

Romans: A New Commentary by Beverly Gaventa, Read from a German-Language Exegetical Perspective

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Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Romans: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024).

1. The Commentary World of Romans

The already very extensive scene of commentaries on Romans, which to our knowledge begins with Origen,¹ has been enriched with another important new publication: the nearly 500-page commentary by Beverly Gaventa. From the outset, Gaventa places value on the fact that she has independently worked through the text. The commentary is the result of *her* reading. She understands it not as a “reference commentary” (2) and refers to exegetical discussions only in places where she regards it as absolutely necessary (1). In her clear introduction (1–19), she makes readers aware of her exegetical premises and the basic features of her understanding of the text. She reads Romans (Rom) as “inherently theological” (1) in the sense of “talk about God and God’s doings in the world” (1). This implies that Paul is concerned with “matters of life and death” and that this dimension also has significance for today’s Christians (1). Gaventa has thus written a “theological” commentary on Romans that reflects her own engagement with the text. It moves within the framework of the commentary series “The New Testament Library,” which is published by Westminster John Knox.

Into which larger contexts has Gaventa written her commentary? In the German-language commentary literature, a “theological” commentary on Romans was prominently submitted by Karl Barth (1919 [ET = 2024], ²1922 [ET = 1933]). Gaventa refers rather frequently to Barth. Adolf Schlatter followed this systematic-practical-theological line with his commentary *Gottes Gerechtigkeit: Ein Kommentar zum Römerbrief* (Calwer, 1935; ³1975; ET = 1995).

Other German commentaries, such as the influential exegetical series commentaries by Ernst Käsemann (HNT, Mohr Siebeck, 1973; ⁴1980; ET = 1980), Peter Stuhlmacher (NTD, Vandenhoeck &

¹Editions: Caroline Hammond Bammel, ed., *Der Römerbriefkommentar des Origines: kritische Ausgabe der Übersetzung Rufins* (Freiburg: Herder, 1990 [Books 1–3], 1997 [Books 4–6], 1997 [Books 7–10]). T. Heither, ed., *Commentarii in epistolam ad Romanos: Lateinischer Text, griechische Fragmente und deutsche Übersetzung*, 6 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1990 [*Liber primus, liber secundus*], 1992 [*Liber tertius, liber quartus*], 1993 [*Liber quintus, liber sextus*], 1994 [*Liber septimus, liber octavus*], 1996 [*Liber nonus, liber decimus*], 1999 [Fragmenta]). For an English translation, see T. P. Scheck, ed., *Origen, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., The Fathers of the Church 103/104 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2001/2002).

Ruprecht, 1989; ET = 1994), and Eduard Lohse (KEK, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003) also understand Romans as Paul's theological magnum opus or as his theological testament, but they explain the text exclusively with philological-historical methods and interpret the general theological dimension of the letter and its significance for the church and its biography only in their introductions. Ernst Käsemann especially emphasized this hermeneutical background in his inimitably personal-radical style in the first sentence of his commentary:

When on the third day of my semester in May, 1925, full of curiosity, I attended Erik Peterson's lecture on the Epistle to the Romans, the course of my study and in some sense, as befits a theologian, my life was decided. *The basic problem was posed.* In the following semesters I then listened to the expositions of H. von Soden and R. Bultmann. I then turned successively to the work of K. Barth, A. Schlatter, Luther, and Calvin, studied them critically, and was led by them into interpretation ancient and modern. No literary document has been more important for me. Thus the circle of my theological work closes logically as I now seek to show in my own commentary *what the apostle says to me* and what is the result of my preoccupation with the towering mountains of scholarly production.²

Here, one finds the existentially affected tone that is still familiar to those exegetes – including this reviewer – who studied with New Testament scholars from the Bultmann school: “the text and I.” At the same time, Käsemann and all the other commentators mentioned work, according to their series requirements, through the scholarly literature and place their own respective interpretations in the context of the breadth of exegetical interpretive possibilities. The fundamental theological and anthropological significance of the text is presupposed in these commentaries but not systematically-theologically discussed. The multi-volume commentary by Ulrich Wilckens (EKK, 3 vols., 1978–2003) and, most recently, by Michael Wolter (EKK, 2 vols., 2019–2022) have expanded this concept, above all with respect to the documentation of scholarship. In particular, Wolter has continued the tradition of the extensive “reference commentary” and deepened it through important excurses. By contrast, the predecessor commentary by Wilckens was especially devoted to documenting the history of interpretation and reception.

