



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

Birger Olsson

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The long history of interpretation of the three Johannine letters has been largely characterized, at least since Irenaeus in the late second century, by the assumption that the Elder was addressing the Gnostic heresy. In recent years, particularly with the work of Raymond Brown, attention has been focused on the internal schism within the Johannine (or Beloved Disciple's) community, thus taking the first epistle as a corrective to secessionists' misguided attempts to read the Gospel of John in an "advanced," spiritualizing manner.

Birger Olsson returns to a less common perspective, one that views the crisis facing the Elder as a wholly "intra-Jewish" problem. The Johannine community comprised Jewish believers who regarded Jesus as the long-promised Messiah of Israel, but at some point in the community's life, under the leadership of one Diotrephes, some members of the community chose to reject this conviction and to entice other members to do likewise. Olsson anchors his thoroughgoing interpretation of the three letters in this conflict among Jewish Christians over the nature of the Messiah and the renewal of Israel's ancient covenant. Among other things, this implies that the letters were written in reverse order of their numbering.

"Though not the first to identify the Epistles with an intra-Jewish dispute, Olsson develops his own view with meticulous attention to the text of the Epistles, arguing that they should be read in reverse order. This has the effect of describing the process of the schism reported in 1 John. Serious readers of the Epistles will benefit greatly from this persuasive and insightful work."

—John Painter, Professor of Theology, Charles Sturt University

"Few if any commentaries can match the fullness of Olsson's multifaceted approach to the Johannine Letters. Here is a virtual mine of information of every kind, from historical to theological, from literary to sociological, that bears on the understanding and interpretation of these fascinating documents of the early church. For those who seek to know the Johannine Letters, this is the essential resource to have."

—Donald A. Hagner, Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Fuller Theological Seminary

"Birger Olsson's major commentary on the Johannine Epistles locates these distinctive New Testament writings at the end of the first century within a Judaism struggling to find itself following Rome's destruction of Jerusalem. . . . This is not a commentary for timid readers but one that will reward in deepened insight with each reading. Highly recommended."

—Robert W. Wall, Professor of Scripture and Wesleyan Studies, Seattle Pacific University

Birger Olsson is Professor Emeritus at Lund University in Sweden. He is the author of numerous works on text-linguistic analysis and on the Johannine literature, including *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-Linguistic Analysis of John 2:1–11 and 4:1–42* (1974). The current volume was originally published in Swedish as part of the *Kommentar till Nya Testamentet*, for which Olsson also wrote the volume on 1 Peter.

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