," cries St. Augustine; "he says not 'ye have,' nor 'ye have me,' nor even 'ye have Christ.' But he puts forward Christ, not himself; and he says 'we have,' not 'ye have,' thus placing himself in the rank of sinners."¹⁰⁸ Nor does St. John cover himself under the subterfuges by which men at different times have tried to get rid of a truth so humiliating to spiritual pride – sometimes by asserting that they so stand accepted in Christ that no sin is accounted to them for such; sometimes by pleading personal exemption for themselves as believers.

This Epistle stands alone in the New Testament in being addressed to two generations – one of which after conversion had grown old in a Christian atmosphere, whilst the other had been educated from the cradle under the influences of the Christian Church. It is therefore natural that such a letter should give prominence to the constant need of pardon. It certainly does not speak so much of the great initial pardon,¹⁰⁹ as of the continuing pardons needed by human frailty. In dwelling upon pardon once given, upon sanctification once begun, men are possibly apt to forget the pardon that is daily wanting, the purification that is never to cease. We are to walk daily from pardon to pardon, from purification to purification. Yesterday's surrender of self to Christ may grow ineffectual if it be not renewed to-day. This is sometimes said to be a humiliating view of the Christian life. Perhaps so – but it is the view of the Church, which places in its offices a daily confession of sin; of St. John in this Epistle; nay,

of Him who teaches us, after our prayers for bread day by day, to pray for a daily forgiveness. This may be more humiliating, but it is safer teaching than that which proclaims a pardon to be appropriated in a moment for all sins past, present, and to come.

This humility may be traced incidentally in other regions of the Christian life. Thus he speaks of the possibility at least of his being among those who might "shrink with shame from Christ in His coming." He does not disdain to write as if, in hours of spiritual depression, there were tests by which he too might need to lull and "persuade his heart before God."¹¹⁰

(3) St. John again has a boundless faith in prayer. It is the key put into the child's hand by which he may let himself into the house, and come into his Father's presence when he will, at any hour of the night or day. And prayer made according to the conditions which God has laid down is never quite lost. The particular thing asked for may not indeed be given; but the substance of the request, the holier wish, the better purpose underlying its weakness and imperfection, never fails to be granted.¹¹¹

(4) All but superficial readers must perceive that in the writings and character of St. John there is from time to time a tonic and wholesome *severity*. Art and modern literature have agreed to bestow upon the Apostle of love the features of a languid and inert tenderness. It is forgotten that St. John was the son of thunder; that he could once wish to bring down fire from heaven; and that the natural character is transfigured not

inverted by grace. The Apostle uses great plainness of speech. For him a lie is a lie, and darkness is never courteously called light. He abhors and shudders at those heresies which rob the soul first of Christ, and then of God.¹¹² Those who undermine the Incarnation are for him not interesting and original speculators, but "lying prophets." He underlines his warnings against such men with his roughest and blackest pencil mark. "Whoso sayeth to him 'good speed' hath fellowship with his *works*, those wicked *works*"¹¹³— for such heresy is not simply one work, but a series of works. The schismatic prelate or pretender Diotrephes may "babble;" but his babblings are wicked words for all that, and are in truth the "works which he is doing."

The influence of every great Christian teacher lasts long beyond the day of his death. It is felt in a general tone and spirit, in a special appropriation of certain parts of the creed, in a peculiar method of the Christian life. This influence is very discernible in the remains of two disciples of St. John,¹¹⁴ Ignatius and Polycarp. In writing to the Ephesians, Ignatius does not indeed explicitly refer to St. John's Epistle, as he does to that of St. Paul to the Ephesians. But he draws in a few bold lines a picture of the Christian life which is imbued with the very spirit of St. John. The character which the Apostle loved was quiet and real; we feel that his heart is not with "him that sayeth."¹¹⁵ So Ignatius writes — "it is better to keep silence, and yet to *be*, than to talk and *not to be*. It is good to teach if 'he that sayeth doeth.' He who has gotten to himself the word of Jesus truly is able to hear

the silence of Jesus also, so that he may *act* through that which he *speaks*, and *be known* through the things wherein he is *silent*. Let us therefore do all things as in His presence who dwelleth in us, that we may be His temple, and that He may be in us our God." This is the very spirit of St. John. We feel in it at once his severe common sense and his glorious mysticism.

