

○ REVIEW OF *NAVIGATING ROMANS THROUGH CULTURES: CHALLENGING READINGS BY CHARTING A NEW COURSE*

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Timothy J Lang reviews *Navigating Romans Through Cultures: Challenging Readings by Charting a New Course*, edited by Yeo Khiok-khng (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2004).

Navigating Romans Through Cultures is the second volume in the *Romans Through History and Cultures Series*, a project organised by Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte. The entries in this volume are edited by K.K. Yeo and have their genesis in the 2001-2002 SBL seminar chaired by Grenholm and Patte.

The aim of the book is to explore multicultural readings of Romans from contemporary interpreters of diverse cultural contexts. The volume contains eight entries from scholars across the globe, each engaging Paul's letter from a unique cultural perspective and approaching the text with a reflective honesty regarding their hermeneutical interests and particular socio-cultural contexts. After each entry a respondent provides brief comments, criticisms and/or questions for the respective author.

The unifying methodological groundwork for the entire series is the interpretive practice, previously articulated by Grenholm and Patte, termed 'Scriptural Criticism'. The foundational principle of Scriptural Criticism is that an infinite number of diverse and divergent readings may result within the unique and unrepeatable encounter between a particular text and reader; yet, resultant readings may be seen as equally valid and/or plausibly grounded in the text. Scriptural Criticism delimits three ways in which all interpretations are framed. First, every reader approaches the text with an *analytical frame* which reflects the individual interests of the reader; second, there is the *contextual/pragmatic frame* which is the inescapable life-context and cultural/relational history of the reader; finally, the *hermeneutical frame* relates to the religious perspective and theological convictions of each interpreter. The task offered to the contributors in this volume is, while recognizing the general principles of Scriptural Criticism, to offer a reading of Romans that is intentionally self-reflective and aimed at contextualizing Paul's letter within the culture in which the respective author is uniquely familiar.

The first two readings in this volume explore Romans within a European and African setting. Florin Cimpean (Respondent: Herold Weiss) considers Romans from the perspective of Romanian culture, offering both a Romanian Pentecostal and a Romanian Orthodox reading of Romans 8. Guided by Pentecostal and Orthodox perspectives and supplemented by traditional historical-critical methods, Cimpean's reading ends up further strengthening the basal identities of those communities as well as suggesting remedies for aporias in each tradition.

Jonathan Draper (Respondent: Gerald O. West) next offers a more descriptive account of a cross-cultural reading as he examines Bishop J. William Colenso's (1814–1883) missionary work and scholarship on Romans among the Zulu. Draper's essay confronts head on the Western Church's legacy of colonialism and paints Colenso as a significant exception to the shameful heritage. Draper exalts Colenso as a paragon for how indigenous readings ought to be nourished within cultures rather than imposed on them, how distant contextual situations (ie. Jew/Gentile

relations) can be translated into contemporary terms and how both sides of a frontier encounter stand to mutually benefit from each other's unique interpretations.

After Europe and Africa, the book next turns to Latin America and North America. Mark D. Baker and J. Ross Wagner (Respondent: James D.G. Dunn), like Draper, take a descriptive approach as they examine the ways in which Honduran Christians have approached the theme of God's righteousness (or justice) in light of the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch. In the first part of the essay, Baker details his discussions with members of the *Amor Fe y Vida* Church regarding the justice of God. In the second portion, Wagner synthesises the conversations – considering the broader strategies in the Church's reading of Romans and reflecting on how North American readers might learn from the Honduran Christians' approaches.

Juan Escarfuller's (Respondent: Elsa Tamez) entry returns to a self-reflective tone as he narrates his struggle as a Latino theologian within the world of North American academia. He discusses the major approaches to Romans 9-11 in contemporary Western scholarship and then details his preference for an 'Apocalyptic' reading on the basis of his cultural identity, not a hegemonic claim to the determinative meaning of the text. He explains how an 'Apocalyptic' reading helps serve his interests in resisting the socialising and assimilating tendencies inherent in the other approaches, tendencies which relentlessly war on his identity as a 'cultural hybrid'.

