
This is an extremely thorough commentary on the two letters which Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica in Macedonia shortly after his visit to that city in AD 49. The cover blurb says of that visit that ‘a small group of labourers responded positively to his message, resulting in the formation of a church’. This unfortunately is a very inadequate summary of what Malherbe actually says in his commentary. He gives us a much more sophisticated picture of a church involving a number of leading citizens as well as artisans from the lower social levels. Moreover Paul is revealed as using techniques familiar from the Hellenistic philosophers, and as addressing an audience well able to appreciate the rhetorical connections of the gospel as Paul presented it. Malherbe presents the Thessalonian letters as ‘paraenetic/pastoral’ documents and illustrates the genre with copious references to contemporary and earlier texts.

Malherbe offers his own translation which is very good; the translation itself demonstrates how the philosophical and rhetorical insights of the commentary can illuminate the way the text should be translated. An example of this is his translation of 1 Thessalonians 2.7 where the phrase δυνάμενοι ἐν βάρει εἶναι occurs. The *New English Bible* translates this ‘we might have made our weight felt’, applying the phrase to the exercise of authority. Malherbe offers ‘although we might have made harsh demands on you’, and applies the phrase to a description of Paul’s manner of address. He supports this by quoting a number of ancient authors who use the phrase in the context of discussions of παρρησία (144). The point is discussed at some length in the commentary. This is but one of many examples of Malherbe’s method and emphasis on rhetorical insights.

The commentary sections depend very heavily on references to the Greek text. In fact it would be true to say that it would be very difficult to use this commentary without some facility in the language of the Greek New Testament. This is a scholar’s book rather than a book to be picked up in the hope of finding inspiration for the Sunday sermon. It is a book
to be worked through as a whole rather than dipped into. This raises a real question about its inclusion in the Anchor Bible series. The series always transliterates the Greek. This is irritating and unhelpful for those who work from the Greek text, and yet this is the group which will get most from this commentary.

The book is in well defined and consistent sections. Malherbe has an introduction to each section of the letter and puts that section in context. Then follows the commentary section, headed ‘Notes’, where the Greek text is examined in detail. Transliterated quotation is usually translated, nevertheless much of this section would be largely unintelligible to someone with no Greek. Malherbe has an excellent grasp of the grammar and a facility for explaining it. There are also good discussions of individual words and phrases. Imagery is teased out and explained; a striking example of this is Malherbe’s exposition of the games imagery and the victor’s crown (185, in the notes on 1 Thessalonians 2.19). His deep knowledge of ancient literature is apparent here and in many such notes.

In these sections the author relies heavily on the rhetorical background of Paul’s teaching. There are many insights, but there are also times when the reader feels that some of the quotations are too remote from Paul and his times. A case in point is the discussion about Paul’s attitude to the *parousia* (270-1). Malherbe refers to Pindar fr. 13 as quoted by Plutarch in *A Letter of Condolence to Apollonius* 120D. This reference, coming as it does at the end of a protracted discussion, seems disconnected and unhelpful. The commentary sections require diligence and focus on the part of the reader; this book is not easy.

The ‘Notes’ section is followed by a more discursive section entitled ‘Comment’. Here the wider implications of the text are discussed and modern insights are suggested. Further ancient parallels are also cited. There may be some food for the Sunday sermon in these sections, but they can be hard going—such as the discussion about friendship (252-260), which constitutes the whole of the Comment section relating to 1 Thessalonians 4.9-12. The treatment is complex, but for the reader who persists there are good insights from Epicurean values which may well have influenced some early Christian believers.
The Introduction to the two letters at the beginning of the book is thorough and helpful. The internal evidence for Paul’s activities at Thessalonica, and immediately before and after his visit there, is set out and compared with the evidence of Acts. Malherbe is much less sceptical about the value of Acts as a historical document than some modern commentators have been. Historical references may be thin in the body of the commentary, but the historical background is well covered in this Introduction. Malherbe supports the view that Paul tended to focus his mission on members of the upper classes; after all it was they who were able to provide the facilities necessary for church life to function and the leadership qualities which the nascent communities needed. The use made by Paul of his rhetorical skills, appreciated and expounded at length in this commentary, also assume a Christian community with at least some educated and literate members. The Introduction also deals with questions associated with the occasion and purpose of the letter—was there a letter from the Thessalonians to Paul to which he was responding? What was the nature of Timothy’s mission? The final section of the Introduction deals with the style and language of the letter.

Perhaps the most disputed admonition in the letters is that at 1 Thessalonians 4.4 where Paul exhorts the Thessalonians ‘that each of you learn how to acquire his own wife’ (M’s translation). Malherbe discusses this at length and rejects the reference of σκεύος to either the male sexual organ or the body as a whole. Citing rhetorical parallels he refers the word to a man’s wife and concludes his note ‘it is more probable that Paul is directing the Thessalonians to marry rather than fall prey to sexual immorality, as he does in 1 Corinthians 7.2’. The discussion and its conclusion, like the exhortation itself, is thoroughly sensible. This is a thoroughly sensible book; for the reader who persists and who knows Greek the effort of working through it will be found to be very worthwhile.

Calum Gilmour
Auckland