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I, II, & III John



Lieu, Judith

I, II, and III John: A Commentary

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This major commentary adds to the author's already impressive list of publications on the Johannine Epistles. The earlier writings include two important books: *The Second and Third Epistles of John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986); and *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). The title of the first of these does not adequately indicate the extent to which it takes account of the Gospel and first Epistle while maintaining a clear focus on the smaller works, 2 and 3 John. The present commentary, entitled *I, II, and III John*, builds constructively on the foundation of the earlier studies. This title sidesteps the issue of whether the texts for commentary are letters, epistles, a mixture of the two, or something else. However, the previous volumes each used *Epistles* in their titles, and Lieu soon makes clear that a sharp distinction between letters and epistles is not helpful in this case and happily uses both categories at times in the commentary. It is likely that the title was the choice of the series editors. In its title and in much of its interpretative work, I am glad to find agreement with my *Sacra Pagina* commentary of 2002. I hasten to add that I would not wish to suggest that the present work should be judged in terms of its agreement with mine.

What marks the distinctive contribution of this commentary is the insistence that the anonymity of authors is a studied rhetorical strategy. Certainly 1 John is anonymous,

though the voice of the author is heard throughout, speaking in the first person, sometimes using the plural “we” and at others “I.” The “we” also becomes inclusive of the readers, but this is distinguishable, at times with difficulty, from the authoritative voice of the witness of the tradition bearers. Lieu argues that the anonymity of voice focuses attention on the tradition rather than on an authoritative tradition bearer, diminishing the authority implied by the use of the title “Elder” in 2 and 3 John. While I can see how this argument might work with the anonymity of 1 John, it seems to fail when applied to 2 and 3 John. Surely the Elder, though unknown to us, implies his knowledge of those to whom he writes, especially in 3 John, and their knowledge of him. If that is the case, is anonymity an integral rhetorical tool in 2 and 3 John? I am inclined to think that the author of 1 John was also known to his readers. This is less clearly the case, though the author writes with a familiarity that implies mutual knowledge. Other evidence, noted by Lieu in relation to reception history, might also support this view.

Lieu’s approach is to read each epistle as far as possible in terms of its own world of thought without recourse to external factors such as hypotheses of author, audience, or historical situations, based on external evidence. While the consequences are similar to some literary approaches for which the reader constructs the world of the text in reading the text, Lieu’s description is distinctively in her own terms. Although arguing for the anonymous authorship of the Epistles, Lieu argues that they are part of the Johannine tradition, which is understood as a way of thinking using distinctive vocabulary and formulations that reflect a distinctive worldview and understanding. From this perspective, apparent literary relationships can be accounted for by common indebtedness to Johannine tradition. The Gospel and three Epistles may independently draw on Johannine tradition, though Lieu allows that 2 John might draw on 1 and 3 John. She allows that 2 and 3 John might be by the same author or that the author of 2 John modeled it on 3 John. External testimonies to authorship and relationships between the Johannine writings are given little weight. From the internal evidence she concludes that the Johannine Gospel and Epistles might all have been written by different authors (four), though 2 and 3 John might have a common author.

Lieu recognizes that 1 and 2 John refer to an internal schism some time in the past. She is inclined to relegate it to a time somewhat distant, allowing for the repair of the consequences by time. Hence, though mentioned, the controversy and schism do not hold central place or preoccupy the author. She allows for the christological basis of the controversy referred to in 1 John 4:2 and 2 John 7 but doubts that the ethical issues dealt with in the Epistles have anything to do with the schism or that other views and positions criticized in the Epistles had anything to do with schism and those described as schismatics. Rather, these passages are to be read in terms of a rhetoric of persuasion in which the point is to persuade the readers to adopt the position affirmed rather than as a critique of

