

BOOK REVIEW

Thielman, Frank, *Ephesians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010). xxi + 520 pp. Hbk. \$185 USD.

The Baker Exegetical Commentary series is a fairly recent compendium that attempts to reach a wide range of readership, both practitioners and academicians, from an admittedly evangelical framework. In this vein, all of the authors in this series presuppose certain theological views, such as the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures, and assume traditional views of authorship. These presuppositions are fair enough, and I do not think it is always necessary to address every single issue of contention, especially if the stated goal or purpose at the outset is clear and the audience for which it is written is identified. On the other hand, there are interpretive issues, whether understood or not, that simply must be addressed, and Thielman does not shy away from the difficult passages. But of course, having multiple authors in a single series like this will inevitably lead to variations in style, content and foci of material. Having said that, however, I will review this commentary based on the stated target audience in the series preface. As a preliminary statement, this commentary is a good resource for knowing the current divergent views on various passages in Ephesians, and pastors, students and scholars would benefit from including it in their repertoire. In light of this statement, I offer two broad observations that may be considered when using this commentary, first regarding the introductory material, and secondly regarding the Greek grammatical and linguistic features.

The introductory section is fairly standard for an exegetical commentary, including sub-sections on authorship, audience, literary character, date and setting, and the structure of the letter, as well as a brief sub-section on the circumstances that prompted Paul to write it. Because within somewhat recent biblical scholarship Ephesians has not been considered to be a part of the *Hauptbriefe*, Thielman accordingly spends a good amount of space addressing this issue. In fact, the

discussion of authorship actually extends to the section on literary character, and a reader who only reads the section on authorship may miss this material. Thielman writes: ‘If scholars debate the authorship of Ephesians, there is virtually universal agreement that it is a difficult and, for Paul, an unusual text’ (p. 5). Reading further, it may be evident that Thielman is not speaking pejoratively of Ephesians by calling it ‘unusual’, but I am not sure this is the best word to capture what Thielman may be trying to say, especially since this commentary is geared towards an evangelical audience that has a high view of Scripture. Several paragraphs later, he notes the similarities in structure and theme of Ephesians and Colossians, which would seem to contradict the claim that Ephesians is unusual (how unusual can it be if it is so similar to Colossians?). Thielman’s analysis of the linguistic features of the text purports to show Ephesians is ‘unusual’, but it is unconvincing. He identifies three reasons why the letter is unusual: (1) it contains a high number of long sentences, (2) it contains a high number of grammatical and lexical ambiguities and (3) it is a highly redundant text. To each of these points, I would respond by stating that: (1) though the number of participles and dependent clauses is high in Ephesians 1, I do not think this makes the letter ‘unusual’; in fact, the Greek notion of a sentence is probably different than the English notion of a sentence, and we need to first establish whether the number of participles in this section is ‘unusual’ Greek; (2) I am not sure if ‘ambiguity’ is the best word to describe various interpretive issues, since every book has a potentially large number of interpretive difficulties (what makes Ephesians significantly different than the other letters of Paul in this sense?); (3) Hellenistic Greek *generally speaking* may be thought of as a ‘highly redundant’ language—what is redundant in English may not be redundant in Greek.

The point that Thielman seems to be making, however, is that the *style* of Ephesians seems to differ when compared with Paul’s other letters (as noted by the sixteenth-century scholar Erasmus; cf. p. 7). Saying, however, that the style of Ephesians is different than Paul’s other letters is not the same as stating that Ephesians is ‘unusual’. And Thielman even devotes several pages to evince the similarities in style that Ephesians has with Colossians. In the end, however, Thielman concludes that Paul has many styles, and difference in style between books does not necessitate difference in authors of those books. Additionally, *writing style* seems to be a largely subjective criterion that is

not so easily determined. Saying that a writer can only utilize a limited lexis in all of his or her writings is tantamount to saying that a person eats only a limited type of food and is not allowed to eat anything else. In this sense, Thielman's conclusion against proponents of pseudonymity is correct, even though that conclusion is not immune to criticism.

