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Literature on First John

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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

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**


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**


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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