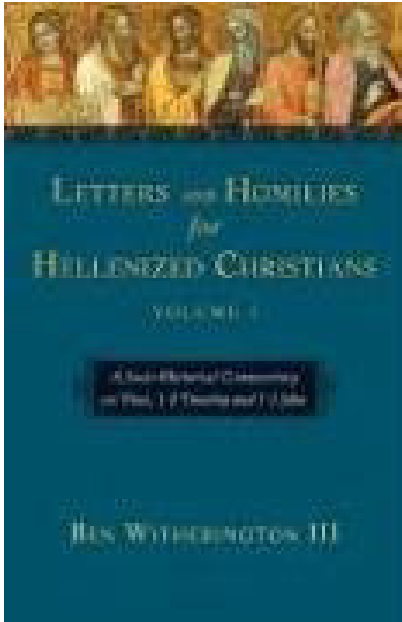


RBL 08/2007



Witherington, Ben, III

Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians: Volume 1: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John

Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006. Pp. 656.
Cloth. \$35.00. ISBN 0830829318.

Raymond F. Collins
The Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C.

As the subtitle of this volume suggests, Witherington's commentary is really two books in one, albeit with a common introduction. His general introduction considers two topics: epistolary pseudepigrapha; and sermons and homilies in the New Testament. Rehearsing a variety of what he describes as old chestnuts, Witherington is more than skeptical of the general acceptability of literary pseudepigraphy by Jews and early Christians. His reflection on sermons and homilies permits him to make the point that writings of the New Testament demonstrate the use of a more sophisticated rhetorical technique than modern commentators are wont to acknowledge.

Three features of each of the two parts of this commentary work make it a particularly valuable work. The first is that, although one would expect the two bibliographies to begin with at least a selected list of commentaries, Witherington's consideration of the commentaries is given in a discursive form that provides the reader with a much more useful tool than is the typical list, even an annotated list of commentaries.

A second valuable feature of the work is the number of its excursus, presented under the rubric of "A Closer Look." Fortunately, the excursus are cited in the table of contents. Among the eight closer looks taken by Witherington during the course of his study of the

Pastorals are “God as Savior, Christ as ‘Our Savior’”; “Paul, Imperial Rhetoric and Christian Ethics”; “Women of High Status and Their Religious Roles in Ephesus”; and “Theologizing in the Pastoral Epistles.” Nine excursus appear in the commentary on the Johannine Epistles. Among them are “Jesus’ Death as Atoning for Sins”; “Antichrists and the Last Hour—Some Caveats”; “Apostasy, Blasphemy of the Spirit, Sin unto Death”; and “The Nature of Authority in the Churches of Asia at the End of the Apostolic Era.” To these seventeen excursus can be added the author’s portraits of Titus and Timothy, “Paul’s Crisis-Intervention Specialist” and “Paul’s ‘Son’ and Coworker in the Gospel,” respectively.

Also worthy of commendation is the way that Witherington engages modern scholarship, particularly scholarship that appears in English. He readily acknowledges the different insights of the commentaries and specialized studies and makes liberal use of them. In this way his commentary is almost a summary on contemporary scholarship on the Pastorals and the Johannine Epistles. On the other hand, Witherington does not naïvely accept any word that appears in print. While citing major positions other than his own, he engages that kind of thought with careful critique.

Witherington’s commentary on the Pastorals begins, as one would expect, with a consideration of authorship. With his generally skeptical view of the acceptability of literary pseudigraphy, Witherington comes down on the side of the Pauline authorship of all three epistles. Given their Hellenistic character, however, Witherington is willing to acknowledge signs of Lukan involvement in their composition. Thus, with respect to 1 Timothy and Titus, he supports as a useful conclusion the thesis that Luke was “the one who chose to shape these letters like a *mandatum principis*” (92–93). Again, with respect to Titus 1:5–9, “the voice is that of Paul, but the hand is that of Luke, who is far more attuned to speaking in a Hellenistic manner” (107). Second Timothy and Titus would have fewer Lukan traits than does 1 Timothy. Titus, by the way, is considered to have been the first of the Pastorals to have been written—a thought that brings to mind the late Jerome Quinn’s thought along these lines.

In his introduction to the three Pauline letters, Witherington offers a number of judicious reflections on the Pastorals as a rhetorically shaped correspondence, carefully avoiding the pitfall of forcing any one of them into a classic model. His deft use of a panorama of classic rhetorical techniques throughout the commentary enables him to analyze the epistles’ pericopes in a manner that any reader will find enlightening.

A study of the issue of authorship also introduces Witherington’s commentary on the Johannine Epistles. The role of the Beloved Disciple provides the hermeneutical key to Witherington’s understanding of the relationship between the three epistles and the

Johannine Gospel. Witherington holds that the Beloved Disciple composed the three epistles, which were written prior to the Gospel. He was already an old man (*presbyteros*) when he wrote the last two of these letters (see 2 John 1; 3 John 1). Witherington opines that the Beloved Disciple shaped the traditions that appear in the Fourth Gospel but that the traditions were collected and edited after his death (John 21:20–24).

Witherington takes a cautious approach in dealing with the “opponents” addressed by the three letters. His preferred nomenclature is “secessionists,” suggesting that the issue is within the Johannine church(es) rather than some form of opposition from without. According to Witherington, 1 John 2:18–19; 4:1–3; and 2 John 7, where the secessionists are respectively identified as antichrists, false prophets, and deceivers, indicate that a christological issue is the major bone of contention. Wary of painting an overly clear picture on the basis of a mirror reading of the text, Witherington grapples with the christological issue but does not define it with sharp traits.

As was the case with Witherington’s exegesis of the various passages in the Pastorals, his exegesis of the Johannine pericopes contains a wealth of material and valuable insights. I particularly appreciated his nuanced remarks on “antichrist.”

Obviously, one exegete is not going to agree with another in every respect, but I find myself wanting to commend this volume. I only wish that the copyeditor or proofreader had exercised a bit more care before sending the manuscript to the printer. Its various grammatical errors and duplicate expressions are a bit disconcerting.