



Keener, Craig S.

Romans: A New Covenant Commentary

New Covenant Commentary Series 6

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009. Pp. xxv + 268. Paper.
\$32.00. ISBN 9781606081563.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Craig Keener is known the world over for his weighty New Testament commentaries¹, and most recently his books *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* and *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*. If you've ever read a book written by Keener then you've undoubtedly been inundated by voluminous foot/endnotes. Keener has mastered what seems like every piece of ancient Greco-Roman and Second Temple Jewish piece of literature known to man. No one can help but be impressed by the attention to detail that Keener gives to providing context for his claims, but I'm willing to bet that more than a few can attest to being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of that information alone.

I'm the type of reader to go off on rabbit trails when I come across footnotes. This isn't a bad thing; I actually enjoy it. The problem is that with Keener's larger volumes I can get so far off the path that it takes what seems like forever to return. This isn't the case with Keener's commentary on Romans in the New Covenant Commentary Series. Don't get me wrong—footnotes abound—

¹ *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994); *Matthew* (IVPNTCS 1; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997); *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999; repr. 2009); *Revelation* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000); *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003); *1-2 Corinthians* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (multi-volume; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, forthcoming).

but they're nowhere near as dominant as in his larger volumes. Keener has streamlined his research and crammed it into as small a space as possible. He does, however, thank his co-editor for "allowing [him] more space than some shorter volumes in the series, so that [he] did not need to end [his] comments, like some early manuscripts of Romans, with chapter 14 (or at least to omit the cover)" (xi).

I really appreciated Keener's introduction, which focused on providing literary and social background material, while simply noting the date (58 CE) and place of composition (Corinth) in passing. Here Keener suggests that Paul was trained in rhetoric and knew how to use it to make his point to both Jewish and Gentile audiences. He emphasizes the shift that came about in NT studies with E. P. Sanders' seminal monograph *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, and the debates concerning Paul's understanding of law and grace. Adding to the complexity of the issue is the fact that Judaism in Paul's day (as it is now) was diverse, and that even the early Church had its own share of diversity.

The commentary proper shows us the concise Keener. Translations are not provided in the text so the reader will have to use this volume with a Bible nearby. In terms of format, there isn't much to speak of, just Keener's comments on the text with tables and excursuses scattered throughout. The excursuses are all printed in a different font from the commentary text and they address anything from important theological vocabulary (e.g., "Dikaiosunē in Romans" [27-29]) to the interpretation of controversial passages (e.g., "Fusing the Horizons: Homosexual Activity" [35-40]) to helpful background information (e.g., "Ancient Mediterranean Food Customs" [161]).

As is my custom, I sought Keener's insights on various issues and passages, such as Romans 1:3-4 with respect to whether or not he sees Jesus as being appointed God's Son (i.e., an adoptionistic reading) or declared God's Son; 2:12-15 and the identity of the Gentiles (i.e., were they Christian or non-Christian); 9:5 concerning the referent of Paul's doxology; and 11:26 in order to see how he understands Paul's use of "all Israel." I'll briefly summarize Keener's findings:

On 1:3-4 he's somewhat ambiguous saying, "As a descendant of David (1:3; cf. 15:12), Jesus could be rightful heir to Israel's throne, but once a king was enthroned, he was adopted by God (2 Sam 7:14-16; Pss 2:6-7; 89:26-33). Jesus was not only descended from David (as some other people were), but attested as God's Son by the Spirit, who raised him from the dead and hence exalted him as Lord. Of course, Jesus is not God's "Son" only in the ordinary royal sense (cf. Rom 8:3, 29; Isa 9:6-7), but the good news that God has established a king, and hence his kingdom, sets Paul's preaching of Jesus squarely in the context of the OT promises." (20)

But I'm unclear on exactly whether or not Keener reads this passage in an adoptionistic sense. On the one hand he clearly sees the Davidic king as being adopted as God's Son, but he sees Jesus going beyond this by virtue of the Resurrection. The question I have concerns whether or not Keener sees the Resurrection as the moment when Jesus was adopted as God's Son or declared God's Son, which he had always been.