We must add that the influence of St. John ¹¹⁶may be traced in matters which are often considered alien to his simple and spiritual piety. It seems that Episcopacy was consolidated and extended under his fostering care. The language of Ignatius (probably his disciple) upon the necessity of union with the Episcopate is, after all conceivable deductions, of startling strength. A few decades could not possibly have removed Ignatius so far from the lines marked out to him by St. John as he must have advanced, if this teaching upon Church government was a new departure. And with this conception of Church government we must associate other matters also. The immediate successors of St. John, who had learned from his lips, held deep sacramental views. The Eucharist is "the bread of God, the bread of heaven, the bread of life, the flesh of Christ." Again Ignatius cries – "desire to use one Eucharist, for one is the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup unto oneness of His blood, one altar, as one Bishop, with the Presbytery and deacons."¹¹⁷ Hints are not wanting that sweetness and life in public worship derived inspiration from the same quarter. The language of Ignatius is deeply tinged with his passion for *music*.¹¹⁸ The beautiful story,

how he set down, immediately after a vision, the melody to which he had heard the angels chanting, and caused it to be used in his church at Antioch, attests the impression of enthusiasm and care for sacred song which was associated with the memory of Ignatius.¹¹⁹ Nor can we be surprised at these features of Ephesian Christianity, when we remember who was the founder of those Churches. He was the writer of *three* books. These books come to us with a continuous living interpretation of more than seventeen centuries of historical Christianity. From the fourth Gospel in large measure has arisen the sacramental instinct, from the Apocalypse the æsthetic instinct, which has been certainly exaggerated both in the East and West. The third and sixth chapters of St. John's Gospel permeate every baptismal and eucharistic office. Given an inspired book which represents the worship of the redeemed as one of perfect majesty and beauty, men may well in the presence of noble churches and stately liturgies, adopt the words of our great English Christian poet —

"things which shed upon the outward frame
Of worship glory and grace – which who shall blame
That ever look'd to heaven for final rest?"

The third book in this group of writings supplies the sweet and quiet spirituality which is the foundation of every regenerate nature.

Such is the image of the soul which is presented to us by St.

John himself. It is based upon a firm conviction of the nature of God, of the Divinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement of our Lord. It is spiritual. It is pure, or being purified. The highest theological truth – "God is Love" – supremely *realised* in the Holy Trinity, supremely manifested in the sending forth of God's only Son, becomes the law of its common social life, made visible in gentle patience, in giving and forgiving.¹²⁰ Such a life will be free from the degradation of habitual sin. Yet it is at best an imperfect representation of the one perfect life.¹²¹ It needs unceasing purification by the blood of Jesus, the continual advocacy of One who is sinless. Such a nature, however full of charity, will not be weakly indulgent to vital error or to ambitious schism;¹²² for it knows the value of truth and unity. It feels the sweetness of a calm conscience, and of a simple belief in the efficacy of prayer. Over every such life – over all the grief that may be, all the temptation that must be – is the purifying hope of a great Advent, the ennobling assurance of a perfect victory, the knowledge that if we continue true to the principle of our new birth we are safe. And our safety is, not that we keep ourselves, but that we are kept by arms which are as soft as love, and as strong as eternity.¹²³

