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BOOK REVIEW

Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell. *James*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008. 280 pp. Hdbk. US\$24.99.

James by Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell offers a useful scholarly resource to teachers and pastors. The emphasis of the commentary is on applying James' teaching on wealth and poverty to contemporary church life. The themes of trial and temptation along with wisdom and speech are also noted by the authors. The simple layout of the text helps mark out primary and supportive material in the epistle. The contemporary applications are helpful, if at times overdone. Ultimately, the commentary delivers on scholarly competence and relevant application, but the brevity of the work necessitates abbreviation of several discussions along the way.

The series layout organizes the text into a logical schematic. This diagram helps to show cause, conditions, manner, and temporal/spatial description among other things. Furthermore, it places the clauses into a logical framework, making apparent which are the supporting and main clauses. The diagram could be useful for sermon and lesson preparation, in that it illustrates main points for emphasis. Also, the diagram is a good refresher for the role of various grammatical features of the Greek text. It shows the implications of conjunction choice, clause structure and qualification. The main participants in the sentence (subject, predicate, complement) are placed in bold. The diagram of the text provides a means of thinking about the sentence structure and logical relations of clauses.

Unfortunately, the logical schematic is unable to show several discourse and stylistic features of the text. The diagram does not make the prominent use of hook words evident ("hook words"

repeat the ending term of a sentence at the beginning of the next sentence) and only some of the hook words used in James are identified in the verse-by-verse comment. This stylistic feature of James is a key stylistic element of the epistle. Likewise features such as word order are hard to represent on the outline. While the semantic implications of Greek word order are still somewhat under debate, diagrams that move pastors and scholars away from the actual word order of the text do not help. These diagrams do, however, provide logical relations that are based on the sentence grammar.

Blomberg and Kamell are able to distill three key themes from the text of James. In contrast to Martin Dibelius's form-critical treatment, the move toward seeing the unity of the epistle is refreshing. The structure of the epistle, based on the assertion of unity, is both plausible in an academic sense and useful in a pastoral sense. Blomberg and Kamell suggest that wealth and poverty, wisdom and speech, and trials and temptations compose the most prominent themes for the epistle. In terms of explaining the text, these issues consistently recur throughout. Furthermore, almost all of what occurs in the epistle can be viewed in terms of these themes. This illustrates the compositional unity of the epistle. As far as application is concerned, these issues not only explain the historical document, but reflect key issues in living the Christian life.

The theme of wealth and poverty is emphasized by Blomberg and Kamell. They argue for its prominence by suggesting an arching chiasmic structure that places this topic at the middle of the discourse. Also, several of the other themes contain elements of poverty and wealth in their discussions. This issue remains a perennial topic in Western Christianity and James' valuable perspective is skillfully applied in many ways.

Blomberg and Kamell attempt, somewhat awkwardly, to unify the three themes in the epistle. While the commentary clearly emphasizes wealth and poverty, the final attempt to create a unifying principle for the three themes centers around the doctrine of God, specifically that God is unswerving in his judgment and mercy. As such, Christianity should hold to this same unswerving demeanor. First, the authors do not address the issue

of unity in terms of the three major themes asserted, leaving the reader to question the value of the categories proposed for understanding. Furthermore, the commentary asserts that God is both giver of mercy and gifts and judge/lawgiver in James. It is odd that the key unifying principle, then, is the unity of God's purpose. Finally, a more traditional unifying principle is that of Christian maturity and completeness. While this completeness is rooted in the attribute of God, it encompasses a doctrinal and ethical program for the Christian community.

Blomberg and Kamell do not always note important dissenting opinions. The series is designed to be a resource for the church leader as well as the scholar and as such has carefully maintained a style and level of discussion commensurate with this purpose. Unfortunately, this means that several more in-depth discussions were not presented in the work. For instance, Blomberg and Kamell side with Davids' structure with three unifying themes. However, Luke Timothy Johnson argues for a singularity to the structure of the epistle. In contrast, Dibelius's form-critical approach sees the text as a redaction of several disparate units. Blomberg and Kamell spare the reader much of this discussion, a decision that has significant implications for how one understands the statements of the epistle.

Application of the text is a paramount concern for the authors. Blomberg and Kamell see in James' epistle a call to work against systemic inequality. This involves both an emphasis on Christian benevolence and a reining-in of the drive to acquire wealth. Furthermore, they advocate a political perspective that must necessarily reject libertarianism in favor of a liberation theology perspective, albeit qualified. Most prominently they encourage suburban churches to involve themselves with urban issues.

The applications of the text are sometimes trite. For example, the authors' casual mention of the "rape" of the environment makes implications unsupported by James' text. Furthermore, this clichéd idiom does not provide the effect that a longer explication of the issue and its relation to James could provide. Also, the attempt to move from personal to systemic ethics is a bit clumsy. For example, Blomberg and Kamell use the illustration of food waste from restaurants to show the excess of Western

culture. The comparison of restaurant patrons to the wealthy landowner who withholds wages from the destitute is a bit of a stretch, especially when more apt illustrations are available. Many of the applications are very pertinent to the Christian situation, but an overvaluation of models based on systemic ethics makes some of the applications unwieldy for the church leader.

Blomberg and Kamell admirably negotiate the liberation readings of James from an evangelical perspective. This commentary addresses key ethical issues raised by the epistle, including their placement in Arminian and Calvinist traditions. However, many will find the ethical aspect of the commentary merely a starting point for further discussion and inquiry. A competent, yet brief, treatment of the themes of “wisdom and speech,” and “trials and temptations,” is included. While Blomberg and Kamell state that wealth and poverty is the most prominent theme, their attempt to elucidate a singular theme does not take this into account. Useful applications of many of the texts are explicated, but some of the applications are extreme. Theme and logic drive the commentary as opposed to style and discourse. The brevity of the commentary has benefits and drawbacks.

Overall, this commentary is a useful resource for the pastor who wants a scholarly opinion, but does not want to get bogged down in issues of history, phrasing, and structure.

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