Reading Romans

By Luke Timothy Johnson in the January 15, 2008 issue

In Review

Romans: A Commentary

Robert Jewett
Fortress

Those paying the $90 price for this commentary in the distinguished Hermenia series can scarcely complain that the book was lightly tossed off. It includes 70 pages of front matter (such as bibliography), 125 pages of back matter (indices and the like) and over 1,000 pages of commentary—actually, given the double-column format, 2,000 pages. Because I will shortly offer some criticisms of Robert Jewett's effort, I want to begin by acknowledging what is good and important in a work that culminates a long career devoted to the study of Paul.

First, the publishers deserve universal applause for their commitment to a commentary series that upholds the highest standards of critical scholarship in an age when the risks involved in such a commitment are painfully obvious. We might bemoan the overly indulgent editorial oversight that allows commentaries to grow so unwieldy, but it is remarkable to find a religious publishing house willing to give scholarship room to expand.

Second, Jewett has applied himself diligently to all the unromantic details that make critical scholarship grueling. He shows the full evidence and argument for the Greek text he establishes, and provides an original translation. He acknowledges and often vigorously engages scholarly positions on both sides of disputed issues. He offers some elements of patristic interpretation. He presents a substantial amount of original research on early Roman Christianity. He uses rhetorical analysis in reasonable fashion (although this sometimes sits uneasily with his form-critical instincts). Most remarkable in a book this large, he posits a strong thesis that he

sustains with impressive clarity throughout. For those seeking up-to-date scholarship on all these points, Jewett is an important resource.

Jewett's commentary appears 89 years after Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* challenged the adequacy of the historical-critical approach to the New Testament then employed in Germany. For Barth, the grammarians and historians could explain the text, but unless they engaged the theological issues that Paul addressed they could not be said to interpret Romans. The issues in the letter are inescapably theological, because they involve the human condition before God: the rebellion of sin, the deception of law, the grace of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the obedience of faith. Barth's slender first edition generated controversy and a renewal of Protestant theology. Biblical critics, however, mostly declined his challenge.

Jewett's massive volume will certainly be consulted (not necessarily read in its entirety) by members of the New Testament professional guild. His book will receive respectful but limited attention. This is not simply because its daunting length and complexity resist entry by ordinary readers, but because Jewett's relentless application of current preoccupations flattens one of the world's most powerful religious writings to the level of the banal and reveals how little theological passion and insight are to be found among contemporary New Testament interpreters.

Over the past several decades the theological assumptions taken for granted by Barth—designated by some as the "Lutheran perspective" on Romans—have been dismantled. Krister Stendahl's 1963 article "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West" (in his *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*) charged that readings of Paul based on Augustine and Luther are theological projections; Paul himself was much more concerned with Jew-gentile relations than he was with the relation of faith and works. The point of Romans is reached not in chapters 7-8 but in chapters 9-11, where Paul works out the dialectical relation of Jew and gentile in God's plan.

E. P. Sanders's seminal work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977) weakened the traditional perspective further by demonstrating that Paul was not a critic of the law but rather, like his fellow Jews, operated religiously within the framework of "covenantal nomism." Paul was not inventing a new "religion of grace," for all Jews lived within grace; the difference between Paul and his compatriots was that he accepted Jesus as God's gift and they did not.

Stanley Stowers pushed for a further rethinking of Paul's purposes in *A Rereading of Romans*: *Justice*, *Jews and Gentiles* (1994). Stowers brought the benefit of rhetorical analysis to his argument that Paul's goal was not theological but moral: the real telos of Romans is reached in chapters 12-14, where Paul exhorts his readers.

This more "horizontal" reading of Romans—and of all of Paul's letters—has been embraced and widely disseminated by N. T. Wright (*Climax of the Covenant*: *Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, 1992), who emphasizes that Paul is not otherworldly but this-worldly, is focused on social healing more than individual salvation, and is more concerned with political resistance than personal holiness.

The new perspective has not met with universal approval. In *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*: *The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (2003) Stephen Westerholm provides an extensive and fair-minded review of current scholarly positions as well as a helpful history of Pauline interpretation in which, inevitably, Romans takes center stage. Some contemporary readers emphasize the soteriological perspective, some the ecclesiological. But at least this debate takes place within a framework that can be called theological.

Insofar as he reveals any theological interest, Jewett can be placed squarely within the horizontal school. As he sees it, Paul's concern is not with the individual but with the social group, not with faith/works but with Jew/gentile.

The deficiency in Jewett's commentary is connected mainly, however, to his enthusiastic embrace of another stream of scholarship, one that derives not from an interest in Paul's theological argument as such but from a confidence in the ability of historical-criticism to explain every aspect of the letter in such fashion that it not only is intelligible within its first context (something everyone acknowledges is important), but is restricted in its significance only to that first context.

