R. Alan Culpepper, Paul N. Anderson (eds.)

Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles
ISBN 978-1-62837-015-7 $39.95

The word “communities” in the title of this book refers to both the communities behind the Johannine Epistles and the present-day community of Johannine scholars. The volume stands for an effort to chart the disputes in and around the Johannine communities in the first and second centuries CE and the disputes in current scholarship over these ancient disputes, in the latter case in the hope to move the discussion forward. In the introductory essay (“Setting the Stage: The Context for the Conversation”, 3-15), Culpepper introduces and summarizes the various chapters, arranged in three groups: “the relationship between the Gospel and the Epistles”, “the church in the Johannine Epistles”, and “the theology and ethics of the Epistles”.

The first part begins with Urban C. von Wahlde’s “Raymond Brown’s View of the Crisis of 1 John: In the Light of Some Peculiar Features of the Johannine Gospel” (19-45). He starts from Brown’s idea that the author of 1 John combatted his opponents, with whom he shared John’s Gospel, by emphasizing minor elements in the Gospel in addition to its dominant strain. He draws attention to features that make John’s Gospel unique within the NT and are also found in 1 John, but then supplemented with or corrected by less dominant elements found in the Gospel (such as the Gospel’s “ethical vacuum” being filled by 1 John’s love commandment). He asserts (against Brown) that these less dominant elements were added to the Gospel after 1 John had been written. Paul N. Anderson (“The Community that Raymond Brown Left Behind: Reflections on the Johannine Dialectical Situation”, 47-93) starts with a survey of Brown’s work on John’s Gospel and Epistles and on the Johannine community, and of responses to and further developments of Brown’s theory. Anderson then presents his own view of the history of the Johannine tradition. He distinguishes several phases and crises in its development and assumes many contacts between this tradition and other gospel traditions. R. Alan Culpepper (“The Relationship between the Gospel and 1 John”, 95-119) gives a survey of the various views that have been developed in recent scholarship on the relationship and the sequence of the Gospel of John and 1 John: priority of the Gospel, priority of 1 John, independence of 1 John, impossibility of determining the sequence, and writing of 1 John during the composition process of the Gospel.

The second group of contributions opens with Judith M. Lieu’s “The Audience of the Johannine Epistles” (123-140). She addresses the question of audience “by treating the Epistles on their own, and specifically as letters,
without reference to the Gospel—... at least on principle” (124). The Epistles are remarkably unclear as regards their audience. Especially in 1 John, the author does not “locate its audience within a continuous dynamic narrative” (135). Moreover, 1 John is marked by a closed dualistic conceptual world of light versus darkness, etc. The idea of “community” is central to the Epistles, but in 1 John this community remains “a cohesive, undifferentiated body” (139). Peter Rhea Jones (“The Missional Role of ὁ Πρεσβύτερος”, 141-154) concludes from an “inductive reading” (144) of 2 and 3 John (and also of 1 John) that the Elder was a theologian and pastor, a figure with authority in an egalitarian context. He also exercised his leadership by letter, and especially 3 John shows him to have been involved in church politics. “The Elder was above all a missional leader who belonged to a church whose ecclesiology was missiological” (154).

The third group of articles concerns theology and ethics in the Johannine Epistles. According to Andreas J. Köstenberger (“The Cosmic Trial Motive in John’s Letters”, 157-178), the motive of the cosmic trial between God and his Messiah, Jesus, on the one hand, and Satan and “the world” on the other, is an overarching and integrative theme in the Johannine corpus (which includes, according to this author, the Book of Revelation). In John’s Gospel, the focus of the conflict is the true identity of Jesus, 1 John “particularizes, at the ecclesial level, the universal cosmic trial of the Gospel” (161), and Revelation deals with the final outcome of the conflict. In “Spirit-Inspired Theology and Ecclesial Correction: Charting One Shift in the Development of Johannine Ecclesiology and Pneumatology” (179-185), Gary M. Burge points out a problem in 1 John: if according to John (esp. 14:26) the Spirit teaches Jesus’s disciples everything, both the Johannine community and the secessionists can appeal to the Spirit, but how does one then test the spirits (1 John 4:1)? The answer of 1 John is: by appealing to tradition. Craig R. Koester (“The Antichrist Theme in the Johannine Epistles and Its Role in Christian Tradition”, 187-196) wants to make readers of 1 and 2 John aware of the differences between the rather sober image of the antichrist developed in these documents and the traditional Christian image of this figure. “In the Epistles the one antichrist is transformed into many, the future becomes present, and the enemy cannot be comfortably externalized but is a force that can operate within the believing community itself” (196). Jan G. van der Watt (“On Ethics in 1 John”, 197-222) explores aspects of the ethics of 1 John: “the ethical implications of fellowship, the family as a social basis for motivating ethics, and following the example of Jesus as the guiding principle for ethics” (197-198). Ethics start with God, who is a Father giving life to his children and loving them through his Son Jesus; in agreement with ancient family models, the children have to reciprocally respond to the Father. The ethics of 1 John are determined by “a relational framework, expressed with terms like