

Martin M. CULY. *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004. 155 pp. \$19.95.

Newer commentaries and handbooks must demonstrate their unique contributions in a market already crowded with good choices. Culy's handbook (he is very careful not to call it a "commentary," xii) is surely justified for its narrow, but much needed, focus on the details of Greek forms, syntax, and textual criticism. More to the point, the handbook is especially useful in its relentless pursuit of the fecund dialogue between Greek language and linguistic theory, particularly in the areas of verbal aspect and discourse structures. Culy brings helpful insights from this conversation to light on almost every page of the text with clear and frequently compelling explanations.

The volume is neither overly technical nor in any way simplistic. It achieves a striking balance of concise, pertinent information delivered in such a way that Greek students, pastors with moderate Greek skills, and NT scholars will repeatedly benefit from its contents. Figures of speech are regularly identified and helpfully defined; syntactical categories are labeled (though not always explained); brief word studies, especially those related to words of heavy theological import, appear with some regularity.

While Culy may be a bit ambitious in saying that the handbook "does attempt to address all significant questions arising from the Greek text," still he recognizes its limitations and, in the final analysis, sees the handbook as providing something of a textual *preview* of the great theological insights to come in the longer commentaries which the handbook is intended to complement. In fact, he calls it a "prequel" (xii).

Identifying 1 John as "hortatory discourse," Culy turns to the work of R. Longacre (and others) for guidance in analyzing the volume's structure, particularly its peaks (xiii). Whether the trajectory of John's discourse gathers around theological themes or grammatical forms (or some combination of these) is a question whose answer remains unsettled (xv-xvi). Specifically, there is much debate about the role of the vocative case as a boundary marker in hortatory discourse. Culy regularly comments upon John's many vocatives and their possible discourse implications.

Culy also relies heavily upon Stanley Porter's verbal aspect theory throughout the volume. In particular, he subscribes to the idea that verbal tense/aspect signals the relative prominence of specific information within 1 John. In Porter's scheme, aorists mark "background" material, presents and imperfects mark "foreground" material ("part of the storyline"), and perfects and pluperfects mark foreground material ("particularly prominent" information, xvii). While admitting that "In the end, this handbook takes a cautious approach to identifying the semantic or discourse significance of verb tenses within the letter," Culy invests much in Porter's work. He believes that the theory works well "particularly with respect to the aorist and present tenses" (xvii).

What is especially significant in this regard is the fact that, while some commentaries and handbooks name a theory in the introductory matter and rarely return to it in the actual coverage of the text, Culy conspicuously allows the theory to be tested by repeatedly identifying its potential merits in actual coverage of specific verses throughout the handbook, often with fairly thorough explanations of the theory's implications (for example, 41). Readers are thus allowed to see how Porter's theory plays out in the text itself over the course of several chapters and thus to formulate judgments about its tenability in a textually informed and sustained way.

Regular attention to things like "mitigated exhortation" (via R. Longacre) and the unsettled state of affairs with the middle voice (via C. Conrad and J. Pennington) occupies much space throughout the work as well. While the mitigated (or softened) command may, and in 1 John clearly does, appear as a third class condition (a point which Culy visits frequently), the problem with middles is more acute. Are these verb forms actually representative of true middle semantics or should not many of them be considered deponent? Repeatedly, the notion of deponency is questioned as today we are hearing that verbs like εφθεασαωμεθα (1:1), ψευδοσωμεθα (1:6), ε{ρχεται (2:18), γνωσωμεθα (3:19), and ειπρωγασαωμεθα (2 John 8) are actually middle both in form *and* meaning. Culy makes a compelling case for doing away with the notion of deponency, at least in many (if not most) instances. And, here again, we hear the full argument against deponency in the introduction and witness its consistent application throughout the whole of the handbook. Indeed, the thorough synthesis of introductory issues and the ways in which these issues play out in the text is one of the really great achievements of this handbook. The author can be counted upon to follow through with his arguments time after time.

The great strength of this volume may well be very closely tied to its chief weakness. That is, while Culy

has picked up upon and admirably covered current issues within the academy's research on Greek text linguistics (verbal aspect, discourse analysis, and middle voice), he has perhaps left other matters less well attended. Word studies, while fairly numerous, often consist of definitions from the Louw Nida lexicon and little more, with no explanation of his preference to Louw Nida over BDAG in so many cases. Noun taxonomy, frequently mentioned in passing (16-17), is not evenly explained from text to text. Traditional verb taxonomy is dropped in favor of contextual influences on verb meaning. Culy observes that the traditional labels for verbs ("ingressive aorists") stem "not from a careful analysis of Greek *syntax*, but rather from grappling with the challenges of *translating* Greek verbs into English" (xxiii). The point is well taken, but it begs a better conceptual framework for explaining just how verbs *should* be translated, and why.

On the other hand, coverage of significant elements of textual criticism is regular and thoughtful. So are explanations of difficult verses like 1 John 3:6, with its present tense ἀμαρτάνει (*hamartanei*). In this instance, Culy wisely observes that John's "concern is not with projected eschatological realities," a point interpreters frequently miss. It is best then not to "water down [John's] statement by pressing the present tense to imply a focus on continual or habitual sin" so as to let John's readers off the ethical hook (73). Point well taken.

Finally, the volume contains an abundance of internal cross-referencing, a feature which spares the trees but at times becomes a tad annoying. Also, a brief glossary of frequently mentioned Greek terms would surely prove helpful.

On the whole, this is a very satisfying volume, one that attracts this reader to the series as a whole. Were more books of this kind available to students currently enrolled in Greek courses, Greek itself would be far more attractive. The volume will really help discerning pastors as well. More than anything, I love the way Culy takes us from rigorous contemporary theoretical debates to concrete application in the text of 1, 2, and 3 John. The volume is warmly received and highly commended. May there be many others to follow.

NEAL WINDHAM

Professor of Greek and New Testament

Lincoln Christian College