



Hultgren, Arland J.

Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Of the making of commentaries there is no end. The book of Romans has been covered in most, if not all, major commentary series that I can think of, so why bother with a standalone volume such as Arland J. Hultgren's (Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN) *Paul's Letter to the Romans*? I can think of several reasons:

First, Hultgren's commentary is up-to-date. Hultgren is able to interact with the best of scholarship in recent times. Obviously, older commentaries are limited in this regard. Second, Hultgren has drawn from thirty years of practical experience teaching through this particular letter. That alone should be enough to make students of Romans curious as to what Hultgren has to say. Third, Hultgren provides his own translation of Romans. I know, this isn't exactly unheard of, but it's still welcomed. Fourth, Hultgren is a Lutheran. With major commentaries from Reformed (Moo, Screiner, Cranfield), Methodist (Dunn, Jewett), Catholic (Fitzmyer), Anglican (Wright, Morris), and Charismatic (Keener) scholars, it's nice to have a Lutheran write something recent.

As for the commentary itself, it begins with a pretty standard introduction covering the date, place, and reason for writing. Hultgren stands within the mainstream of NT scholarship in dating the letter between AD 55 and 58 and placing Paul in Corinth when he composed it (2-4). Paul's reason for writing was to introduce himself and his theology to the church at Rome in hopes of

gaining support for his mission to Spain. This was something of a preemptive strike in case he wasn't received well at Jerusalem. At least in this case he'd still have backing for his trip to Spain (15).

Each section follows the same format, which consists of Hultgren's translation of the unit under discussion, followed by notes on the text and translation, a general comment, a more detailed comment, and then a bibliography. I can't say that I've seen this format used in any other commentaries, and even though it took some getting used to, I like it. As someone who doesn't read commentaries cover to cover I can appreciate this kind of self-contained approach. The bibliographies at the end of each section are ingenious and extremely convenient.

In addition to the commentary proper there are eight appendices that address the following topics:

1. The "Righteousness of God" in Paul
2. Romans 1:26-27 and Homosexuality
3. *Pistis Christou*: Faith in or of Christ?
4. The Imagery of Romans 3:25
5. The Text of Romans 5:1
6. The Identity of the "I" in Romans 7
7. The Church as the Body of Christ in the Letters of Paul
8. House Churches and Communities in Rome

I've had mixed reactions to these appendices. Appendix 3 presents the cases for both the subjective and objective genitive readings of *pistis christou* clearly and succinctly, while highlighting the pros and cons of each position. In the end I think that Hultgren is correct to suggest that the objective genitive makes the best sense of the grammar, syntax, and actual use of *pistis christou*. This is one of the better appendices.

Appendix 2 on the other hand seems misguided. Hultgren's argument amounts to little more than saying that the Bible knows nothing of sexual orientation, and Paul would have known nothing of committed homosexual relationships, so Romans (and presumably the rest of the Biblical witness) has nothing to say to the issue. But of course the issue isn't with same-sex *attraction*, or even homosexuality as a concept, but rather with same-sex *intercourse* (to use Hultgren's translation [87]). God reveals his wrath against the Gentiles (on Hultgren's reading) by giving them over to their abominable practices, homosexual intercourse being one such practice.

Appendix 6 is actually less informative than the earlier commentary on this passage. While Hultgren lists a variety of interpretations for the “I” of Romans 7, he doesn’t summarize them or interact with those contrary to his own view, which is that Paul is speaking of both his pre-Christian and Christian life, although not properly autobiographically. More than being unpersuaded by his reading, I’m disappointed by his lack of interaction with opposing viewpoints. This is unfortunate and somewhat surprising given his approach to the *pistis christou* issue.

As I mentioned above, I don’t read commentaries all the way through, but rather use them as reference tools. For my interests I wanted to see how Hultgren addressed a few passages, namely Romans 1:3-4; 7:7-25; 9:5; and 16:7. I’ve already mentioned Hultgren’s take on Romans 7 so I’ll briefly summarize his position on the other passages:

- On 1:3-4 Hultgren opts for an adoptionist reading where Paul is taking up a preexisting creedal formula that means to say that “Jesus was ‘designated’ or ‘appointed’ God’s Son (for the first time)” at his resurrection rather than being “‘declared’ God’s Son (which he had always been) as he entered into his post-resurrection reign.” (47)
- On 9:5 Hultgren sees a doxology rather than an exalted Christological statement. The fact that Paul doesn’t refer to Jesus as “God” elsewhere in the undisputed letters militates against his doing so here.
- On 16:7 Hultgren takes Andronicus and Junia to be a married couple, hence Junia is a woman, and they are included within the circle of the apostles.

So what makes Hultgren’s commentary worthy of use alongside or instead of others? Well, again, he’s up-to-date. He spent the decade prior to publication writing this volume and in the process he was able to make use of the most recent research and scholarship. The format and layout of this commentary is perfect for people like me who use commentaries as reference tools. The bibliographies are exquisite and open the door to a plethora of scholarly publications. I was pleased to see the interaction with older commentators like Origen, Augustine, Calvin, and Luther beside recent commentators. And I suppose that one could gain plenty of insight into Paul’s letter if they’re really looking for it.

Is there anything that would lead me to direct people away from this commentary? Well, I often found myself disagreeing with Hultgren, such as on Romans 1:3-4 or 9:5. I think his appendices are a mixed bag and some would have been better placed in the actual commentary or excluded altogether. Hultgren has a few original things to say but nothing earth shattering. The majority of

what he says has been said before by others (at least from what I've read). But none of these are strong enough reasons for me to say, "Don't read this!" Hultgren's is a welcomed voice in a conversation that doesn't lack for commentaries on Romans.

Hultgren wrote that he "wrote the book primarily for readers who enjoy and demand a high level of scholarship but want to be able to understand the book as nonspecialists." ("[Why Romans?](#)" EerdWord, 18 Apr. 2011, accessed on 20 Jan. 2012) I think he's managed to reach his audience. I wouldn't recommend this commentary to the person looking for something devotional or something focused on life application, but I'd certainly recommend it to the theologically informed nonspecialist. I look forward to making more use of this volume as I continue to study Paul's letter to the Romans.