A second area of critique involves the commentary on the text, specifically regarding Thielman's analysis of the Greek text. In a number of places, Thielman identifies the tense-forms of various verbs that appear in the letter and applies the category of *Aktionsart* in his interpretation of them. For example, in his analysis of *προορίσας* in 1.5, he writes:

We should take the aorist tense of the participle to refer to antecedent time and understand Paul to say that God predestined his people and then chose them... Alternatively, perhaps *προορίσας* states the cause of God's choice: he chose his people because he determined beforehand that they would be his people (p. 51).

First, it has been shown by verbal aspect theory that the aorist does not convey past time, but that it depicts action as complete by the subjective choice of the speaker/writer. Paul's choice of the aorist does not convey past action (the inherent meaning of the word *προορίσας* conveys that, especially its prepositional prefix) but complete action. Secondly, he writes *προορίσας* may state the *cause* of God's choice. But it is not clear what this conclusion is based on. Perhaps it is the doctrine of predestination and foreknowledge that is being 'eisegeted' here, since the grammatical construction does not communicate this.

Another example of citing *Aktionsart* is his translation of *μνημονεύετε* in 2.11 as 'continue to remember' (p. 152), which interprets the present imperative to refer to continual, habitual or recurring action; this is in opposition to the aorist imperative, which is thought of in *Aktionsart* terms to refer to inceptive or punctiliar action. However, according to verbal aspect theory, the present imperative should be interpreted as a more specific command in comparison to the aorist imperative as a more general command. Thus, the command is not that the Ephesians need to 'continue to remember', and if they stop remembering they are being disobedient. Rather, Paul is emphasizing the importance of remembering that they were Gentiles in flesh, in light of everything he has said in vv. 1-10 (being dead in trespasses and sins, being made alive in Christ and being saved by grace through faith, not by works). The present imperative communicates, not a continual

command, but a specific command in light of what has been discussed in the co-text.

A final example is one that many may be familiar with in 5.18, the present imperatives, *μὴ μεθύσκεσθε* and *πληροῦσθε*. Thielman addresses the problem in interpreting the present tense-forms of these imperatives according to the traditional *Aktionsart* view and concludes:

Best (1998: 508) is probably correct that the present-tense imperatives in the verse (*μὴ μεθύσκεσθε*, *πληροῦσθε*) carry no more of a continuous nuance than the present imperatives that appear from 4.25 up to this point. When Paul says, for example, that his readers should speak the truth, not let the sun set on their anger, steal no longer, and let no rotten speech come from their mouth, he is not especially emphasizing the ongoing nature of these actions, and similarly there is probably no special stress on ceasing drunkenness or continuous filling here (pp. 358-59).

I agree that these present imperatives do not convey a continual nuance, but in light of previous interpretations of the present tense-form above, why is this so? Why is Best (probably) correct? And why do the present imperatives from 4.25 and onward have no ‘special stress’? Thielman does not give reasons for this interpretation and simply provides assertions. If in other places the present tense-form conveys continual, ongoing action, why does it not convey that here? However, if this is read through the framework of verbal aspect, the problem is easily solved. The present (imperfective) imperative, again, conveys a more specific command than the aorist imperative, and this string of commands from 4.25 onward lists specific ways in which readers were to ‘put off’ (*ἀποθέσθαι*; aorist infinitive) their old selves and ‘put on’ (*ἐνδύσασθαι*; aorist infinitive) their new selves.

From the brief analyses above, it is a bit disappointing that a commentary based on the Greek text and aimed at pastors as well as scholars lacks an appropriate interaction with recent scholarship in Greek grammar and linguistics. To be fair, this critique is not against Thielman alone. Many other commentaries written in the past two decades also lack a proper interaction with verbal aspect. This is one area of modern commentaries that needs to be rectified if we want to reflect rigorous scholarship in our commentaries on the Greek of the New Testament. Having said that, the commentary as a whole does provide some helpful insights, and one of its strengths is in identifying the various views on the interpretation of difficult passages. In light of my assessment, I think that this volume is helpful for pastors and scholars,

with the understanding that it could benefit from a deeper interaction with recent research on verbal aspect in the Greek of the New Testament. And since the Greek verb is probably the most significant feature of the Greek language system, this I believe is absolutely crucial.

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