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Romans

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A commentary on such a central New Testament epistle from a Pauline scholar of Leander Keck's stature is certainly a welcome development. Keck does not disappoint.

For readers not familiar with the Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, the series aims to make the results of critical biblical scholarship available to a wide audience of educated readers, including pastors, university students, and leaders in local churches. The primary translation used is the NRSV, though Keck often cites other translations as well as providing his own. Organized around units of text rather than individual verses, each section (e.g., 2:1–16 or 15:7–13) consists of three parts: an introductory piece covering matters of genre, structure, and individual themes; an exegetical section treating leading ideas and development of thought; and a final section analyzing the theological and ethical significance of the passage. The book includes a bibliography of cited works and an index of theological topics. An index of modern authors would have enhanced the book's usefulness.

Keck's twenty-page introduction deals with traditional matters of style and structure, theology, and setting and purpose. He helpfully describes Romans as a "discourse within a letter" (23). Although he reviews proposals reconstructing the situation among Roman Christians that account for the letter, he contends that the argument of the letter has its

own internal coherence and is, therefore, not a direct response to circumstances there. At the same time, Keck allows that disputes among the Romans Christians could hinder Paul's need for support from them for his mission to the West and, thus, influenced the content of the letter. I did not find that this attempt to have it both ways always worked out well in the exposition of the text. Regarding theology, Romans is not Paul's systematic theology but a sustained reflection on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection of the human plight. Keck rightly highlights the centrality of the Christ-event for Paul and the formative role played by the LXX in shaping Paul's thought expressed in the letter.

A number of features characterize the actual commentary on the text. First, so much has been written about Romans and its theological themes that it becomes difficult for an author to say anything new. Yet Keck's ability to approach familiar issues in fresh ways and then write about them with clarity and verse sets this work apart from other commentaries of similar depth on Romans. He also makes good use of introductory sections, both to individual passages and to major divisions of Romans, for placing the passages within their context in the larger argument. In other words, the reader stands in no danger of losing the forest for the trees. Occasional lapses in expression, such as describing God as "the ground of being and value" (73) do not mar this overall judgment.

Furthermore, Keck often remains undecided on contentious issues of interpretation or tempers his own conclusions. For example, how one reads the disputed second half of Rom. 9:5 "need not be decided, since nothing in the context requires a firm decision" (229). Earlier, he acknowledges that although he sees the "I" of Rom 7:7–25 as "Adamic self ... whose plight has become clear in light of Christ" (180), none of the proposed identifications of this "I" is without significant problems. At the same time, Keck does not shy away from firm conclusions where he sees them warranted. To cite one example, he argues strongly for reading *telos* in 10:4 as "goal" rather than "termination" of the law. The point is that he does not feel constrained, as many commentators do, to draw firm conclusions on each and every point, even when indecision remains the best option given the ambiguity of the evidence at our disposal.

Keck sees the theological theme of Romans as "God's otherness." Repeated often, the phrase indicates "God's otherness, God's freedom to be God and exercise 'Godhood' on God's own terms, apart from the law but not contrary to the law" (225). God, therefore, can actually rectify the ungodly (4:5). God will not be bound by human standards and expectations.

Finally, Keck attends to the rhetorical conventions apparent in Paul's argumentation. For example, he astutely notes Stanley K. Stowers's identification of *prosopopoiia*, or "speech

in character,” and diatribe in Romans (without following Stowers’s conclusions about the nature of Paul’s argument in the letter). Keck, furthermore, does not simply cite these practices for their own sake but makes good use of them in his exegesis.

Given the interpretive difficulties posed by a text such as Romans, any reviewer will find places where he or she will disagree with a commentator. I have my own disputes with Keck. For example, I have never found his arguments for an interpolation at Rom 5:6–7 convincing (nor at 16:17–20, as argued here). I also find the argument of the letter more specifically addressed to circumstances on the ground in Rome. Yet to dwell on such differences and others would diminish the obvious strengths of this commentary.

Any work of this nature should be evaluated in terms of how well it accomplishes its stated purposes. On that score, this volume fares well. Accessible to a wide audience yet clearly informed by responsible scholarship, Keck’s commentary on Romans should enjoy a long and fruitful life in the classroom and in local faith communities.