

Book Review

The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love, by Zane C. Hodges, The Grace New Testament Commentary, (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999). 312 pages. Hardback, \$17.95. Reviewed by John Niemela, Professor of Greek and Hebrew at Chafer Theological Seminary.

Scholars often characterize John's epistles as exhibiting simplicity of Greek, but profundity of thought. Though it sounds catchy, what do they mean? Disjointed preaching from 1 John may lead a congregation to complain, "Although the Greek may be *simple*, the thought is *profoundly complex*." Sound exposition (as in this commentary) can correct this into "The Greek is *simple* and the thought is *profoundly simple*." This commentary combines a popular, easy-reading style with academic rigor.

Zane Hodges is eminently qualified to write this commentary. He taught these epistles many times in his twenty-seven years as a Greek professor, and contributed the sections on the Johannine epistles to Dallas Seminary's *Bible Knowledge Commentary*. This book evidences an intimate knowledge of John's writings, enabling the author to offer insightful comments on issues that many others avoid or mishandle.

For example, commentaries often claim that no argument progresses systematically through 1 John.¹ Consequently, if the apostle John really has a cogent argument to make, any

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commentary that (1) concludes otherwise or (2) replaces his outline errs in its understanding. Could this be why expositors often muddle the profound simplicity of John's epistle? Hodges looks beyond the nebulous associations that commentators promote to justify their imposed patchwork-quilt outlines and demonstrates that John distinguishes his introduction, body, and conclusion through rhetorical features common to ancient writers.² Once John's own structure and theme are evident, only then does the contribution of each paragraph

¹ The statement of I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*. NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 22, is rather typical, "It [the argument] is, however, extremely difficult to find in the author's [John's] thinking, and many different suggestions have been offered." He then rejects seven outlines that characterize the commentary literature (ibid., 22-26). Ibid, 26, concludes: "... it seems preferable to regard the Epistle as being composed of a series of connected paragraphs whose relation to one another is governed by association of ideas rather than by a logical plan."

² Hodges, *Epistles of John*, 31-33. His outline of the Johannine books applies features gleaned by specialists in ancient rhetorical criticism. Biblical writers enhanced their clarity by using common outlining features of the day, just as modern preachers draw upon contemporary rhetorical devices to clarify their outlines.

become evident. Having immersed himself in John's writings for years, Hodges is uniquely prepared to conclude:

The opinion so often stated in the past, that John lacks clear development and structure in his first epistle, turns out, upon careful examination, to be unfounded I have no hesitation in saying that the author of First John was a man whose simplicity of language in no way indicates that his concepts and thought structure were simplistic. On the contrary, no book of the New Testament-not even Romans-has been structured with more care than the Epistle of First John.³

1 John 1:3 indicates that the author's audience-focused purpose is that they might have *fellowship* with the Father and the Son. A purpose clause deals with something potential that the author desires. One cannot say whether all of his readers had *fellowship* with God, which is the nature of purpose clauses. Unfortunately, many commentaries do not define *fellowship* contextually. They misguidedly try to identify those not having *fellowship* as those who have not "**truly believed.**" **Instead, John** challenges those who have **believed the truth** to have *fellowship*

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with God as well. Although some of the readers may not have yet enjoyed *fellowship*, they all possessed the gift of eternal life. After all, 1 John 2:12–14 attributes qualities to his readers that unbelievers do not possess.⁴ This commentary by Zane Hodges is refreshing, because it allows John to speak freely, rather than shackling him with theological chains imposed by humanly devised theological systems.

Although the commentary tradition has consistently misconstrued 1 John 5:13a as the purpose statement for the whole book, Hodges does not play "follow the leader." It is true that 1 John 5:13a, *These things [Tauta] I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life*⁵ resembles John 20:31. That verse gives the purpose of the Gospel's signs: *these [tauta] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name* (John 20:31). Observe that, though John 20:31 and 1 John 5:13 have several words in common, the significance of the neuter plural *these* differs. In John 20:31 it refers back to *signs* (verse 30) also a neuter plural: *And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written* However, 1 John 5:13 uses the neuter plural *these* in the same way as

³ Ibid., 33.

⁴ Ibid., 94ff.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the *New King James Version (NKJV)*, 1982.

in 1 John 1:4; 2:1 and 2:26. The first three use the neuter plural form to refer to the paragraph immediately preceding it. Would the fourth, 1 John 5:13, be any different? No! John consistently follows his general pattern. These things [5:6–12] *I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life ...* . John wished to reassure them that the false teachers were wrong-simple faith alone in Christ alone for eternal salvation had given them eternal life as a certain possession. Amen!

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Having taught these epistles in Greek more than once at Chafer, I recommend this book without reservation. Please allow me to make a suggestion: Do not just read sections on certain “problem passages” to see what Hodges says. Pull out your text (even those using only English can profit) and work through this commentary starting with the “Introduction.” The commentary is written for those who will spend time carefully considering John’s epistles, not for proof-texters. It is designed for those like the noble-minded Bereans of Acts 17:11, who received the Word with all readiness and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. They took the time to find out whether Paul’s comprehension or their former understanding of the Old Testament was right. Perhaps a generation of noble-minded Bereans exists today who will examine these epistles anew. They will discover that John did not meander around. He actually had an outline and a logical point-by-point development. Both his thought and his Greek are profoundly simple.