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TEXT, EXPOSITION, AND NOTES

ADDRESS AND GREETING (1-3)

1. *The elder,*

To the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth— and not I only, but also all who know the truth— 2. because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever:

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

1 Unlike a modern letter-writer who leaves his reader guessing his identity until he reaches his signature at the end of the letter, ancient writers of letters began by naming themselves and their readers in a formal salutation.¹ To understand the letter we need to put ourselves in the situation of the original readers and see whether the writer's message to them still has something to say to us in our different situation.

The writer of this letter does not give his personal name. He writes like a modern clergyman who might sign a pastoral letter to members of his congregation with "Your vicar" or "Your pastor" without adding his name (which would of course be familiar to them). What matters is his position rather than his personal name. This is indicated by the phrase "the elder." The word simply means an old man, and hence a (usually old) person exercising oversight and leadership. Elsewhere in the New Testament it refers to groups

¹The usual form of greeting in a Greek letter was "A (says) to B, Greeting" (Acts 15:23; 23:26; Jas. 1:1). Christian letters follow an oriental model in which the greeting proper has become an independent address to the recipient (Dan. 4:1). See E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*. Philadelphia, 1971, 5f., where fuller references are given.

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of leaders in local churches.² This meaning is unlikely here since the writer refers to himself in the singular as “*the elder*,” and since he is probably writing to a church of which he was not a member. It is possible that he was simply a venerable figure in the church known with affectionate reverence as “the old man.” More precisely he may have been one of a group of persons with links with the earlier days of the church who were known as elders.³ But since ecclesiastical terms were used loosely in the early days of the church, it is also possible that the writer was what we would now call a “superintendent” or “bishop” with responsibility for a group of churches.⁴ In any case, he has a position of authority over against his readers.

He addresses his readers as “the chosen lady and her children.” This is a metaphorical way of saying “the church and its members.”⁵ If the letter was sent to a particular church,⁶ there was no need to specify more particularly which church was meant—and this may have been indicated on the package containing the letter.⁷ The personification of a community was not uncommon in ancient writings. Jerusalem was regarded by the Jews as the mother of the nation,⁸ and it was natural for Christians to think similarly of the church. When Peter writes about her “who is in Babylon, chosen together with you” (1 Pet. 5:13), he is using the same idea.⁹ The word translated “lady” is a respectful term meaning “mistress.” It is the feminine form of the word “lord”; possibly there is a hint of the church being the bride of the Lord, so that her children are the

²Acts 11:30; 14:23; 1 Timothy 5:17; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1, *et al.* The Jews also used the word for venerated scribes (Mk. 7:3, 5) and for religious and community leaders (Mk. 8:31, *et al.*). See G. Bornkamm, TDNT VI, 651–683; L. Coenen, NIDNTT I, 192–201.

³For details, see the Introduction, section 6.

⁴Admittedly we have no other evidence for such a usage, which must have been local in extent and of limited duration. But there is no reason in principle why one person should not have come to be “the elder” in a specific church situation.

⁵Older scholars (e.g. Plummer, 57f.; Smith, 162f.; Ross, 129f.; Morris, 1271) took the phrase literally as a reference to a particular lady and her children. But the interchange of singular and plural in the letter and the reference to the lady’s sister all support the view that the writer is personifying the church. For detailed argument in support of this position see Brooke, 167–170.

⁶Bultmann, 107f., thinks that the letter is a “catholic” epistle to be taken to a number of churches. But to justify this view he has to argue that the details in the letter which suggest one particular destination are fictitious.

⁷Dodd, 145, notes the possibility that the name of the addressees was omitted for prudential reasons during a time when the church was being persecuted.

⁸See Isaiah 54:1–8; Baruch 4:30–37; 5:5; Galatians 4:25; Revelation 12:17.

⁹Both here and in 1 Peter 5:13 it is the local church which is meant. The one church is visible in its local manifestations.

spiritual offspring of the Lord and his church.¹⁰ She is "chosen," an adjective often applied to Christians to denote that it was God who called them to be his people; the word always signifies those who have responded to this call and thus actually become the people of God.¹¹

Although the writer is following the standard pattern of an ancient letter, he is not bound by it, and before moving on to the greeting which should follow at this point he assures his readers of the love which he has for them. He uses the Greek word which often functions in the Greek Old Testament and in the New Testament to express the particular kind of love shown by God to men and which must be shown by men to God and to one another. The use of this word, rare in secular writing, shows how a new word was needed to bring out the special elements in Christian love.¹² It contains such thoughts as caring for other people, showing loyalty to them and seeking their good, in contrast with other words which are more expressive of seeking one's own enjoyment in the object of love or of mutual attractiveness and affection.¹³ Christian love is first and foremost *giving* love, although it does not lack other elements such as affection.

