

**Lee Gatiss and Bradley G. Green (eds.), *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: New Testament XII: 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019, lxi + 426 pp., \$48.81.**

As many are already aware from use of this commentary series, and as the title itself suggests, this work collects various insights from Reformation-era commentators, which hitherto have been “largely unknown and for the most part unavailable in English” (book jacket). One major contribution of the series in general is expanding contemporary reflection on the sacred text to include the much-needed—and diverse—voices of the past, particularly those of the Reformers. The benefits of this achievement mirror the overall benefits of studying history: we guard against reinventing the wheel, chronological snobbery, and limited perspective; in short, “the tendency to ignore all but recent interpreters” (xlv). For these benefits alone I commend the work by Lee Gatiss and Bradley G. Green.

The editors do a commendable job of prefacing the commentaries on the individual letters with the orienting chapters “A Guide to Using this Commentary,” “General Introduction,” and “Introduction to 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.” The first orienting chapter details what is fairly intuitive for the reader: how each the commentary for each individual book is organized: Pericopes of Scripture; Overviews; Topical Headings; Identifying the Reformation Authors, Texts, and Events; Footnotes and Back Matter. The second orienting chapter is helpful because it presents “an overview of the context and process of biblical interpretation in the age of the Reformation” (xix). As I write this review, our world is mired in the context of the coronavirus outbreak, and there is no way that my reflection on Scripture right now will not be affected by the current pandemic. In this sense, it is always helpful to know the context of comments made. The editors do a marvelous job of summarizing the Reformation and identifying key thinkers and seminal events; see also the chapter entitled “Biographical Sketches of Reformation-Era Figures and Works” (333–402). Quoting Richard Muller, this chapter concludes with an apt exhortation: “[W]hile it is often appropriate to recognize that traditional readings of the text are erroneous on the grounds offered by the historical-critical method, we ought also to recognize that the conclusions offered by historical-critical exegesis may themselves be quite erroneous on the grounds provided by the exegesis of the patristic, medieval, and reformation periods” (xlii).

The third orienting chapter mainly summarizes the “Historical context [of interpretation],” “Theological themes and interpretive issues,” and “historical reception” of each grouping of letters—1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, and Philemon. In this chapter, the editors judiciously assert that “the reformers *were* certainly reading Paul” (xlv) and do not shy from asking the pointed questions of whether the Reformers faithfully understood Paul and whether they “were reading Paul closely, and trying to understand him” (xlv). This work clearly presents the answer to the second query in the affirmative; the answer to the former depends in large part on where one currently stands with respect to the so-called “New Perspective.” My own reading of Paul suggests that the Reformers—on the whole—understood Paul correctly. Finally, this chapter concludes with “A Note on Methodology,” explaining briefly (perhaps too

briefly) how the editors went about selecting what to include. In the absence of an explicit methodology—save for “minimal” use of Luther and Calvin and widespread representation—the reader might initially wonder whether the final compilation is unduly haphazard or excessively representative of the editors’ own interpretations of the sacred texts. However, when reading the individual commentaries, it quickly becomes apparent that the editors sought to reflect interpretations of the letters that reflect the general consensus of the Reformers while noting some places where they differed.

Regarding the commentaries on individual works, these “compilation-commentaries” are, simply put, fascinating. Perhaps most notable is that the Reformers made an effort to work closely with the texts and then to apply their findings to their present situations. Anyone that supposes that the likes of Martin Luther, John Owen, and John Calvin were merely theologians that reflected on Scripture in the abstract betray an ignorance of their strong grasp of and commitment to the sacred text. While no one is entirely immune to eisegesis, the Reformers—as evidenced in this work—labored to derive their theology from the texts instead of superimposing pre-existing ideas. Despite the centuries separating contemporary readers from the Reformers, a shared commitment to the same inspired texts reveals striking similarities in interpretation when basic and sound interpretive principles are observed. What might surprise some readers is how contemporary the Reformers sound (as well as the pastoral issues they faced).

