

Commentary on II Thessalonians, by Ronald Fung. Bible Commentary Series. Hong Kong: Tien Dao Publishing House, Ltd., 1990. Pp. 388 + 15 pp. of index. (paper) [This is a Chinese text: 馮蔭坤：帖撒羅尼加後書註釋《天道書樓》]

Realizing the need of Chinese scholarship in the area of biblical commentaries, Tien Dao Publishing House invited Chinese scholars to embark on the project of writing the Bible Commentary Series (in Chinese). The idea was noble and challenging: noble in the sense that this series will be written by Chinese scholars only; challenging in the sense that each commentary is to be well-balanced with exegesis and exposition. To accomplish the task is by no means easy; and Fung's work is a massive 404-page definitive Chinese commentary on 2 Thessalonians.

The first 38 pages is an introductory section addressing critical issues (authorship, date, unity, purpose, recipient) of 2 Thessalonians. After giving a review and critique of various positions, Fung occasionally states his position. At times, Fung's own view is less clear. For example, regarding the audience, Fung states that "the letter provides little concrete and detailed information." (p. 48)

From pages 58-383, Fung provides word and phrase studies on the meaning of each verse. Fung uses no less than six pages for the exegesis of every verse. The general thesis of the book is that Paul wants his congregation to be watchful and to wait for the Day of the Lord. The exegetical section mainly provides cross-referencing of terms within the book and beyond, a Greek reading of the text explained in Chinese, a frequency-count of the word's appearance in the book or the Bible, and detailed word studies. An example will suffice to show the style of the commentary, and this example is paradigmatic of Fung's exegesis throughout. On pages 59-60, Fung writes,

'...is fitting...' has 'as' (see also 3.1) in front of it in the original language. The conjunction links this phrase to the preceding one, and together they read: 'We ought to give thanks to God always for you, as is fitting.' This phrase not only stresses the word 'ought', it also points out that Paul and his co-workers have a responsibility to give thanks for the Thessalonians. This thankfulness should be mutual. Paul and his co-workers felt that they should give thanks to God for the Thessalonians because they were deserving of it.

This adjective ["is fitting"] in the original language -- same root as an adverb already appears in 1 Thess 2.12 (cf. *1 Thessalonians* [Fung's

Commentary], 169) -- is used 8 times in the Pauline epistles (NT 41 times), one of which clearly carries the original 'compare' connotation (Rom 8:18)... The other five meanings are 'worthy to gain' (1 Tim 5.18), 'worthy to receive' (1 Tim 6.1), 'worthy of' (1 Tim 1.15, 4.9), 'deserve to' (Rom 1.32), ... The other two times the adjective means 'ought to' and 'fitting', which remain close to the original meaning of correspondence between action and situation. [translation *mine*]

Fung's material and the position he takes in the first 38 pages look are very similar to those found in commentaries of E. Best and I. Marshall;¹ but now readers can read it in Chinese. The whole commentary is indicative of the indebtedness that Chinese scholarship has towards western research. To write a Chinese commentary without consulting western research is inevitable. Original and indigenous Chinese research may not be realized for some time yet. To speak of Chinese scholarship does not mean one should abandon or reject western scholarship. The question is how to build on western scholarship but also be conscious of one's context. Fung's summary and analysis in the first 38 pages are substantive and logical.

Regarding Fung's methodology, he attempts to do an objective exegesis based on the Greek text; it is debatable whether such approach is possible. Such exegesis fails to face realistically the presupposition of the exegete and the semantic context of the text. Is this why Fung is unwilling to presuppose, for example, the audience situation? Therefore, Fung considers the purpose of writing 2 Thessalonians is purely to correct the audience's eschatology.

But already in 1 Thessalonians, we see that the audience has faced profound problems: grief over dying members (1 Thess 4.13-18); over-preparedness for the parousia (1 Thess 5.1-11); resistance of community expectation of labor by the ἄτακτοι (1 Thess 5.12--14); rejection of Paul's traditional ethic (1 Thess 4.1-12). There is evidence in 2 Thessalonians that some of these problems do persist into the time when Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians. For example, the problem of overrealized *parousia* in 2 Thess 2.1-15; the problem of ἄτακτο in 2 Thess 3.6-15. The context of 2 Thessalonians continues to be suffering (1.5) and affliction (1.6); in fact, both have become intensified as is indicated by the term τοῖς διωγμοῖς (1.4). Could it be that the congregation believed that the day of the Lord had come (2 Thess 2.1-12), a belief which resulted in disruptive idlers (3:6) and weariness in well doing (3.16)? Could it not be that precisely this millennial thought of the congregation misunderstood Paul's eschatology to be a realized

¹Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: A.& C. black, 1972); I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

eschatology?

The commentary will be greatly improved if modern research is taken into consideration, such as, Robert Jewett's hypothesis of the "millenarian movement" in Thessalonica.² Literary criticism (grammatical, exegetical and word study approaches as used by Fung) has its base in the semantic, therefore exegesis cannot be isolated from social scientific method. In other words, a purely literary approach is not as objective as many would claim, because the literary approach has its own cultural and social base. The fact that a word is used in other Pauline epistles does not mean that the same word has the same meaning in 2 Thessalonians. The semantic domain of words and phrase studies in the commentary is narrow.

The greatest contribution of this commentary is no doubt its bountiful material for seminarians who can readily use the data Fung collects in their preparation of sermons or Bible studies. Those who do not know Greek will find this book difficult to understand, even though they are reading the Chinese explanation.

I often asked myself the following questions in the course of reading Fung's commentary: Where is Chinese biblical scholarship heading? Is Chinese biblical scholarship heading in the direction of CD-ROM data collection only? Can a commentary on the epistle be considered adequate without attempting to reconstruct the context and audience? Is commentary writing not only compilation of data but also interpretation of data? Has an interpreter fulfilled his task when he renders the Greek words in Chinese, or has he also to utter the meaning, the

²The issue of social exigency in writing the 2 Thessalonians is contingent on the symbolic worldview of the audience which takes into account the forms of the social-economic, religious and political forces. This brings us to the social model one uses to interpret the congregation (see works of Gager, Danker, Meeks, and Jewett) which Fung does not consider. Scholars postulate that the Thessalonian congregation were converted mainly as the result of their dissatisfaction with the social, political, and economic order. See Klaus Wengst, *PAX ROMANA and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (trans. John Bowden. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis, Missouri: Clayton Publishing House, 1982); John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975); Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Robert Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

significance, and relevance of the text to his readers as well? (Surely the latter task is part of the mandate of the Tien Dao's Bible Commentary Series.) Can there be culture-free interpretation or are we not historical beings, free subjects embedded in the world? Is exegesis not an attempt to outline the interplay between the movement of the community (Thessalonians) and the movement of the writer (Paul)? And is exposition not an interaction between the movement of the community (Chinese audience) and the movement of the commentator?

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