

The Importance of the Ecclesia at Ephesus

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Introduction

Understanding the situation in the ecclesia at Ephesus is crucial to understanding the context of many of the NT writings. At first glance the ecclesia at Ephesus only features in Acts 19 and in the Epistle to the Ephesians. Both writings are associated with the apostle Paul – Acts 19 (recorded by Luke) describes the situation that Paul encountered when he first arrived in Ephesus and the epistle addresses problems between Jews and gentiles at a later stage of development.

Was Paul the founder of the ecclesia at Ephesus or did he build on the foundations of others? Early church ‘tradition’ relates that the apostle John lived in Ephesus for some time; but is there any validity to this tradition, and did it occur before or after Paul’s visit/epistle? Many may question the usefulness of such an investigation; does it really matter? After all, the Bible does not tell us, therefore it is probably not important. However, by employing an intertextual method, this article hopes to show that John’s writings, and the Epistle to the Hebrews, were also addressed to the ecclesia at Ephesus. This is important because it throws new light on those writings and helps us better understand their first century context.

The following order of writing is proposed and will be tested against intertextual evidence:

- Fourth Gospel – author the apostle John
- Epistles of John – author the apostle John
- Acts 19 – author Luke
- Ephesians – author the apostle Paul
- Hebrews– author?

The hypothesis to be tested is that all these writings were directed to the ecclesia at Ephesus. The only writing that has not been included in this list is the warning to Ephesus from the book of Revelation. This has been deliberately omitted in order not to confuse the issue but evidence indicates that the author of Hebrews was aware of the warning given in Revelation.

Interpretive Keys

The very early ecclesia (pre-Pauline) at Ephesus was not a separate entity from the Jewish synagogue. Initially it would have contained large numbers of unconverted Jews, possibly a very few Jewish-Christians and a small number of gentiles that had

converted to Judaism. The status of John the Baptist at the ecclesia at Ephesus is an important interpretive key. Many of the Jews at Ephesus would have travelled to Jerusalem for the high-feast days (cf. Acts 2:5) and some would have been attracted to the preaching of John the Baptist. The powerful preaching of the Baptist concerning repentance and the coming judgment marked him as a prophet and many unconverted Jews would have readily accepted his prophetic credentials. There was then a growing movement at Ephesus that regarded John the Baptist as a prophet and some may even have speculated that he was the promised Messiah. Luke recounts (Acts 19:1-7) that Paul found ‘about twelve’ (i.e., the new Israel) disciples of John the Baptist, who had not heard about Jesus, but who had been baptised by John the Baptist. They had only received the baptism of repentance (v. 4). These disciples of the Baptist were re-immersed and received the Holy Spirit.¹

The preaching of John the Baptist may well have been controversial but it did not fall outside the remit of Judaism. It would have been perfectly acceptable for a law abiding and morally upright Jew in Ephesus to hold to the teachings of the Baptist without risking excommunication.²

The status of John the Baptist at Ephesus is an interpretive key because the Fourth Gospel is at pains to stress the superiority of Jesus’ ministry (John 3:30; “He must increase, but I *must* decrease”) and *Hebrews* emphasizes that for those who apostatize (i.e., go back to Judaism) it is impossible to renew them to repentance (Heb 6:6; “...if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance). In other words, those who received the baptism of repentance (the Baptist’s) in preparation for baptism into Christ (administered by Paul at Ephesus) could not go back to Judaism (deny Christ) and then hope to be re-immersed once again into John the Baptist’s baptism. Progression was irreversible – baptism by John (repentance) naturally led to baptism into Christ – the process could not go backwards (from Christ to John) but only forwards (from John to Christ).

¹ [Ed AP]: This assumes that the baptism of John was different to Christian baptism rather than Acts 19 being a baptism based on inadequate knowledge and this is a point of contention.

² J. Ashton remarks, “Certainly there came a stage in the history of the Johannine group when the status it accorded to Jesus began to be felt as intolerable by the parent community, who consequently decided to expel the Christian Jews from their midst. But if these claims had been associated with the charge of ditheism right from the beginning, the group would hardly have been allowed to remain the synagogue in the first place”, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 145.

The Gospel and the First Epistle of John

There is evidence that the Fourth Gospel (4G) and the Epistles of John were addressed to the same readers (Ephesus). Some scholars (and principally R. E. Brown) suggest that the 4G underwent two editions, with a second edition of the 4G (necessitated because John's arguments were being wrested by a group in Ephesus) being distributed with a 'covering letter' (the first epistle).