These Epistles are full of instruction and of comfort for us, just because they are written in an atmosphere of the Church which, in one respect at least, resembles our own. There is in them no reference whatever to a continuance of miraculous powers, to raptures, or to extraordinary phenomena. All in them

which is supernatural continues even to this day, in the possession of an inspired record, in sacramental grace, in the pardon and holiness, the peace and strength of believers. The apocryphal "Acts of John" contain some fragments of real beauty almost lost in questionable stories and prolix declamation. It is probably not literally true that when St. John in early life wished to make himself a home, his Lord said to him, "I have need of thee, John;" that that thrilling voice once came to him, wafted over the still darkened sea – "John, hadst thou not been Mine, I would have suffered thee to marry."¹²⁴ But the Epistle shows us much more effectually that he had a pure heart and virgin will. It is scarcely probable that the son of Zebedee ever drained a cup of hemlock with impunity; but he bore within him an effectual charm against the poison of sin.¹²⁵ We of this nineteenth century may smile when we read that he possessed the power of turning leaves into gold, of transmuting pebbles into jewels, of fusing shattered gems into one; but he carried with him wherever he went that most excellent gift of charity, which makes the commonest things of earth radiant with beauty.¹²⁶ He may not actually have praised his Master during his last hour in words which seem to us not quite unworthy even of such lips – "Thou art the only Lord, the root of immortality, the fountain of incorruption. Thou who madest our rough wild nature soft and quiet, who deliveredst me from the imagination of the moment, and didst keep me safe within the guard of that which abideth for ever." But such thoughts in life or death were never far from him for whom Christ

was the Word and the Life; who knew that while "the world passeth away and the lust thereof, he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."¹²⁷

May we so look upon this image of the Apostle's soul in his Epistle that we may reflect something of its brightness. May we be able to think, as we turn to this threefold assertion of knowledge – "*I* know something of the security of this keeping."¹²⁸ *I* know something of the sweetness of being in the Church, that isle of light surrounded by a darkened world.¹²⁹ *I* know something of the beauty of the perfect human life recorded by St. John, something of the continued presence of the Son of God, something of the new sense which He gives, that we may know Him who is the Very God."¹³⁰ Blessed exchange not to be vaunted loudly, but spoken reverently in our own hearts – the exchange of we, for I. There is much divinity in these pronouns.¹³¹

NOTES

Note A

1 John iv. 8, 9, 10. Modern theological schools of a Calvinistic bias have tended to overlook the conception of the nature of God as essential or substantive Love, and to consider love only as

manifested in redemption. Socinianising interpreters understand the proposition to mean that God is simply and exclusively benevolent. (On the inadequacy of this, see Butler, *Anal.*, Part I., ch. iii., and Dissertation II. of the Nature of Virtue.) The highest Christian thought has ever recognised that the proposition 'God is Love' necessarily involves the august truth that God is *sole* is not *solitary*. ("Credimur et confitemur omnipotentem Trinitatem – unum Deum *solum* non *solitarium*." Concil. Tolet., vi. 1.) "Let it not be supposed," said St. Bernard, "that I here account Love as an attribute or accident, but as the Divine essence – no new doctrine, seeing that St. John saith 'God is love.' It may rightly be said both that *Love* is *God*, and that love is *the gift of God*. For Love gives love; the essential Love gives that which is accidental. When Love signifies the Giver, it is the name of His essence; when it signifies His gift, it is the name of a quality or attribute." (*S. Bernard., de dil. Deo*, xii.). "This is nobly said. God is love. Thus love is the eternal law whereby all things were created and are governed – wherewith He who is the law of all things is unto Himself His own law, and that a law of love – wherewith He bindeth His Trinity into Unity." (*Thomassin. Dogm. Theol.*, lib. iii., 23.)

Note B

ἡ ῥίζα τῆς ἀθανασίας καὶ ἡ πηγή τῆς ἀφθαρσίας· ὁ τὴν ἐρημον καὶ ἀγριωθεῖσαν φύσιν ἡμῶν ἠρεμον καὶ ἡσυχιον

ποιησας, ὁ της προσκαιρου φαντασιας ῥυσαμενος με και εις την αι μενουσαν φρουρησας (*Acta Johannis*, 21). These sentences are surely not without freshness and power. One other passage is worth translating, because it seems to have just that imaginative cast which makes the Greek Liturgies, like so much else that is Greek, stand midway between the East and West; and because it apparently refers to St. John's Gospel. "Jesus! Thou who hast woven this coronal with Thy plaiting, who hast blended these many flowers into the flower of Thy presence, not blown through by the winds of any storm; Thou who hast scattered thickly abroad the seed of these words of Thine" – (*Acta Johannis*, 17).

