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Literature on First John

RON L. TYLER

The joy of study comes to one who spends the time and effort to discover what is in 1 John. At a time in which “new age” ideas are dominant and religion is viewed as totally personal, 1 John speaks to those with ears to hear and eyes to see.

TOPICS OF DISCOVERY

Authorship

The authorship of 1 John is anonymous and there is no scholarly consensus as to who the author might be. Proposed authors vary from John the Apostle (an ancient tradition), John the elder, a John of Jerusalem to a Johannine school as a community of disciples.

Dating

The dating of 1 John is likely in the 90s, with a few interpreters taking exception to this date. It is generally believed that 1, 2, 3 John and the Gospel of John appeared in the decade of the 90s, but the order of appearance is disputed.

Relationship to the Gospel

1 John’s relation to the Fourth Gospel remains controversial, with some scholars seeing specific passages in 1 John as directly relating to the Fourth Gospel, while others see little or no connection.

Textual problems

The few textual problems in 1 John (1.4; 2.20; 3.14; 5.6; and the “Johannine comma” in 5.7) are aptly summarized in the dictionary article by Robert Kysar and discussed in many commentaries.

Audience

Possibilities for the audience to which 1 John is addressed range from one specific church, such as that in Ephesus, to various groups in multiple churches.

Occasion for the writing

Scholars generally agree that the occasion for writing 1 John concerns an existing schism in which separatists have gone out from the fellowship of the church or groups to which 1 John is written. Specific details regarding the identity of those who left vary among interpreters, but it is clear that problems concerning Christ and his true incarnation, the reality of sin, and the necessity of love pervade the writing.

Purpose

Several purpose statements appear in 1 John: 1.4; 2.1; 2.12; 2.26; 4.2 and 5.13. Why these purposes? They appear to be refutations of false teachings (see 1.1-4; 2.3-4; 2.9; 2.19; 2.22; 2.26; 4.20). Scholars of 1 John

have long noted that the writing touches on matters that seem obviously related to what we know from late first and early second century thought, which was branded by Patristic writers as heretical—notably the teachings of the Cerinthians, the Gnostics, and the Ebionites. Accordingly, various scholars bring in one or more of these in their analysis of 1 John, often under the label of “proto-gnostic” or “early” Gnosticism.

Genre

There is much discussion concerning the genre or literary form of the writing. Is it a letter, a sermonic essay, a treatise, an epistle, a circular letter, a religious tract, an apologetic writing, an affirmation of ancient tradition or some other genre?

Structure and outline

The structure and outline of the writing, as with James, are notoriously difficult to determine. Options vary from simple to extremely complex. It is recommended that the student of 1 John read it several times and make his or her own outline based on the text. Donald G. Miller and Robert Law can be especially helpful in this regard.

Theology and themes

Regarding the theology and themes of the writing, there is much common ground among scholars. Reading the theological sections in the works that follow will reveal the following themes, among others: Christology, sin, love, ethics and life.

Implications for the church today

Discovering how the letter relates to the life of the church today is always the most difficult part of interpretation. The stress is upon faith in a true incarnation, the character of true love and the practical application of these in daily living. The student who wishes to learn the meaning of 1 John for today will be richly rewarded by doing serious study to discover the original meaning of the writing, with an eye on the particular group being addressed. One should avoid mere moralizing or strict legalism in any context.

Does all this lack of scholarly consensus leave us with a sense of frustration? It shouldn't, because underneath all the diversity of opinion is the exciting text of 1 John itself. The serious student can use the readings below as selective “dialogue partners” in study. One who delights in this pursuit will be stimulated to further reflections. What we find in our study of 1 John is preserved that we might have hope.

DICTIONARY ARTICLES

G. M. Burge in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, 1997, 587-599, gives current orientation to modern issues. Couple this article with Robert Kysar's entry in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3, 1992, 900-912, and you are well served with an orientation to 1 John. David Rensberger, “John, Letters of,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 2000, edited by David Freedman, 725-726, digests a lifetime of study. I. H. Marshall's “John, Epistles of,” Volume Two, 1982 in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition*, edited by G. Bromiley, is a lengthy but good introduction. Robert Law, “John, Epistles of” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1939, has a convincing analysis of the structure of 1 John.

