

Notes on

Johannes' Third Letter

Authorship and Date:

The author of this letter also wrote the other Johannine literature. At the beginning of the commentary on "According to Johannes" is a discussion of the identification of the author with Johannes the envoy, son of Zebediah. This letter was written when Johannes was older, probably around the same time as his "second" letter, c. 60-65 CE.

Commentary:

The elderly man to Gaius the beloved one, whom I love in truth:

All we know about Gaius is contained in this letter. He was a trusted friend of the author's, who had a good reputation for assisting other Christians. As in his other writings, Johannes mentions "the truth," which is the spiritualization or internalization of the Torah as the principle of trust and love.

Beloved one, I wish for you to prosper in all things and to be healthy, just as your soul is prospering. For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified that you were in the truth, just as you are walking in truth. I have no greater joy than this: that I hear my children walking in the truth.

The traditional blessing is coupled with the author's statement of pleasure that Gaius was still following the spiritual Torah. At least by this time, hearing that people that he "converted" had not left the Messianic movement had become a great cause of pleasure for the author.

Beloved one, you are doing faithfully whatever you work for the brothers, and this to strangers! They testified about your love in the presence of the assembly. You will do well to send them out in a manner worthy of God, for they went out on behalf of the name, taking nothing from the gentiles. Therefore, we are bound to take such people in, so that we would be working together for the truth.

The spiritual Torah is summed up by the precept of Love, and so Johannes praises Gaius for what he had heard: that Gaius was acting out of love toward his fellow Christians -- even ones whom he did not know. The context indicates that Gaius had shown hospitality by taking these strangers into his home. Apparently they were traveling around sharing the message with others, although the letter is not explicit on this point. Quite possibly they were envoys.

"They went out on behalf of the name" appears to indicate that they were traveling messengers, but these people took "nothing from the gentiles." The members of the Twelve always expressed that they were a part of "true" Judaism. These traveling Christians would not accept assistance from those outside of Christianity, and so they were dependent on their fellow-Christians to

provide food and lodging for them as they traveled. Paulus says elsewhere that although the envoys have such a privilege, it is best not to partake of that privilege; consequently he supported himself.

Johannes urges Gaius to send them out in a manner befitting Christian love, and in offering them hospitality, Gaius was participating in the message of love as much as the envoys themselves were. The wording indicates that the envoys were still staying with him.

I wrote something to the assembly, but the one who loves to be foremost among them, Diotrefes, does not receive us. For this reason, if I come, I will remember those deeds of his that he is doing, talking trash to us with evil words. And since he is not satisfied with these things, he doesn't even receive the brothers, and he casts from the assembly those who want to receive them.

The use of "us" again appears to refer to the envoys, some of whom were staying with Gaius. Johannes had previously urged the people in Gaius' locale to help support the travelers, but a certain Diotrefes would not accept them. Instead, he was saying bad things about the envoys -- probably alleging that they were sponging off of their fellow Christians.

But his distaste for the traveling prophets was not the sole problem, for Diotrefes was asserting some sort of positional authority over other Christians, in direct violation of the teachings of Jesus on equality (Mt 20:20-8; Mt 23:1-12). In this instance, he was ordering others not to accept the envoys into their homes on penalty of being expelled from the local Christian meetings. Possibly "cast from the assembly" indicates also that the others were told to regard the ones who were "cast out" as though they were not Christians. This uninspired person, Diotrefes, was treating himself as more than an equal.

Notice that it was not the case that Diotrefes was challenging anyone else's "authority." The problem was that he was **claiming** authority, to the point of rejecting those who showed love for their fellow Christians.

Beloved one, don't imitate the bad thing but the good. The one who does good is from God. The one who does bad is has not seen God. Demetrius has been testified about by all, and even by the truth itself. Now we also testify, and you know, that our testimony is true.

Johannes assures his friend that showing love is the right thing, and quite probably Gaius had already been "kicked out" of Diotrefes' group for having accepted them. Therefore the author hopes that he will continue to do what is right, even though others are behaving in a denominationalist, sectarian fashion.

Demetrius was probably the bearer of the letter, and Johannes notes that this Demetrius has a good testimony of love about him, much like Gaius himself. "We also testify" about Demetrius -- the envoys themselves know Demetrius and assure Gaius that he is a loving brother.

I had many things to write to you about, but I don't want to write to you with ink and pen. But I hope to see you immediately, and we will speak mouth to mouth.

The closing is similar to the one in Johannes' second letter, with the author hoping to see his reader soon.

Peace to you. Friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.

"Friends" certainly refers to fellow-Christians, but the group may be more specific than that. Since this is all that is written, we know no further details.

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