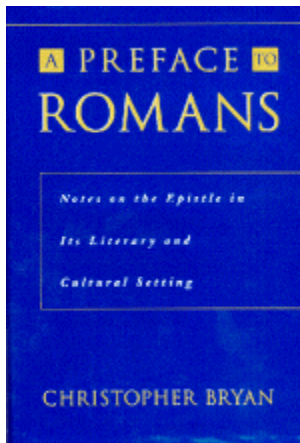


RBL 07/13/2000



Bryan, Christopher

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

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

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Christopher Bryan provides a reading of Paul's text integrated with an annotated commentary-style discussion for each section of the letter, "listening" to the argument as it unfolds. At the end of each section are a series of additional notes allowing the opportunity for detailed discussion, usually of significant words or phrases and controversial issues. Introductory chapters clarify Bryan's position on such matters as the genre of Romans and Paul's use of terms like Scripture and Law. The approach offers an excellent way to read the text and follow the flow of Paul's argument as it unfolds.

Although sometimes failing to signal or engage alternatives argued by recent interpreters of Romans, Bryan is careful and fair with the sources he does discuss, and his preferences are well argued. In controversial areas, he often decides to keep the door open to more than one reading, comfortable with ambiguity where he finds it in Paul. This judicious approach is exemplified in "Additional Note O. On Translating *Pistis Christou*" (pp. 108-11). Rather than decide for or against the alternatives of translating the genitive construction of 3:22 as subjective ("Christ's faith") or objective ("faith in Christ"), noting that advocates of both translations can appeal to details of Paul's theology, Bryan seeks a translation that maintains the ambiguity present in the Greek itself ("through the faith of Jesus Christ"). This is not an example of indecisiveness on Bryan's part; rather, he recognizes that ancients were not so troubled by such ambiguity as are many later interpreters. Citing Nigel Turner, Bryan concludes, "not to sacrifice fullness of interpretation to an over precise analysis of syntax. There is no reason why a genitive in the author's mind may not have been both subjective and objective" (emphasis his). In

terms of his introductory chapters, the discussion of rhetorical and epistolary issues for the interpretation of this letter is well informed and clearly presented. Yet in view of the general practice toward ambiguity just discussed, one might quibble with Bryan's drawing of a sharp enough distinction to separate neatly such concepts as affirming communal values and doing something about those values to thus conclude that the genre of Romans is deliberative rather than epideictic (p. 22).

Bryan advances from the start that he finds "the basic purpose of Romans" to be "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" (pp. 20, 32). This reviewer cannot help but wonder, however, whether this programmatic decision does not perpetuate a reformation context for analysis instead of the Epistle's literary and cultural setting, as claimed. The assumption that someone or ones in Rome (or anywhere else) believed otherwise is now questioned with respect to Paul's time: do we know of anyone then who would claim that his or her or Israel's relationship with God is founded upon anything at any time except God's justice and grace? Does not this approach to Paul's purpose risk confining the results of Bryan's analysis to the interpretive concerns of another time, place and person than the mid-first century, Cenchræe and Rome, or Paul? What is to be expected when the author reveals the sectarian and ideological premises of later interpreters buried in his assumptions, for example, noting (while not defining or explaining the terms used or why this is so): "Thus nascent Christianity, like ancient Judaism before it, kept eschatological and social concerns bound together" (p. 40)? Was Romans written by one and to ones whose self-understanding was Christian in the sense of being unarguably sectarian and institutionalized apart from Judaism? When referring to the fluid world of first-century Jewish groups of the Diaspora or Judea during the period when the Temple still stands, to what does "ancient Judaism" refer? Is the implication that "nascent Christianity" kept these concerns bound together in a way that contemporary Jewish groups did not? Bryan's own arguments elsewhere undermine such traditional reformation-oriented implications, creating inconsistency in terms of his approach to the letter's historical context, for example, when he observes that "the pious first-century Jew" Paul's discourse, as well as the understanding of his hearers, is "drenched" in the rhetoric of the Septuagint (p. 43).

The strengths of Bryan's contribution to the genre of commentary and his generosity of spirit are evident in the discussion of "The Final Salvation of All Israel (10.11; 11.32)." There is a noticeable vagueness in Bryan's translation and commentary discussion of the fate of Israel, especially with regard to how the mystery that Paul is revealing is to play itself out. But that is intentional, not accidental, as his Additional Notes AA to JJ make clear. The lack of clarity begins with Paul, and is thus faithful to his argument: "pace 'two covenanters' and 'one covenanters' alike, Paul offers no forecasts, and no explanations. In particular, we may note, he offers no forecasts of the Christians finally 'winning'" (p. 191). Rather, Bryan concludes that since Paul "was content to fix his eyes on what he saw

as the astonishing mercy of the cross, to remember the promises and the faithfulness of God, and to declare God's unfathomable and inexhaustible generosity," there is no need to join those proponents of either "one" or "two covenant" positions that would imagine Paul "presumed to mount God's throne and hear the divine counsels" (p. 192).

Bryan writes elegantly, and provides an informed and clear approach to many issues; interpreters of Romans will want to consider this work.