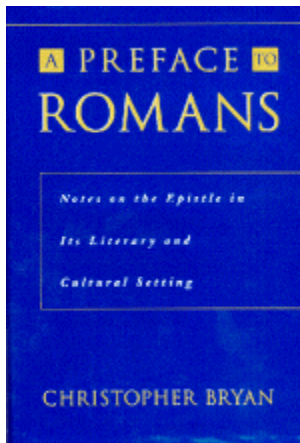


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Bryan, Christopher

A Preface to Romans: Notes on the Epistle in Its Literary and Cultural Setting

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
Pp. xviii + 278, Cloth, \$49.95, ISBN 0195130235.

James C. Miller
Daystar University
Nairobi, Kenya

True to the subtitle of the book, Bryan examines Paul's letter to the Romans in its literary and cultural setting. After a brief prologue describing the book's scope and purpose, the author divides his treatment of Romans into two sections. Part one asks, "What kind of a text is Romans?" analyzing the genre of the letter and the relationship of Paul's gospel to the Jewish Scripture and Mosaic Law. Part two, the bulk of the book, presents Bryan's reading of the letter broken down into five segments: 1:115, 1:164:25, 5:111:36, 12:1-15:13, and 15:1416:23. This reading consists of the text of the letter printed in boldface interspersed with Bryan's remarks in an almost line-by-line fashion. These comments attempt to trace the flow of Paul's argument rather than touch on every exegetical detail along the way. Bryan places discussion of more substantive interpretive issues, whether philological, cultural, or theological, in forty-one "Additional Notes" scattered throughout. Bryan concludes with a brief epilogue. The book includes a general bibliography, list of abbreviations, and indices of Scripture, Subjects, and Authors/Sources, the latter broken down into three segments (Ancient, 10001850, and Modern).

In chapter one, after describing the importance of genre and surveying different proposals regarding the genre of Romans, Bryan concludes that it is an example of protreptic, or persuasive, discourse embedded in a "family letter." Paul writes in this manner because he regards followers of Jesus Christ as the "household [or family] of God." According to Bryan, Paul, in the style of a philosopher, sought to persuade the Roman Christians toward "a favorable view of his beliefs about God and God's promise (p. 27)." More specifically, Paul's "basic purpose" (p. 32) through the letter was to

dissuade his hearers “from a view of God’s relationship with the world or with Israel that would see it as ever at any time or in any situation founded on anything except God’s justice and grace (p. 20; italics original).” Bryan sees Paul’s persuasive discourse progressing through three stages. The first, Rom 1:16-25, carries the brunt of Paul’s efforts to dissuade his hearers from erroneous viewpoints. Secondly, Paul demonstrates in a positive fashion, how God’s justice and grace works in the life of a follower of Christ (5:11-13). The concluding section contains exhortations emerging from the demonstration of chs. 5-11 (but not, apparently, from chs. 14). Throughout this reading of the letter, Bryan gives consistent attention to social and literary factors shaping Paul’s expression of his argument.

Although I found myself often agreeing with Bryan’s construal of Paul’s argument as he progressed through the details of the letter, difficulties emerge in Bryan’s larger reading of the letter. For example, what is the relationship of Paul’s dissuasive argument in 1:16-25 to Paul’s hearers in Rome? Although Bryan offers his own reconstruction of Paul’s audience in Rome and the circumstances that prevail among them, finding a link between the audience he posits and the contours of Paul’s argument remains unclear. Thus, Bryan’s description of Paul’s argumentation tends to remain on the abstract level of argumentation divorced from the historical situation in which Paul wrote.

Bryan further runs into trouble as he tries to assemble the larger pieces of Romans into a whole. In his discussion of Rom 1:1, Bryan offers a helpful treatment of Paul’s statement that he is a “slave” of Christ. He goes on to assert that the section 1:18-25 will “then” (which I take as consequential) be dissuasive, “concerned with our willingness (or not) to acknowledge our utter dependence on the justice and grace of God; in other words, our willingness (or not) to be in bondage to God” (p. 58; italics original). The link between the term “slave” in 1:1 and the thrust of Paul’s argument in chs. 14, however, is anything but apparent (in fact, Paul does not return to the theme of “slavery” until ch. 6). Bryan must provide greater substantiation for his claim if his readers are to be convinced that Paul is dissuading his hearers on this point rather than, say, demonstrating that Jews and Gentiles are alike in sin and, therefore, alike in their manner of redemption (1:18; 3:9, 22-23; 4:11).

Yet, despite these shortcomings, Bryan does highlight several important features of Paul’s argument. First, Bryan finds in Romans an emphasis on the gospel as the fulfillment of Scripture and reads Paul’s argument in this light. Although Bryan is certainly not alone in making this observation, this factor informs his interpretation of the letter throughout, thereby enhancing the substance of his reading at numerous points. Second, Bryan consistently pauses at points in the letter that present interpretive difficulties or that have served as fodder in theological battles throughout the centuries (though he passes over without comment the controversial participle *horisithentos* in 1:4) in order to explain interpretive options and argue for his own viewpoint. Once again, I found these explanations lucid and accurate for the beginner. Often, Bryan concludes that we must not

force Paul into an either/or situation, that Paul may have remained deliberately ambiguous. Third, Bryan reads Romans as an interpretation of Israel's story. Although, as I have noted, his interpretation runs the risk of becoming ahistorical, his emphasis on story places Paul's letter firmly within its Jewish context.

Finally, three features make this book useful to students. One, as mentioned above, the "Additional Notes" provide succinct discussions of critical issues for the interpretation of Romans. With each Note, Bryan provides a short, annotated bibliography. I found these to be accurate assessments of the best material a student should turn to for further help. Notably absent however, is any reference to M. Nanos's important monograph, *The Mystery of Romans* (Fortress, 1996). Two, students will benefit from Bryan's discussion of genre and Scripture in his opening two chapters. Bibliographies are also provided for each section of these discussions. Three, a student reading through this book will quickly be alerted to interpretive hotspots in Romans and become so with much less pain than is required of reading a full-blown commentary.

Owing to its price and format, this is not a book I will use for a classroom text. I will, however, place it on library reserve and require students to read Bryan's treatment of genre, Scripture, and several of his additional notes. Furthermore, I will warmly recommend it to students and fellow scholars as an informative reading Romans.