If we look from the perspective of German-language exegesis to the Anglo-American field, the two-volume commentary by James D. G. Dunn (WBC 1998) as well as the major commentaries by Joseph Fitzmyer (AB 1993) and Robert Jewett (Hermeneia 2007) stand out among the many commentaries. While Fitzmyer has presented a classic historical-philological “reference commentary,” without which any further work on Romans does not seem sensible to this reviewer,³ the commentaries by Dunn and, subsequently, Jewett are shaped by certain interpretive concepts – the new perspective on Paul and the rhetorical reading of Romans – that led to new interpretive approaches and have introduced a significant, not-to-be-neglected innovative potential into the interpretation of Romans, while simultaneously representing a certain methodological narrowing of the exegetical perception of the text. This also applies to the social-historical commentary by Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). In their commentary *Der Römerbrief. Rechenschaft eines Reformators* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), Gerd Theißen and Petra von Gemünden have reacted to the diversity of interpretive approaches with a commentary format of their own: a cursory “text-immanent reading” (59–88) is followed by forms of reading that are focused on different methods, namely, historical, image-semantic, theological, social-historical, and psychological readings. The conclusion consists of a psychologically-

²E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London: SCM, 1980), vii (O.W.'s emphasis). German version: idem, *An die Römer*, HNT 8a, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980), iii.

³Fitzmyer should remain a necessary point of reference for every conceivable new commentary format.

mythically determined placement of the letter and its author in the history of religion and theology. The continuous philological-historical commentary has been abandoned.

2. Beverly Gaventa's Commentary

In this field – which I have sketched only roughly here – Beverly Gaventa takes a mediating, methodologically careful, conservative position. She keeps herself just as far away from a dogmatically focused hermeneutic as from a theoretically determined choice of method that seeks to make the text capable of being connected to current cultural-hermeneutical models in the sense of specific cultural-scientific hermeneutics, for example, by selecting historical parameters such as ancient Judaism, the social history of the ancient Mediterranean region, the Greco-Roman religious and cultural world, or the *imperium Romanum* as dominant interpretive models or by hermeneutically adapting the text for anti-imperial, feminist, or postcolonial theories.

Instead, she declares her support for a “hermeneutic of generosity” and explains “put directly, I attempt to read as I would wish to be read” or, put differently: she finds joy in the reading of Romans and wishes to pass on this reading stance:

To be quite honest, I do not think I could have labored so long to teach and understand a text in which I did not take delight. (3)

From a German perspective, Gaventa is thus close in substance to the hermeneutics of *Einverständnis*,⁴ which was prominently advocated by Peter Stuhlmacher (*Von Verstehen des Neuen Testaments. Eine Hermeneutik* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979; ²1986]). This positive reading stance differs both from a purely philologically and historically based interpretation – which always maintains a distance from the texts and forgoes its own resonances – and from the hermeneutically understood material *Sachkritik* of Rudolf Bultmann.⁵ The dedication of the commentary, however, makes clear that Gaventa's hermeneutic has a different tone, is less theoretically focused, and exhibits a personal and humane character: “With gratitude for Phoebe of Cenchreae and all her sisters.” Within the framework of her commentary, Gaventa forgoes a theoretical explication of her hermeneutics, as Stuhlmacher presents it:

We will best do justice to our responsibility vis-à-vis the biblical texts in view of the tradition in which we stand and amid the consciousness of truth of the present when we strive to practice a *hermeneutics of Einverständnis with the biblical texts that is methodologically and reception-historically considered*.⁶

⁴Translator's note: In his translation of Stuhlmacher's work on hermeneutics, Roy A. Harrisville translated the German term *Einverständnis* with “consent.” See P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent*, trans. R. A. Harrisville (London: SPCK, 1979). Other proposed translations of *Einverständnis* include “agreement,” “common understanding,” “mutual understanding,” and “empathy.”

⁵Cf. Translator's note: Common proposals for translating *Sachkritik* into English include “theological criticism,” “content criticism,” and “material criticism.” In my judgment, it is best to retain the German technical term *Sachkritik* – or, if it must be translated, to render it with “theological criticism.” For further discussion of this term, see L. Bormann and M. Petzoldt, “Sache/Sachkritik,” in LBH (2009): 512–13. See also R. Morgan, “Thiselton on Bultmann's *Sachkritik*,” in *Horizons in Biblical Hermeneutics: A Festschrift in Honor of Anthony Thiselton*, ed. S. E. Porter and M. R. Malcolm (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 39, “What . . . Bultmann meant by the word [*Sachkritik*] was criticism of a *text* (what is *said*) in the light of the *Sache* that the New Testament author intended to speak of (what was *meant*), ultimately the truth of the gospel.”

