

Book Review

Robert Riall. *The Surprise of Mercy: The Letter to the Romans, An Anabaptist Reappraisal*. Humansville, MO: published by the author, 2022. Pp. 54.

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Robert Riall is a member of the Old Order Amish church in Polk County, Missouri. Typical of Amish in that settlement, Riall is a produce farmer. However, he is atypical insofar as he joined the church from a non-Amish background. He received a PhD in classics in 1987 before joining the Amish in the 1990s with his wife. Thus, Riall brings the ability to read Greek *and* an Anabaptist theological framework to his reading of Romans.

This 54-page book has two parts. The first third lays the Anabaptist theological foundation for the following two-thirds of the book, which consists of Riall's paraphrase of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Riall's primary concern is with Martin Luther's mistaken understanding of two Greek words:

- *pistis*, normally "faith" or "faithfulness," and
- *dikaioyne*, normally "justice" or "righteousness."

Riall argues that Luther "narrowed the meaning" (2) of the first term to "reliance on," removing any sense of faithfulness on the part of the believer, so the resulting justification is a forensic or "alien righteousness," devoid of real moral transformation on the part of the believer. "This double set of redefinitions sparked a revolution in the way Paul was understood" (3), which in turn brought a conservative reaction on the part of the Anabaptists, who argued with Luther's theological narrowing of these concepts and the "tragic moral disintegration" (3) that accompanied it. Riall then presents a selection of quotations from various sixteenth-century Anabaptists that demonstrate how Anabaptist understandings of faith and justification reflect broader, and arguably more biblical, understandings. These witnesses include Hans Schlaffer, Leonard Frick, Leupolt Scharnschlager, Pilgram Marpeck, Hans Hut, Hans Denck, Georg Blaurock, the anonymous Passau prisoners who wrote hymns 47 and 125 in the *Ausbund*, and Hans Betz.

"The purpose of recalling these ten testimonies," Riall explains, "is to clarify the particular emphases in my presentation of a Luther-free rendering of Paul's magnificent *Letter to the*



Romans” (14). Riall defends paraphrasing Scripture as something the Anabaptists did and valued. Riall hopes to help the reader hear Romans in a new and fresh way, stripped of the misleading Lutheran filter through which most Protestants read it.

The paraphrase itself is a fresh and largely faithful rendering of the Greek text of Romans. Some of Riall’s paraphrasing I would call distinctive and some I would call questionable. Among Riall’s distinctive readings is his rendering of the Greek *euangelion*, usually translated “gospel” or “good news,” as the “Announcement.” The phrase with which Paul begins and ends this letter, “obedience of faith” (1:5; 16:26), Riall translates as “faithful obedience.”

Among the questionable readings is his failure to include the opening word of grace in Romans 1:7b (“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”). Riall paraphrases the Greek *hagioi*, usually translated “holy ones” or “saints,” as [God’s] “eschatological warriors” (19; Rom. 1:7). Paul uses this term to refer to all the believers in Jesus who are in the churches he addresses. However, Riall explains that he thinks these are the “eschatological warriors in company of the Son of Man in Dan. 7:18, 21, 22, 25, 27” (19n3). The questionable rendering recurs in Rom. 12:13 (44) and 15:25 (51). Riall paraphrases what the NRSV translates as “do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are” (Rom. 12:16) as “Never consider yourself beyond God’s little ones. As the saying goes, ‘Self-esteem stinks’” (45). This seems an unhealthy and unfaithful exaggeration of what Paul actually says.

Occasionally, words slip into Riall’s paraphrase that some of his fellow worshipers might not recognize. These include *solipsistic* (22), *feckless* (32), *craven* (34), *homogeneous* (42), and *proleptically* (46).

On the other hand, Riall’s paraphrase often does what it is meant to do: help us hear and appreciate Paul’s letter in a new and fresh way. Examples:

- “It is vain self-deception for a man to play the moral scold and yet himself be emmeshed [*sic*] in the same vices” (21; Rom 2:1).
- “The Law says what it has to say to everyone in its purview for one single purpose: to reduce everyone to silence and to bind the entire cosmos into debt to God. The Law is useless to help impotent man to self-improvement. Its sole practical effect is the revelation of human failure” (25).
- “Law, by its very nature, results in wrath. The absence of Law—stunningly!—means the absence of transgression” (27).
- “Without the Law’s clear word, sin remains a vague non-issue” (32).
- “Sin has managed to get effective possession of me so that my own inner self is shattered into dysfunctional fragments” (32).

One should not expect to find inclusive language in this paraphrase. Despite the fact that the Hebrew word for Spirit is feminine and the Greek word is neuter, Riall refers to the Spirit as “He.” Riall renders *Ioulias* in Romans 16:7 as “Junius,” using the male form of the name in keeping

with medieval scribes who changed Paul's feminine name to a masculine one more palatable to a male-dominated church.

In short, this is a worthwhile paraphrase of Romans that presents Paul's letter in terms that can help readers appreciate Paul without the limiting theological filters through which most of us have read it. Of course, Romans raises a host of other theological issues important to Anabaptists that are addressed more thoroughly in a commentary like *Romans* by John E. Toews (Believers Church Bible Commentary, 2004).

Erratum

12/5/2022: Activated links in PDF file.