The premise here is that if Paul was not writing a theological tract for the ages—and everyone agrees he had no intention of doing that—then Romans must be understood within the circumstances of Paul's ministry, as generated, as were his other occasional letters, by a situation in his own ministry or in a church that called out for his apostolic attention. Historical critics typically gather all evidence from within a letter that might point to a specific rhetorical situation; then, with the help of other information—when available—reconstruct the situation Paul addresses; and, finally, read the details of the letter as they fit within that reconstruction. Some

degree of circularity is inevitable even in the best examples of this method, but the circularity becomes vicious when exegetes distort the textual evidence of the composition by making it serve only their own reconstruction.

Romans has proven to be remarkably resistant to being treated just like all other Pauline letters. Karl Donfried's *The Romans Debate* (2nd enlarged edition, 1991) contains essays that offer several not entirely reconcilable reconstructions and purposes for this powerful composition. A helpful review of the interpretive options is available also in A. J. M. Wedderburn's *The Reasons for Romans* (1988).

The problem is this: Paul is quite clear about his own circumstances and why he is writing to the Roman church. As Jewett notes, the personal notices in chapters 1, 15 and 16 indicate that Paul is at a turning point in his ministry. As he sets out to deliver the collection to the church in Jerusalem, he seeks the financial assistance of the Roman Christians for his planned mission to Spain.

But if Romans is basically a fund-raising letter, how do we account for the contents of chapters 1-14? The simplest suggestion is that Paul shared with the Romans the missionary theology that he had worked out in light of the Galatian and Corinthian controversies—and his efforts for the collection—so that the Roman Christians would gladly support the "good news" of an apostle whom they had not yet met face-to-face. But this suggestion is insufficiently situational for many critics. For them, reading Romans like other letters means reading it as instruction or correction of the Roman readers.

In letters like 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, Paul does identify and address problems among his readers. But in Romans he is remarkably circumspect. His discussion of the diversity of practice among the "weak" and "strong" in chapter 14 is vague, and he suggests that his readers are capable of instructing themselves. Nevertheless, many contemporary critics (including Jewett) insist that everything in the letter must be directed by Paul to the historical circumstances of his first readers: everything in chapters 1-13 should be understood in terms of the community differences described briefly in chapter 14: the strong are contemptuous of the weak because of their observance of dietary and Sabbath rules, while the weak are judgmental of the strong for their failure to observe the same.

The most obvious way to do this is by reading the weak as Jewish believers and the strong as gentiles. Once this is done, chapters 1-13 seem to be filled with encoded

references to the Roman disputants, and the way is open to a more detailed reconstruction of the specific situation among Paul's readers that he is assumed to be addressing.

Such reconstruction is necessarily speculative, because hard evidence is lacking. Scholars can therefore come up with quite distinct scenarios. In a book that appeared at the same time as Jewett's commentary, *Solving the Romans Debate* (2007), A. Andrew Das argues that the Roman readership was entirely gentile (all evidence to the contrary is explained away) and that those who are represented by "Jews" in the encoded text are actually gentiles who had been god-fearers and were attracted to Jewish observance. Das is responding to the argument of Mark Nanos, in *The Mystery of Romans*: *The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (1996), that some gentile believers continued to meet in the context of synagogues.

Each solution requires stretching and twisting the evidence to fit the theory being offered. Equally important, the effort expended to develop each historical scenario draws attention even further from the religious argument that Paul is making. The meaning of what he says tends to be reduced to the identity of those to whom he says it.

Jewett's reconstruction is even more comprehensive. Indeed, historically speaking, he wants it all. He wants Paul's letter to be ambassadorial (designed to gain financial support), but he also sees it as a means of correcting the Roman congregations. The plural is important: Jewett envisions not a single church but multiple ones, some Jewish, some gentile, some perhaps mixed. From Paul's greetings in chapter 16, furthermore, Jewett proposes to distinguish churches that meet in households from those that meet in tenements, and he is prepared to offer possibilities for the geographical location of these small communities and to suggest that the diverse social settings also entailed different notions of ecclesial structure and practice. "Jew/gentile" is far too simple a disjunction for Jewett: he sees Paul addressing the full complexity of Roman Christianity.

Jewett adds two more elements that are even more speculative. First, he reads Paul's statement in 1:14 that he is obliged to Greek and barbarian as a reference to the Spaniards whom Paul hopes to evangelize: they do not share in the Hellenistic and Jewish cultures that Paul has heretofore been able to assume. The payoff here is that Paul particularly needs Roman connections in this venture, since he will lack others.

