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BOOK REVIEW

J. Scott Duvall and Verlyn D. Verbrugge, eds. *Devotions on the Greek New Testament: 52 Reflections to Inspire and Instruct*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. 154 pp. ISBN: 0310492542.

As the title indicates, this short book is a compilation of short devotions based on selected passages of the Greek text of the New Testament, with a total of 31 contributors including the editors. Some of these contributors include recognized authors such as Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, Lynn Cohick, Scot McKnight, William Mounce, Mark Strauss, and Ben Witherington. The project seeks to answer the often-asked question, perhaps mostly by seminary students the night before a final Greek exegesis exam or paper:

Does it [my Greek exegesis class] really make a difference in the understanding and application of the Bible? What can you gain from reading a passage in Greek that you cannot gain from an English translation? (p. 11).

I agree that these are important questions to ask, and that they should be answered positively. The editors state:

The need to know why you are studying Greek, particularly in relation to the ultimate purpose of strengthening your walk with the Lord, never fades into the background (p. 11).

With that in mind, they take this opportunity to illustrate how knowledge of the Greek helps facilitate “a deeply *Spiritual* experience” (p. 11). Often times, the most effective pedagogical method is to show how something is to be done; and this volume is a practical way of exemplifying that approach.

Due to the multiplicity of contributors in this book, it is difficult to monolithically review its overall value—even the editors state that these devotions will vary in their approaches. “Some

contributions diagram the passage, others trace important literary patterns such as chiasms, and still others draw attention to the connections between the Old and New Testaments” (p. 11). However, before examining the individual devotions, in response to this introductory statement, I wonder what some of these particular elements have to do with the *Greek* of the New Testament. The presence of a chiasm, for example, is often debatable and chiasms function more as a literary feature than a linguistic or grammatical one—at least in the Greek of the New Testament (cf. “The Gospel in Galatians: Gal 1:3–5” by J. R. Dodson [pp. 77–79], who does an analysis of this passage in light of a perceived chiasm). And of course, an investigation of the Old Testament in the New is not strictly a linguistic issue, though comparing the Greek New Testament with the LXX is *one* of the procedures involved. Though these issues are important and undoubtedly crucial, they seem to be peripheral to the grammatical and linguistic issues of the Greek text.

As stated already, I will select a few devotions that seem to be representative of this collection. The first in the volume is entitled “Learning from Joseph’s Righteousness: Matthew 1:19,” by Roy E. Ciampa (pp. 15–17). The major issue that Ciampa addresses in this verse is the function of the participles in *δίκαιος ὢν* and *μὴ θέλων*, whether they should be considered to be *causal*, as the majority seem to take it to be (hence, “Joseph acted as he did *because* he was righteous” [p. 15]), or *concessive*, (hence, “despite being righteous and because he was unwilling to make an example of her” [p. 16]). He takes the view that it is causal, but the reason for doing so is not contained in the immediate co-text but the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, since one major recurring theme in Matthew is mercy and compassion. He also states:

The present participle indicates not that he had been righteous but thought of acting unrighteously in this instance, but rather that he was righteous even as he decided on his plan of action (p. 16).

Since this is all he states on the matter, it is difficult to decipher how that conclusion was reached from the present participles. But aside from that, the participle in question is *ὢν*, a form of

εἰμί, which is an aspectually vague verb. The tense of the participle is not significant. While the conclusion here is agreeable, and Joseph certainly should be an example to all Christians, the way of drawing that conclusion seems a bit strained from the Greek grammar.

One particular devotion, “You and You: John 1:50–51,” by Dean Deppe, focuses on the singular versus plural pronouns used by Jesus in the first chapter of John’s Gospel. Jesus initially addresses Nathaniel in this discourse, where he states, “you (sing.) will see greater things than these.” Then Jesus shifts to a plural pronoun, ὑμῖν, and states, “you will see heaven opened.” On the basis of this change, Deppe states that “Jesus’ word is not just for Nathaniel but for all of Jesus’ disciples as well” (p. 43). Then after a few statements, he concludes that “Jesus’ words to Nathaniel have a broader audience—all God’s people” (p. 44). Is this a legitimate conclusion based on the Greek grammar? Minimally, it may be concluded, based on the switch from the singular to the plural, that Jesus first addressed Nathaniel, but addressed his second point also to the other disciples that were in his presence. The habit of many modern interpreters seems to be to “jump” from exegesis to application by quickly attributing the text to contemporary readers without first acknowledging the application in the first-century context. It appears the conclusion that Deppe has drawn from the Greek grammar is tenuous at best concerning the question of whether “we,” as disciples living in the twenty-first century, will “see heaven opened.” This all depends on one’s view of the *eschaton*, and other theological factors. Instead of focusing on the switch from singular to plural, it seems that the more significant grammatical features of this short passage may be: (1) the middle voice of ὁράω, or even (2) the perfect tense-form of ἀνεῳγότα.