There is considerable debate concerning the sequence of these four documents [gospel and three epistles] ...but a consensus has emerged showing that they stem from the same community and, for many, they share the same author. Moreover, it is widely accepted that the problems addressed in the letters are reflected in the Fourth Gospel itself. A common compositional history argues that an early edition of the Fourth Gospel was followed by a theological crisis in the community. This crisis prompted a revision of the Gospel and the writing of 1 John. This explains, for instance, the parallels between the Gospel's prologue and that of 1 John, as well as parallels between 1 John and John 14-17, John's Farewell Discourse...Finally, 2 John and 3 John were penned to address a subsequent local problem.¹

G. M. Burge talks of 'revision' here but this is too strong a term to consider this hypothesis; we have no firm information here, so it is better to form the hypothesis in terms of the Gospel material coming out in stages and getting *added* to by John. Pursuing this hypothetical history, J. D. G. Dunn says,

At the same time, 1 John 1.1-3 may also give a clue to the Christological developments following the Fourth Gospel. In particular if R. E. Brown is correct, the secessionists from the Johannine community (2.19) based their understanding of Christ on the Fourth Gospel – a Christology which devalued the earthly life and ministry of Jesus (4.2-3); hence by way of response the stronger emphasis in 1.1-3 on the tangible historicity of the beginning of the gospel in the life and ministry of Jesus. In which case we can see how quickly the thought of Christ as the Son of God come down from heaven led in some minds to a devaluation of Jesus the man...²

¹ G. M. Burge, "John Letters of" in *The Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* (eds. Ralph P. Martin, Peter H. Davids; Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1997), 588.

² J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology on the Making* (London: SCM Press, 1980), 246.

Of course, such Christology as John presented in the Fourth Gospel lends itself to abuse and even in the first century a warning against Docetic¹ teachings was necessary - this came in the form of the First Epistle of John. However, it is not necessary to posit the existence of two editions of the 4G to note the striking affinity between the 4G and the first epistle, as both writings were dealing with the same problems.

To sum up the hypothesis: The situation had deteriorated to such an extent that many had 'broken-away' from the church at Ephesus to form a separate fellowship. The secessionists had a different view of the nature of Christ – for them Jesus did not really possess human nature, or he was not truly human. They refused to partake of the 'bread and wine' as this spoke of Jesus' humanity. They possibly thought of themselves as sinless (1 John 1:18), and (because they claimed the Spirit) as living a life similar to their Lord (who only 'seemed' human).

In any case, both the 4G and the epistle stress the command(s) of Christ, this is the command (cf. John 14:15, 21; 15:10, 14, 17; 1 John 2:3; 2:4; 3:22, 24; 5:2, 3) to partake of the 'bread and wine', which was known as the **love feast** (John 13:34; *agape*), and the command to be born of water and Spirit (John 3:5). Particularly in the epistle, the word 'love' should be understood within the matrix of the 'love-feast' from which all acts of charity, brotherly love, and truth should flow. For John, it was crucial to identify with Jesus' human nature because it was Jesus who had *overcome sin*. So, although Christ is *qualitatively* the same as us, his human nature is *quantitatively* different because he never sinned and therefore Jesus can encourage us to, 'drink his blood and eat his flesh' – that is, identify with his (crucified) human nature that had literally become *dead to sin*. The schismatics were loath to do this; hence, the Gospel records the reaction of some of Jesus' followers,

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard *this*, said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?"...From that *time* many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. John 6:56, 66

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. 1 John 2:19

John constantly stresses the necessity to identify with Christ's human nature and the only mechanisms for a Christian to do so is baptism (water) and the Eucharist

¹ Docetic views affirm that Jesus only *seemed* to have a physical body and to physically die, whereas in reality he was incorporeal, a pure spirit, and hence could not physically die.

(blood) coupled with the assurance of the Spirit. Peter is informed at the Last Supper that it is not enough to be baptised but his feet must also be constantly washed by Christ (John 13:8). John himself witnesses that Christ gushed ‘water *and* blood’ when he was pierced at the crucifixion (John 19:34). John testifies:

This is He who came by water and blood -- Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. 1 John 5:6-8 (NKJV revised with NIB)

Jesus was literally born of water and blood (born of a woman) by the power of the Spirit, more importantly his water baptism was assured by the Spirit (John 1:32-33), and the Spirit remained with him until he died at the crucifixion— in so doing Jesus poured forth *water and blood* and gave up the Spirit (John 19:30); essentially the suffering and travail of his death heralded a rebirth and Christ was ‘born from above’ – “You *are* My Son, Today I have begotten You” (Ps 2:7). For John, all believers must be “born from above” (John 3:7) and cannot inherit the kingdom unless their flesh and blood is identified (through water, Spirit and blood) with the crucified flesh of the Son of Man. Hence, this became for him the litmus test for true Christianity:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. 1 John 4:1-3; cf. 2 John v. 7

The ‘spirits’ (those who professed possession of the Spirit) could make claims in the name of the Spirit, but if those assertions were contrary to the confessional statement declaring (both positively and negatively) the humanity of Christ -- then that ‘spirit’ was in actuality a false ‘spirit’ (prophet) -- the ‘spirit’ of Antichrist.