⁶Stuhlmacher, *Verstehen*, ²1986, 222 (emphasis in the original).

She can be more likely be placed in proximity to Joseph Ratzinger, who for his Jesus trilogy asked only for a measure of antecedent sympathy:

I would only ask my readers for *that initial goodwill (jenen Vorschuss an Sympathie)* without which there can be no understanding.⁷

However, she relates the sympathy, with evident modesty, not to her own commentary but to the text on which she comments.

In view of the enormous learning that has been applied to writing commentaries on Romans – Michael Wolter’s commentary is the most recent impressive example – a certain general restraint in the tone and scope of the exegesis is highly appropriate. Gaventa practices this restraint to a high degree without becoming unclear or imprecise. Her commentary style makes clear that – at least for a commentary on Romans – the concern cannot be with ultimate solutions but “only” with well-grounded proposals. Moreover, Romans has been read time and again as the key text of Pauline theology and thus also of the person of Paul. Gaventa does not attempt to go beyond the text and to derive from the letter categorical solutions for questions about the person of Paul and his religion, theology, and psychology, as Gerd Theißen does, but instead remains entirely *in* the text. This double restraint deserves special recognition. The commentary does not teach about Paul but rather explains the text of Romans in a careful and responsible way. This makes for an enjoyable reading experience, since readers are not pressured argumentatively or by an ideology of history and are able to perceive the fairness and freedom of the commentor vis-à-vis different possibilities of interpretation. The following remark of Gaventa is especially important from a hermeneutical perspective:

However important the letter is for many of us, it was not originally written for us. (3)

In the concise, focused introduction (1–19), Gaventa first highlights characteristic features of Romans: (1) the “distinctiveness” of the letter (length of the work, addressees he does not know well, extensive quotation of Scripture, diatribe style, rhetorical elements), (2) “The Gospel as Intrusion” (“an unexpected event”). Following this characterization of the gospel, Gaventa adds an important statement on the contested relation of Paul to Judaism:

Insisting that Paul remained a Jew is and should be utterly noncontroversial. At the same time, it is crucial to understand that this particular Jew had experienced an event and that event has left nothing untouched. It has not made him something other than a Jew, but it has produced a new way of thinking, assessing, and evaluating ... He has been grasped by Jesus Christ. (5)

Gaventa treats the so-called introductory questions (“Circumstances”) moderately in the sense of the exegetical majority opinion. The introduction concludes with observations on the use of Scripture and on style and rhetoric. What stands at the center of the commentary is not the extensive list of introductory questions but rather the text of the letter.

3. Individual Questions

For the critical reading of the commentary, it is advisable to focus on a few especially important and controversial texts. The abundance of exegetical insights and valuable individual judgments can just as

⁷Joseph Ratzinger – Benedikt XVI., *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. A. J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xxiv (O.W.’s emphasis); GV = idem., *Jesus von Nazareth*, vol. 1 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2007), 22.

little be documented here as all the questions of this reviewer. The selection corresponds to the interests of the reviewer. Let us begin with **Rom 1**: Gaventa reaches the very clear judgment that here Paul condemns female (unusually first) and male homosexuality and speaks of the “ferocity of Paul’s argument” (72), but immediately adds from the auditor’s perspective the important observation that Paul will speak much more comprehensively about sin in chapter 2. Thus, if the Roman Christ-believing auditors would affirm the sexually charged accusation of gentiles from chapter 1 and not feel implicated themselves, this would fundamentally change in chapter 2. For, according to Gaventa, the distinction between circumcision and uncircumcision is undercut in chapter 2 (72): All, non-Jews as well as Jews are guilty before God. Correspondingly, Gaventa convincingly treats the disputed question of the identity of the interlocutor in **2.17–24** as secondary on the basis of the textual logic of the entire chapter (85 and 87):

Whether Jews by birth or by affiliation, Paul addresses those who assume they have the law and who understand themselves accountable to it (unlike the “lawless” in 2:12). . . . The final verses further destabilize the categories of Jew and gentile.

In contrast, the emphasis on the anthropological perspective is particularly important for the first two chapters (89):

Both Jews and gentiles participate in the *anthrōpos* of 1:18, not because of some inherent flaw in Judaism . . . Together they are alike subjects of territory occupied by Sin and Death.

Gaventa answers the question of primitive Christian tradition in **3.24–36** negatively. She reads the section as “Paul’s own composition” (105). Gaventa convincingly understands the *hilastērion* in 3.25 as a translation of the Hebrew *kapporet* as in the LXX. She discusses the pros and cons of this translation at length. Two things are decisive for her: The cultic metaphor is “powerful” (114) and places Jesus at the most holy place:

Given the emphasis in the early chapters of Romans on the glory of God and of humanity’s refusal to acknowledge that glory, this reference to Jesus as the center of the holy of holies is significant (114).