On 2:12-15 Keener sees three possible referents for the Gentiles who by nature do the works of the Law: 1) "a real but small class of people (the way some Jewish people thought of 'righteous Gentiles')"; 2) "a hypothetical class of people (posited perhaps for rhetorical purposes)"; or 3) "Christians" (44). He finds merit in the latter two options but ultimately argues that the first is the focus of this passage since Paul is arguing for "God's ethnic impartiality." One can see how this would make sense if Paul stopped speaking here, but in light of what Paul says about the sinfulness of humanity in Romans 3, and the mind set on the flesh's enmity with God in 8:7, I think the more likely option is #3.

On 9:5 Keener, rightly in my opinion, sees Jesus as the referent of Paul's doxology, saying, "Given the parallel to Paul's doxology in 1:25, 'who is... God blessed forever' in 9:5 most likely applies to the Christ who is over all, though Paul more often prefers the divine title 'Lord' for him (10:9-13; 1 Cor 8:5-6; Phil 2:9-11 [with Isa 45:23])" (116-17). While there is a note about those who dissent from this view and those who agree with it, there is no mention of the alternative interpretation and its supporting reasons. In fact, Keener rarely gives more than a brief mention to alternative viewpoints throughout the commentary, which I suppose is understandable given the limited space he had to work with. On the other hand, more interaction with other views would prove extremely helpful.

On 11:26 Keener understands "all Israel" to be "Israel as a whole" as opposed to a "completed Gentile church," which is a position that some argue. Keener rightly notes that in the context of Romans 9-11 Paul has been contrasting "Israel" with the "Gentiles." This is a very important point to make since there is no shortage of people who argue for Gentile believers as "spiritual Jews" or "the true Israel" based on a couple of verses taken out of context (e.g., Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6 cf. Gal. 6:16). Keener also rightly understands that the salvation of "all Israel" or "Israel as a whole" does not mean that every single individual Jew will be saved, nor does he understand the passage to be speaking of individual salvation, but rather corporate salvation.

I have to say that I greatly appreciate Keener's no frills approach to this commentary. He provides plenty of background information without overwhelming us with it. He mentions the

commentaries of others in passing but he reserves most of his space for making his own observations. This seems to be a trend in this commentary series as Fee (Revelation) and Bird (Colossians & Philemon) have taken similar approaches in their respective volumes (Fee is much more extreme in his lack of interaction than either Keener or Bird though).

If I had to lodge a complaint or two then they would be these: First, Keener lays (here and elsewhere) a lot on the shoulders of Greco-Roman customs, culture, literature, etc. I will in no way, shape, or form deny the importance of this background info, and I won't deny that Paul's was a Judaism steeped in Hellenism, but at times it seems that the emphasis is on Greco-Roman material where more interaction with Jewish material would have been preferable.

Second, Keener gets kind of lazy with his references to midrash (54, 63, 126) or "midrashic linking" (55) or "reading [a] key text for all its worth as midrashic expositors typically did" (64). The problem is that he doesn't really explain exactly what midrash is or expound on different techniques of midrashic exegesis. The references are pretty vague to be honest. While one might risk anachronism, it's worth it to explore later rabbinic writings for possible insights into what Paul does with his exegesis, and Keener makes plenty of reference to rabbinic material so it wouldn't have been difficult for him to do so here.

Some readers will find themselves less than thrilled with some of Keener's theological insights, e.g., he suggests that Paul's use of terms like "chose" or "predestined" weren't invested with all the meaning that they'd come to acquire in later debates like the "Greek fathers' defense of free will against fatalism, Augustine's defense of God's sovereign grace against Pelagius, or the debates of the Reformation era" (109). Rather than pitting God's sovereignty against human choice, Keener says that most ancient Jews understood God as accomplishing his sovereign purposes by "work[ing] in and around choices (Exod 13:17; 1 Sam 9:8, 16)" (109, n. 45), and that "Paul might ground predestination in foreknowledge (8:29) to allow that God takes faith into account (in advance) in salvation (a question much debated by theologians)" (110). Others will find themselves more than thrilled by such suggestions.

Whatever your theological disposition, this is a commentary that will benefit you, if for no other reason than it will supply you with plenty of background information (in both the text and the footnotes, as well as in the Scripture and Ancient Source indices) to understand the text in ways that its original audience simply took for granted. And for those looking to study matters further, Keener has a detailed bibliography to lead you in the right direction. Not only has he mastered the primary literature; he's seemingly mastered the secondary material as well.