

thus, questions revolving around divine or redemptive suffering must be analyzed with a critical view toward this missing perspective. In the analysis of Mark 8:31–38 (ch. 5), St. Clair asserts that a womanist reading of these verses causes suffering to lose its sacred standing: “Agony is not the will of God but a manifestation of moral evil” (p. 164). While she argues that both the “call” and the “consequences” of discipleship are a part of the gospel story, the consequences should not be viewed solely through the lens of divine or redemptive suffering, but rather through the “life-affirming, God-glorifying, agony-eradicating” ministry of Jesus.

This compelling book was inspired, in part, by ecclesial experiences that confirmed for St. Clair how different communities of interpreters and worshippers may interpret the teachings of Jesus depending on their understanding of his call to bear the cross and suffer in the world. The dilemma of how to resolve interpretive tensions related to self-denial, agony, and “taking up the cross” led to this balanced blend of Markan scholarship and actual experiences of African American women—many of whom live on the margins of society and are considered, in the words of Zora Neale Hurston, to be “de mule uh de world” (p. 165). With this book, interpreters from various cultural backgrounds can now easily access the questions and concerns framed by womanist scholars and apply this material to the task of exploring new options and meanings of discipleship.

The remnants of the dissertation are still evident, particularly in ch. 2, which summarizes Markan scholarship, and also in ch. 3, which discusses the sociolinguistic method used as the foundation for womanist biblical interpretation. Despite this minor limitation, St. Clair provides an engaging, rigorous analysis of Mark’s Jesus and challenges interpreters to reevaluate the meaning of the call to share in his suffering and to focus more on the “call to partner with Jesus in service, not pain” (p. 166). This book is required reading for any serious engagement with the Gospel of Mark and a useful supplementary text for introductory NT courses.

GAY L. BYRON  
COLGATE ROCHESTER CROZER DIVINITY SCHOOL  
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

## **Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition**

*by Dean E. Flemming*

New Beacon Bible Commentary. Beacon Hill, Kansas City, 2009. 255 pp. \$25.99. ISBN 978-0-8341-2411-0.

OF THE MAKING OF commentaries there is no end, and there are already some fine medium-length commentaries on Philippians (e.g., Bockmuehl, Fowl). Dean Flemming’s contribution to the New Beacon Bible Commentary series fills a void, however: a mid-length commentary that combines the sophisticated historical and theological approaches of the best commentators with additional features and perspectives that will be useful to preachers and teachers in the church. As a volume in a series written for the Wesleyan tradition (specifically the Nazarene Church), there are naturally references to Wesley and Wesleyan distinctives such as holiness, but the commentary will be beneficial to readers from all Christian traditions; Flemming cites Augustine, Chrysostom, Bonhoeffer, and several well-known hymns, for example. He has taught Philippians for many years, primarily in Europe and Asia, so his theological and pastoral insights are enhanced by his global and missional perspective (especially appropriate for Philippians) and by his attention to contextualization.

As an exegete, Flemming is especially sensitive to the rhetorical aspects of the letter, the narrative character of Paul’s theology, and the communal focus of Paul’s spirituality. He identifies and traces five primary themes in Philippians: the story of Christ, the knowledge of Christ, the gracious work of God, cruciform living, and partnership in the gospel. He does not overlook “joy” or “friendship” or the theological images, but neither does he overdo them. In addition to careful exegesis, for each section of the letter, the commentary provides material on historical and literary contexts (“Behind the Text”) and substantive theological reflection (“From the Text”).

The strengths of this commentary are numerous. The format of the series is crisp, clean, and user-friendly, with identification of the verse(s) under discussion in the margins and the scriptural text printed in bold (NIV) or bold italics (Flemming’s translations) when cited. The exegesis is superb, the theological reflections extraordinarily insightful and useful for preaching and teaching, the background notes informative, the sidebars on related subjects interest-

ing, and the citations of other interpreters and theologians appropriate and helpful. There is an excellent, up-to-date bibliography, and the book is sprinkled with quotations from the best recent interpreters of Philippians. Finally, unlike many commentaries, this one is also simply a delight to read as a book, even cover to cover. Therefore, buy it—and keep an eye on this series.

MICHAEL J. GORMAN  
ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY  
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

### Colossians: A Commentary

by Jerry L. Sumney

New Testament Library. Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2008.  
305 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-664-22142-3.

THIS NEW COMMENTARY IS aimed at a general readership with special reference to pastors and teachers. The latter will find it potentially helpful in preparing sermons of an exegetical kind, though applications to the modern scene are passed by in this work. This work is notable in the concentration on word studies and major theological themes. A commendable feature of this commentary, which readers will appreciate, is the new translation of the text provided and a clear discussion of the textual evidence on which the translation is based.

Jerry Sumney's approach to the text is the traditional historical-critical one, with little regard paid to some more modern approaches. These would include the rhetorical and the history of interpretation disciplines. The latter goes under the cumbersome name of *wirkungsgeschichtlich*, which is the method that attends to the reception of the text and the subsequent effect in the church's history. The one exception is the use made of social-scientific categories in the treating the Household Code of 3:18–4:1.

The introduction treats the usual topics of authorship and destination. A current view in scholarly circles is to regard the epistle as written by an associate of Paul shortly after his death. Sumney accepts this, yet with some hesitation, and in a few places, he notes how uncertain the pseudonymous character of Colossians is. As to destination, there is no firm conclusion possible, though connections with the churches in the Lycus Valley, in what is now central Turkey, seem likely. Sumney's chief concern is not, however, these critical questions, but the pur-

poses of the letter. His central point is that "the readers, and by extension all believers, have been reconciled to God and so are guiltless in God's judgment" (p. 81) with the result that "the assertion of forgiveness is a central affirmation of the letter" (p. 91).

The discussion of the poetic/hymnic section in 1:15–20 is deftly and skillfully drawn. However, Sumney hesitates about whether we can reconstruct today the original form of the passage. Even to call this passage a "hymn" is doubtful (p. 61), which is an interesting assertion, given that Sumney cannot escape using the repeated description of the passage as "hymnic." Yet, Sumney's interest is not with these issues; the way Colossians "battles the visionaries' teaching" (p. 79) is his main point.

The section of 2:16–23 is, by common consent, the most difficult to interpret, with v. 23 as the exegetical conundrum. Sumney's lucid discussion does much to throw light on this dark place. In his view, the key is found in the bid to enter the secrets of the universe, with the outcome that the visionaries are left with a prideful claim to have attained this goal.

The other part of the commentary deserving meritorious mention is 3:18–4:1, which receives a special excursus on the Household Code. Attention to its setting in Greco-Roman society is especially to be welcomed, and there are fresh insights from recent disciplines of social-scientific studies, especially on the role of children, wives, and slaves. For the author of Colossians, the "profound feature" (p. 240) is the way everything in this social comment is brought under the lordship of Christ.

It is hard to think of any issue in Colossians that Sumney has left untouched. He has managed to do this in a way that is immediately accessible to modern readers with limited knowledge of Greek. Each Greek word is transliterated and fully explained in clear English, with translation, with only one exception (p. 87).

Anyone wishing for an up-to-date treatment of this epistle in the Pauline corpus will not be disappointed by the volume. There may be one or two gaps in the bibliography. I was surprised to see no use made of Robert McL. Wilson's 2005 commentary on Colossians in the International Critical Commentary series. And as early as 1950, Charles Masson offered one of the most attractive commentaries on the letter in the *Commentaire du Nouveau Testament* series, which Sumney could well have utilized. Yet these are mere pinpricks in what is intended

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