Against this background, we can place the epistle to the Hebrews, which can be seen to pick up the same themes (addressed to the same readers?) and thus demonstrate awareness of the Johannine writings. For example, take Hebrews 2:

Hebrews 2		Reference	
v. 1	things we have heard	1 John 1 John 4 John 8	which we have heard (v. 1, 5) we ourselves have heard (4.42) I heard from God (8.40) you are not able to listen (8.43) you do not hear (8.47)
v. 11	For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified <i>are</i> all of one , for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren .	John 17 John 20	...that they also may be sanctified (v. 19) ...that they may be one (v. 11) go to My brethren (v. 17)
v. 13	whom God has given me	John 17	those whom You have given Me (vv. 6, 9, 11, 12, 24)
v. 14	Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood , He Himself likewise shared in the same...	1 John 4	By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God...
v. 15 v. 16	fear of death...subject to bondage ...seed of Abraham	John 8	We are Abraham's descendants , and have never been in bondage to anyone. (v. 33)
v. 17	to make propitiation for the sins	1 John 4	...sent His Son <i>to be</i> the propitiation for our sins. (v. 10)

If we step through Hebrews 2, the following correspondences with John's writings can be made:

(1) Hebrews 2 commences with the words, "things we have heard", which is almost a *leitmotif* in the Johannine writings. In contrast 'the Jews' are not able to listen and do not hear (a charge that is established in John 8).

(2) The testimony of Jesus' followers is confirmed by the 'signs and wonders' that they perform. The 4G holds out the same promise to Jesus' disciples; "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater *works* than these he will do, because I go to My Father" (John 14:12). However, it is the same gospel that stresses that John the Baptist "performed no sign" (John 10:41) and Jesus declared that he has, "a greater witness than John's; for

the works which the Father has given me to finish -- the very works that I do -- bear witness of me, that the Father has sent me” (John 5:36). The contrast is between the disciples of John the Baptist (who performed no sign) and the apostles of Jesus, such as Paul, who passed on the Holy Spirit to disciples of John the Baptist and performed ‘unusual’ miracles at Ephesus (Acts 19:6, 11). Thus, the gift of the Spirit and the re-baptism of John the Baptist’s disciples into the name of Jesus (Acts 19:5) confirm the superiority of Jesus’ ministry and the necessity for believers to be born of “water *and* Spirit” (John 3:5). Psalm 8 is referred to at this point (Heb 2:6-8) in order to establish the superiority of Jesus’ ministry and this Psalm is also echoed in the Pauline epistle to the Ephesians.

(3) The next verses in Hebrews 2 (vv. 11 and 13) allude to the prayer in John 17, and include key terms from the prayer, with a stress on **sanctity** (John 17:17, 19) and **unity** (John 17:22, 23), and a reminder that they are now all brethren of Jesus (cf. John 20:17), because they have been **given** (John 17:2, 6, 9, 11, 12, 24) to Jesus by the Father.

(4) Unity is emphasised because the church is threatened by schism (‘they went out from us’ in 1 John 2:19; ‘if they fall away’ in Heb 6:6) over the nature of Christ; ‘flesh and blood’ (Heb.2:14) ‘flesh’ (1 John 4:2). Both Hebrews and the epistle to the Ephesians employ the phrase ‘flesh and blood’ in a Passover context; namely that of the destroying angel on the Passover **night** (cf. John 13:27, 30) – the prince of this world has ‘nothing’ in Jesus (John 14:30) and the Ephesians (6:12) are reminded that their wrestling (like that of Jesus) is not just against human institutions but against the rulers of the **darkness** of this world who killed the firstborn on Passover night.¹

(5) Vv. 15 and 16 of Hebrews 2 stress the twin motifs of slavery (in Egypt/to sin) and descent from Abraham. In Genesis 15 Abraham is told that his descendants would be slaves in a foreign land (Egypt). They were rescued at Passover. It is no coincidence that in John 8:33 the Jews make a claim for descent from Abraham alongside the false declaration that they have never been in bondage to any man.

(6) In Heb 2:17, the verb ‘to make propitiation’ (NASB) links with the corresponding noun in 1 John 2:2, 4:10) which only occurs twice in the New Testament.

Conclusion

We have sketched an historical hypothesis about how the writings of John, Hebrews and the letter to the Ephesians have come about: (i) Ephesus was the recipient of John’s writings; (ii) the epistle to the Hebrews was addressed at a later stage to Jews

¹ On this see, P. Wyns, “Kosmokrator” *Cejbi* 5/2 (2011): 29-37.

at Ephesus; and (iii) Paul's epistle should be placed between John's writings and Hebrews.

Paul was especially interested in introducing the Gentiles to the 'hope of Israel', but the Jews at Ephesus already had problems accepting Christ as saviour and while some had 'split' the ecclesia by preaching a Docetic Christ, others reacted by clinging to John the Baptist's preaching. Paul's introduction of the Gentiles was the final straw and many went back to Judaism. However, it was not possible to renew them again to repentance (Heb 6:6; the repentance baptism of John the Baptist) as they had passed beyond this point when they 'put on Christ'. There was no turning back.