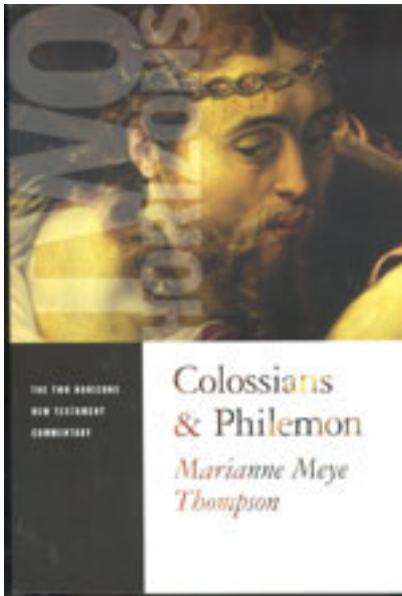


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Thompson, Marianne Meye

Colossians and Philemon

The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary

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I have long been an advocate of commentary series that are geared primarily for pastors or preachers, to give them a good feel for message of a particular text without bogging them down with every possible interpretation that has ever been proposed. The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary series, under the general editorship of Joel B. Green and Max Turner, promises to be one such series. Its goal is clearly stated:

Seeking to bridge the existing gap between biblical studies and systematic theology, this distinctive series offers section-by-section exegesis of the New Testament texts in close conversation with theological concerns. Written by respected scholars, the THNTC volumes aim to help pastors, teachers, and students engage in deliberately theological interpretation of Scripture.

What I want to do in this review is to show briefly how Marianne Meye Thompson achieves this goal in this commentary and also to give you a taste of its rich content.

Thompson ably fills the stated goal in her discussion of Colossians and Philemon. While she undoubtedly knows the literature surrounding the various interpretations for these two letters of Paul, she does not feel obligated to include hundreds of footnotes to prove that to the reader, nor does she get sidelined with proposals and counterproposals for

minutiae of detail. Rather, as the template for the series indicates, she gets at the heart of the message for each section of the letter.

There are, of course, places where one cannot ignore alternate viewpoints, especially where there is no scholarly consensus on a pericope. For example, she cites the two main views for the *stoicheia tou kosmou* of Col 2:8: the *stoicheia* (1) as spirits, perhaps astral deities, thought to rule this world, or (2) as the basic principles that present the world's point of view and standards. In brief terms, she outlines her arguments for the latter view, and she weaves her interpretation into the essential message of the letter. As another example, in her discussion of the household codes, in less than one page she reviews the contributions of Dibelius, Hays, and Schweizer.

At times too, where important, Thompson discusses grammatical issues. That the authors of this commentary series struggle with grammatical issues is clear, since the translation of the Greek text is their own. In discussing 1:9–12, Thompson notes, for example, how the parallelism of the four plural participles in these verses gives shape to conduct that is considered “worthy of the Lord.” This structure is often missed in current translations of this passage.

After discussing each of the various sections and showing how each unit fits into the overall flow of Paul's argument in the context of the Colossian heresy (which she argues is Jewish Christians who are advocating ascetic practices in order to attain higher levels of understanding the mysteries of God), Thompson goes into the second horizon of the commentary, the theology of Colossians. She divides these eighty pages into two sections: “The Theology of Colossians” and “Colossians and Constructive Theology.”

The first section places Colossians into the larger biblical narrative and especially into the larger framework of the theology of Paul's other letters. She acknowledges the misplaced efforts of biblical theologians over the centuries to reduce Paul's thinking to one main center, such as “justification by faith.” Thompson chooses a broader theme—“the narrative structure of Pauline theology”—as the framework for understanding Paul's analysis of what God has done in human history. This is the scheme of creation–fall–redemption–ultimate redemption. What stands as the center of Paul's theology is this eschatological framework, with the crucified and risen Christ at the center. “It is not as if some of God's work were done by Christ or some things were saved through Christ; rather, all things were created and will be redeemed through him” (147). Nevertheless, “though created and sustained in Christ, the world awaits its renewal in Christ.”

It is sometimes a bit difficult to differentiate the second section of the theological part from the first; indeed, there is some repetitive overlap. If anything, Thompson uses the

second section to address more directly some of the issues pertinent to contemporary theology, such as postmodernism, metanarrative, pluralism, and quest for spirituality. Just to give one example here: Thompson shows that even though Christians should be glad to endorse and even to celebrate *cultural* plurality, to *advocate religious* pluralism is an entirely different matter.

On the one hand, there is the description of Christ in terms that are sometimes labeled “the cosmic Christ.” ... Various authors have explored the possible implications of this “cosmic christology” for thinking about the religions of the world. This christology posits that all people exist “in Christ” because they are part of the creation of the cosmos “in him.” ...

On the other hand, alongside the emphasis on the creation and reconciliation of all things in and for Christ, Colossians links the “hope of glory” with hearing the gospel, the word of truth, and standing firm in the faith (1:4–6, 27). It also refers to those who have been rescued from darkness, forgiven of their sins, and transferred to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son, so that they have a share of the inheritance that belongs to the saints in the light (1:12–14). ...

Moreover, it is hard to imagine that Paul, raised on the Jewish insistence that there is only one God, could simply have abandoned this foundational belief on coming to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and Lord. (179–80)

Thus, Thompson herself soundly rejects religious pluralism and comes out in favor of particularism, but not exclusivism. The important thing to note in this discussion is that her view is grounded in Pauline theology, particularly in Colossians, not on philosophical presuppositions or reasonings of how she might like it to be.

Finally, on Philemon (which covers a little over seventy pages) Marianne Meye Thompson acknowledges that this is not a book filled with deep theological thoughts. It is, after all, an occasional letter that deals with a specific problem. The main issue she sees for this letter is that of reconciliation among Christian brothers. Here is the crux of Paul’s thinking on this important issue:

Paul’s theology of reconciliation in Christ takes shape in the way in which he appeals to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Philemon holds all the cards, for he is the wronged slave owner, while Onesimus, as a slave and alleged wrongdoer, already has two strikes against him. But Paul identifies with Onesimus “while he was yet a sinner” (cf. Rom. 5:8), taking the side of the less powerful in order to serve as an intercessor on Onesimus’s behalf and a mediator between him and Philemon. In the same fashion, Paul calls upon Philemon to put aside the prerogatives of power, to treat Onesimus as a brother and friend. The mutuality of

relationships in Christ places a particular obligation on those who hold power or authority in any relationship. (236).

In her section on “Philemon and Constructive Theology,” Thompson deals with such issues as dualism of body and soul, freedom and inner dignity, and the important task of how to read Scripture and apply it to today. These are vital theological issues that any pastor or theologian needs to struggle with, and Thompson helps to chart the way. I look forward to other commentaries in this series.