In the small excursus “The Faith of Christ” at **3.26** (*pistis Iēsou*) Gaventa argues that we should go beyond the alternative between subjective and objective genitive and proposes the English translation “Jesus [Christ] faith,” specifying the genitive as a genitive of origin (118–119) – a translation that challenges Lutheran-based interpretations.

Gaventa sets a decisive course for chapters **5–8** of the letter. Differently from Dunn and Fitzmyer, she emphasizes the cosmic dimension of the activity of Christ and gives this section the heading: “Romans 5:1–8:39: Christ, Cosmos, and Consequences.” She comments on this heading as follows (137):

Now he returns to interpret the consequences of Christ’s death in ch. 5 by casting the problem in cosmic terms. The powers of Sin and Death had invaded the entire human cosmos and were defeated only through Jesus Christ and his life-giving work (6:1–7:6). Not even the holy law of God remained exempt from the enslaving grasp of Sin (7:7–25).

This is a decisive interpretive perspective that understands the themes of Death, Sin, and Law as cosmological-anthropological entities and at the same time makes chapters 5–7 comprehensible from the creation, redemption, and consummation perspective in chapter 8. Gaventa especially emphasizes the power of Sin, which Paul has presented already in 3.9 and then in 5.12–21 as the Adamic inheritance for humanity (214). For **chapter 8**, she states:

the cosmic – that is to say, the world-encompassing – character of the letter comes into clear view (234).

Since the new perspective on Paul and especially since the Radical Perspective / Paul within Judaism approach, exegetical interest is especially focused on **chapters 9–11**. Gaventa provides a careful introduction to the place and significance of the chapters in the letter as a whole. She does not refer here to the history of religions categorizing perspectives and the underlying reconstructions of Judaism in the early imperial period and of the biography of Paul but restricts herself to the following exegetical note (265):

In more recent decades the tendency has been to attach an outsize importance to this passage, as when it is identified as the climax of the whole argument ... or “the very center” of the letter ... Neither extreme accounts adequately for the letter as a whole.

Romans 9.5 has always presented special difficulties for commentators. Should the phrase *ho ōn epi pantōn theos* be related to Christ (“Christ who is God over all”) or be drawn to the last part of the sentence (“May God who is overall be blessed forever”). Gaventa presents the issues associated with both possibilities and chooses a notable intermediate position: “from them is the Christ, physically speaking, the one who is over all – God be blessed forever. Amen” (267). She explains this translation as follows (273):

The translation above seeks middle ground by inserting a dash between “the one who is over all” and “God,” leaving interpretation to the ear of the audience.

This reviewer continues to lean toward the syntactical resolution “May God who is over all be blessed forever,” while also regarding Gaventa’s proposal as possible. The entire phrase remains difficult, regardless of how it is resolved.

For an understanding of the three chapters but especially of chapter 11 that is appropriate to the subject matter, Gaventa points out multiple times that Paul especially addresses the non-Jewish Christ-believers and emphatically designates himself as apostle to the gentiles in 11.13 (311):

Despite multitudinous depictions of Rom 9–11 as concerned with “God and Israel” or even “Israel’s unbelief” or some such, this direct address to gentiles [11.13] prompts the suspicion that Paul’s discussion about God and Israel has an immediate cause in gentile believers ... Here [11.13b] the concern is not with *Jewish* resistance to gentile mission, however, but with *gentile* misunderstanding of Israel’s future.

For Gaventa the concern here is with the respect for the Jews that the apostle to the gentiles, Paul, demands from the formerly pagan Christ believers in Rome. The fact that Paul ultimately proclaims the salvation of all, non-Jews as well as Jews, in the form of an apocalyptically colored *mystērion*-saying lies on this same line for Gaventa (330):

vv. 33–36 draw a veil across all of that, reminding all Paul’s readers – both ancient and modern – that no one knows God’s mind.