A third devotion deals with the Greek participle. It is entitled “Being Filled with the Spirit: Ephesians 5:18–22,” written by David L. Mathewson. He begins by stating that “Greek writers love the participle, and to master the New Testament one must master the participle” (p. 85). Even if one does not “master” the participle, familiarity is indeed important. Mathewson notes that there are five participles that follow the present imperative

πληροῦσθε, and asks the important question, “can we identify more closely in what way these five adverbial participles modify πληροῦσθε?” (p. 85). After briefly surveying various propositions for the function of the participle, Mathewson concludes that since these participles are “undetermined” or “unmarked,” their sense must depend on context. He concludes that the context determines that these present tense participles detail the controlling verb. The implication for this is that these five participles (λαλοῦντες, ἄδωτες, ψάλλοντες, εὐχαριστοῦντες, and ὑποτασσόμενοι) tell Paul’s audience of specific ways in which they could be “filled with the Spirit.” This devotional seems to interact with the Greek grammar in a significant way, and draws an appropriate applicational conclusion from it.

A final devotion that I will evaluate here is entitled “Quench or Extinguish: What Are We *Not* Supposed to Do to the Spirit?” by Mark W. Wilson. The major question here is regarding the meaning of σβέννυτε in 1 Thess 5:19, as indicated by the title. He begins by stating that the NIV (1984) renders it “literally” as “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire,” but this is actually not a literal translation, since there is no direct word for “fire” in the Greek; the Greek simply says τὸ πνεῦμα μὴ σβέννυτε. While Wilson notes that the meaning of “extinguish” or “put out” is the predominant meaning in both the New Testament and LXX, he states that this is probably not the case here, as it would mean that “the apostle would have envisioned a group close to falling away from the faith” (p. 105). Why this must be the conclusion of such an interpretation is not stated directly, but it seems that “extinguishing the Spirit” can potentially have various possible implications, one of which might be falling away from the faith. The alternatives he proposes, “quench” and “stifle,” do not really provide clearer definitions either. Since σβέννυτε applies here only with the Spirit as the object, this is probably metaphoric or figurative language, related to extinguishing a fire. In the same way that a fire is extinguished and no longer present, the command is to refrain from extinguishing the work of the Spirit and his presence. Wilson does note that the next clause, προφητείας μὴ ἐξουθενεῖτε, probably helps to determine the meaning of σβέννυτε, and he is right. Prophecy (προφητεία) is one of the

most important spiritual gifts that Paul later identifies as a function of the church (cf. 1 Cor 12–14). He makes it clear that spiritual gifts are not human abilities, but enablements by the Spirit to members of the body of Christ. Despising prophecies would seem to be rejecting or denying the Spirit's activity in the life of the body. Possibly in an attempt to relate this to modern culture, Wilson states: "Family and work responsibilities, answering email, keeping up with social networks such as Facebook—they all conspire daily to quench the presence of the Spirit" (p. 106). However, I am not sure this is the best application of Paul's command to the Thessalonian church. It seems preferable to relate this to denying the Spirit's work in our lives, so that we must allow the Spirit to work in and through us, and to welcome (especially) prophecy (regardless of whether one believes it to be equivalent to preaching or to divine revelation).

Having noted some criticisms of the volume, I should note that the overall purpose of the project is worthwhile and perhaps even needed, in today's age where the emphasis on the original languages for preachers seems to be waning. The selection of passages ranges from the difficult (e.g., Matt 5:17–20) to the familiar (e.g., Matt 28:19–20); from the Gospels to the Epistles; and three devotions are even provided from the Apocalypse (Rev 1:4; 2:20; 5:7), although the selected passages may be considered the more didactic portions. However, and this may be a broader criticism of scholarship in Greek language and linguistics in general, a devotional volume based on the Greek language would be more profitable if the writers abandoned the *Aktionsart* paradigm of the Greek verbal system and became more acquainted with verbal aspect.

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