

BOOK REVIEW

Weima, Jeffrey A.D., *1–2 Thessalonians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014). xxii + 711 pp. Hbk. \$49.99 USD.

The letters to the Thessalonians are frequently overlooked in favor of the more popular Pauline letters to the Romans and Galatians. Jeffrey Weima offers a fresh, authoritative and up-to-date commentary that should be much appreciated. Serving as a teaching Professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids for over twenty years has made Weima one who can integrate scholarly rigor with theological interests. He has established himself as a widely recognized expert on ancient letter writing, with a specialization in the two letters to the Thessalonians. In fact, this is his second commentary on Thessalonians. He has also published an annotated bibliography on Thessalonians studies, co-authored with Stanley Porter and published by Brill, with over 1300 references, making abundantly clear that Weima is an expert on the current state of Thessalonians scholarship. This broad base of knowledge shows up in the commentary in the form of substantial indices of modern authors, biblical references and ancient literature, which helpfully suggest further research.

Beneficial features of the book include its user-friendly layout. There are clear headings and subheadings to orient readers to relevant sections. Each pericope begins with an introductory floating box offering a general overview of the content and issues involved. These and other features combine to make the commentary more readable than many reference tools. Instead of being in multitudes of footnotes, many of the more common references are given a short form and included in-line with a simple parenthesis. Such shortening helps the reader and affords Weima the means to include thousands of references without worry of making the book unnecessarily cumbersome.

Beyond intelligent formatting, the commentary has a natural flow to it. Weima begins with a thorough discussion of a number of relevant social and political background details. He avoids frivolous issues and

focuses on valuable information that some commentaries lack. The reader is presented with details regarding the significance of the location of Thessalonica and its status as a ‘free-state’ within the Roman Empire. Furthermore, significant facts of history that have direct implications for the interpretation of the two letters are highlighted. For instance, Weima explains that archaeological findings have shown a number of ancient religions to be present in Thessalonica during Paul’s correspondence, notably the cults of Dionysus and Cabirus. This socio-historical information creates a relevant framework for better appreciating how Weima unpacks the exhortations on sexual morality found in 1 Thess. 4.3-6.

Once the historical details are addressed, Weima moves to the controversial issues of authorship and epistolary structuring. Weima makes clear he does not intend to offer another commentary with nothing more than a collection of popular opinions, but instead a reasoned scholarly work that is willing to go against the grain. Acknowledging that recent decades have strongly contested Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, Weima finds the arguments to be very subjective and ‘proponents far too often exaggerate’ the issues (p. 54). Working through internal and external evidences, Weima justifies his stance on Pauline authorship by shedding significant light upon various textual details: (1) the potential interpolation of 1 Thess. 2.13-16, (2) the tone of 2 Thessalonians, (3) the authenticating comment in 2 Thess. 3.17, (4) possible eschatological differences, and (5) literary dependence (pp. 40-54).

For Weima, traditional Pauline authorship is not adopted merely to maintain his position within evangelicalism. Readers will find a fair and balanced analysis of the evidence with scholarly precision. Also, the conclusion has ramifications for the rest of the commentary. It affects the interpretive process when cross-references to 1 Thessalonians and other Pauline texts are used to address exegetical challenges and ambiguities (an example is the treatment of Phil. 1.28 on p. 458, see also pp. 451, 453).

A second feature of this commentary marks a major step forward by taking more seriously the letter-writing conventions of the first century. Traditional approaches have focused on theological and thematic outlines for the New Testament letters, but in recent years, literary analysis has made significant advances in biblical studies. However, Weima finds the use of Greco-Roman rhetorical methodologies that are

currently popular to be significantly flawed. Instead, Weima contends that since Paul was a letter writer, the ‘most important source for understanding the apostle’s letters must naturally be the letter-writing practices of his day rather than the rules for oral discourse’ (pp. 55-56).

While some see the letter features of the New Testament as mere ornaments to the epistles, Weima vigorously argues for the formal epistolary approach. He even structures the entire commentary on grammatical indicators of the epistolary features. Every section begins with a substantial focus on literary analysis, covering details in distinct subheadings: character of the passage, epistolary conventions, extent of passage and internal structure. These details will be a tremendous help to students for learning how an epistolary framework affects the exegetical process. It will also serve as a guide to help preachers and teachers better follow Paul’s argumentation and presentation.