This reviewer would like to add two other interpretive considerations to this important text-hermeneutical perspective – Paul as Jewish missionary to the gentiles addresses the formerly pagan Christ-believing Romans about the right relation to the Jews – that is expressed above all in the olive tree analogy and in the concluding passage about the salvation of “all” (Rom 11.32). First, alongside the Roman address, in chapters 9–11, Jerusalem, as Paul’s next travel destination, already stands in the background and thus the fate of Israel – and not only of the Jews in Rome – does as well. Second, the theme of the relatively unsuccessful mission to the Jews of the Jerusalem apostles and the Jerusalem Christ-believing

community under James in contrast to Paul's own successful mission to the gentiles is connected to this. Here, Paul constructs a *salvation-historical* logic in God's action: the mission to the gentiles must *temporally* precede the mission to Israel. Had Israel immediately confessed Jesus Christ as Lord, there would not have been a mission to the gentiles. Now, however, Paul can even praise his office as apostle to the gentiles, because he also brings Jews to believe in Christ (Rom 11.13). Gaventa points to Acts as a historical reference text (310) but remains rather skeptical toward the argument. To this reviewer, by contrast, this salvation-historical construction in Rom 11.11–16 seems to point precisely to the historical moment in which Paul sees himself prior to his journey to Jerusalem.

For the interpretation of Rom 13.1–7, Gaventa deviates from her rule of not explicitly thematizing the history of interpretation (355). She provides a very concise sketch of interpretations from Polycarp of Smyrna to the present day. Her own text-hermeneutical course setting is then very important (357):

His [Paul's] instructions aim to shape the behavior of the addressees, who are believers, rather than their rulers. That means this is not a treatise on rulership, as is Seneca's *De Clementia*, which purports to advise the emperor Nero on the differences between a tyrant and a good ruler ... far from providing rulers with unrestricted authority, however, Paul's assertion that God puts authority in place means that all their authority is derivative.

And she clarifies (366):

While Paul is not writing about "Rome" as such or about "the empire," these authorities are agents of Rome, put in place by Rome, or more generally in service of Rome ... for Paul, they are God's [agents].

In the details, she rightly stresses the theme of tribute and taxes (or taxes and customs), although she warns against an overly precise social-historical concretization. Here (367), however, an additional reference to the significance of the problem of taxes in Judea/Jerusalem would have been helpful. One can, however, only support the overall judgment (368):

This passage poses a significant challenge to anti-imperial interpretations of the letter. That is not to say that the gospel supports the empire, whether the empire of Rome or any other ... But the emperor and his cronies remain God's creation.

On the relationship of law and love in 13.8–14, Gaventa makes a decisive statement (380), which expresses the factual change in the grounding of ethics in Paul:

Love fulfills the law, and that is good; nothing Paul writes here critiques the law. Nonetheless, the law does not shape Paul's instruction. To the contrary, it is Christ who shapes it ... And when he writes that the "reign of God" is not about diet, because the one who serves Christ pleases God, the law appears to have been eclipsed.

Finally, **16.1, 3 and 7**. On Phoebe Gaventa states (428–429):

When Paul introduces Phoebe, he provides her with the most elaborate introduction found in any NT epistle ... She requires this introduction, since she is the only one charged with delivering the letter, an action that is of utmost importance to Paul ... Phoebe is the representative or emissary of the church in Cenchreae.

Furthermore, Gaventa portrays Phoebe as a benefactor, as the one who read Paul's letter in the Roman assembly and presumably also provided information about how to understand the letter. From a social-historical perspective, Gaventa places her not among the elite but indeed in a comfortable life

“above subsistence” (431).

With regard to Aquila and Prisca, Gaventa points especially to the fact that the married Jewish couple receives thanks from all non-Jewish churches – an unusual distinction. Andronicus and Junia are also Jewish Christ-believers who are especially elevated by Paul – as an apostle pair analogous to 1 Cor 15.7 and as fellow prisoners, with Gaventa placing special emphasis on the difficult fate of imprisoned women (436). Gaventa could also have discussed whether the two came from the earliest Jerusalem community, since Paul distinguishes them with the title of apostle.

The concluding doxology in **16.25–27** does not belong to the original letter, which concluded with 16.24, as Gaventa postulates in agreement with most exegetes (444–445).

4. Conclusion

As far as this reviewer can see, Beverly Gaventa is the first woman to write a comprehensive scholarly commentary on Romans. The commentary is a great achievement and a philological-hermeneutical enrichment of the landscape of commentaries on Romans sketched at the outset. Gaventa sets her own tone and places many distinct accents. She is focused on the text, philologically precise, and particularly careful in tracing the argumentation. She is confident in her exegetical judgments and is committed neither one-sidedly to an ideology nor to a theological school of thought. And she is congenial in her avoidance of excessively demonstrative erudition that buries the text rather than elucidates it. Her emphasis on Phoebe is not an expression of a belabored feminism but the result of an intelligent, sensitive, and dialogical reading. This reviewer read the commentary to the end with excitement and would have enjoyed discussing many texts with Beverly Gaventa. The commentary is highly recommended for *all* readers, for those who up to now have not yet understood Romans and for those who thought they already knew it.

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