Those who know the Anchor Bible Commentary on Luke by Joseph Fitzmyer will have expected the very highest standard in his commentary on Romans in the same series, and they will not have been disappointed. Fitzmyer's Romans is a publishing event in the world of New Testament studies, for it offers us a clear and penetrating analysis of Paul's most important epistle from one of the leading Roman Catholic New Testament scholars in the world.

Together with an introduction and commentary, Fitzmyer offers, in the custom of the Anchor series, a fresh translation of the Epistle. His translation gives new and creative renderings of familiar phrases. So the reader is struck by an expression like "weapons" (6:13) or "whatever proceeds not from conviction is sin." (14:23). But the most recurrent and striking feature in the new translation is the use of "uprightness" for the familiar "righteousness" of our English versions. Here Fitzmyer follows Goospeed in an attempt to avoid "a peculiar ring in English suggesting to many something like self-righteousness" (p 258). Whether readers will readily assume this connotation is debatable. Thus with so important a term as "the Righteousness of God" it is probably better to keep the old word and explain it.

One misses in many modern commentaries the thorough discussion of textual criticism, so common in earlier works. But Fitzmyer's treatment is admirably thorough. Following Gamble in the important matter of the integrity of the last two chapters, Fitzmyer argues that we should consider them a genuine part of the letter. He concedes, however, that this conclusion could "change with the discovery of new evidence" (p. 50). Essentially, Fitzmyer follows the 1979 UBS3/Nestle 26 which "represents the best available form of the Greek text of Romans" (p. 44).

In the commentary notes he regularly resorts to arguments from the best MSS" (7:6, p. 459; 8:1, p. 482; 9:31, p. 758), the "earliest MSS" (15:19, p. 713) or the "oldest and best MSS" (8:21, p. 509). But, as Fitzmyer concedes, the better Greek MSS fail us at 5:1 where "Paul's utterance is a statement of fact expressing the effect of justification which suits the context better than the hortatory subjunctive" (p. 295). But if internal criteria such as context and style may be used at 5:1 for deciding the textual question, why not also at 1:28 where many Greek MSS have ὁ θεός as the subject of παρέδωκεν? We infer from his translation that Fitzmyer does not think that ὁ θεός stood in the original text. (It is omitted by Ν A 0172). Here he parts company with UBS3/Nestle 26. Yet elsewhere he notes that ὁ θεός is the most frequently used substantive in Romans (p. 104), a factor that should be given special consideration both at 1:28 and 8:28. In both places the argument that the copyist removed the repetitious ὁ θεός to improve the style is re-enforced by the fact that the oldest and best MSS have the longer text.

Another recurrent argument on matters of the text in this commentary is the claim of assimilation, a copyist's harmonization of the New Testament text to the LXX in quotations. So, for example, at 10:5 Fitzmyer writes of the demonstrative pronoun αὐτά that it is missing in Ms Ν*, a copyist's "harmonization of the Pauline text with the LXX" (p. 589). So also, with 3:4 (quoting Psa. 51:6), where the subjunctive νικήσῃς of Ms Β etc. is dubbed "a secondary harmonization of the Pauline text with the LXX reading" (p. 328). Sanday and Headlam noted that there is a similar textual variation in the LXX text of Psalm 51:6. "νικήσῃς is the reading of Ν Β (defective in A). νικήσεις of some fourteen cursives. The text of the LXX used by Paul
differs not seldom from that of the great uncialis" (Sanday and Headlam, Romans (1898, p. 72). Harmonization appears to have worked in both directions, and Fitzmyer's comments on 1:17 indicate that he is aware of this. Sometimes the New Testament was indeed conformed to the Old by scribes. At other times it was the Old Testament that was conformed to the New. The whole matter of assimilation calls for further study. It is clear that New Testament texts were at times corrected by scribes to conform to the LXX. But this can hardly have occurred in circles where the Old Testament was neglected or rejected in favor of the New (eg. Marcion). By contrast one would expect that the New Testament text would be corrected in the direction of the Old in Christian communities where the Old Testament was more highly regarded (for example, in the early Syriac church, see B.M. Metzger, The Early Versions of the New Testament, Oxford, 1977, pp. 96-97).

Just how early this process of assimilation began to operate in the transmission of the New Testament is an especially relevant question in the light of Fitzmyer's reading of the composition of the Roman Church to which Paul wrote the epistle. This community, Fitzmyer argues, was mixed, "partly of Jewish, but predominantly of Gentile background" (p. 33). Fitzmyer builds on the thesis of Marxsen, explaining the special situation in the Roman church in terms of the Edict of Claudius, "who expelled from Rome Jews who were making constant disturbance at the instigation of Chrestus" (according to Suetonius). At just what point the expulsion occurred and just when expelled Jews returned is debated (see pp. 31-32). Nonetheless, Fitzmyer notes, "on their return to Rome these Jewish Christians would have found a Christian situation different from what they had left (p. 33). It is against this background that Fitzmyer interprets Chapter 14 concerning the "strong" and the "weak." His reading of the situation, that the "weak" refers to Jewish Christians and the "strong" to those of Gentile background (pp. 33, 687) seems on the mark. But other changes would have occurred in the Roman church with the expulsion and return of the Jews. Inevitably, a predominantly Gentile church would be less oriented toward the Old Testament than a largely Jewish congregation. If the expulsion and return of the Jews caused such a shift with regard to the place of the scriptures in the church, then we may detect a further reason why Paul wrote Romans. It is clearly one of Paul's concerns to remind them that the scriptures were "written for our instruction" (15:4). It may be right to give greater attention to Romans 15:1-13 as a key to understanding why Romans was written. Paul writes to encourage the Roman Christians to keep the scriptures central and to show that the gospel he preaches is "according to the scriptures." This view has the advantage of reckoning with chapters 9:11, which Fitzmyer rightly sees as an integral part of the letter and not just an afterthought (p. 80). The details of this suggestion I must work out elsewhere. One thing likely to emerge from such a study is a picture of an epistle far more deeply shaped by the Old Testament scriptures in the light of Christ than is sometimes recognized. Scripture is not so much quoted to support or cap off an argument as it is the very ground and seed-plot out of which the argument arises. Paul does not merely quote scripture to "bolster his view" or "aid his argument." (pp. 109, 705). For Paul, scripture is not so much plundered as pondered. Perhaps where Paul's use of scripture seems to make least sense from our point of view is an important clue for such a study. Fitzmyer writes of Paul's use of Isaiah 52:15 at Romans 15:21, "It is not easy to explain why Paul introduces at this point in his statement of plans a quotation from the O.T." (p. 716). Had not Paul pondered that text in its context, in terms of the gospel, on the question of Christ and Israel, and in relation to his Apostleship to the Gentiles?

Such is the value of this commentary that it provokes and shapes questions like those raised in this review. The creativity of Fitzmyer's magisterial commentary springs from his
soundness and sureness in handling the text of Romans. He never allows himself to be swayed by current fashions or contemporary agendas (as at 1:26-27). He stands firmly within the tradition as a Roman Catholic, and this informs rather than obscures his vision (see his discussion of Adam at 5:12-21). He does not allow his special interest in Qumran and intertestamental Judaism to lead to undue emphasis or unwarranted conclusions. He is a consummate workman whose references truly illuminate (as in his discussion of Hab. 2:4 at 1:17). Time and again Fitzmyer's treatment of the text proves to be sound, balanced, and creative. No serious student of Romans can do without this commentary.
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