

Steven Coxhead, review of Paul Barnett, *Romans: The Revelation of God's Righteousness*, *Reformed Theological Review* 63 (2004): 87–88 (used with permission, and re-edited to conform with SBL style).

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ROMANS: The Revelation of God's Righteousness

By Paul Barnett (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2003), 384 pp., £8.99.

This book is Paul Barnett's second contribution to the *Focus on the Bible* commentary series, which is a relatively new series in the process of development by Christian Focus Publications. This series has the 3 'R's "Readable, Reliable, Relevant" as its motto, and Barnett's commentary is fairly much all three. The commentary is easy to read, interacts in a popular but sound way with wider scholarship on Romans, and contains helpful pastoral applications throughout.

While the book belongs to a commentary series that claims to be popular rather than technical in nature, Barnett is a first-class scholar and it is obvious from the book that he is on top of the major issues. The strength of the commentary lies in the fact that Barnett seeks to read Romans in its historical context. This comes as no surprise given that he is a trained historian. This historical orientation allows him to be open to the insights provided by the New Perspective on Paul. In fact, his commentary has an appendix in the introductory part, which deals briefly with the New Perspective (pp. 14–18).

It is significant that Barnett acknowledges points of agreement with the New Perspective. Barnett, siding with the New Perspective critique of Luther's understanding of *the law* in Paul, denies that "the Law-keeping of Judaism neatly anticipated medieval Catholicism's preoccupation with religious and moral 'works' for salvation" (p. 16). Barnett is of the opinion that "Paul writes against 'Law' and 'works' in Judaism because Jews at that time were rejecting the apostolic preaching that Jesus was the Messiah ... preferring instead their 'Law' and its 'works'" (p. 16). By thus placing Romans within its proper Jewish context, Barnett is open to understanding the majority of the references to *the law* in Romans as being references to the Mosaic law. Other strengths of the commentary include a very comprehensive and easy to use subject index, and questions for personal reflection placed at the end of each chapter of the commentary.

In terms of the weaknesses of the commentary, the major one is that, having identified in theory the Jewish context of the letter, Barnett fails to put theory into practice and place Paul's theological argument firmly in the context of the clash between Judaism and Christianity which was working itself out in the middle of the first century. The book of Acts is proof that the big issue in Paul's ministry was the opposition that he faced from non-Christian Jews without and from Christian Jews (or Judaisers) within, who were united by their adherence to Jewish covenantal particularism, which involved the limiting of justified status to Jews, i.e., to those who had been circumcised and were committed to following the law of Moses (see Acts 15:1, 5). Paul's preaching of the Christian gospel, however, which offered justified status to Jew and Gentile on an equal basis and independently of submission to the Mosaic law, flew fair in the face of Jewish zeal for the law. That is why, wherever he went, Paul was fiercely opposed by Jews. Paul himself speaks of the "trials" that he faced because of "the plots of the Jews" (Acts 20:19). This was the big issue of Paul's

ministry, which Romans also seeks to address, partly because of the trouble being caused by Jews coming back to Rome after A.D. 54, following the ending of the Jewish expulsion under Claudius.

Barnett sadly fails to identify Jewish covenantal particularism as being the big target in

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Paul's sights in the theological argument of Rom 1:18–5:21, and this impacts on his interpretations at a number of points. For example, despite his good comments on p. 14 concerning the Jewish nature of the law-keeping issue in Romans, in the body of his commentary *the works of the law* is simply defined as “any standard, God-given or man-made” (p. 73). Thus, Barnett's commentary is not as theologically or historically integrated as it could have been.

Other weaknesses of the commentary include the bibliography, which is unfortunately very poor. In fact, there seems to have been a blooper with the words “details soon” appearing twice within the bibliography. It looks like the necessary details somehow did not make it into the final draft before it went to press.

Overall, this commentary represents an admirable effort at dealing with what is arguably the most challenging Pauline letter to interpret. I would recommend Barnett's commentary as certainly worthwhile for those interested in a less-technical commentary on Romans.

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