

Catholic Biblical Quarterly 60 (1998) pp. 558-60

Brendan Byrne, S.J.

Romans

(SacPag 6; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press/ Michael Glazier, 1996). Pp. xx+503.

\$29.95

Reviewed by Mark D. Nanos

This review published with the permission of the copyright holder.

CBQ webpage at <http://cba.cua.edu>.

Brendan Byrne's exposition of Romans joins other volumes in a NT commentary series by Catholic biblical scholars for biblical professionals, graduate students, theologians, clergy, and religious educators. The style is clear and accessible. The book has separate sections for translation, interpretation, notes, and references. It concludes with several indexes. The format often leads an author to eschew direct reference to sources, leaving this task to other commentators, presumably in favor of reading with minimal interruption.

Byrne engages traditional theological and historical-critical methods but states a commitment to move beyond them by employing the tools of rhetorical and literary criticism, expressly because they focus the interpreter's sights on the implied audience and the persuasive impact of the letter's argument. In the preface B. expresses debt to N. Elliott and D. A. Campbell for their work in developing these methods. B. cautiously refrains from extensive concern with formal rhetorical categories of the period, an area of NT discipline still in its formative stages and not yet harmonized sufficiently with ancient epistolary theory. Instead, he develops the useful insights of the new rhetoric. To this end B. also acknowledges the contributions of social-science criticism and the sociology of knowledge, wherein the key symbols shared by Paul and his addressees are emphasized.

The stated approach is important. It signals this commentary's harmony with recent works on Romans. For example, it leads to a productive focus on the implied readers as Gentiles and highlights Paul's use of diatribe to account for the Jewish partner in dialogue in the early chapters. There is a surprising amount of traditional theological discussion throughout B's commentary, however. The focus is often on matters which have surfaced later in the history of interpretation. As discussions or notes these have their obvious usefulness, but as a central focus in some of the interpretive sections they are well worn, and they distract from the considerable task of uncovering Paul's persuasive intentions or the symbolic world shared with his implied addressees.

This problem emerges, for example, in B.'s assertion of the epideictic nature of Romans. This appears correct, for Paul is calling the addressees to adhere to previously shared values in the face of competing ones. However, B.'s move to understand the rival claims gaining ground as "attachment to the Jewish law" (p. 17) grows not out of the text of Romans but out of the history of interpretation. This interpretation does not take into account that in Romans the Gentiles are confronted by Paul not for being suddenly tempted to embrace Jewish identity or observance (as in Galatians) but rather for the opposite, for growing smugly triumphant and imagining in their new-found status as the people of God that they have supplanted the people of the Law who do not share their gospel values. This problem is borne out not only in the rhetoric of chap. 11, but in chaps. 14—16, where Paul challenges the assertion of freedom of those who are "strong" to eat even if doing so would provoke blasphemy of their claims in faith. It is to a later time, and in fact to Catholic piety (or at least, its caricature), that the temptation toward adherence of such a value (which the Reformers deemed "attachment to Jewish Law") was the explicit threat to be met by the implied author.

The unevenness which results from inconsistently applying these methodologies surfaces in B.'s discussion of the "weak" and "strong" of chaps. 14—15, an area of particular importance in the current "Romans debate." Here B. perceptively utilizes

rhetorical criticism to tease out the likely presence of the apostolic decree, which "reflects the position of the 'weak in faith' and testifies to its later prevalence in important circles of the community" (p. 405). Sustained attention to the rhetorical constraints would push this observation further, for this appears to be the position of the "weak in faith"—and of Paul!—toward the behavior now required of the "strong." But B. does not go in this direction; instead, he turns to 1 Corinthians, as one would expect of someone using the traditional methods but not of someone using the new rhetorical methods. Thus B. considers the context of the "conscience" of the "weak," a context quite at odds with the rhetorical information provided in Romans (B. notes this absence with puzzlement [p. 411 n. 1]).

Once this move is made, the rhetorical concern of the "weak" in Rome to condemn the eating of the "strong," thereby perhaps destroying the "weak" for whom Christ died, is lost to the imported Corinthian problem of injuring the conscience of the "weak" when they, without being fully convinced, adopt the eating behavior of the "strong." This position is quite different from the rhetorical situation of Romans, where the "weak" are not so much resisting such eating for themselves as they are opposing it for the "strong," as inappropriate behavior for those who would claim to be among the covenant people of God. Thus, unlike 1 Corinthians, there is no suggestion in Romans that the "weak" would be seduced to embrace the "inappropriate" eating habits of the "strong" against their conscience. My disappointment is clearly not with B.'s employment of the new methodologies but with his allowing their interpretive potential to be sidetracked by traditional theological categories, thereby failing to deliver the argumentative texture of Romans across the breath of the letter, perhaps suggesting that these methods merely return us to the same places already trod by previous interpreters.

This commentary is concise, yet it shows that its author is well informed, and the book is not without a few surprises. B. provides a view of the potential of the new critical

methods, and his interpretation of Romans will no doubt prove helpful to many a student of this letter.