

BOOK REVIEW

Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2nd edn, 2011). xv + 166 pp. Pbk. US\$13.78.

Thomas Schreiner is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and author and editor of numerous books. He writes in the preface to *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* that the purpose of the second edition is to provide significant additions to the 1990 original. Readers will wonder, however, what these ‘significant additions’ are, as Schreiner does not specify them, except for the addition of English translations to the presentation of the diagrams (the original only has Greek). In fact, he says that ‘The book has not changed dramatically, for I am convinced that the substance of what I wrote some twenty years ago is correct’ (p. ix).

Schreiner makes some important points throughout the book. One is that many pastors and students ignore biblical exegesis (to their own detriment) simply because they do not find it relevant to contemporary life. Another is the importance of acquiring a biblical worldview that serves as the goal of exegesis, although his assumption that ‘the Scriptures present a unified worldview’ and his assertion about the ‘law of non-contradiction’ (p. 7) require elaboration and supporting evidence. Another key point is his acknowledgment of the role one’s presuppositions play in exegesis, rightly noting that absolute certainty in interpretation is impossible. A fourth important point he makes is his emphasis on discovering the theological significance of the text for contemporary application, although, as I indicate below, further comments need to be made about this. Despite these commendations, there are also some problematic statements in the book that need to be addressed. I mention them below and summarize some of the key points of each chapter.

In the introductory chapter, Schreiner states that the goal of exegesis is to create a worldview that is informed by the biblical text, and he identifies the various areas one must study in interpreting the Pauline letters. He allocates discussion of each of these areas to nine chapters. Schreiner’s approach is typical of traditional exegesis, which pays at-

tention to the historical, introductory, grammatical and theological elements of a passage. His clear and concise way of presenting the procedure and the necessary factors to be considered at each step of the exegetical process is commendable. As such, this book is accurately labeled a ‘handbook on Pauline exegesis’ (p. 4), which may be useful for pastors, but is especially useful for first-year seminary students. Everyone will find the book slanted towards a conservative evangelical orientation. This is apparent, for instance, when the author says that ‘Any theory claiming that the meaning of the author is unattainable or that the reader imposes one’s own meaning into the text *should be rejected*’ (emphasis added; p. 8; cf. pp. 10, 52).

Chapter 1 explains the value of understanding the nature of letters. The author first addresses the question of the genre of the Pauline letters by pointing out the distinction Adolf Deissmann makes between epistles and letters, and concludes by asserting that the Pauline letters had normative and authoritative status. After outlining the basic structure of Pauline letters, which resembles that of the Greco-Roman letters of Paul’s day, he enumerates several questions raised against Hans Betz’s proposal on the rhetorical pattern of Galatians. But in the end Schreiner acknowledges that some conspicuous rhetorical and formal features cannot be overlooked in the Pauline letters, such as diatribe, paraenesis, hymns and confessional statements. A major section of the chapter discusses the occasional nature of Paul’s letters, in which Schreiner warns about the danger of reading them as ‘systematic treatises’ (p. 31).

Chapter 2 sketches some basic principles concerning the practice of textual criticism. Schreiner points out that interpreters should evaluate both external and internal evidence, as well as make prudent judgments in reconstructing the original text of the passage under study. He claims that the Alexandrian tradition preserves the original reading better than the Byzantine text, although he does not give the basis or criteria for this claim. As for internal evidence, Schreiner posits typical text-critical principles derived from the so-called eclectic method as criteria for determining the best reading. He then provides a few examples on the application of these principles to some Pauline texts. The author notes in the conclusion that most manuscript variants in Paul and the New Testament ‘relate to incidental details and do not radically alter the meaning of the biblical text’ (p. 46). While this statement may cause great relief to students, it is at the same time misleading and, in my opinion,

defeats the purpose of the chapter. In fact, the textual variants he brings to attention in the specific examples (e.g. the placement of Rom. 16.25-27 in the book of Romans) are significant enough to influence the interpretation of the entire book. If manuscript variants 'do not radically alter the meaning of biblical text', what is the point of doing textual criticism?

Chapter 3 introduces readers to some of the tools necessary for translating and analyzing the Greek text of the New Testament. These tools include lexica, Bible software programs, Greek New Testament readers and M. Zerwick and M. Grosvenor's *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*. The student engaged in the exegetical task is instructed to translate the passage in order to have a working knowledge of the text, but Schreiner does not recommend the use of Greek-English interlinears. However, I suggest that instructing students to translate at this stage in the exegetical process may be unhelpful. Not only is translating tedious and time-consuming, it is premature at this stage of analysis. I think that it is better to work on sentence diagramming, lexical study and tracing the arguments of a passage first before doing translation. This will allow one to determine the context of the passage and the appropriate translation of individual words based on its syntax and context, which, in turn, will facilitate easier and more accurate translation of the passage as a whole.

