

[MJTM 19 (2017–2018)]

BOOK REVIEW

Murray J. Harris. *John*. Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament. Nashville, TN: B. & H., 2015. xxiv + 366 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-4336-7687-1. \$34.99.

Joseph H. Hellerman. *Philippians*. Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament. Nashville, TN: B. & H., 2015. xxix + 297 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-4336-7686-4. \$29.99.

Benjamin L. Merkle. *Ephesians*. Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament. Nashville, TN: B. & H., 2016. xxvi + 246. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-4336-7611-6. \$24.99.

John D. Harvey. *Romans*. Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament. Nashville, TN: B. & H., 2017. xxxiii + 429 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-4336-7613-0. \$29.99.

If there is no end to the writing of books, then there will be no end to new biblical commentary series either. B. & H. Academic is a publishing line of LifeWay Christian Resources. In 2010, they launched a new series, the Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament, or EGGNT for short. There are currently six volumes published in the series, and four are used for this review of the series.

Like most commentary series, their stated aims are far-reaching. The back cover of each volume states the series “closes the gap between the Greek text and the available lexical and grammatical tools.” However, it is not obvious what that means. The lexical and grammatical tools are about the Greek text, so what gap are they referencing? Thankfully, the introduction in each of the books is slightly clearer, stating that “each EGGNT volume aims to provide all the necessary information for understanding

the Greek text and, in addition, includes homiletical helps and suggestions for further study” (*Philippians*, xvi).

The commentaries have the features readers have come to expect. The opening section addresses introductory matters of authorship, document integrity, date, occasion, and includes a literary outline. The section is in the range of a dozen pages or less, which is much shorter than the bloated introductions in more technical commentaries. Each subsequent chapter focuses on a single unit or periscope such as a letter greeting. Each pericope is accompanied by verse-by-verse commentary focusing on what is deemed essential or exegetically difficult. The chapters end with bibliographical information for further study and a brief homiletical outline.

There are some positives. First, the general editors are experienced for their role, having published a number of commentaries between them. They know the importance of careful editing, with Köstenberger having had two of his commentaries on John recalled for plagiarism in the BECNT and ZIBBC series, for which he has apologized. The editors select established names in the field for the individual volumes.

A second positive is that the series does provide information to make the interpretive process easier. The stated target audience is those who “want to preach or teach with accuracy and authority.” For many involved in preaching and teaching in a local church setting, time can often be a limitation. These volumes are concise and avoid information deemed tangential or unhelpful for the pastorate.

A third positive is what the series offers for readers who want details about a particular verse or topic. To meet that need, the series provides readers enough information to get started, but the section bibliographies provide resources for further study. Fourth and finally, the target audience may benefit from the homiletical suggestions concluding each section. While it is doubtful that the outlines will be adopted as presented, they do suggest how a pericope could be divided into primary and supportive points.

At the same time, the series has many shortcomings. First, while the desire for a shorter introduction is appreciated, here the pendulum swings too far towards brevity. The authors do not

give enough space to background features or chronological setting for readers to have a solid foundation from which to interpret. If the series is designed to be a reliable and quick single source for preachers and teachers, the books simply do not provide enough introductory context.

Second, the commentary itself is monotonous. The books are not designed for extended reading, as this reviewer did, but merely for selective referencing. The commentary from verse to verse and section to section feels disjointed. Furthermore, the tone of the commentary reads more like exegetical notes—something akin to the UBS Handbook series—rather than a commentary born of reflection. In sum, the commentary is not as insightful as its near competitors like the NIGTC or Pillar series, and not as readable or helpful with the literary flow as something like the NIVAC series.

Third, given the focused nature of the series as exegetical aides, one expects this to be their forte. Unfortunately, the explication of the grammar is not entirely helpful. For instance, consider the handling of the preposition, which is a small but tricky grammatical element. Linguists and grammarians point out that prepositions have minimal semantic content. Therefore, interpreters of texts should not attempt an explication of the meaning of a preposition, but the relationship prepositions create between the verb and the noun phrase. In an exegetical commentary, the authors should not point to grammatical formulas such as $x + y =$ exegetical outcome but should instead explain how x and y work together to create a particular meaning.

Lamentably, the series is filled with formulaic interpretations that leave the reader confused. At Eph 1:7, the author says ἐν ᾧ is a “dat. of location or sphere and not means,” and at 1:10 ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ “communicates the location (or sphere),” at 6:10 “the prep. phrase ἐν κυρίῳ communicates sphere,” but at 5:19, 6:15, 16, and 18 ἐν plus the dative communicates manner or means (*Ephesians*, 25, 28, 210, 175, 215, 216, 219 in order of referral). The author does not explain to readers how ἐν plus the dative has different meanings in different verses. There is no explanation or defense of the interpretation. The reader is not equipped to understand or defend the position. They are instead only told what

to think.

Furthermore, after nearly two hundred pages of the commentary treating prepositions as important, the authors may also deny their having any value. Commenting on the textual variation to omit the preposition in Eph 5:19, the author concludes that “the sense of the passage is not changed either way” (*Ephesians*, 175). It begs the question, what are the linguistic criteria that determine that one occurrence of the preposition ἐν is powerfully significant for theology, yet another occurrence has no bearing on the sense of the passage? In all the locations the preposition ἐν is spelled the same, it is immediately followed by a dative noun, and occurs in the same text. So why the theological fluctuation when the grammar is the same? Readers are not provided with the grammatical tools to answer such questions.

One last example occurs in the Romans volume. There is much theological discussion in print concerning Rom 1:17, making a brief summary of the verse difficult. Unfortunately, the author tells readers, again with preachers and teachers as the target audience, that the first ἐκ πίστεως (ἐκ + genitive) denotes source, but at the end of the same verse ἐκ πίστεως (ἐκ + genitive) “denotes cause” (*Romans*, 30–31). While I take exception to the grammatical categories and labels being used, it does behoove the author to explain and defend how the same constructions in extremely close proximity have different meanings. What internal linguistic elements trigger the latter phrase to be different from the former? Readers are not offered insight into the exegetical data, contrary to the series’ claims. They are being told the author’s conclusion with little to no support or defense.

In conclusion, readers are presented with a commentary series dedicated to evangelical theology with little frills and even less innovation. If readers want a concise general commentary on a particular New Testament book, and they can acquire the book for a reasonable price, then they might be interested in the series. However, in a market saturated with commentaries, there is no real feature to make this series stand out.

The series faces a twofold problem. First, modern commentaries have far too much overlap, hence the recent number of recalls due to plagiarism. Second, with such a market it begs the

question, why buy this commentary when so many others provide similar if not the same information? On account of the saturated marketplace and the shortcomings of the series, I think readers are better served by other series.

Chris S. Stevens
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON