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Strecker, Georg
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The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John

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Hermeneia

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The late George Strecker's Meyer (KEK) Commentary on the Johannine Letters (1989) has now appeared in English translation. Like its predecessor in that series, Rudolf Bultmann's commentary (1967; ET 1973), it becomes the Hermeneia Commentary on these three letters. Strecker's work is more than twice as long as Bultmann's and is a fuller, richer commentary. In its demonstrations of genuine erudition and technical competence it is a worthy successor in the tradition of the *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar*. Strecker's chief discussion partners, aside from Bultmann, are, appropriately, R. Brown and R. Schnackenburg; and there are frequent references to other twentieth-century commentators such as C. H. Dodd, S. Smalley, A. E. Brooke, and H. Windisch.

Strecker expresses great respect for Bultmann, who was one of his first teachers of New Testament (p. xiii; but not his *Doktorvater* as the editorial note on p. vi erroneously indicates), and refers frequently to his commentary. Yet he disagrees on major issues of criticism and interpretation. For example, he frequently indicates his disagreement with Bultmann's source and redaction theories, which parallel the latter's proposals about the Gospel of John (e.g., pp. 6-7, 39). Few exegetes have actually agreed with Bultmann in this matter; so Strecker's demurral is scarcely original, although I think it entirely warranted. Moreover, Strecker is also wisely reluctant to embrace a pre-Christian gnosticism as an important component of the milieu of the Johannine literature despite the antidocetic position of 1 John (pp. 26-27). The Letters' and the Gospel's sacramentalism and apocalypticism, which Bultmann sloughed off upon later

ecclesiastical redaction, Strecker regards as quite important and original in both (p. 234, n. 7). In fact, apocalyptic eschatology was of fundamental importance at the beginning of the Johannine school. Sacramentalism was an important element in the opposition to docetic Christians, who as Ignatius testifies, tied their deficient Christology to neglect of the Lord's Supper.

In his depiction of the development of the Johannine school, Strecker again departs from Bultmann who, with most commentators, takes the Letters to be later than, and dependent upon, the Fourth Gospel. Rather, Strecker argues that 1 John and the Gospel are independent, presumably more or less contemporary, expressions of the Johannine school. In his view, the shorter letters, 2 and 3 John, are earlier. In fact, the earliest document of this school is 2 John, which according to Strecker was written at about the end of the first century by the same Elder John who is mentioned by Papias. The same author wrote 3 John soon thereafter. (The Gospel and 1 John are then dated, rather generally, in the first half of the second century.) That Papias was a chiliast supports the position that the Elder John was as well. This in turn fits and supports Strecker's interpretation of what is for him the crucial statement of 2 John 7 about Jesus' coming in the flesh (first put forward in his article "Die Anfänge der johanneischen Schule," *NTS* 32 [1986] 31-47).

The present participle *erchomenon* must, Strecker contends (pp. 233-34), have a present or future meaning; it cannot be translated "has come." By way of contrast, the similar statement of 1 John 4:2, which insists on the confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, has the perfect participle. Strecker argues that 2 John 7, unlike 1 John 4:2, should be construed as pointing to the future coming of Jesus, his *parousia*, not his incarnation. The more obvious present construal could refer to denial of Jesus' sacramental presence in the Eucharist. Strecker rejects this possibility, however, because unlike 1 John, 2 John contains "no indication of a conflict over the interpretation of the sacraments" (p. 234). (One might object, of course, that 2 John is so brief that it is extremely hazardous to mount an argument on the basis of what these thirteen verses do *not* contain.) The Elder denounces those who deny that Jesus Christ will (at his *parousia*) return in the flesh. By the time 1 John and the Gospel were written this chiliastic apocalyptic eschatology had attenuated. But Strecker finds evidence of its existence in Revelation, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, and especially the *Epistle of Barnabas* 6:9, which speaks explicitly of Jesus' "coming manifestation in the flesh." He specifically rejects Bultmann's reference to John 3:31; 6:14; and 11:27 as instances of the use of the present participle of *erchomenos* to refer to the coming of Jesus in a general (including past) sense.

Strecker's grammatically plausible argument for the translation of the present participle as future is made to bear a tremendous weight in his reconstruction of the history of the Johannine school, of which 2 John is said to be the earliest representative. In fact, apart

from Strecker's interpretation of v. 7, there is little unambiguous evidence of the existence of (apocalyptic) eschatological issues in 2 John (and 3 John). In 1 John and especially the Gospel, where such issues do appear, they are the subject of reinterpretation. One can think, as Strecker does, that the eschatological thought of the Elder John was more primitive, since 2 and 3 John are earlier; but that seems to beg the question, since both the eschatology and the chronological position of those letters are subject to doubt.

In effect, Strecker stands Raymond Brown's (*The Community of the Beloved Disciple, The Epistles of John*) history and chronology of the Johannine literature on its head, inasmuch as Brown sees the Letters as presuming the Gospel of John or something much like it, while 2 and 3 John follow 1 John. On Brown's terms much of what we read in the Letters thus becomes intelligible (e.g., 1 John 1:1-3; cf. John 1:1-18), as the Gospel provides a much needed context for reading them. Strecker's beginning point, on the other hand, is the corpus of these two briefest of letters, which contain at most a minuscule fragment of what their author evidently thought. His apocalyptic eschatology must therefore be inferred on the basis of the slimmest of evidence drawn from these and other documents. While this state of affairs may not justify the inference that Brown is clearly correct and Strecker wrong, it is fair, and safe, to say that a majority of exegetes will go on following Brown's approach, or something like it, because it is more satisfying hermeneutically and gives fewer hostages to fortune.

Among the strengths of this commentary are the many valuable excurses, which cover a wide range of relevant topics, for example: the docetic false teachers in 1 John (pp. 69-76); "love" (*agap/h*), pp. 144-48); the Comma Johanneum of 1 John 5:7-8 (pp. 188-91); second repentance (pp. 203-8); the Antichrist (pp. 236-41); and early Catholicism (pp. 244-49). There are also extremely useful bibliographies and bibliographical footnotes.