Introduction To John The Apostle

John was the brother of James the “Greater” (Matt. 4:21; 10:2; Mark 1:19; 3:17; 10:35). He was one, probably the younger, of the sons of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21) and Salome (Matt. 27:56; comp. Mark 15:40), and was born at Bethsaida in Galilee. His father was apparently a man of some wealth (comp. Mark 1:20; Luke 5:3-11; John 19:27). He was doubtless trained in all that constituted the ordinary education of Jewish youth. He, together with his father and brother, were fishermen on the Lake of Galilee. At some point, he gained a personal acquaintance with Caiaphas the high priest (John 18:16,19,28). When John the Baptist began his ministry in the wilderness of Judea, John, with many others, gathered round him, and was deeply influenced by his teaching. There he heard the announcement, “Behold the Lamb of God,” and then, on the invitation of Jesus, became a disciple and ranked among his followers (John 1:35-37) for a time. He and his brother then returned to their former vocation, for how long is uncertain. Jesus again called them (Matt. 4:21,22; Luke 5:1-11), and now they left all and permanently joined the company of his disciples. He became one of the innermost circle (Mark 5:37; Matt. 17:1; 26:37; Mark 13:3; Luke 9:28; Gal. 2:9), but he alone among the twelve carried the distinction of being the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20). In his character, we see love and gentleness manifested in his love and devotion to the Lord, but in zeal and intensity of character he was a “Boanerges” (Mark 3:17) probably on account of his energy and power in preaching the gospel, or of his vehement and rash zeal (Luke 9:51-56). His boldness is seen at the betrayal where he and Peter follow Christ afar off, while the others betake themselves to hasty flight (John 18:15 comp. Matt. 26:56; Mark 14:50). Also at the trial he follows Christ into the council chamber, to the praetorium (John 18:16,19,28) and on to the place of crucifixion (John 19:26,27). John and Peter are often found together, possibly because of their former acquaintance and common boldness (John 20:1-8; 21:1,7; Acts 3:1; 4:13; 8:14). John apparently remained in Jerusalem where he boldly proclaimed the gospel (Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-42) though he was imprisoned, scourged and threatened. He, together with James and Peter, held positions of leadership in the church there (Acts 15:4,6; Gal. 2:9). He was faithful to this position even during the persecution of which Saul of Tarsus was a part (Acts 8:1 / 9:26-27). His brother, James, is the first of the apostles to be martyred for the cause of Christ (Acts 12:1,2). John’s subsequent history is unrecorded in scripture. What we do know, we know by tradition and the testimony of historians. History relates that Jesus’ mother resided at John’s house until her death, about fifteen years after the crucifixion of Christ. History goes on to relate that after her death, John resided chiefly at Ephesus. Here he continued the work of spreading the gospel in Asia Minor for many years after the death of Paul lending his personal and apostolic influence to the work of the gospel there. History goes on to relate that in the persecution under Domitian he is taken to Rome, and there he is thrown into boiling oil which, by the intervention of God, had no power to hurt him. He is then sent to labor in the mines, and eventually exiled to the isle of Patmos (Rev. 1:9) where God gave him a revelation of Jesus Christ that was prophetic in nature speaking of “things which must shortly come to pass”. On the accession of Nerva, he was set at liberty, and returned to Ephesus, where he lived to a very great age so that he could scarcely go to the assembly of the church without being carried by his disciples. Being now unable to make long discourses, his custom was to say in all assemblies, “Little children, love one another;” and when they wondered at his frequent repetition of this concise exhortation, his answer was, “This is what the Lord commands you; and this, if you do it, is sufficient.” Chrysostom, Clement, and Eusebius relate that on his return from Patmos he found that a young man of promise under his charge had been misled, and had joined a band of robbers; and that the aged apostle sought him out in his mountain haunts, and by the blessing of God on his fearless and faithful love, reclaimed his soul from death. Heresies continued to show themselves, but he met them with the strongest possible protest. The very time of his death lies within the region of conjecture rather than of history.

Besides the gospel and the Revelation of Jesus Christ which bear his name, we have three epistles (letters) that he wrote. The first is a catholic or general letter, designed apparently to go with his gospel, and refute certain Gnostic errors as to the person of Christ; but also and chiefly to build up the church universal in truth and grace, and especially in holy love. The second epistle is addressed “to the elect lady,” or the excellent Kuria, who was probably some Christian woman eminent for piety and usefulness. The third is directed to Gaius, the Latin Caius, whom John praises for his fidelity and hospitality, and exhorts to persevere in every good work. The Revelation and epistles of John are the latest books of the New Testament cannon, which, as the last surviving apostle, he must have greatly aided in settling.

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Easton’s Bible Dictionary

The American Tract Society Dictionary

Smith’s Bible Dictionary

Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary

Albert Barnes’ NT Commentary