

## **“THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES” BY RUTH B. EDWARDS (IN *THE JOHANNINE LITERATURE*)**

BOOK REVIEW BY ÁDÁM SZABADOS

In *The Johannine Literature* (by Lindars et al) Ruth B. Edwards writes an able presentation of the Epistles of John, or as the more permissive title suggests (as far as the authorship is concerned), the *Johannine* Epistles. Edwards is aware of the tradition that she stands in and is transparent about the fact that though she is committed to the Christian faith, she is, nevertheless, critical about the message of the biblical text. Edwards wants us to be aware of this approach from the beginning (p. 119-120). It is in the conclusion of her presentation that she summarizes her critical assessments, and the selective nature of her conclusion proves that our presuppositions determine our findings.

In Chapter One Edwards introduces the subject by raising the question: “Why study the Johannine Epistles?” Her answer is surprisingly profane: “The three epistles of John occupy only five or six pages of an English Bible, yet they are among the most intriguing writings of the New Testament.” (p. 112) The introduction that follows deals with these enigmas and problems within the letters (the tension between love and the lack of dialogue with the opponents, the tension between love and condemnation, the obvious polarization within the Johannine community, and finally, the ambiguous teaching on sin). Though Edwards admits that “we can learn something of value from these writings” (p. 120), her answer to “Why study the Johannine Epistles?” is, nevertheless, essentially that *studying the difficulties* within this literature *is an interesting historical exercise*. She wants us to see the epistles’ importance in that historical-critical light (“one should not accept their message uncritically”).

In Chapter Two the form, style, and content of 2-3 John are discussed. Edwards’ assumption is that 3 John preceded 2 John (p. 119), though she does not present her arguments that would substantiate this claim. The summary of the several explanations for *eklekté kyria* is, on the other hand, very helpful and goes beyond the ordinary discussions of the identity of the elect lady.

It is in Chapter Three where she starts dealing with 1 John in more details. Edwards makes wise decisions when she discusses the *genre* of 1 John. Her conclusion takes all the significant clues into account, but remains tentative in the end. The same is true of her discussion of the *structure* of 1 John. Comparing it to a “rather rambling sermon” is ingenious, but Edwards is right when she counterbalances this with the persuasive purpose of the author (p. 134). She also resists the temptation to attribute too much to Greek rhetoric figures.

The role of oral traditions in the background, on the other hand, seems to her to justify several of the author’s appeals to the knowledge of the audience. I am not sure, however, if Edwards took the importance of these references seriously enough. Besides being possible references to oral tradition, they could also be references to a more personal common

knowledge within a community of people – why not even references to apostolic warnings? This taken into account might affect our views on the genre of 1 John and would push us to the traditional assumption that 1 John is basically a (circular) letter written to Christians in Asia Minor.

Edwards is careful not to attribute too much to the similarities between the Johannine letters and the Nag Hammadi texts. The background of the epistles is better illuminated by the Dead Sea Scrolls and especially by the other New Testament texts. In my view the latter one could have been given an even more prominent role in Edwards' discussion.

In Chapter Four Ruth Edwards enters the discussion of the authorship and dating of the Johannines. She lists the patristic evidences, the internal evidences, the similarities between the Gospel of John and 1 John, and then attempts to date the Johannine Epistles. In her conclusion she says: "It is still possible to argue for a common authorship of 1-3 John and the Gospel of John by John, the son of Zebedee, though this now seems unlikely." But it is hard to find any significant explanations for why she thinks that this early hypothesis is unlikely. Though Edwards' conclusions flow with certain trends in Johannine studies, they do not seem to be really conclusive. Moreover, she makes some unwarranted assumptions that we will come back to later.

Chapter Five discusses the Christology of 1 John and the identity of the opponents. This is one of the most interesting and most original parts of Edwards' writing. She lists the potential opponents: Jews, Cerinthians, Docetists, and Gnostics. She very helpfully emphasizes that John's polemics turns against false teachers and not ordinary church members. But then she makes a very interesting point: it is possible that the epistle is much less polemical than it is often assumed, maybe the opponents are not even a real group of people! John's message might be essentially positive, not negative, and his goal might be to warn rather than to condemn. It is a thought worthy to ponder, but we should not forget about the historical situation in which some *did* leave and *did* try to mislead others, and *did* deserve the title of "antichrist".

The next chapter is a summary of the leading theological ideas in 1 John. Edwards follows her own structure of the epistle: 1. Prooemium or Opening Statement (1.1-4); 2. Main Body (Walking in the Light as a Sign of Fellowship with God /1.5-2.11/, Admonitions and Warnings /2.12-17/, The 'Last Hour' and True Confession or Denial of Christ /2.18-27/, The Children of God and the Children of the Devil /2.28-3.24/, Two Kinds of Spirits /4.1-6/, The Nature and the Demands of Love /4.7-21/, Victory and Testimony /5.1-12/); 3. Conclusion, Postscript and Re-affirmation (5.13-21).

Chapter Seven is likely to be Edwards' best contribution in this study of the Johannine Epistles, just as the "teaching on love is one of the Johannines' most attractive features" (p. 174). She first compares divine love and human love in the epistle, then gives a long critique of the sharp distinction between *agape* and *eros* advocated by certain theologians, like Nygren and Spicq. Edwards is wrong when she says that A. Nygren used 1 John as a foundation for his theology of love (p. 180) (in fact, the opposite is true: Nygren found 1

John very dangerous to his theology!), but she is right in her arguments against the view that the word *agape* is an exclusively Christian word (a view that Nygren would not adopt, though!).

