



Belleville, Linda, Jon C. Laansma, and J. Ramsey Michaels

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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I'm not a fan of commentaries, there, I said it! They're generally dry and cumbersome; a sure antidote for the worst insomnia. How anyone can read a commentary from cover to cover is beyond me. Nevertheless, I realize that I'll never know everything there is to know about the Bible, so in hope of acquiring extra knowledge and a heightened understanding of any given verse, passage, chapter, or book, I turn to scholars who devote significant amounts of time to understanding and explaining the text. Enter Linda Belleville, Jon C. Laansma, and J. Ramsey Michaels and their commentary on the Pastoral Epistles and the book of Hebrews (volume 17 in the Cornerstone Biblical Commentary series). I use commentaries only as reference works and my review will reflect my actual use of this volume which I have not (and probably never will) read in full. In any commentary there are always a few places I turn to first to see how the author(s) addresses the issues. For the books included in this volume I've checked out the warning passages in Hebrews (esp. 6:4-8); the handling of Titus 2:13 in reference to the deity of Christ; and finally (given all the attention that this passage gets in the blogosphere), 1Timothy 2:11-15 and the issues surrounding women in ministry.

Before moving on to examine these passages a word about this commentary's design and layout is in order. There is one introduction for the Pastoral Epistles as a single unit and another introduction for the book of Hebrews. Each introduction covers the standard issues of authorship, date of composition, audience, canonicity and textual history, and major themes. The intro to the Pastorals also includes sections on the occasion of writing and literary style and form, while the Hebrews intro has a section on genre and another on the theological concerns of the book. Both are rounded out with book outlines. The authors argue for Pauline authorship of the Pastorals by referring to the internal and external indicators as well as by presenting the main arguments against Pauline authorship along with cogent counterarguments and explanations. The authorship of Hebrews is exactly what you'd expect: unknown. The book commentaries themselves follow the outlines in the introductory sections. Each pericope begins by presenting the NLT text in double columns, which is immediately followed by brief exegetical notes, and then the full commentary. The main sections are concluded with bibliographies of the works cited throughout the commentary.

1Timothy 2:11-15 — Linda Belleville notes that Paul’s concern in vs. 11 is *how* a woman is to learn, i.e., “*quietly and submissively*,” (56) which was significant because in Paul’s day “*higher education past the age of 12 [for women], though on the rise, was still not commonplace*.” (57) Concerning Paul’s corrective in vs. 12 for women not to teach men or have authority over them, Belleville posits that “*there was a bit of a battle of the sexes going on in the congregation*.” (58) The key term here is *authentein* which Belleville sees as not referring to the “*ordinary exercise of authority*” (58) which could have been expressed with any numbers of words (e.g., *exousia*, *epitage*, *krino*, *kurieuo*, or *arche*). Rather *authentein* means “to control in a domineering manner” (*Louw & Nida* 37.21). Having already shown that women teaching is something common in Paul, Belleville asks how teaching and domineering are connected. She says that “*the ouk-oude structure of verse 12 requires a single coherent idea*” (59) and supports this contention with reference to various “neither-nor” texts in the Bible. So the end result is that women are not to teach men in a domineering way, not that women are not to teach men at all. Belleville sees Paul’s reference to the order of Adam and Eve’s creation as emphasizing “*a temporal, not hierarchical, sequence*.” (61) She also says that “*Paul’s use of Eve’s deception as a warning about corporate deception precludes any theological possibility of deception inherent to Eve’s female descendants*.” (61)