But even Christian love can be counterfeited by people who present the appearance without the reality. So the elder adds that he loves "in truth." By itself this phrase could simply mean "truly, really," indicating that the elder's love is genuine and springs from his heart. It is not a merely outward attitude, perhaps taken up to hide some ulterior motive, nor is it anything less than wholehearted.¹⁴ But in view of the significant role which "truth" plays in these letters, a deeper sense may already be present here.

¹⁰For *κνρία* see W. Foerster, TDNT III, 1045. For the thought of the church as the spiritual mother of believers see Cyprian, *De Unitate* 6; J. Calvin, *Institutes* IV:1:1; "To those to whom (God) is a Father, the Church must also be a mother."

¹¹Cf. 1 Peter 5:13. See G. Schrenk, TDNT IV, 181-192; L. Coenen, NIDNTT I, 536-543.

¹²G. Quell and E. Stauffer, TDNT I, 21-25; W. Günther, H.-G. Link, and C. Brown, NIDNTT II, 538-551. However, the word *ἀγαπάω* can also be used of other kinds of love (e.g. 2 Sam. 13:15 LXX; 2 Tim. 4:10).

¹³Thus *ἐρωσ*, which does not occur in the New Testament, on the whole expresses passionate longing. *φιλέω* is a more neutral word, used of the love which exists between friends. It does not occur in 1-3 John, but is used frequently in John, where its meaning is scarcely distinguishable from that of *ἀγαπάω*. See especially C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, New York/London, 1960. See also notes on 1 John 2:5; 3:16; 4:8.

¹⁴Cf. Schnackenburg, 307. On this view *ἐν ἀληθείᾳ* is equivalent to *ἀληθῶς* (Jn. 1:47) or *ἐπ' ἀληθείας* (Mk. 12:32). Note that this attitude is precisely the opposite of the hypocritical spirit which Jesus so often condemned (Mt. 23:13ff.; Lk. 12:1-3).

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The elder loves in a way that is consistent with the Christian revelation that has been received by both him and his readers. In other words, the "reality" with which the elder loves the church is the true, divine love revealed in the Christian message.¹⁵

The fact that the elder is writing to a church rather than an individual family is confirmed by his further assertion that his love is shared by all who know the truth.¹⁶ To know the truth means to know and accept the Christian message.¹⁷ Such knowing goes beyond merely knowing facts or doctrines to a positive acceptance of the truth and commitment to it. All who have come to know the truth in this way are brought into the same bond of mutual love which exists between the elder and this congregation. Acceptance of the truth involves active love; where love is absent, it is a sign that the truth has not been accepted.

2 The fact that knowing the truth issues in love is emphasized by the phrase "because of the truth," which perhaps sounds repetitious after the previous two uses of "truth." But the elder has a tendency to round off his paragraphs by a repetition of the opening thought,¹⁸ and in this case the effect is to accentuate the point and deepen it. The point here might simply be that Christians love because the revelation of the truth contains the command, "Love one another," but the elder's point is deeper. The truth is something which has come to stay in the members of the church, and it exercises an inner dynamic on them to love. What is said in the Gospel about the Spirit of truth (Jn. 14:15-17) is here affirmed of the truth, so that the truth has become a personal influence within Christians.¹⁹ Somewhat loosely the writer adds that the truth will be with

¹⁵Brooke, 170; Dodd, 145; Stott, 202; see also Haas, 13f. The difficulty with this view is that there is no article with the phrase (cf. 2 Jn. 3, 4; 1 Jn. 3:18; 3 Jn. 1, 3b). But the writer appears to use the phrase with or without the article without any obvious difference in meaning (cf. 2 Jn. 4 and 3 Jn. 3 with 3 Jn. 4; and 3 Jn. 3a with 3b), and in 1 John 3:18 it is difficult not to give ἀληθεία its full force alongside ἔργον.

On ἀληθεία see G. Quell and R. Bultmann, TDNT I, 232-251; C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, New York/Cambridge, 1954, 170-178; R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, Freiburg, 1971, II, 265-281.

¹⁶The perfect tense is used to signify those who have come into a lasting knowledge of the divine reality revealed in the Christian message.

¹⁷For the elder "truth" signifies what is ultimately real, namely God himself. Hence it can refer to the expression of God in his incarnate Son and in the Christian message. In 2 John 2 it becomes evident that the truth is tantamount to the Spirit of truth who can enter into the believer. The truth stands in contrast to the ultimately unreal and deceptive lies which stem from the devil.

¹⁸See Malatesta's schematic presentation of the Epistles of John (Introduction, section 3).

