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DIOTREPHESES : THE FIRST GNOSTIC BISHOP ?

by ROBERT W. ORR

IT has sometimes been surmised that the letter which the Elder "wrote unto the church", according to 3 John 9, was the Second Epistle of John. This surmise prompts the attempt to reconstruct the life-setting of the two epistles, and in any such reconstruction the role of Diotrephes must receive some consideration. The two principal alternative accounts of him are, in the words of Professor Dodd, "(i) that Diotrephes is in fact the first monarchical bishop known to history in the province of Asia . . . (ii) that Diotrephes is a symptom of the disease which the quasi-apostolic ministry of monarchical bishops was designed to relieve." In the following brief article Mr. Orr, a member of the Village Medical Evangelistic Unit operating in West Pakistan, makes some interesting observations on this question.

IS the Second Epistle of John written to a church or to a lady ?

The *possibility* that it could be addressed to a church under the guise of a lady (presumably for security reasons) is strengthened by St. Peter's cryptic reference to "her that is in Babylon" (1 Peter 5: 13). The following statements, among others, would seem more in character in a letter written to a church than to a lady: (a) *all* that know the truth love her (v. 1); (b) by unwise behaviour on her part there would be lost the results of the *apostle's* labour; and (c) the exhortation "that we love one another", while appropriate for a church, might be deemed unsuitable when addressed to a private lady. The conjecture that the Epistle was addressed to the church which Diotrephes ruled gives point to every verse in both the Second and Third Epistles, and imparts a unity to the pair of letters which have been preserved together, thus affording a high degree of probability.

The chief exhortation of 2 John is to a united stand by the church in the bonds of brotherly affection (v. 5). The letter, by its very form, suggests danger from persecuting powers; but the greater peril was the tendency within the church to "advanced" Gnostic teaching—advancing beyond and right out of the apostolic doctrine (I.V.F. Commentary, *in loco*). Was there an individual

in mind who tended to "take the lead" (v. 9, R.V. mg.) and advance into this non-apostolic doctrine? Yes: Diotrephes (3 John 9); this provides the link between 2 John and 3 John.

The conjecture then stands thus: St. John sent 2 John to the church, but Diotrephes suppressed it (3 John 9); so St. John next wrote to a trusted believer in that church, himself converted through St. John (v. 4). He censured Diotrephes' behaviour, and commended Gaius in the very matters in which Diotrephes was offending (walking in the truth, and receiving and helping the brethren in a worthy manner). Thus the church is advised by apostolic authority that Diotrephes is no longer worthy of his place as an elder; Gaius is provided with a testimonial as to his fitness to succeed Diotrephes; and Demetrius is commended as a suitable fellow-elder for Gaius. The autocratic rule of one man is to give way to the joint administration of two well-proved men.

Thus the pair of Epistles constituted an attempt to help the church to get things set right among themselves. Failing this, the apostle would be forced to the less satisfactory resort (cf. 1 Cor. 4: 18, 21) of putting things right by authority, on a personal visit (see the second-last verses of each Epistle).

Why did St. John (taking the question of authorship for granted) refer to himself as "The Elder" in this pair of epistles? Of course, if we are right in supposing that the destination of the letter was concealed for security reasons, it is only consistent that the writer's identity should also be concealed. But the epithet chosen suits well the purpose of the epistles, reminding one of St. Peter's words: "The elders among you I exhort, who am a fellow-elder . . ." (1 Peter 5: 1).

The second and third Epistles of John may be of significance for church history. Let me quote from H. M. Gwatkin's *Early Church History* to A.D. 313, vol. i, p. 289:

We . . . mean by episcopacy the monarchical government of a single bishop as opposed to the collective government of sundry bishops who are not easily distinguished from presbyters. The first broad fact we notice is that though we find no trace of episcopacy in the New Testament, it is universal a century later.

Had Dr. Gwatkin examined our two epistles in his search for traces of episcopacy? Here are rather broad "traces" of a monarchical bishop, and monarchical not for lack of capable and worthy colleagues, but from love of office. In all fairness, however, we must note that the objection to Diotrephes is not in his monarchicalism, but in his tyranny.

Multan, W. Pakistan.