THEOLOGICAL WORDBOOKS

Among the choices available, *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, 1950, edited by Alan Richardson, remains essential – evidenced in that it has never gone out of print. J. J. von Allmen edited *A Companion to the Bible*, 1958, which has fewer, but longer, articles than in Richardson. William Barclay, *New Testament*

Words, 1974, is outstanding and includes an index to Barclay's *The Daily Study Bible*. Donald Gowan edited *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, 2003. Colin Brown edited *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* in four volumes, with the fourth containing a thorough index volume. Ministers and teachers would do well to have access to these theological wordbooks.

STUDY BIBLES

There are many excellent study Bibles that have brief introductions and notes. These can be very useful to anyone wanting to teach or preach a series on 1 John. I strongly recommend Donald G. Miller's notes, based on the RSV, and his outline of topics for 1 John in the early edition of *The Oxford Annotated Bible for Students*, 1962. He has clearly delineated the content units for a serious study or sermon series. (Miller also wrote the introductions and notes on John, 2 John and 3 John.) Robert Kysar, a competent Johannine scholar, wrote the introduction and notes for 1 John in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 2003.

SPECIAL STUDIES

Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Lives, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times*, 1979, is an excellent resource who has had a lasting impact on Johannine studies. Brown sees many groups behind the letter, as he did with his earlier work on the Fourth Gospel. He came to be more certain of these groups with his final writings. His views are set forth in chapter 12 of his outstanding *Introduction to the New Testament*, 1996. Judith Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, 1991, is an excellent study of the themes and deserves a careful reading. H. De Jonge, *A Translator's Handbook on the Letters of John*, 1972, United Bible Societies, provides a basis for a commentary. C. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 1993, 734-746 is helpful on the setting of 1 John, with brief commentary on various passages. In *The Quest for the Messiah: The History, Literature and Theology of the Johannine Community*, 1993, J. Painter well fulfills the promise of the title. Suzanne de Dietrich, *This We Know: A Study of the Letters of John*, 1963, is a brief study of 60 rich pages for the teacher/preacher. I. H. Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 2004, 532-547, covers the theology of 1 John admirably. Carl Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, 2005, 519-532, plus the additional information on the accompanying CD-Rom, is highly commended.

Introductions in commentaries give further information, as do advanced introductions to the New Testament such as Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament in The Anchor Bible Reference Library*, 1997. One of the best short introductions to 1 John is A. M. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament, Third Revised Edition*, 1972, 178-182. Thankfully, Hunter has left us many books, written in a popular manner that makes his writings accessible to most audiences.

On how the *Dead Sea Scrolls* influenced Johannine studies, read Raymond Brown, "John, Gospel and Letters of," in the *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 1, 414-417, 2000, edited by L. Schiffman and J. VanderKam.

The Internet can be a rich source of information if carefully used. Generally if the address has *edu* at the end, it may be appropriately consulted. There are various scholars who teach Johannine studies and who maintain Web sites.

MAJOR COMMENTARIES ON THE GREEK TEXT

Commentaries are difficult to recommend to people without knowing the need being addressed, a person's educational level, the time one has for study, the length of the study, and numerous other issues. A preacher or teacher planning several weeks of study on 1 John would have a different need than someone doing just one or two classes. Don't reject Greek text commentaries – the English wording is often provided with the verse that concerns you. The following selections are recommended.

B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 1883, remains of value. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 1984, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, sees two groups of opponents in 1 John, one denying that Jesus is divine and one denying his humanity. He struggles to see to what extent Gnostic ideas were present. His studies on Christology are striking. He also provides good bibliographies. A. E. Brooke, 1912, in *The International Critical Commentary*, is still useful on the details of the Greek text and matters of textual criticism, although much of his contribution has been included in later works. G. Strecker, *The Johannine Epistles, Hermeneia*, 1996, replaced the study by R. Bultmann. Strecker dates the Johannine Epistles in the second century (definitely a minority opinion today considering papyri finds). He gives many helpful critical notes, exegetical observations, footnotes and bibliographical materials. Strecker affirms that 1 John was written after the second and third Epistles. R. Bultmann's work in *Hermeneia*, 1973, is not up to the quality of his commentary on the Fourth Gospel but contains some relevant theological observations.

