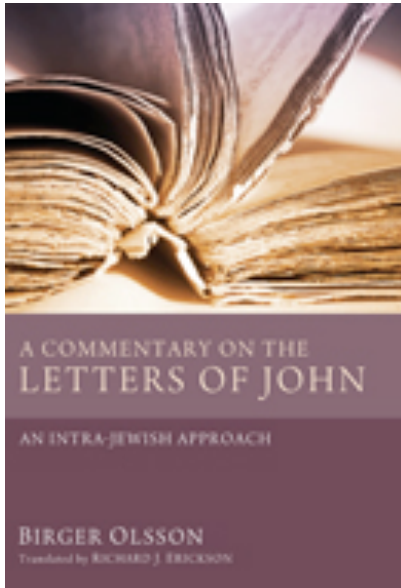


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Birger Olsson

A Commentary on the Letters of John: An Intra-Jewish Approach

Translated by Richard J. Erickson

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Birger Olsson is Professor Emeritus at Lund University, where he taught New Testament exegesis from 1992 to 2003. His research has focused on ancient Jewish synagogues and on the Johannine literature of the New Testament. The present volume is a translation by Richard J. Erickson of Olsson's contribution to the Swedish *Kommentar till Nya Testamentet* (KNT), for which Olsson served as editor. On the whole, the translation is quite easy to read, and the volume is well-edited with a pleasant layout. The target audience appears to be pastors and interested laypeople, as references to Greek and Hebrew are transliterated and there are no footnotes or endnotes. Many of the discussions in which Olsson engages, however, will likely be of interest only to members of the biblical studies guild.

Olsson's doctoral work (*Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel*, published in 1974) applied text-linguistic analysis to the Johannine literature. The close analysis of the text's structure required in such an approach is also present in this commentary. Each section of the commentary has four parts. First is a "Translation Display," which is basically a rather underdeveloped structural outline. This is followed by "Notes" that make extensive reference to the Greek text and contain the bulk of the commentary's lexical analyses and exploration of Septuagint–New Testament verbal parallels. Next, an "Analysis" section addresses how each paragraph of the letter fits into the overall structure and deals with

the primary exegetical and interpretive issues that arise from the text. Finally, an “Interpretation” section provides a space for extensive discussion of the text’s meaning and message to its original recipients. After the commentary proper, Olsson includes almost one hundred pages of appendices on topics of special interest, such as the use of “we” in the letters, the “sin unto death,” and the role of house churches and hospitality in the Johannine movement.

Perhaps the key decision any treatment of the Johannine letters must make is how to identify the opponents (or secessionists), described in the letters as “antichrists” and “false prophets.” They appear to have recently left the author’s community, a departure to which the author is still reacting by the time of 1 John. Scholarship on the letters has typically identified these secessionists by analogy with christological “heresies” known from the church fathers, typically docetism, Cerinthianism, or the more vaguely defined Gnosticism. On the other hand, Raymond Brown popularized the view that the opponents espoused an “ultra-Johannine” theology that they based on a progressive reading of the Fourth Gospel. In contrast to these readings, as the subtitle indicates, Olsson pursues an “intra-Jewish” approach. On this view, it is not the details of Christology that are at issue in the secession but the more basic question of whether Jesus is actually the Jewish Messiah. The secessionists are ethnic Jews who became believers in Jesus as the Messiah but later “regressed,” recanting their initial confession and returning to nonmessianic synagogues. Thus, 1 John 2:22–23 is to be read in its natural sense: the secessionists deny that Jesus is the Messiah. Likewise, in the second major secessionist text, 1 John 4:2–3, the focus is not on the language of “in flesh,” which is formulaic and nonpolemical, but on the identification of Jesus as the Messiah who has come. This is borne out by the simpler wording of 4:3, where the antichrists “do not confess Jesus.” Olsson is not the first to take such an intra-Jewish approach. Indeed, he joins several recent interpreters who adopt a similar reading (e.g., H. Thyen 1988; T. Griffith 2002; D. R. Streett 2008, 2011; M. Jensen 2012; earlier scholars taking this view include Löffler 1784; Eichhorn 1811; most extensively Wurm 1903).

Another distinctive of Olsson’s commentary is the sequence in which he believes the letters were composed, namely, the reverse of their canonical order. All three letters were composed by the anonymous presbyter, but they reflect distinct stages in the history of the presbyter’s community and its relationship with other Jewish synagogues. Thus the earliest letter, 3 John, depicts a time when Johannine Christians were Jewish messianic members of synagogues that were not necessarily messianic. They received teaching from itinerant prophetic teachers who proclaimed Jesus as Messiah and transmitted Jesus traditions. Third John addresses the stance a particular local synagogue leader (Diotrephes) had taken against such teachers, barring them from teaching in his synagogue and banning members of the synagogue who wanted to support such teachers. Having been

banned in this way, the Johannine Christians formed their own synagogues or house churches. This is the situation in 2 John, where the community is confronted by a new development, a secession or “regression” of some Christians back to a nonmessianic Jewish faith. Apparently some of the itinerant prophets/teachers have also joined the secession. The elder therefore must warn his audience to beware of visiting teachers who do not hold to the teaching that Jesus is the Messiah. By the time of 1 John, the secession is in the past but is still in some ways an unhealed wound and an abiding threat to the author’s communities. He writes with pastoral concern to reiterate the warnings he made in 2 John and to encourage them with the promise of eternal life for those who remain faithful.

Because the commentary was originally published in 2008 (in Swedish), it unfortunately does not interact with many of the recent publications on the Johannine letters, including the substantial commentaries by Lieu (2008), von Wahlde (2010), and Jobes (2014), nor the recent monographs, some of which also offer intra-Jewish readings of the letters (e.g. Streett, *They Went Out from Us* [2011], and Jensen, *Affirming the Resurrection of the Incarnate Christ* [2012]). Indeed, the text of the commentary itself does not cite any secondary literature, though Olsson does include a helpful (but now quite out-of-date) annotated bibliography. Thus there is no need for an author index. Also missing is a scripture index, although the subject index is quite thorough.

On the whole, Olsson’s commentary must be considered a significant contribution to scholarship on the Johannine letters and community. At 360 pages, the volume is not exhaustively detailed (for this we will still need Brown, Klauck, and von Wahlde), but it is certainly a quite substantial interaction with these texts. It is clearly the product of a lifetime of critical study and original thinking about the Johannine literature in its Jewish context. As such, it merits the close attention of anyone engaged in research on the Johannine literature.