

RBL 04/2006



Keck, Leander E.

Romans

Abingdon New Testament Commentaries

Nashville: Abingdon, 2005. Pp. 400. Paper. \$22.00.
ISBN 0687057051.

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Years ago when I was still writing my own commentary on Romans and enquiring what other work was being planned in the field, I remember being excited by grapevine reports that Lee Keck had agreed to write the Romans volume for one of the major commentary series. I remember also the disappointment when, in due course and a good few years later, the Romans commentary appeared in that series from a different author. The disappointment was slight, since the other contributor was weighty in his own right. But disappointment there still was since I knew that a Romans commentary by Keck would demonstrate a theological acumen, a penetrating insight, an ability to keep in view the wood without getting lost in the trees, and a neatness and terseness of expression that few others in the field today can rival.

The disappointment was much diminished when I learned that Keck had been recruited to the Abingdon series and completely assuaged when I read the volume itself. In some ways, indeed, the Abingdon format plays to Keck's strengths. We do not really need another major commentary that loses us in the minutiae of word studies, literary parallels, sociological and rhetorical hypotheses; we have such in plenty. The Abingdon series, however, by its limited size, forces the contributor to focus on the primary task of the commentator: to clarify the meaning (intended or potential) of the words of the text and

to provide some basic reflection on its/their continuing significance. And that is where Keck excels.

Particularly welcome are his regular comparisons of and comments on current translations. As other commentators have found, simply by exposing the rationale of the alternative translations, the issues of meaning can be posed and fruitfully clarified. Keck does this well. He is also well versed in the Romans literature and current debates about Paul's theology, and his commentary is laced with often very effective, sometimes trenchant, rejoinders on matters of continuing debate.

Here are some of his comments "on the hoof" that caught my attention. On the currently popular attempt to classify the letter using the different types of rhetoric: "This classification, like identifying parts of the letter in rhetorical terms (exordium, narration, prods, peroration), does little more than paste a rhetorical label on the letter" (22). On the issue of whether 2:14–16 has Christian Gentiles in view: "This interpretation is unacceptable, for among other reasons, it violates Paul's whole argument, which concerns non-Christian Gentiles" (80). He has an excellent treatment of "justification by faith" on pages 123–25: "for Paul the faith that God regards as a right relation is the ungodly person's utter reliance on *God's* making the relationship right" (124). Romans 5:8 "is Paul's Christology in a nutshell" (139). "Paul's theology in Romans is theocentric but christomorphic" (141). On chapter 6: "Nothing that Paul has said in verses 4–12 has diminished one's responsibility; rather, what he said increased it: you *must* because *now you can!*" (165–66). In 7.7–25 "the allusions to Genesis suggest that the 'I' portrays the Adamic self (not simply Adam himself), whose plight has become clear in light of Christ" (180).

The treatment of Rom 9–11 is particularly sharp and effective. "Rom 9–11 is addressed to the beginnings of what is now called 'supersessionism'" (225). "The more deeply Christian faith is rooted among non-Jewish peoples around the globe, the more urgent is the task of appropriating Paul's legacy by pondering theologically the significance of the fact that Africans, Asians, and Polynesians are learning to call Abraham 'our father' (4:12)" (270). "Because Paul's olive tree image calls for Christian Gentile inclusion in Israel, 'a Gentile church ... as an equal co-partner *alongside* Israel' ... is precisely what Paul does *not* want" (274). "Understanding what Paul is saying in this paragraph requires most Christian Gentiles to flush out of their minds what they assume Paul is talking about, namely, the 'conversion' of Jews to 'Christianity'" (286).

On 12:6: "The gift of prophecy is not a license to innovate but power to explicate the faith given to all" (300). In view of the current enthusiasm for the political dimension of Paul's gospel, the treatment of 13:1–7 is particularly welcome, as Keck draws attention to

what the passage does *not* say: “two things are notably absent: a specific reference to the Roman Empire itself, and any mention of Christ, together with the vocabulary of salvation.... The Roman Empire, whether as a whole or in any of its particulars, is not evaluated, neither denounced nor celebrated.... Paul gives no hint of the ‘God or Caesar’ issue.... one is struck by its pragmatic, minimalist character” (319–22). With regard to 13:8–10 he rightly points out that “the text does not replace the law with love.... what is actualized in love is not a disposition but the law” (329). And on the blessing upon those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve (14:22), Keck wisely comments: “The beatitude does not make one’s self-assessment the real criterion of what to do or not to do; it rather recognizes that the absence of self-condemnation confirms that the decision made ‘in honor of the Lord’ (v. 6) is valid because it expresses faith in God” (347).

Of course there are matters where we disagree on controversial topics. His argument that 2:1 does not yet turn to the situation of the Jew (76) ignores the echoes of the attitude expressed in Wisdom of Solomon in 2:1–4. And it is odd that he passes over the theme of “boasting” in 2:17 and 23, despite its obvious importance for Paul in 3:27–4:2. He criticizes me as misunderstanding 2:28–29 “profoundly” for suggesting that in these verses Paul was critiquing his own native religion (87–88), although it still seems self-evident to me that Paul was indeed critiquing or warning against a too-superficial understanding of what being a Jew means, in the same way that he warns against a too-superficial understanding of “Israel” in 9:6–26—rather as Keck himself observes a few paragraphs later (somewhat to my surprise) that in 2:17–20 “Paul accused the interlocutor of distorting his vocation into a tacit claim to superiority” (90). He also seems to miss the point that 3:19–20 is addressed to Jews, “those who are under the law,” as the summation to Paul’s indictment of *all* “under sin” (3:9), that is, Jews as well as Gentiles—*all!*

It will be no surprise to those engaged in Pauline studies that I remain unconvinced by Keck’s opting in favor of *pistis Christou* as meaning “the faithfulness of Christ” (104–5, 110). Since Paul goes on in chapter 4 to elaborate the *pistis* of which he has spoken in chapter 3, and since in chapter 4 the *pistis* is so obviously Abraham’s *faith*, Keck’s interpretation leaves me puzzled about the sequence of Paul’s thought from chapter 3 to chapter 4. Was Paul’s exposition of Abraham’s *faith* not in implicit opposition to the traditional exposition of Abraham’s *faithfulness* in offering up Isaac? But Keck does not really address the point. And while I have some idea of what Paul might mean in the phrase “living by faith,” I still wonder what Keck means when he talks about Christians “living by Jesus’ faithfulness” (113). Likewise, his passing swipe at the new perspective on Paul as having “wrought much mischief in the interpretation of Paul” (125) reads slightly oddly alongside his advocacy of the view that “their own righteousness” in 10:3 “refers to the righteousness that distinguishes Jew from Gentile” (247).

At other points I would have welcomed some further clarification—for example, the body being dead (8:10), the warning of 8:12, and the *eiper* (“if, provided that”) of 8:17. It is also to be regretted that the series presumably restricted interaction with other views to those of English-language scholarship, since it is good for students and others to be aware of different-language scholarship on such a seminal text, and the policy may reinforce a certain insularity of debate within some American and church circles.

But none of these quibbles detracts from my sense of appreciation for this superb commentary and of gratitude that we now at last have Keck on Romans.