MAJOR ENGLISH COMMENTARIES

Raymond Brown, *The Anchor Bible*, 1982, is a mega-commentary of 812 pages of critical analysis, theological and historical studies and 146 pages of introduction. This work moved commentary writing to a new level. Brown is certain that his study of the groups in the community of 1 John is correct. He sees many things in 1 John that relate to the Fourth Gospel and leaves no stone unturned while arguing that the conflict in the community being addressed was over Johannine tradition. R. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 1992, is a translation from the German. Schnackenburg carefully examines the theological and historical aspects of 1 John, with a detailed exegesis that includes several outstanding excursuses. I rank him as a first choice.

OTHER ENGLISH COMMENTARIES

Two clearly written books by David Rensberger are most helpful: *1 John, 2 John, 3 John* in the Abingdon *New Testament Commentaries*, 1997, and his later and smaller work, *The Epistles of John* in the *Westminster Bible Companion*, 2001. Both works are essential resources. Colin Kruse, *Pillar New Testament Commentary*, 2000, is a solid study by a scholar who knows the original literature but popularizes it in a clear manner. I. H. Marshall, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 1998, introduces the work of others in a useful way while giving his own theological insights. J. Stott, *The Tyndale Commentary*, revised 1988, has a pastoral sensitivity. It is one of the best in that older series and its reprinting indicates its value to many. Robert Law, *The Tests of Life*, 1909, is an often overlooked devotional study of the structure of 1 John. Law sees the writing as a pertinent series of tests for wandering preachers so the church can discern truth from error. G. G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal*, 1909, is worth checking. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 1970, is solid, traditional scholarship in verse-by-verse format. W. Barclay's *The Letters of John and Jude*, 1958, is filled with historical and philological information. R. Alan Culpepper, 1985, in the *Knox Preaching Guides*, provides one of the most useful in that series. J. W. Roberts, *The Letters of John*, 1968, is outstanding for his explanations of the words of the text. (In a private conversation, Roberts said that Schnackenburg was the most helpful author to him in the writing of his own commentary.) C. Black in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, XII, 1998, is excellent for students and preachers. The older work by C. H. Dodd, *The Moffatt New Testament Commentary*, 1946, is still worth reading, as he interprets 1 John in light of the Hellenistic setting. Despite his criticism of the author of 1 John, Dodd says some things that still need to be heard. R. Kysar, *Augsburg New Testament Commentary*, 1986, is competent but not as complete as one might wish from such a Johannine expert. G. Burge in his work, *The Epistles of John*, 1996, seeks for contemporary applications. J. L. Houlden, *Harper's New Testament Commentaries*, 1973, sees a church shattered by controversy over the humanity of Jesus, forming early views of orthodoxy and heresy. PHEME PERKINS, *New Testament Message*, 1984, gives us one of the best studies for beginners. She believes atonement and sin are at the heart of the letter. R. E. O. White, *Open Letter to Evangelicals*:

A Devotional and Homiletical Commentary on the First Epistle of John, 1964, has been helpful to many. G. Lewis' *Epworth Preacher's Commentaries*, 1961, is outstanding for teachers and preachers with twenty-seven pertinent "notes." T. Johnson's *New International Bible Commentary*, 1993, is brief and targeted to beginners. Marianne Meye Thompson, *InterVarsity Press New Testament Commentary*, 1992, also writes for the beginning student. Ruth Edwards, 1996, has contributed the volume in *New Testament Guides* from Sheffield, which is filled with useful information. Gerald Bray, 2000, covers Patristic comments in the new series, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament*. Here you will find the ancient traditions regarding how the early church writers read 1 John. Thomas Olbricht's study of 1 John for the Pepperdine lectures, *Life Together: The Heart of Love and Fellowship in I John*, 2006, has his usual warmth and scholarship.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As you begin a serious study of 1 John, I recommend that you read Kysar's dictionary article first and then the two works by Rensberger, along with Schnackenburg's commentary. Beyond those suggestions, enjoy studying from the broad range of available sources, remembering that what is preserved for us in scripture is for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope (Rom 15.4).

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