Dunn, James D. G.

The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text

New International Greek Testament Commentary


Lewis R. Donelson
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary
Austin, TX 78705

James D. G. Dunn's well-known and formidable exegetical skills are amply displayed in his new commentary on Colossians and Philemon for the New International Greek Testament Commentary series. On both these texts Dunn offers balanced and reasonable readings that will certainly become essential moments in scholarly discussion of these texts. One of the expressed purposes of the NIGTC series is that the commentaries "interact with modern scholarship" (p. x). Few persons could manage that task as well as Dunn has here. He is consistently fair to scholars with whom he does not agree and to exegetical options he does not hold. At each point of debate, he states clearly and equitably the readings he himself does not maintain and then provides forceful argument for his own readings. This volume thus becomes a wonderful exegetical resource for at least two reasons: first, Dunn offers persuasive and plausible readings of these texts and, second, he provides a wealth of information on scholarly debate on these texts.

Typical of Dunn's balance and fairness is his decision about authorship. After giving sympathetic accounts of the arguments both for and against Pauline authorship, he attempts to strike a balance between them. Colossians, he argues, was written by Timothy under Paul's direction (from either Rome or Ephesus in the mid-50s). Thus Dunn can state that "the distinction between 'Pauline' and 'post-Pauline' as applied to Colossians becomes relatively unimportant" (p. 38). In some ways, this is a satisfying solution to the peculiar puzzle of the relationship of Colossians to the rest of the Pauline corpus. It is by Paul; it is not by Paul. Thus Dunn will sometimes hear Paul's own voice in a text;
sometimes he will hear that of Timothy. In this way, exegetical tensions disappear, for
the fact of multiple authors accounts for the multiple voices in the text.

At the same time, even if this in-between position satisfies certain exegetical problems it
creates a curious inelegance in the commentary. Dunn cannot decide how to refer to the
author: Paul, Timothy, the author, or what. Furthermore, modern commentaries are
normally anchored by way of the imagined center of the author's perspective. This
commentary lacks that center. Perhaps that is a good thing. Perhaps it is even proper in
the case of Colossians. But it does tend to dislocate the reading. Who is speaking, why, to
whom? Certainly Dunn does not intend this, but at times the commentary almost feels
postmodern in its readings.

This decision about authorship means, perhaps more importantly, that Colossians is read
through Dunn's own readings of Paul. The compressed and elusive phraseology of
Colossians is grounded in the larger and more explicit arguments of other Pauline letters.
Over and over again, Dunn explains a phrase or a sentence with a reading from Paul.
Thus, we know what faith, love, hope, the gospel, and so on mean in Colossians because
we know (with Dunn's help) what Paul means by them. Sometimes Dunn cannot make
this work. For example, Colossians' use of the term flesh is not really typical of Paul. In
this instance and in others like it, Dunn argues that the ideas of Timothy and not Paul are
being heard.

Dunn's exegetical procedures here accord with what we have seen elsewhere in his work.
Dunn interprets by articulating the ideas behind the text. In fact, what keeps these
readings from being ironically postmodern is Dunn's ability to anchor the text in ideas--
ideas that can be readily articulated and understood. Dunn loads the text with meaning.
Each word, each phrase, each sentence carries the full depth of Paul's insights, of Jewish
theology, of early Christian tradition, and/or of (sometimes at least) the deutero-Pauline
elaboration of Paul. Colossians under these elegant word studies, these thorough
explanations, becomes a weighty, profound, and penetrating text.

I am convinced that the exegetical balance and conceptual complexity of Dunn's readings
will make this commentary an essential part of subsequent discussion of this text.
Grounds for complaint, however, are numerous. Are texts held together by ideas in this
way? Is Dunn always reading Paul correctly when he uses Paul to read Colossians? Many
readers, including this one, will feel that Dunn too often collapses the fragile, poetic
syntax of Colossians into precise, enclosed ideas. Colossians, to me at least, seems often
to evoke rather than to argue.

For the future of scholarly debate on Colossians, Dunn's arguments about the nature and
identity of the opponents in Colossians may be more important than his arguments about
authorship. In this instance, Dunn is unsympathetic to the previous consensus, seen in the
classic commentaries of M. Dibelius, E. Lohse, and E. Schweizer, that the heresy in Colossians comes from some form of Hellenistic philosophy or early Christian gnosticism. Dunn makes a strong case that the "heresy" (he does not think this is the proper term here) in Colossians comes from the local synagogue. Christians attracted to ideas in the local synagogue are threatening in a mild way the Pauline traditions in Colossae. Dunn thinks the Jewish leaders are asking questions of the type Paul confronted at Galatia. These are potent questions, but they do not, as of yet, pose a serious danger. It is a friendly, if serious, critique.

Dunn makes a good case. His argument will be a forceful one in scholarly circles, for his explanations of the key passages in 2:8-23 are consistently plausible and a theory of Jewish origins fits the current tendency in NT scholarship to prefer Jewish parallels to Greek ones.

His theory that 2:6-7 functions as the thesis statement of the letter will probably be less persuasive. It is not so much that these verses do not evoke some of the main themes of the letter as that so many other verses do so just as well. Furthermore, this view relegates the "hymn" in 1:15-20 and the prayer in 1:9-14 to curiously ancillary roles. Dunn is perhaps overestimating the parallels he detects between the structure of Colossians and those of Romans and Galatians. It may be that Colossians is not ordered by a single thesis.

Dunn's work on Philemon is equally competent. He opts for what is becoming the prevailing thesis on the origin, namely, that Onesimus is not a fugitive and Paul is not harboring a runaway slave, but that Onesimus has come to Paul to ask Paul to intercede for him with his master Philemon. Dunn shows how some of the traditional exegetical problems disappear under this thesis.

Overall this is a stunningly successful commentary. Once again, Dunn shows that he is an instructive and persuasive reader of biblical texts. (5/97)