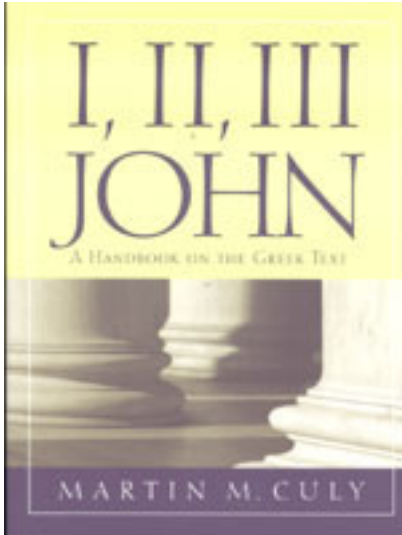


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Culy, Martin M.

I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text

Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2004. Pp. xxiv + 175. Paper. \$19.95. ISBN 1932792082.

Jan van der Watt
University of Pretoria
Pretoria, South Africa

This book on 1, 2, and 3 John was written with the purpose of providing a “reliable guide through the intricacies of the biblical text and occasionally shed fresh light on how the Greek language works” (vii). The book starts with a rather brief introduction (xi–xxiv) in which the reader is informed about the purpose and approach taken. The reader is warned not to expect an “endeavor to label exhaustively every feature of the syntax” or a discussion of “every textual problem” or analyses of “all lexical forms.” However, an attempt is made to “address all significant questions arising from the Greek text itself.” Since more complex issues related to the Greek syntax are often ignored by the standard commentaries, this book tries to fill that particular gap in the available literature. However, the book is written both for people with just a basic knowledge of the Greek language as well as for the more advanced scholar.

Since the focus falls on the linguistic characteristics of the text of the Letters, questions of introduction (e.g., author, date) are not discussed; neither is the theological meaning of the text explored. The introduction does, however, offer discussions on the genre and structure of the relevant text, tense, aspect, and mood, mitigated exhortations, deponency, syntactic categories and labels, and Trinitarian ambiguity. These discussions are brief and by no means comprehensive or exhaustive. Some of the most recent discussions on aspect and mood are, for instance, reflected, but the discussion only reflects a part of the particular debate. The presentations of these relevant issues give the impression of

selective and partial treatment. This brings me to a question rather than to a point of criticism. Is it enough to assume that a reader with a “basic Greek knowledge” will adequately find her or his way through the grammatical, linguistic, and syntactical remarks, picking up and understanding the presuppositions and points of departure that are employed in the book? If not, the user-friendliness of the book will be jeopardized. On the other hand, it could be asked whether providing more guidance in the introduction would not amount to a sort of “basic grammar,” something that could easily be found elsewhere and that is evidently not the purpose of this book. After working through the book, my inclination is that what was offered in the introduction is not adequate or structured enough. There is also a lack of—but by no means no—proper integration of the introductory material with the body of the book. The reader is indeed referred to issues mentioned in the introduction, but a higher level of engagement and integration between the introductory material and the relevant issues in the text would have increased the value of the book.

The introduction also states that the intention is not to engage with secondary literature except in exceptional or significant cases. However, there is indeed some engagement with secondary literature in the discussions. In some cases it amounts to a casual reference or remark, while in other cases the views of others are discussed in some detail. The latter is especially interesting, but such discussions are few and far between.

The Greek text of 1–3 John is systematically analyzed and discussed in the book. The way in which the text is discussed varies. In some cases just a brief remark (e.g., “genitive of relationship”) is made, while in other cases longer discussions are given dealing with a variety of issues, such as parsing of words, textual criticism, occurrences in the rest of the New Testament, more detailed grammatical debates (sometimes reflecting opinions found in secondary literature), theological interpretation, rhetorical aspects, and so forth.

Both the relevant Greek text as well as an English translation is given before an analysis of the text itself starts. The discussions on the Greek language are, generally speaking, accurate and always present a probable explanation. Every Greek scholar would recognize that Greek is not a “mathematically precise language,” and in many cases it becomes difficult to determine the exact function of the grammatical and linguistic features such as a genitive or why a perfect was used. Apart from that, the analytical categories used (e.g., “genitive of...”) are also a matter of continuous debate and difference of opinion. Within these limitations and confines, about which Culy could do very little in a book of this type, he guided the reader responsibly through the Greek text. Here and there a little more evidence for his opinion would have helped the reader to gain greater clarity.

It is a pity that Culy does not always distinguish between the exact contribution that the grammatical material makes over and against the theological or even contextual information. This relates to the question of what a word or a grammatical feature contributes and what is part of the context and not necessarily of the word or grammar. In a handbook of this nature, which focuses on grammar, these distinctions should be respected, for the simple reason that it is important to distinguish between the contribution of specifically the grammar and other sources of information in a book claiming to focus on the Greek text, as this book does. Obviously, all the information will be interrelated in the end to result in a comprehensive understanding of the text, but in this process exegetes must be crystal clear how and from where they got their information.

Let me give some examples. On page 2 the phrase ἀπ' ἀρχῆς is discussed. The question is whether it refers to preexistence on the basis of thematic or linguistic links with John 1:1 or to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Is this a grammatical or a theological issue? The use of the neuter relative pronouns (ὅ) in the first few verses of the letter is mentioned (2), but the grammar is not discussed in much detail. Why is the neuter used when the reference is to a person? The reason given, namely, that it refers to the "eyewitnesses' broad experience of the incarnate Jesus," does not solve the grammatical problem. Consulting secondary literature on this issue would have opened up a series of other possibilities more directly related to the grammatical problem. The same applies to, for instance, the discussion of sin on page 73. Is what we have there really a grammatical discussion? On the other hand, the discussion of καί on pages 5–6 or ἐάν on page 14 is, for instance, much more accurate and detailed in regards to the above critique.

Reading this book while translating the text of 1–3 John or while analyzing the text in depth will most certainly be worthwhile. It sensitizes the reader to the intricacies of the Greek language and reminds her or him of the invaluable contribution that a knowledge of Greek can make to the proper understanding of the text.

In conclusion, I think Culy provides us with a handbook that will be welcomed by many students of the Letters of John. I am especially positive about the fact that the book is written in such a way that inexperienced Greek students who might consider bypassing the analysis of the Greek text now have a handbook that will help them to conquer their fear, hopefully giving them the necessary confidence to integrate the analysis of the Greek language with their exegetical activities, leading to a responsible understanding of the Letters of John.