¹⁹ἐν ἡμῖν refers to the writer and his readers.

his readers forever; his thoughts are carried beyond the immediate issue to the horizon of Christian experience.²⁰

3 After naming the writer and recipients, the customary opening of a Greek letter included some form of greeting. Just as the former element was often developed to indicate the Christian status of the persons involved, so too the greeting took on a Christian form. We can trace this new type of greeting especially in the letters of Paul, and it may be that he was largely responsible for developing it.²¹ The elder makes his own characteristic use of the Christian formula "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."²² His greeting is a positive affirmation rather than a wish, since he is sure that it will be fulfilled, and he includes himself in the circle of blessing.²³ "Grace and peace" figure in the typical Pauline greeting, but the elder includes "mercy." "Grace" signifies the love and favor shown freely to men by God, and "mercy" has very much the same meaning; "peace" represents the sum total of the spiritual blessings given to men by God in his grace and mercy.²⁴ None of these words is characteristic of the letters of John.²⁵ They are part of the conventional language of the church, just as we may use in prayer words which are not part of our normal Christian vocabulary (e.g. we rarely refer to "trespasses" except when we are saying the Lord's Prayer). But the fact that they are not words that sprang automatically to the elder's lips does not weaken their force. If he himself preferred to speak of love, this is not very different from "grace" and "mercy," and similarly he would have preferred to speak of "eternal life" rather than its equivalent, "peace."

The greeting goes on to specify the source of these blessings

²⁰The use of *καὶ . . . ἔσται . . .* after a participle produces anacolouthon and reflects Hebrew style (cf. Jn. 5:44; BD 442^b; 468^b). For *εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα* see the same phrase used of the Paraclete in John 14:16.

²¹See 59 n. 1.

²²Galatians 1:3. A simpler form is found in 1 Thessalonians 1:1.

²³The textual variant *ὑμῶν* is poorly attested (K 69 *pm* lat sy^b; TR) and is clearly a simplification of the text to what the scribe expected to read.

²⁴For the combination "grace, mercy, peace," see 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Jude 2. The Jewish form "mercy and peace" (2 Bar. 78:2; cf. Gal. 6:16) appears to have influenced the usual Christian "grace and peace," which was itself probably formed from the Jewish greeting by the substitution of "grace" for "mercy." On "grace" see W. Zimmerli and H. Conzelmann, TDNT IX, 372-402; H.-H. Esser, NIDNTT II, 115-124; on "mercy" see R. Bultmann, TDNT II, 477-485; H.-H. Esser, NIDNTT II, 593-601; and on "peace" see G. von Rad and W. Foerster, TDNT II, 400-417; H. Beck and C. Brown, NIDNTT II, 776-783.

²⁵Only *εἰρήνη* recurs in 3 John 15, again as part of a greeting. For *χάρις* see John 1:14, 16f.; for *εἰρήνη* see John 14:27; 16:33; 20:19, 21, 26. It would seem that the use of the three terms here reflects accepted usage adopted by the writer.

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as God the Father and Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father. God is given the title which had taken on a new significance for Christians in the light of the revelation of Jesus as his Son; "father" was a word already used in the Old Testament and in Judaism to describe God, but only in Christianity was the thought of God's personal, loving relationship to the individual developed.²⁶ As the elder insists elsewhere, it is through the revelation of his Son that God is known as the Father, not merely of the Son but also of all believers; it follows that rejection of the Son means rejection of the way in which God has revealed himself to be the Father. To say "no" to God's way of revealing himself is to say "no" to God himself, for he will not let himself be known by men except on his own terms.²⁷ The elder, therefore, gladly used this fixed form of words which expressed so clearly his own thinking; it is one of the typical "binitarian" formulae which have come down from the early church and place the Father and the Son on the same level of reality.²⁸ But the elder draws out the meaning in his own characteristic way. His description of Jesus as "the Father's Son" makes explicit the significance of naming God as Father. He also writes that the blessings of the Father and Son will be with his readers "in truth and love." These words prepare the readers for the central theme of the letter in verses 4-11. Their immediate purpose is to indicate that the "conventional" blessings of "grace, mercy and peace" are accompanied by truth and love. The revelation of God in Jesus takes place in truth and love (cf. Jn. 1:14, 17) and its effect is to lead believers into truth and love; it is as Christians grow in truth and love that they go on to experience the fulness of God's blessing.²⁹ By these alterations in the conventional greeting, the elder has succeeded in repristinating its language for his readers so that its familiar words make a fresh and meaningful impact upon them. Today we perhaps need some way of giving fresh life to "truth" and "love," especially the latter of these two words.

²⁶See G. Quell and G. Schrenk, TDNT V, 945-1014; O. Hofius, NIDNTT I, 615-621; J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, Naperville/London, 1967.

²⁷1 John 2:23; 4:15; 5:10.

²⁸O. Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, London, 1949; V. H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, Grand Rapids/Leiden, 1963.

²⁹The precise linking of the phrase to the rest of the sentence is not clear. For the three possibilities suggested see Dodd, 147; Schnackenburg, 309; Stott, 204.