Every pericope is, therefore, understood with a logical literary flow according to its place in the overall letter. Weima makes clear that the pericope boundaries or parameters are based on epistolary features and grammatical details rather than his own subjective theological readings. The epistolary structure is even made use of in addressing interpretive challenges. For instance, Weima in principle rejects interpretations separating 1 Thess. 4.6 from what precedes, since, among other factors, ‘there is no transitional epistolary formula’ (p. 275). Weima is committed to reading the letter as the author wrote it. And since Paul used first-century letter-writing methods, Weima’s interpretation works within these epistolary conventions.

The consistency in methodology is one of the major strengths of the work. Every section repeats the same layout and the same procedure is performed, rather than adopting an eclectic approach to individual issues. While some commentaries read awkwardly and are compartmentalized, this consistency makes the book more readable.

Besides coherence and scholarly rigor, Weima also maintains a very balanced approach to his work. He is forthright about not going beyond what the text offers. This sometimes leaves questions unanswered. Limiting his theological conclusions to the actual textual features is a commendable strength of the commentary, keeping it free from wild conjecture. Weima himself charges that some modern authors ‘run the danger of reading too much into the meager information that is available’ (p. 295).

Weima's textual commitment helps guide the discussion at numerous points. He also avoids sweeping statements. For instance, 2 Thess. 2.1-17 is a theological and interpretive crux on many accounts, but Weima contends that interpreters should not rush to label the pericope as apocalyptic literature. First, giving the pericope a label does not resolve the interpretive challenges. Secondly, Weima wisely warns that restraint should be exercised, since upon closer examination, although Paul makes use of apocalyptic images and themes, the text is not 'full-blown apocalyptic' (p. 490).

In addition to scholarly restraint, Weima maintains an academic precision that includes a keen awareness of pastoral and theological concerns. Such balance comes across very clearly in his exegesis of 1 Thess. 4.13. Weima writes with a dual audience in mind, scholars and pastors. Scholars will, therefore, appreciate his attention to detail, and pastors will benefit from his lucidity and clearly defined terminology.

Simultaneous concern for scholars and pastors is also observed in the amount of attention given to the opening and closing sections of the letters. While some commentaries offer only cursory remarks, Weima builds upon his monograph on epistolary endings (*Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings* [JSNTSup, 101; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994]). Pastors and preachers will benefit from being provided with enough material and insight to preach and teach the unique features of these sections (pp. 416-32 cover only 1 Thess. 5.23-28). Scholars also will find Weima has done a commendable job demonstrating that the epistolary form leads to function, which significantly affects exegesis.

As in all such large works of scholarship, there are some weaknesses. One the reader should be mindful of is the grammatical analysis, which is a double-pronged issue in Weima's book. On the one hand, it is very refreshing to see a commentary that does not try to resolve issues simply by reference to the most popular opinion found in other commentaries. Weima frequently engages in grammatical matters that guide his interpretations. However, the use of grammatical resources could be updated in precision and nuance. At points, he is overly dependent on tense-form usage alone. For instance, he remarks that an imperfect in 2 Thess. 2.5 highlights the 'customary or repeated nature of the action' (p. 506, see also pp. 43, 110, 174, 346 n. 4, 506). He does not refer to grammars in many of these locations and does not offer a justification for interpreting the verbs in such a manner.

A New Testament scholar such as Weima is free to be committed to the grammatical system he deems correct. However, even older grammatical approaches contend that the co-text is determinative for interpreting the use of an imperfect or present. The lack of nuance and grammatical substantiation is noteworthy given the current debates concerning grammatical discourse features, tense, aspect and *Aktion-sart*. The same weakness concerns the presentation of the genitive case (pp. 482, 598).

The problem comes to the fore when many of the grammatical issues discussed use BDAG as the default citation. BDAG, however, is not a grammar but merely a lexicon. Weima's secondary source for grammar is BDF, with some references made to Moulton and Moule. These grammars were published over fifty years ago, and there have been extensive advances in grammatical and linguistic studies since their publication. So while I am very pleased to see Weima place such an important emphasis on grammar, the book could have been more up-to-date on grammatical resources. To be fair though, this is the only category I believe needs updating. The rest of Weima's references are extremely thorough and current.

In conclusion, Jeffrey Weima has provided the Baker Exegetical series with a new standard bearer for Thessalonian studies. Given that Weima contributes unique viewpoints on various topics and even challenges some of the status quo positions, there will be those who disagree. But readers from all positions will benefit from his thorough and textually-based work. Owning only one Thessalonians commentary will not necessarily be a bad thing, if this is the one you own. It is a welcome addition to the field of biblical studies and will offer useful insights to numerous scholars, students and pastors for years to come.

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