Edwards wisely emphasizes that the teaching that “God is love” should not be taken as an absolute claim.

We can no more deduce from the statement that ‘God is love’ that every single activity of God is done in love than we can deduce from ‘I am the bread of life’ that every activity of Jesus is concerned with feeding. (p. 178)

God’s nature cannot be captured by just one attribute, He is also “spirit”, “light”, and a “consuming fire”. Edwards goes against the popular view that “the idea of God as love is a special ‘New Testament’ insight, whereas the ‘Old Testament’ teaches of God’s wrath” (p. 179). 1 John is in harmony with the Hebrew Bible as far as the love of God is concerned, says Edwards.

Love in 1 John is mainly love for *the brethren*. This is interesting first, because it seems to exclude non-Christians and Secessionists, and second, because it is likely to exclude women, too! Edwards denies the first charge (“even if we follow the majority of scholars... we must reply... that the Johannines nowhere suggest that a Johannine Christian would neglect a dying stranger” /p. 181/), but basically accepts the second charge and attributes it to John’s “androcentric” worldview.

In Chapter Eight the topic is sin, forgiveness, judgement, and eschatology. Sacrifice and forgiveness are key ideas in 1 John, just as a future judgement, the question of sin and sinlessness, and the mysterious “sin unto death”. Attention is given to the different interpretations of John’s potentially perfectionist sentences. Though Edwards mentions that there might be certain theological and philosophical problems (she does not tell us what these can be), she nevertheless admits that the author’s purpose was to teach that God’s children do sin, but there is forgiveness “through the atoning death of Jesus” (p. 193).

The “Johannine Epistles” is generally helpful, informative, and gives a good summary of the essential issues with regard to the letters of John. It is not without flaws, however. We can appreciate Edwards’ openness about her approach, but it would go against the evangelical Christian faith, and the clear teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, to accept the critical attitude to the message of the letter. Edwards’ methodology is not only critical towards the different human interpretations of and traditional assumptions about the texts, it is also critical about their content (“one should not accept their message uncritically” /p. 120/). And this is where Edwards puts herself above the Word of God, and instead of letting herself be criticised and judged by it, she herself becomes a critic and judge of it. A notable example for this is John’s supposedly sexist language which might need some correction today (p. 182). I am aware of the importance of *a priori* assumptions and presuppositions in this epistemological subject, but so does Edwards. It is simply that our

presuppositions are radically different from each other. One is orthodox and evangelical, the other is liberal or radical.

Possibly led by critical prejudices, Edwards is sometimes appallingly silent on traditional solutions, and occasionally makes unwarranted assumptions, which result in potentially wrong conclusions. Let me mention a few of them.

On p. 130 she compares 2 John with 3 John and makes the following statement:

So serious does he deem departing from this tradition that he forbids the elect lady and her children greet them or give them hospitality... This is a far cry from the generous, condition-free hospitality of 3 John. Either the situation had drastically changed, or we are dealing with a different author.

But why doesn't she mention the third option, which is that nothing has changed, except that we are talking about two different scenarios?

Or in the next paragraph Edwards says, referring to a similarity in language in the two minor Johannine epistles: "The phrase is virtually identical to the one used more appropriately in the opening of 1 John. Is this another sign that 2 John is imitative?" But again, why is this a more logical assumption than to suppose that the author is the same of both? She mentions this "third alternative" later, but why not here?

A similar case is when she analyses the theological content of the Prooemium. "The Prooemium is couched in the first person plural. Some have suggested that it is a genuine plural to denote a group distinct from the readers, for example, eye-witnesses or tradition-bearers who speak for the Johannine school." (p. 163) I honestly do not understand why Edwards does not even mention the traditional answer that this might be a reference to the group of the apostles.

There is another example, which is not essential to Edwards' thesis, yet is also an annoying example of the all-too-frequent unwarranted assumptions that she makes. On p. 128 she says:

One sometimes suspects that a reason why the 'elect lady' has been so rarely taken as an individual is reluctance to assume that a woman could have led a church. But female church leaders are attested elsewhere in the New Testament: we note particularly 'Nympha and the church at her house' /Col 4.15/ and Phoebe, minister or deacon of the church at Cenchræe /Rom. 16.1/.

But are not these biblical examples rather weak if we want to prove by them the presence of female church leaders in the early church? Nympha could be simply a host, and deaconesses were generally not considered to be leaders in the church. Is this interpretation in harmony with the plain teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14.33b-34 where he states that women "in all the churches" should be silent and obedient? Whatever we think of the practice advocated by Paul, it seems totally unwarranted to say that the New Testament attests female church leaders. One might suspect, instead, that we are dealing with another prejudice here, a prejudice likely caused by "modern standards" (p. 182).

On the whole, therefore, "The Johannine Epistles" is helpful, in that it discusses important historical, structural, contextual, and theological issues in the epistles. And yet is also unhelpful, in that one of its leading presuppositions is clearly unevangelical, and some of its assumptions lack any substantial warrant or are silent about traditional solutions that might be more plausible than modern ones.