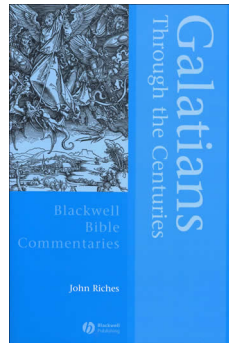


○ REVIEW OF JOHN RICHES, *GALATIANS THROUGH THE CENTURIES*. BLACKWELL BIBLE COMMENTARIES

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This book is a commentary on the reception history of St. Paul's epistle to the Galatians. History of reception is a growing emphasis in biblical studies. There have been prior studies that give some attention to analyzing the reception history of a particular biblical text (notably Ulrich Luz's commentary on Matthew in the *Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* series); however, the Blackwell Bible Commentaries contribute to this research field by being the first series devoted to the reception history of the texts of the Bible. Most commentaries on the Bible are typically concerned about the historical criticism of a text for grasping its original meaning. However, according to the series' editors, this unique commentary series is 'based on the premise that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant' (p. ix). John Riches' volume on Galatians is a recent addition to this valuable series.

Paul's letter to the Galatians, though a very short text, fares as one of the theological heavyweights of the Bible. Riches perceives that the letter is one of the most subversive texts in the New Testament, given Paul's distress over the intense controversy in the Galatian church, a church he founded. Moreover, Riches asserts that the reception history of the letter demonstrates that this powerful text 'continues to exert a formative, often disruptive and subversive, influence' on human history in the course of two millennia (p. 1). In particular, Galatians (alongside Romans) was Martin Luther's favorite text, which inspired and grounded his Reformation. Consequently, this text has been used in recent decades to combat Luther's influential readings.

Given the series' unique approach to commentary writing, Riches' introductory chapter is an important section of the book – in fact, it occupies about 65 of the book's 300 pages. He indicates that although the series is interested in how texts of the Bible exert their influence through forms of human creativity other than literature (e.g. visual art, music, drama, and film), his volume in the series is, unusually, almost exclusively a reception of Galatians in literary history

– a literary history that is dominated by the commentary form (p. 2). Moreover, in his discussion about the question of method, he discusses the dialectical relationship of literary texts to the social, economic, and political realities of their times (p. 6). In fact, one of his underlying premises is that literature does not merely reflect or imitate its social, political, and cultural world (*weltabbildend*) but it actually is involved in shaping that world – that is, ‘world building’ (*weltbildend*). Since the letter’s legacy in literary history is in the commentary form, Riches discusses the principal commentators with whom he engages and dialogues: Marcion, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, William Perkins, F.C. Baur, and J.B. Lightfoot. He describes each commentator’s historical setting and also highlights the close dialogue found between the commentators. In addition, he includes some other important scholars (e.g. R. Bultmann and E.P. Sanders) into his discussion.

Riches approaches the commentary by discussing salient themes of and questions raised by Galatians. Going through the sections of the letter consecutively, he treats each issue by tracing the discussion through the different historical periods (e.g. patristic readings, mediaeval period, Reformation, and modern period) or the major commentators. After looking at the historical and literary context of the letter, Riches looks at the themes of Paul’s apostolic authority and the understanding of evil and salvation in 1:1–9. In 1:10–24 he deals with the issues of Paul’s relation to Judaism and Paul’s conversion. Then in 2:1–10, Riches considers the history and interpretation of the relationship of Acts and Galatians, the question regarding whether Titus was circumcised, and the nature of the dispute. His weighty section of 2:11–21 first spotlights the issue of the conflict at Antioch; then he offers a rich presentation of the reception history of justification by faith and not by works of the law. Riches next delves into ‘Galatians 2:20 in the Mystical Tradition’ which includes Pseudo-Dionysius, Umberto of Casale, St. John of the Cross, and, interestingly, Keiji Nishitani and the Kyoto School of Zen Buddhism.

Riches moves on to 3:1–14 and the history of interpretation of the argument from the Galatians’ experience of the Spirit (vv. 1–5) and the theme of Abraham as the Father of all those who believe. The latter theme is divided into the issues of Abraham as the source of blessing to those who believe; and the curse of the law and its removal by Christ to make way for the blessing of Abraham. Then Riches turns his attention to the issues of the ‘Purpose and Limits of the Law’ and ‘New Life as Sons (and Daughters?) of God’ in 3:15–29. For Galatians 4, Riches discusses the themes of the Galatians’ former state (4:1–20) and the Hagar/Sarah story and its allegorization (4:21–31); for Galatians 5, he treats the topics of ‘Faith Working through Love Fulfills the Law’ (5:1–15) and ‘New Life in the Spirit’. Finally, Riches deals with Galatians 6: Paul’s ethical advice in 6:1–10, and the motif of ‘new creation’ in 6:11–18. The book closes with a helpful glossary listing important terms and commentators/interpreters, a bibliography, and useful subject and Scripture indices.

The series’ unique approach to the enterprise of commentary writing, poses some challenges and questions. One worth mentioning is how to understand Riches’ role as a commentator in his commentary of reception history. In his extended introduction, Riches states that in the book he does not offer his own interpretation of the texts or set out his own views in his presentations (pp. 30–31). However, it is curious to consider whether his presentation of the reception history of Galatians is from a certain perspective that is influenced by his own ‘historical’ setting. Does Riches wield his influence on his presentation of the text’s reception history through his choice of which themes merit his focus, and which (male) commentators warrant more attention than

others? In addition, there are moments where he offers incisive remarks about certain interpretations or interpreters, such as E.P. Sanders (e.g. pp. 136–37; p. 263). Thus, it is interesting to ponder how Riches' commentary on the reception history of Galatians affects or influences the ongoing literary history of the text.

Although Riches' book primarily concentrates on the text's literary history, he does occasionally spice up his presentation with some paintings, and with the reception of certain texts in non-Christian (Western) traditions – such as Galatians 2:20 in Zen Buddhism (pp. 140–41), and Galatians 4:1–7; 5:17 in Gnostic and Manichaean literature (p. 215; pp. 265–67). These insightful points whet the readers' appetite for further explorations of the text's reception in other non-Christian traditions and non-literary forms throughout history. Nevertheless, as Riches has clearly demonstrated, it is the text's literary history that has contributed to the letter's legacy in Western intellectual society.

This well-written, dense work contains a rich wealth of material, and testifies to Riches' mastery of the immeasurable amount of material. Riches takes his readers on a worthwhile trek through neglected or forgotten terrains of the landscape of literary history. He brings together, into the same dialogue, many interpreters from throughout history. As a result, readers are enriched as they encounter the significance of Paul's letter to the Galatians from a variety of historical perspectives. Riches' volume is a brilliant, stimulating, and thought-provoking work.