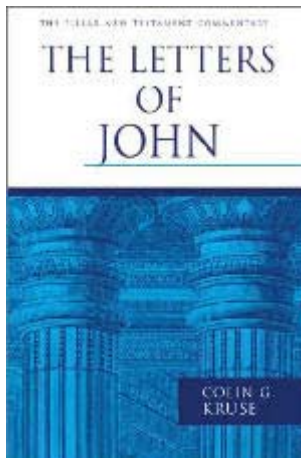


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Kruse, Colin G.

The Letters of John

The Pillar New Testament Commentary

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This recent addition to the Pillar New Testament Commentary series is consistent with that series in that it is scholarly but not overly technical, while engaging questions of the relevance of the New Testament texts for contemporary readers.

In an introductory chapter, Kruse constructs a "working hypothesis" for the historical origins of the Johannine letters, which he understands to be closely linked to the Fourth Gospel. Kruse's position is that an early form of the latter text was produced by the Beloved Disciple, who was an eyewitness to most of the events described in the story. Thus the Gospel of John is primarily about the conflict between Jesus and some of his Jewish contemporaries. At "a secondary level, the way the story of Jesus is written may reflect something of the experience of the Christian community of which the Beloved Disciple was a member when he wrote his Gospel" (2). After this early version of the Gospel was completed, great division arose within the community, centered primarily upon the person and work of Christ, and the Johannine letters addressed this schism in different ways. Either during the writing of these letters, or directly thereafter, the Beloved Disciple died, and members of the community revised the Fourth Gospel into its present form.

The "working hypothesis" also includes the notion that because of the similarities in language, style, and content between 1 John and 2 John, and between 2 John and 3 John, respectively, these three letters were all quite possibly (Kruse is not definite on this issue) written by the same person, the "elder." This elder may well have been the Beloved

Disciple, John, who was a follower of Jesus and, as mentioned earlier, the author of an early version of the Gospel. But although the letters and the Gospel may have been written by the same individual, they do not all address the same situations. Because of this shift in historical contexts, words shared by the Gospel and the letters cannot be assumed to mean the same things all of the time (although Kruse often uses the Gospel as a major comparative text for the letters). For example, *paraklētos* refers to the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John, while in the letters, Kruse argues, it denotes Jesus, who is the advocate to the Father on behalf of the believers who sin. In the letters, this *paraklētos* serves as part of the author's argument about sin that is in contrast to that of the secessionists.

Kruse suggests that 1 John was a circular letter written to discredit the teachings of the secessionist faction and thus to prevent the believers from being deceived by these heretics. Kruse infers the schismatics' teachings from 1 John itself, arguing, as many do, that they de-emphasized the incarnation and the atoning sacrifice of Christ's death, as well as the command to love one another. Kruse finds the closest parallels to this breakaway group in the docetic opponents of Ignatius, but in the end he agrees with Schnackenburg, who finds no definite counterpart to the heretics in 1 and 2 John or in any other group of that era.

In contrast to the circular nature of 1 John, 2 John was written to an individual house church and its members (the "chosen lady and her children") to warn the church of the deceivers and, secondly, to remind them to love one another. If both 1 and 2 John emerged from the same author, then 2 John may have been written after the circular had been sent, to warn an individual church of the approach of the secessionists. If 2 John was written by an "elder" who is not identical to the author of 1 John, then, Kruse says, the author was addressing the same type of situation and was knowledgeable of both 1 John and the Gospel. Finally, 3 John was written to the individual Gaius with a threefold purpose: (1) to encourage Gaius to continue providing hospitality to itinerant Christian missionaries; (2) to note the unacceptable behavior of Diotrephes; and (3) to commend Demetrius.

This commentary is lucidly written, engages a wide range of recent scholarship on the Johannine letters, and offers excurses on a variety of themes, such as the notion of sinless perfectionism, the antichrist, eternal life, and hospitality. Kruse examines the letters within their ancient literary and historical contexts, but he does not delve deeply into their rhetorical structures. Kruse justifies this latter point with regard to 1 John by claiming that there is no developing argument in that letter. He thus analyzes the text "in terms of what appear to be its natural divisions" (32). These natural divisions could be further discussed throughout the commentary. In keeping with the aims of the series, Kruse does address issues of contemporary theological concern that the texts raise, but minimally. However, this is a commentary that those working on the Johannine letters should

review, and it will appeal to pastors and laypeople, especially those within evangelical traditions.