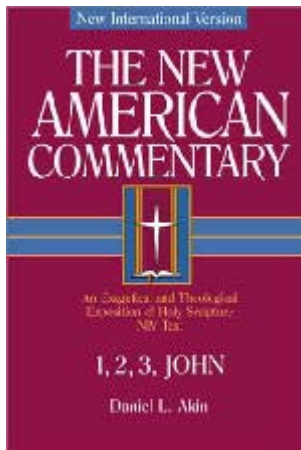


RBL 10/2002



Akin, Daniel L.

1,2,3 John: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture

The New American Commentary 38

Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001. Pp. 296, Cloth, No Price Available, ISBN 0805401385.

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This commentary on the Johannine epistles is part of a series, based on the New International Version, published for Southern Baptists and other evangelicals. Its author, Daniel L. Akin, is the Dean of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. As the general editors of the series state, all of the authors of volumes in the NAC series “affirm the divine inspiration, inerrancy, complete truthfulness, and full authority of the Bible,” and the theological perspective of the commentaries is “unapologetically confessional and rooted in the evangelical tradition” (p. 7). They seek to combine conservative biblical scholarship with an attention to the preaching and teaching needs of pastors and churches. Akin’s commentary on 1-3 John is a good example of these guiding principles and their inherent strengths and limitations.

In the Introduction to 1 John, which the table of contents mistakenly lists as an introduction to all three epistles (each letter actually has its own separate introduction), Akin affirms, without substantial discussion of the alternatives and problems, apostolic authorship of the three Johannine letters. He reads the prologue to 1 John (1:1-4) as requiring an eyewitness author and thinks that other views are unwarranted skepticism. Contrary to most readers of these letters, Akin sees the Elder as a dogmatically authoritative writer, consistent with his being the apostle John, one of the “sons of thunder,” who also wrote the Fourth Gospel. The letters of John are written after the Gospel, from Ephesus, toward the end of the first century, and they intend to correct a Christological misinterpretation of the Fourth Gospel.

Akin describes the occasion of 1 John as a crisis of false teaching and prefers to call the Elder’s opponents “heretics.” They have left “the Christian community” (p. 29) and have continued to spread their false teaching to other Johannine churches, sending

out the itinerant missionaries mentioned in 2 John. Thus, the first epistle has two principal purposes: “to combat the propaganda of the false teachers” (p. 29) -- which is doctrinal, moral, and social -- and “to reassure believers” (p. 30). Akin states that “First John shows that humanity can be divided into two groups – the children of God and the children of the devil (3:10)” and that “no other classification is possible” (p. 31). The Elder’s four explanations of why he is writing 1 John (1:4; 2:1; 2:26; and 5:13) are taken to be four statements of purpose for 1 John as a whole, but the main one, Akin believes, is 1 John 5:13 (“that you may know that you have eternal life”), which directly correlates with the Fourth Gospel’s statement of purpose in John 20:31.

The theology of the Johannine epistles (pp. 32-36) is described under the headings of six doctrines (God, Sin, Christ, Holy Spirit, Salvation, and Eschatology). God is light and love. “The devil is source of sin” (p. 33). Under Christology, Akin makes a list of all the titles or statements about Christ in 1 John. He does not treat the epistle’s *distinctive* presentation of the Spirit but summarizes that the Spirit “is a person who is distinct from the Father and the Son and yet clearly has equal status with them” (p. 34), a Trinitarian concern foreign to 1 John. Salvation is “believing and receiving the Son,” being born again, becoming a child of God, and receiving eternal life (pp. 34-35). John lived in imminent expectation of the Antichrist and the parousia, and he expected the resurrection, judgment, and eternal life. In summary, Akin states “John believes our faith in the Son of God must be orthodox” (p. 36). Akin is aware of various scholarly treatments of Johannine theology (n. 47, p. 36), but he makes little use of them. It is evident in this section that contemporary, evangelical theological interests override the distinctive theological voice of the epistle itself.

In a long section, out of proportion to the treatment of other subjects in the introduction, Akin considers “the structure and form of 1 John” (pp. 37-47). Several pages are consumed unprofitably with the listing of the outlines of other scholars. Akin’s own division of the first epistle divides it into two sections after the prologue (1:1-4) and before the conclusion (5:13-21). The first section (1:5-3:10) focuses on God as Light and the second (3:11-5:12) on God as Love, even though, as Akin acknowledges (p. 153), there is no real break between 3:10 and 3:11 (a verse that supplies a reason for the statement in 3:10), and even though the themes of love and light (or holiness) are treated in both sections of the letter.

The exposition section of the commentary is a significant improvement over the introduction. Akin handles the task of interpretation conservatively and with care. His introduction and use of the Greek text is judicious, keeping in mind the general reader of this series. When Greek is cited in the main body, it is transliterated; when it is cited in the extensive footnotes (notes that make frequent use of nearly every evangelical commentary ever written on the Johannine epistles – and a few others), it is left untransliterated. Akin makes exposition his main task, faithfully following the line of thought in the text of the epistles.

Larger issues are treated in a set of excurses and appendices on: “‘Light’ in the Gospel of John” (pp. 64-68), “‘Light’ in 1 John” (pp. 69-71), “Johannine Comma” (198-200), “Propitiation or Expiation: The Debate Over *Hilaskomai*” (pp. 253-265, which

summarizes C. H. Dodd's and Leon Morris' work and sides with the latter affirming that propitiation is the correct rendering of the Greek, that it emphasizes the personal anger of God against sin, that it includes expiation, and that those who disagree have a defective view of Scripture, p. 256), "The Origin and Theology of the Term 'Antichrist' in the Epistles of John" (pp. 267-70, a helpful and balanced discussion), "Welcoming False Teachers into Your Home" (pp. 271-72, which turns into advice on how to treat members of a cult who come to your door), and "Homiletical Outlines for the Epistles of John" (pp. 273-80, which are not, for the most part, models of the helpful exegesis Akin provides in the body of the commentary).

The interpretation of 2-3 John is fairly thorough (pp. 217-52). There is good summary of the meaning of the term "chosen lady" (p. 220), an excellent set of comparisons between 2 and 3 John on pp. 235-237, and a sociologically sensitive understanding of hospitality in 2-3 John (pp. 242-45). The issue of "eternal security" is discussed in 2 John (p. 222), as were other matters of interest to Calvinists in 1 John (see, e.g., pp. 85, 116, 210). Akin affirms that *how* passages are understood "will be influenced by the theological commitments one brings to the text" (p. 231). Akin does not accept that "some of your children" (2 John 4) is veiled a reference to the schism in the community (p. 225). He sees the Elder's opponents as licentious Docetists of the Cerinthian type (pp. 121-22, 141, 173, 229). He acknowledges the problem of the Elder's "harsh and uncompromising" language (p. 230) about the opponents but does not deal with this as in tension with his teaching on love (1 John 4:20-21). Nor is the Elder's apparently weak response to the challenge of Diotrephes allowed to challenge the standing of the author as an apostle (3 John 10).

A selected bibliography of just over a hundred works on the Johannine epistles, and brief subject, person, and Scripture indexes complete this volume. Akin's work is a substantial commentary that will be of use mainly for those readers who find themselves firmly committed to an evangelical theological perspective, conservative exegetical conclusions, and an expositional approach to the text.