opponents. Lieu is critical of those who see a polemical purpose in the Epistles, arguing that the Epistles are directed to the community, not to and against the opponents outside (17). Here I believe she has misread the main exponents of the tradition of interpretation that recognizes the continuing threat of the opponents or secessionists, whatever they are called. I would say that none of the main exponents of this position has suggested that any one of the Epistles was directed to the opponents (not Schnackenburg, not Brown). From my earliest publications on the subject (1975), I argued that the Epistles were directed to those who remained but were traumatized and shaken by the schism. Pastorally, the approach to those who remained was to show them the errors of the secessionists and to reassure and strengthen them. This insight is already clear in Schnackenburg's German commentary of 1953 (see my *1, 2, and 3 John* [Sacra Pagina 18; Colleagueville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002], 9–10, 14–17, 84–86). It remains at issue whether in the Epistles, especially 1 John, the schism and its causes remain a significant, pressing, and traumatic issue troubling the community. Evidence for and against this view is concentrated within the Epistles. Evidently Lieu thinks that the scars of a significant schism heal quickly and leave little scar tissue. I am skeptical of the minimalization of the evidence of the impact of the schism.

Lieu uses evidence of resonances of the Johannine Epistles with the Qumran texts to argue that the christological problem confronted in the Epistles is to be understood in terms of difference concerning the messianic understanding of Jesus. This would not be suggested by a reading of the Epistles in their own terms. Rather, it is allowing a supposed relation to the Qumran texts to swing the argument. In his book *John and Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1975), C. K. Barrett argued that, when claims about the Jewishness of a document are made, care needs to be taken to isolate whether the Jewish elements appear because of the subject matter, the author, or the readers. In my view, such Jewish elements as appear in the Epistles appear there because of the author. Lieu notes that, unlike the Gospel, the Epistles lack any quotation from Scripture or any discussion of specifically Jewish issues. This reduction of concentration is a result of change of subject from Gospel to Epistles and a change of readership. The readers are dominantly not of Jewish origin. The author(s) continues to share in the Jewish character of the Johannine tradition, the way of thinking using distinctive vocabulary and formulations that reflect a distinctive worldview and understanding. My work on the Gospel is at pains to show how the Gospel of John emerges out of a form of Judaism best illustrated by the Qumran texts with the specific kind of dualism found there (see my *The Quest for the Messiah* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991; 2nd ed., 1993; 2nd ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1993], 33–50). A comparison with the Synoptic tradition confirms that this Jewish influence is not a consequence of the subject matter but an expression of the author's point of view. But the Jewish issues and explicit use of Jewish Scriptures express the point of view of the author, which is directed

to readers of Jewish origin. Contrast the Johannine Epistles, directed by a Jewish Christian author to Christians lacking Jewish origin.

Though there is room for a critique of some decisions that have an effect on interpretation, this is a well-written and learned commentary by an author who has a proven record in the study of early Judaism and early Christianity, especially the Johannine Epistles. This seminal work will attract those who are unpersuaded by the approach that finds in the Epistles evidence of a devastating schism from which the Johannine circle of churches perhaps did not recover. Lieu recognizes that 2 and 3 John provide evidence of at least a small circle of churches in some city where these Epistles circulated. She notes that the earliest quotations in Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.16.8; see also 1.16.3) draw on 1 and 2 John as if from the same Letter (2). This evidence was one of the factors that led me to suggest that 2 John was attached to 1 John as an introduction to the Johannine circle of churches beyond the author's own community. I suggested that 1 John was first delivered in his community before sending it on to the circle of churches in which Johannine influence was established. In 2 John the additional issue of the role of hospitality is raised, giving the Elder's view of the place and importance of hospitality in mission in the context of the messenger(s) bearing 1 and 2 John. That Irenaeus knew of 2 John as part of 1 John may suggest that that is the way 1 and 2 John first circulated. That we learn this from Irenaeus may suggest that there is something in the tradition of the origin of the Epistles in the Ephesian region (see my *1, 2, and 3 John*, 49, 51–57, especially 55–57). The tardy appearance of evidence of the use of the Epistles might support the view that distinctively Johannine churches did not long survive the schism, a view advocated by R. E. Brown.