Given the audience of this review, some comments are in order regarding the Pastoral Epistles. First, unlike the majority of contemporary scholars, the “Reformers all believed that the apostle Paul penned these six letters” (xlili). In my estimation, the letters themselves better support Pauline authorship (which I detail in my commentaries). Second, John Calvin picked up on a central insight for interpreting 1 Timothy correctly: “We must not imagine that this letter was written by St. Paul for the benefit of one man only, but it is for the whole church, as we can see from the contents of it. For Timothy had no need of many of the directions that St. Paul gives here” (111). Unfortunately, many readers today still view the Pastorals as “personal” letters from Paul to his apprentices. Again, in my commentaries I illustrate the interpretive relevance in recognizing a broader audience. At the same time, we see that a failure to adopt a rhetorical interpretation of the letters (see below for a more extended criticism) led to gratuitous theological reflections. Johannes Piscator, for instance, in discussing 1 Tim 2:6 (“who gave himself as a ransom for *all*”) argued for a “sufficient-efficient distinction.” Similarly, Peter Martyr Vermigli suggested an interpretation of “sufficient for all, but not effectually.” Close attention to the rhetorical purpose of 1 Timothy 1–2 suggests that by “all” Paul simply has in mind Jews and Gentiles, including the “chief sinners” from them “all” as embodied in the apostle himself. As an aside, the interpretations of the divisive text concerning women (1 Tim 2:12–15) are wildly entertaining—and intriguing.

Concerning the comments on 2 Timothy, perhaps most noteworthy is that “there is nothing new under the sun.” Not too long ago, Craig A. Smith asserted in his commentary (*Timothy’s Task, Paul’s Prospect: A New Reading of 2 Timothy*) that the letter—contrary to the opinion of many, if not most—does *not* represent Paul’s Farewell Speech or Last Testament. In other words, Smith

contends that Paul expected to continue ministry with Timothy in the near future. Whether one agrees with Smith is secondary; my point here is that his “new” point is fairly old. John Mayer, an Anglican priest and biblical exegete (1583–1664) argued along similar lines: “That saying in 2 Timothy 4:6 (‘I am already being poured out as a drink offering’) does not so necessarily imply his suffering was so near at hand, since he expected still to be preserved, as appears in verse 18, and in that he willed Timothy to come to him and to bring the cloak he left at Troas ...” (214).

Somewhat notable in the overall comments concerning Titus is the little attention given to the central topic of good works. Given the historical context in which the Reformers were seeking to restore the doctrine of salvation by faith alone, this comes as no surprise. We live in a somewhat different time today, that is, we are not fighting the same battles as Luther and Calvin. Thus, we are free to see the central theme of philanthropy—a zeal for good works *as* saved people—that pervades this letter. This does not mean that the Reformers were poor exegetes but were—like all of us—mere mortals who could not fully escape the air they breathed.

Perhaps the main drawback of the commentary is that it gives little attention to the macro-structure of each letter. The focus on individual phrases, sentences, and short passages could encourage a reading of Scripture that fails to ask the question, “What is this entire letter about?” Only when we see the “big picture” can we understand the full meaning of individual passages and even words. Similarly, the commitment to represent what different Reformers said about different passages results in an almost complete neglect of the rhetorical flow of the letters. That is, the reader simply sees what different Reformers said about the meaning of a section versus how the section is working, what rhetorical effect it is seeking to achieve (which is basic for a correct interpretation of all of Paul’s letters). Finally, the practice of citing what different Reformers said about individual sections can, in fact, misrepresent what the Reformers thought on the whole about the letters. Like a Scripture text memorized out of context, statements by Reformers taken out of their full commentary can misrepresent their full interpretation (although the editors do a good job of avoiding this last potential mistake).

In sum, this installment of the *Reformation Commentary on Scripture* is useful—but perhaps less as a commentary on the letters and more as an introduction to the exegetical world (or mindset) of the Reformers. To be sure, if a present exegete is interested in what others, especially those from our past, said about individual words, phrases, or short sections, the work is a wonderful repository of knowledge and insight. Still, if the interest is in understanding the broader meaning of the letters and how individual sections work into their overall rhetorical strategy, this work—at best—points readers to the more complete commentaries of these master exegetes. Given our tendency to dismiss the wisdom and even ability of our predecessors, this fine work merits a place in any reference library for students committed to identifying the best biblical commentaries from the past *and* present.

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