Riches, John

*Galatians through the Centuries*

Blackwell Bible Commentaries


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This commentary on Galatians is part of a very exciting new project, a series of biblical commentaries (mostly one to each book) covering the whole of the Hebrew and Christian canon (and perhaps the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical writings?), from the point of view of reception history. Its focus is therefore less on the historical-critical question What did Paul, or this text, originally mean? than on how it has been understood by key interpreters down the ages. That is, of course, also a historical question, one that requires its own kinds of critical discernment, asking us to engage imaginatively and intellectually with writers from many different social settings as each in turn engages with the biblical text.

It is a striking fact, which John Riches brings out repeatedly, that up until the middle of the nineteenth century it was taken for granted that theological and biblical scholarship (and the two were not easily separated) consisted in a knowledge of a stream of appreciation and critical discussion of biblical texts stretching back to the patristic period and integrated with reflection on the relevant strands of doctrine. It is true to this day in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, but it was true also in the otherwise divided communities of the West, Catholic, Protestant, and Anglican. It is easy but unwise to dismiss all such writings as “pre-critical,” fairer to say that questions of historical background, literary
genre, and philology were habitually subordinated to theological questions of the meaning and truth of the documents. The development of literary and historical methods from the late eighteenth century onwards delivered, in their best exponents, the astonishing level of critical insight and acumen, together with a sympathetic understanding of the theological tradition in its breadth and depth, found in England in the commentaries of nineteenth-century writers such as J. B. Lightfoot and B. F. Westcott.

But John Riches is able to show how it is precisely here, in Lightfoot’s commentary on Galatians, that we see the refusal to engage theologically in the debate coming down from the past. At key points Lightfoot restricts himself to philological and historical points and abstains from comment on the meaning or relevance of the Pauline text or alternative views of it. He writes:

The period from the fifth century to the Reformation was an entire blank as regards any progress made in the interpretation of this Epistle. And from that time to the present century, though single commentators of great merit have appeared at intervals … there has been no such marked development of interpretational criticism as we have seen in our own times. (Lightfoot 1865, vii, cited by Riches, 55)

It is a pattern that is now all too familiar. Biblical studies became the application of historical methods from “our own times” to the biblical text, almost without reference to (and frequently in ignorance of) discussions taking place between the first century and the nineteenth. Theological issues in particular came to be ruled out of order, since now, in the specialized world of the academy, these are dealt with elsewhere under the heading of “Doctrine” or “Systematic Theology.” The same historical abridgement has operated in that context, too, as courses of study jump from the development of the creeds in the fourth and fifth centuries, via a cursory glance at the Reformation period, to the issues of “modernity” and beyond.

In the half century since Gadamer’s proposal that books should be studied through their “history-of-effects” and Jauss developed his related concept of “reception history” (the term preferred in this series), many voices have been calling for, and attempting to practice, an integration of current scholarship with an older, more holistic pattern, but it cannot be said that progress has been swift. It is admittedly difficult, calling for a breadth of expertise not now widely available. The best example is Ulrich Luz’s commentary on Matthew (English trans. 1989), which offers both a critical commentary in the usual manner and a history-of-effects of at least key elements of the Gospel text. A memorable example is his history of ingenious attempts to justify resistance to the harder sayings in the Sermon on the Mount. That is “reception” of a kind.
The present volume does not attempt to be a regular commentary on Paul’s text (of which there are many) but seeks to engage instead with the way its doctrine and its passion have influenced Christian (and some non-Christian) thinkers, preachers, and community leaders down the centuries. It begins with a sixty-five-page introduction outlining the book’s methodology and presenting the ten selected dialogue partners, ranging in time from the second to the nineteenth centuries and equally various in their views. These are Marcion, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, William Perkins, F. C. Baur with Adolf Hilgenfeld, and J. B. Lightfoot, plus a selection of recent writers. Each is allowed a short essay sketching his historical, social and theological context and concerns, essential preparation for understanding these readings of the Pauline text. The substance of the book then follows, dividing Paul’s text into paragraphs, identifying key questions, and presenting a critical appraisal of the approaches taken by these and other interpreters.

Galatians is a short text (shorter than this review!) but very complex, and the power of its central ideas (faith, justification, works of law, all one in Christ, new life in the Spirit) is seen in the way they have been both divisive and formative for Christian communities from the very beginning. To engage with this material is a heady experience, as Riches himself comments (xii), requiring a constant refocusing on new perspectives, values, and qualities of belief and understanding from very different cultures and centers of church life. A particularly striking experience has been working through the sections at the heart of the letter (2:11–3:29) with Riches’s exploration of the way Paul’s restless questions and passionate theological commitments became crucial for the Christian West through the minds of Luther and Calvin, foreshadowed in earlier discussions by Augustine and others, and continuing to drive exegesis and theology in the twentieth century, in the work of Bultmann and Sanders. Put the other way around, this experience was about seeing how much of this long doctrinal debate has hung, not on generalized or abstract concepts, but on the specific force and nuance of Paul’s rich and sinewy text.

Yes, the dialogue partners are all men (or almost so), all Christians (or almost so), and all writers of books (apart from six monochrome illustrations of the apostle). This is simply where the weight of influence has occurred, in this particular case. Other issues are not disregarded: feminist concerns are invoked in relation to 3:28; there is an awareness throughout of Jewish responses, in different periods, to Christian use of Paul’s arguments against Torah and Judaism; there is a fascinating detour on “Galatians 2:20 in the Mystical Tradition” drawing in a different cast, including Pseudo-Dionysius and the Kyoto school of Zen Buddhism. But for Galatians the emphasis in a history such as this must fall on how certain (male) Christian theologians have worked with, and been worked by, this text.
It is surely one of the purposes of this series to engage readers from outside the bounds of theology who might be daunted by both the style and the concerns of a technical commentary and to demonstrate that biblical interpretation is not a narrowly Christian undertaking but a significant vehicle of the intellectual history of the Western world. To the extent that it achieves that aim, it may be instrumental in allowing Paul’s influence to flow more widely and in more varied fashion. The text that (with Romans) powered the intellectual revolution known as the Reformation has a claim on anyone interested in the history of ideas.

The existence of a series of reception histories such as this is a sign that the intellectual climate in which theology operates is changing. It is certain that in the future all modes of criticism will have to be more ready to acknowledge their theological presuppositions and to recognize that they are participating in an interpretative conversation that began well before the Enlightenment. We may note that the major single discussion in Pauline studies in recent decades has been the criticism of a purported “Lutheran” understanding of Paul, for smuggling into historical-critical inquiry the Reformer’s theological interpretation. That is an example of recognizing theological presuppositions, though from the viewpoint of reception history the resulting New Perspective on Paul might be construed as a rearguard attempt to keep “objective” historical study separate from theology, and Riches has some crisp remarks on E. P. Sanders’s willingness to abandon the attempt to render the core of Paul’s thought intelligible. That others have found his thought worth wrestling with, and the attempt to do so both stimulating and life-giving, is what is successfully demonstrated in this excellent and thought-provoking volume.