The next cultural encounter with Romans, discussed by Monya A. Stubbs (Respondent: Kathy Ehrensperger), offers a reading of Romans 13 by a self-described African-American, inexorably located within the dominating ethos of a free-market (capitalist) economy (the Roman imperial order of her day). Stubbs criticises 'one-dimensional' readings of Romans 13 which resign to unreflective subjection to the reigning system. She recommends a 'three-dimensional' reading (subjection, reflection, resistance) that does not confuse subjection with positive acceptance or support. By reading Romans 13 within the broader context of the letter and other paradigms of resistance in African-American history, Stubbs shows how Paul can be read as endorsing a strategy of resistance and critical distancing from ruling systems, particularly the dominating system of a free-market economy.

The remaining three chapters in this book deal with Romans in an Asian context. Daniel C. Arichea, Jr. (Respondent: Douglas A. Campbell) discusses the reception of Romans in South East Asia. Besides the traditional problems regarding Paul's 'righteousness' language that continue to bedevil historical-critical scholars, Arichea relates some of the specific issues involving the translation of Romans in the South East Asian context. He details how mistranslations of the letter have led to the imposition of Western sensibilities on South East Asian culture (sensibilities that Campbell terms 'quasi-Lutheran') and subsequently endangered Christian witness.

Revelation Enriquez Velunta (Respondent: Troy W. Martin) next approaches Romans and the Pauline phrase, 'from faith, to faith' (1:17), within a Filipino context. Velunta describes his mother's rather idiosyncratic interpretation of Romans 1:17 and then seeks to legitimate her 'perspectival' reading. Unlike the situation described by Arichea, where Western notions are forced upon the indigenous culture, Velunta's mother's reading is an indigenous reading, or one predominately inspired by values which are central to Filipino culture. Velunta defends this reading through a postmodern critique and occasional recourse to historical-critical methods.

Yeo's own entry (Respondent: Brian K. Blount), the final in the volume, assesses Paul's Christological predestination language in Romans 8 in light of Confucian messianic expectations and the hope of recovering a past golden age. Yeo considers how Paul and Confucius might

mutually illuminate one another, examines what themes rise to the fore when the one is read in light of the other, and finally contrasts the two in order to enlighten the essential distinctiveness of each.

The unavoidable bane of any monograph which combines the work of several contributors is the inevitable unevenness of the entries. This book is certainly no exception. However, given the rather novel and experimental aims of the book, the reasons for the strength of some contributions and the weakness of others is actually quite revealing. The entries which, in my view, were the most interesting and methodologically consistent tended to be those which engaged the project on a more descriptive level. The two which immediately come to mind are Draper's essay on Bishop Colenso and Baker and Wagner's description of the Amor Fe y Vida Church's response to Hurricane Mitch. By describing the interpretive practices of another person or group, these scholars were generally freed from the tendency to inadvertently slip into historical-critical argumentation or lapse into language suggestive of normative claims regarding authorial intent or a single, determinative meaning in the text. Furthermore, by simply describing an already existent cross-cultural reading, they were spared the thorny task of traversing the tightrope between cultures themselves. The contributors who did not go about the project in a descriptive manner, however, were spared neither the treacherous tightrope between cultures nor the task of keeping their rhetoric and methodology consistent with their hermeneutical presuppositions.

Readers with predilections against interpretations hewn from a postmodern chisel will not, in all likelihood, be won over by the contributions in this volume. The goal of the volume is not, however, to offer a series of disembodied, theoretical apologies for textual indeterminacy and the role of the reader in shaping meaning. Rather, it is an all too rare attempt for biblical scholars of a shared postmodern stripe to begin to put their interpretive money where their theoretical mouths are. Thus, for readers sensitive to the importance of contextualised interpretations which seek to incarnate Paul's gospel within the contexts of various cultures, this book will be seen as a welcome contribution and helpful template for similar projects; yet it is also a sober harbinger of how difficult this task truly is – particularly for those who are still being weaned from historical-criticism's breast.