Second, Jewett adopts whole-cloth the latest fad in New Testament scholarship, which broadly terms itself as postcolonial, and reads virtually everything in the New Testament as a coded critique of the Roman Empire and especially of its claims of cultural superiority elaborated in the civic cult of the early empire.

The issue in Romans, in Jewett's reading, is not humanity's alienation from God because of sin and the ways in which sin is revealed through boasting over others and in which the law becomes implicated through the deep urges of the flesh. The issue, rather, is the cultural hegemony that arises from living within an empire that rejects barbarians as alien and boasts of Roman cultural superiority. This problem is to be addressed by the diverse Roman congregations as they eschew mutual boasting and practice mutual acceptance. Thus they will be persuasive purveyors of the good news ("to overcome cultural barriers and conflicts") to barbarians in Spain.

Full credit to Jewett for keeping so many balls in motion. But it must be said that, even at the level of historical analysis, he relies almost entirely on assertion rather than demonstration. We cannot know that some of Paul's readers met in tenements rather than house churches, much less that they had different ideas about leadership. Jewett cannot know that some of those with slave names in chapter 16 worked within the imperial bureaucracy and therefore could provide Paul with administrative help with his Spanish mission. Least convincing is Jewett's thesis that Paul's rhetoric has Roman imperialism as its target, especially in light of 13:1-7. It is, in fact, a thesis that has virtually no real support in the text, with the result that its constant reassertion becomes intrusive.

Is it really likely that when the Romans heard Paul's words about creation being "subjected to futility" in 8:20 they "could well have thought about how imperial ambitions, military conflicts, and economic exploitation had led to the erosion of the natural environment throughout the Mediterranean world, leaving ruined cities, depleted fields, deforested mountains, and polluted streams as evidence of this universal human vanity"? It seems that theology is not the only "ideology" that can anachronistically be imposed on Paul's text with a "hegemonistic agenda."

To concede that Romans is not systematic theology does not in the least imply that Romans is not profoundly theological from beginning to end; the interpretive task is not to eliminate the theological register of the composition, but to engage it appropriately. Jewett is absolutely correct to emphasize Paul's concern for Jew-gentile reconciliation and his appeal to Roman congregations to adopt attitudes of

mutual acceptance. But he fails to show how this horizontal dimension does not exclude but rather depends on Paul's sense of the vertical dimension—how God's intervention in Christ has created the possibility for a new way of being human.

The sheer number of philological details, scholarly debates and historical speculations threatens to make the interpreter (and the reader) lose the true power of Paul's argument. Paul's argument works within a grand narrative (or drama) involving God and humans. It is distressingly banal to reduce Paul's language about sin and grace, about disobedience and love, to the level of cultural attitudes (toward, for example, "imperial ideology"), though such a reduction often passes itself off as theology in some seminary classrooms today. Paul is getting at something deeper than the play of cultural distortions. He is working at the level of the disease of every human heart that continues, no matter what adjustments are made in cultural arrangements, to pursue destructive behavior. And Paul is making claims about "all flesh" and "every person" and about the "power of the gospel to save" that go beyond the specific cultural conditions of Jews and gentiles in the first century—his language demands to be engaged with at the anthropological/theological level.

Some of the difficulty in finding this aspect of Romans in Jewett's commentary undoubtedly is due to his desire to be compendious and his dedication to his own horizontal, culturally defined reading. Some of his exegetical decisions, however, suggest that at some level he does not fully appreciate the powerful religious drama that underlies Paul's argument. Paul's readers are invited to choose whether they are to continue living according to the story of Adam (with dispositions of disobedience and mutual hostility) or the story of Jesus (with dispositions of faithful obedience and mutual acceptance). Paul urges them to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

Because Jewett rejects (without appearing fully to understand) the important recent work done on "the faith of Jesus Christ" in Paul's letters, above all in Romans 3:21-26, he is not able fully to connect God's saving work disclosed through Jesus' obedient faith and the lives of obedient faith that he seeks to cultivate among his readers. In short, the central theme of faith in Romans is removed from its powerful role as the essential human response to God, one with profound anthropological implications, and reduced to something far more formal (like commitment to Christian belief). Failing to grasp how Paul has made Jesus' human response to God part of God's essential gift to humans means failing to grasp how dispositions of

mutual acceptance articulate the form of life possible only because of that powerful and transforming gift. That it is possible to read Romans from the perspective of such a strong Christology without losing in the least the horizontal dimension (of relations between Jews and gentiles) is shown by A. Katherine Grieb's *The Story of Romans*: *A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (2002).

Robert Jewett's commentary is a monument to contemporary historical-critical biblical scholarship. It simultaneously informs readers of many things they did not know—and perhaps do not really need to know—and inhibits an engagement with what readers have not yet heard—and definitely need to hear.