Witherington, Ben, III, with Darlene Hyatt

Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary


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The question that immediately crosses my mind as I pick up this book is, Why have we another commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans? There are so many commentaries on this letter available today, including recent ones from such distinguished scholars as Philip Esler and N. T. Wright. Ben Witherington III, however, seems to have an impressive ability for producing very thorough, if not necessarily very original, commentaries on Paul’s letters. His commentaries on Galatians and the Corinthian letters are particularly well thought of by many Pauline scholars, and this present volume on Romans appears to be a step in the same direction. My initial impression, though, is that this commentary succeeds where some of the previous ones have failed. There seem to be proportionally more original readings and scholarship on his own part. This, as one might expect, comes alongside the excellent summaries of, and references to, the work of others, often including rather obscure journal articles and monographs overlooked by most scholars.

His introduction is very thorough, as I expected it would be. One concern regarding the introduction, though, is his seeming dismissal of the “New Perspective on Paul,” whether in the form proposed by Stendahl, Sanders, Dunn, or other more recent proponents. However, the main body of the commentary interacts very happily with New Perspective
practitioners, often in agreement with their ideas, although where there are explicit references to Paul’s continuing Jewishness, there are rather brief disagreements from Witherington. For example, in dealing with the issue of covenational nomism, Witherington dismisses it with a reference to A. A. Das’s discussion of the issue, leaving a simple statement that he disagrees with the concept in the text itself. Considering the widespread support for E. P. Sanders’s views on this in modern Pauline scholarship, this flat disagreement seems inadequate.

In the introduction to the commentary Witherington outlines his own rhetorical viewpoint of Romans in quite some detail, and the layout of the commentary enforces this. However, having said that, it is disappointing to see no reference to, among other important works, Mark Given’s recent, very important, work on Paul’s rhetoric, Paul’s True Rhetoric: Ambiguity, Cunning and Deception in Greece and Rome (see the review at http://admin.bookreviews.org/pdf/1787_3097.pdf). Perhaps that may be due to the length of time it has taken for this commentary to be published, although that is only my own personal speculation. Although I do not personally support such a comprehensively rhetorical view of Romans, I find Witherington’s arguments for the rhetorical structure as convincing as those put forward by others, with accurate referencing to original ancient works and recent monographs.

Rather than attempt to summarize Witherington’s whole commentary, I have chosen to reflect upon his commentary on a few passages upon which I have worked fairly extensively myself. Hence I begin by considering Witherington’s commentary on the latter part of Rom 1. His treatment of this section is particularly interesting for several reasons. First, Witherington virtually ignores the rather problematic section on human sexuality, again referring the reader to other works. Instead he focuses on parallels with other ancient texts that contain “vice lists.” Although these parallels are interesting and may be of some relevance to one’s understanding of this chapter, the lack of focused discussion of the content of the list is disappointing.

Second, Witherington is nonetheless to be commended for his insistence upon the intrinsic connection of the arguments of Rom 1 to the rest of the letter, which a number of commentators fail to acknowledge. It would have been good to see a link made between Paul’s boasting in Rom 1 to the boasting in later chapters, linking it to the work of Simon Gathercole, which he does incidentally draw upon at a later stage in the commentary. However, having said that, I suppose that there is only so much one can put into a commentary while still making it accessible to students and preachers, as well as Pauline scholars.
Third, another interesting emphasis of his commentary on 1:18–32 is perhaps a part of Witherington’s own theological bias. He solidly rejects any deterministic readings of Romans (perhaps even Calvinistic), instead opting for a theology that sees free will as being important in the overall theme of Paul’s letter (something approaching an Arminian reading of the text). Although I am in sympathy toward such a reading of Romans, in my opinion this kind of doctrinal comment is a little out of place in a modern, scholarly biblical commentary. In the “Bridging the Horizons” section he links free will to grace and predestination to bad theology, saying such things as, “Grace is a power given that enables a person to choose the good” (72). Comments on theological issues should, in my opinion, be limited to these Bridging the Horizons sections and should not appear in the main commentary sections.

I will also mention, albeit rather briefly, Witherington’s treatment of Rom 9–11. It is somewhat disappointing to find these three chapters grouped together into one very long commentary section, as it can seem rather daunting for the reader. However, Witherington does recognize the intrinsic connection between these three chapters and the way in which they work together to make Paul’s point with quite some force. In some ways this passage represents some difficult issues for practitioners of the New Perspective on Paul, as it appears to point beyond a present salvation for Jews toward a future salvation experience. Witherington is very much in his element as he deals with this issue, and in fact his treatment is probably as good as that of any other modern commentary, dispensing with some of the unanswered questions that one feels when reading other commentaries on this passage.

Witherington’s comments upon the final greetings section of Romans are also of considerable interest. He is the first commentator, at least as far as I am aware, to make use of a particularly important article on the identity of Junia and Andronicus in these greetings (Michael H. Burer and Daniel B. Wallace., “Was Junia Really an Apostle? A Re-examination of Rom. 16:7,” NTS 47 (2001): 76–91). If this commentary was pitched more toward the most scholarly end of the market, the lack of getting to grips with the complex grammatical construction of the Greek of Rom 16:7, as laid out in the Burer and Wallace article, would be disappointing. However, considering the fact that this commentary is aimed more toward students and intelligent ministers and lay people, Witherington’s interaction with the above mentioned article, or to be more accurate Richard Bauckham’s treatment of it, is relatively in depth, yet concise and to the point. He makes the main arguments accessible and provides enough detail for the reader to make up his or her own mind on the issue.

Also impressive is the amount of space Witherington devotes to the final chapter of the letter. Many other commentators gloss over the significance of this chapter in the overall
context of Romans, but that is certainly not an accusation that one could level fairly at Witherington. He provides a substantial amount of comment on each person mentioned by Paul, although I would have liked to have seen some firmer conclusions drawn from this as to the likely social makeup of the group of people to whom Paul is writing. Witherington is of the view that at least some of those mentioned are natives of Rome, whereas others are relatively recently arrived. Although this view is still the majority one, another alternative has been argued for persuasively by Esler in his recent commentary on Romans. So although I am not entirely convinced by Witherington’s views, I find his argument well put together and well referenced.

In conclusion, I think that Witherington’s latest commentary is a very worthwhile one to add to one’s collection of commentaries. His thorough approach and extremely readable style help to make one’s usage of it as pleasurable an experience as possible. His layout is also very helpful and systematic, including an index of modern authors, an index of ancient sources and biblical references, and a categorized bibliography. It would have been good for this commentary to have also included a brief topical index, particularly outlining rhetorical techniques and features to which Witherington refers extensively, but that is probably expecting a little too much. For anyone who owns any other commentaries by Witherington, I would suggest that there will be many similarities in style and approach in this commentary on Romans, but with one or two additional features that I have highlighted above. I hope that Witherington’s prolific output, particularly of New Testament commentaries, continues to achieve such high standards as this in the future.