Titus 2:13 — Jon C. Laansma’s treatment of this verse is quite terse taking up just under two pages. He treats 2:11-14 as a unit by my interest in solely in his treatment of the grammar in vs. 13 regarding the deity of Christ. He begins by noting the reading that places “*Jesus Christ*” in apposition to “*glory*” where “*the idea would be ‘the glory ... [which is] Jesus Christ*.” (274) He says that this view is “*ably defended*” by Philip Towner who views “*‘Jesus Christ’ as being in apposition to the entire phrase, ‘the glory of our great God and Savior.’*” (274) But Towner’s able defense withstanding, Laansma sides with the “*many scholars*” that conclude that “*‘Jesus Christ’ is in apposition to the phrase that immediately precedes it; so that the idea is that our great God and Savior is Jesus Christ*.” (274) Based on the grammar alone he rejects arguments against this reading as being unlikely because it’s too straightforward of an assertion of Christ’s deity. Oddly, no mention is made of Granville Sharp’s rule although a reference to Dan Wallace does appear. But I quite agree with Laansma when he says: “*[t]he theology behind this claim may be something less consciously developed than the later church creeds would articulate, especially at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and thereafter, but it is certainly at the root of these more elaborate statements*.” (275) He rightly notes however, that this verse isn’t “*inserted into this passage as an abstract theological assertion of Jesus’ deity; it is here in the service of the whole flow of thought in verses 11-14. Given the alternation of 1:3-4 (‘God our Savior... Christ Jesus our Savior’), this assertion may have been more natural for Paul than some suppose*.” (275)

Hebrews 6:4-8 — J. Ramsey Michaels does well to treat this passage in the most straightforward way possible. He sees it as a genuine warning, to genuine converts, and he doesn’t see repentance from the forewarned apostasy as possible. In fact he makes much of the word “impossible” (*adunatos*) in vs. 4 saying that it’s:

Not impossible like a rich man entering the Kingdom of God, of which Jesus once said, “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God” (Mark 10:27). Not impossible “unless” something happens to

make it possible, as if often the case in the Gospel of John (for example, John 3:3, 5; 6:44, 53, 65). This is something impossible for anyone under any circumstances. Just as it is “impossible for God to lie” (6:18) or for “the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (10:4) or “to please God without faith” (11:6), so it is impossible—even for God—to “bring back to repentance” those who “turn away” from him (6:6). (373-74)

When asked about the possibility of an apostate repenting I’ve often responded by saying that I don’t think they ever *would*, although theoretically I suppose they *could*. I based this on my understanding of “nailing him [i.e., Jesus] to the cross” and “holding him up to public shame” as being present participles which denoted a continuous action. I’d say that if such actions were to cease then I suppose repentance would be possible. Not so, says Ramsey, because such a view doesn’t tell us what these actions actually entail. He says that “[a]ccording to the more common causal understanding, their meaning is clear because they describe what it means to ‘turn away.’” (375) A second problem Ramsey sees is that even if this view is correct, it doesn’t account for the “*equally grim and serious warnings of 10:26-31 and 12:15-17.*” (375) His points are well taken. But one thing I really appreciated about his handling of this passage was the recognition that it doesn’t really go beyond what the Gospels say. It’s also nice to see his insistence that no one can say with certainty whether or not one is saved or apostate until the “end” because “*only the ‘end’ will reveal who does or does not belong to ‘the assembly of God’s firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven’ (12:23).*” (376)

As far as commentaries go, this one is quite easy to read and follow. It’s not a technical commentary by any means, but it’s not dumbed down either. The target audience is definitely interested laypersons and I think that it suits its audience well. I still don’t want to read a commentary straight through (not even this one), and I won’t personally use it for anything other than quick referencing when a question pops up, but that’s *my* modus operandi. If you’re the type who does read commentaries from cover to cover than I think you’ll be enthralled with this one. If you’ve already got a number of commentaries on the Pastorals and Hebrews then you can probably skip it, unless of course you’re one of those people who have a compulsion to get as many points of view as possible. But even in that you might be able to pass because from what I’ve seen there’s nothing new or innovative in this volume. The authors basically take some of the best that scholarship has to offer and disseminate it in an understandable format for a lay audience. The bottom line is that if you’re in the target demographic then I think you’ll be more than happy with this commentary. If not, then you’ll probably be bored.