PART II

SOME GENERAL RULES FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF THE FIRST EPISTLE OF ST. JOHN

I. Subject Matter

(1) The *Epistle* is to be read through with constant reference to the *Gospel*. In what *precise form* the former is related to the latter (whether as a preface or as an appendix, as a spiritual commentary or an encyclical) critics may decide. But there is a vital and constant connection. The two documents not only touch each other in thought, but *interpenetrate* each other; and the Epistle is constantly *suggesting* questions which the Gospel only can answer, *e. g.*, 1 John i. 1, cf. John i. 1-14; 1 John v. 9, "witness of men," cf. John i. 15-36, 41, 45, 49, iii. 2, 27-36, iv. 29-42, vi. 68, 69, vii. 46, ix. 38, xi. 27, xviii. 38, xix. 5, 6, xx. 28.

(2) Such eloquence of *style* as St. John possesses is *real* rather than *verbal*. The interpreter must look not only at the words themselves, but at that which *precedes* and *follows*; above all he

must fix his attention not only upon the *verbal expression* of the thought, but upon the *thought itself*. For the formal connecting link is not rarely omitted, and must be supplied by the devout and candid diligence of the reader. The "root below the stream" can only be traced by our bending over the water until it becomes translucent to us.

E.g. 1 John i. 7, 8. Ver. 7, "the root below the stream" is a question of this kind, which naturally arises from reading ver. 6—"must it be said that the sons of light need a constant cleansing by the blood of Jesus, which implies a constant guilt"? Some such thought is the latent root of connection. The answer is supplied by the following verse. ["It is so" for] "if we say that we have no sin," etc. Cf. also iii. 16, 17, xiv. 8, 9, 10, 11, v. 3 (ad. fin.), 4.

II. Language

1. *Tenses.*

In the New Testament generally tenses are employed very much in the same sense, and with the same general accuracy, as in other Greek authors. The so-called "enallage temporum," or perpetual and convenient Hebraism, has been proved by the greatest Hebrew scholars to be no Hebraism at all. But it is one of the simple secrets of St. John's quiet thoughtful power, that he uses tenses with the most rigorous precision.

(a) The *Present* of continuing uninterrupted action, *e. g.*, i. 8, ii. 6, iii. 7, 8, 9.

Hence the so-called *substantized* participle with article $\acute{\omicron}$ has in St. John the sense of the continuous and constitutive temper and conduct of any man, the principle of his moral and spiritual life — *e. g.*, $\acute{\omicron}$ λεγων, he who is ever vaunting, ii. 4; $\pi\alpha\varsigma \acute{\omicron}$ μισων, every one the abiding principle of whose life is hatred, iii. 15; $\pi\alpha\varsigma \acute{\omicron}$ αγαπων, every one the abiding principle of whose life is love, iv. 7.

The Infin. Present is generally used to express an action now in course of performing or *continued* in itself or in its results, or *frequently repeated* — *e.g.*, 1 John ii. 6, iii. 8, 9, v. 18. (Winer, *Gr. of N. T. Diction*, Part 3, xliv., 348).

(b) The Aorist.

This tense is generally used either of a thing occurring only once, which does not admit, or at least does not require, the notion of continuance and perpetuity; or of something which is brief and as it were only momentary in duration (Stallbaum, *Plat. Enthyd.*, p. 140). This limitation or isolation of the predicated action is most accurately indicated by the usual form of this tense in Greek. The aorist verb is encased between the augment ϵ - past time, and the adjunct σ - future time, *i. e.*

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