Chapter 4 emphasizes the significance of historical and introductory issues in exegeting a Pauline letter, and is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on historical-cultural issues, and the second one on matters concerning authorship, dating and literary integrity. Schreiner supplies an ample list of both primary and secondary sources, as well as Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias designed for these purposes. He points out that one will always benefit from knowing the original author's historical and social culture in interpreting a passage. And because New Testament introductions provide information about the author, provenance, dating, integrity and other critical issues of a book, the student should read an introduction first before launching into the interpretation of a passage.

Chapter 5 tackles sentence diagramming and grammatical analysis. Schreiner rightly says that diagramming compels one to think carefully through the various elements of a text, as well as the syntactical relationship among all the words, phrases and clauses in a sentence. Recognizing that there are different systems for diagramming, he presents

thirty-three specific textual constructions from the New Testament using his own diagramming conventions. In each case, he begins with a description of the procedure and the conventions for diagramming, followed by application to a Greek text and an English translation. He subsequently provides a grammatical diagram of 1 Thess. 1.1-5 and a master symbols chart for diagramming, and provides a bibliography of both intermediate and advanced grammar resources. Readers will want to consult Schreiner's sentence diagramming method for its usability and clarity in analyzing the breakdown of the various components of a sentence. This method may be supplemented with the [OpenText.org](http://OpenText.org), which is another excellent resource available online for these kinds of diagrams.

Chapter 6 takes on the tracing of arguments in a passage. According to Schreiner, this is 'the most important step in the exegetical process' (p. 97), since it is one of the weaknesses of many commentaries that only focus on individual words and verses. Schreiner argues that the key to tracing Pauline argument is understanding the relations among the different propositions of a passage. Accordingly, he discusses the various types of coordinate and subordinate clausal relationships, as well as relative clauses and prepositional phrases. Although he acknowledges the objection by some that not all Pauline arguments proceed in a logical manner, Schreiner gives his three-step procedure in tracing an argument and applies it to a number of Pauline texts. Tracing the argument of a passage, however, could be more accurately done by the application of a theory of discourse analysis. It is difficult to see the relationship between sentences and propositions based solely on grammatical analysis at the sentence level.

Chapter 7 provides some basic principles on how to do lexical studies. Schreiner argues that 'words derive their meaning from the context in which they occur' (p. 126), and subsequently enumerates nine rules for doing lexical studies. Because Paul wrote thirteen letters, Schreiner suggests that the interpreter can trace the meaning of a particular word through the Pauline corpus, and he correctly cautions that 'students should beware of assuming that Paul uses his terms technically' (p. 128), since Paul did not write systematic or philosophical treatises. In many ways, Schreiner's conception of lexical study is a sound, post-James Barr approach to determining lexical meaning, although he fails to provide a methodological procedure for an actual lexical study.

Chapters 8 and 9 deal with probing the theological context and delineating the significance of Pauline letters for contemporary readers. This is one of the major issues the book wishes to tackle: 'We must be ever mindful that the process of exegesis is not complete unless we bridge the gap between the first-century world and the contemporary world' (pp. 1-2). I think that Schreiner has overstated his case here, since these two tasks can be mutually exclusive. Whereas exegesis is geared towards a reconstruction of the historical meaning of texts, 'bridging the gap' between the ancient and contemporary world tends to be more complex and multi-faceted, since it is primarily constrained by one's religious, social and cultural background. I also find problematic Schreiner's claim that 'the capstone of exegesis is theological synthesis' (p. 135). This statement strikes me as an attempt to conflate the two distinct disciplines of biblical exegesis and systematic theology. In fact, Schreiner explicitly endorses the importance of taking into account the occasional nature of each of the Pauline letters in the process of exegesis. He also acknowledges that 'all systematic theology should be informed by, and based on, solid exegesis' (p. 6). Additionally, he defines exegesis as 'the method by which we ascertain what authors meant when they wrote a particular piece of literature' (p. 7). Most importantly, he does not present a *method* for doing theological synthesis. For these reasons, I do not think that Schreiner is coherent and consistent in his argument here. Chapter 8 ends with a good number of theological resources to consult, before the author lists by way of a summary the various steps of exegesis discussed in the book in the concluding chapter.

Overall, aside from the comments noted above, I was hoping to see a more focused treatment on exegesis of the Pauline letters, rather than a general method of exegesis of the New Testament. Many of the examples in the diagrams in fact are taken from non-Pauline texts. Moreover, I would have wanted to see a clearer distinction between exegesis of Pauline letters and other books of the New Testament, as well as between the tasks of hermeneutics (interpretation) and exegesis, terms which the author seems to have used interchangeably.

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