

Daniel Patte, *Romans: Three Exegetical Interpretations and the History of Reception*, vol. 1: *Romans 1:1–32*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018. ISBN: 978-05-67-69329-7. Hardback, pp. xxv + 531. \$245.00.

- [1] The book under review is the first of (presumably) three volumes on the book of Romans. The huge task of these volumes is to present the three basic strands of interpretations contemporaneous exegetes use to understand the entire letter to the Romans. In this book, however, Patte deals only with Rom 1:1–32, for he spends much time on the background and methodological framework of this project. In contrast, the forthcoming volumes will go *medias in res*, presupposing the groundwork given in volume 1. As Patte explains and as becomes clear throughout the whole book, this multivolume project can be seen as the result of the SBL Seminar “Romans through History and Cultures” (RTHC), which Patte initiated in 1997 and which ran until 2011. The experiences and in-depth research he made during this interdisciplinary seminar with not only exegetes but also church historians and theologians are mainly responsible for the concept and ideas behind the book. The volume “seeks to draw together in a concise, thematic way the many insights they [ninety-three scholars of the SBL Seminar] offered” (7). Thus, Patte also takes up the results of the ten-volume book series *Romans through History and Cultures* (T&T Clark, 2000–2013).
- [2] The distinctive feature of Patte’s compilation is to show that all three different and even contradictory interpretations found in contemporaneous commentaries are “equally legitimate and plausible” (13). So, Patte never tires of encouraging his readers to “a much more respectful attitude toward the many and diverse receptions of Romans. We have much to learn from them” (2). By *reception* Patte does not only mean modern critical commentaries on which he focuses in chapters 3–5. Assuming a “collective wisdom of generations” (2), reception includes also interpretations of authorities such as Augustine and Luther (see ch. 7) and even so-called illiterate people of our times. Instead of refusing such interpretations in a knee-jerk reaction, Patte demands more self-effacement among exegetes and a relativization of their own position. This is one of the lessons that he as an exegete had to learn during his interdisciplinary work in the SBL Seminar and that led him to the conclusion that it is untenable to “establish the (only) true, legitimate, and plausible interpretation” (4) of the text.
- [3] To achieve his huge task that ultimately reflects his personal development since the beginning of the SBL Seminar in 1997, Patte offers three parts in his book. Every chapter begins with a short recapitulation of what Patte has argued up to this point, and he usually gives helpful outlooks on the following (sub)chapters. With great sensitivity for possible reservations by exegetes against his assumption of equally legitimate and plausible interpretations, Patte gently takes the reader by the hand and tries to develop his argument in a comprehensible and pedagogical manner. From time to time this results in a repetitious effect, but it makes his attempt all the more understandable. Moreover, one could easily start to read anywhere without having the impression that information is missing. Besides bibliography and two helpful indexes (name, subject), the volume includes a splendid table that lists thirty-one key theological and ethical themes and contrasts the way how the three different interpretations deal with them.
- [4] Part 1 is to be understood as preliminary discussion that sketches the premises on which parts 2 and 3 build their argumentation. Here Patte explains why it is suitable to assume a multiplicity of equally legitimate and plausible interpretations of Paul’s Letter to the Romans. This is achieved by presenting the inclusive critical methodology that shapes

the whole book and that shaped the teamwork of the SBL Seminar: “scriptural criticism” (16–20). According to Patte (and the other members of the group), every interpretative process concerning Scripture depends on a threefold decision: “analytical textual choices, hermeneutical theological choices, and contextual choices” (18; see also 339–40). The first decision is about the exegetical method one decides to use, the second relates to the interpretive lines of reasoning within an interpretation, and the last aspect applies to the fact that every interpretation is an “interested interpretation” (see also 340). Among the exegetical methods, there are three main approaches: a philological/epistolary interest, a rhetorical/ideological approach, and a thematic/figurative questioning. Or, as Patte further clarifies in another well-known exegetical jargon, the three strands of exegesis focus either on “behind-the-text,” “in-front-of-the-text,” or “within-the-text” (see 23–28, 53–55).

- [5] In chapter 2 of part 1, Patte explains that the ambivalences of Paul’s letter lead to different decisions concerning these three exegetical methods. Choosing different focuses ultimately has the consequence that exegetes follow three plausible interpretive lines of logic—“theological logic,” “rhetoric and ideological logic,” and “thematic and figurative logic”—that result in three lines of interpretation—“forensic theological interpretations” (54), “covenantal community interpretations” (55), and “realized-apocalyptic/messianic interpretations” (55).
- [6] Part 2 takes up these three strands of interpretation, each in a separate chapter, and develops their exegetical features alongside the text of Rom 1:1–32. According to Patte, all three attempts at interpretation one can find in contemporaneous critical commentaries are legitimate, that is, solidly grounded in the text, and plausible, that is, making sense and coherent and consistent hermeneutical decisions (73; see also xv). Due to the fact that all three ways of interpretation are offered by well-educated and sophisticated exegetes, it would be hubristic to abandon too quickly their proposal in favor of one’s own privileged reading. (In part 3, Patte explains that interpretations that differ from one’s own should be taken as legitimate and plausible until proven otherwise [391–96].)
- [7] Chapter 3 discusses “forensic theological interpretations,” chapter 4 presents exegetes whose attempt Patte summarizes under the heading “covenantal community interpretations,” and chapter 5 deals with “realized-apocalyptic/messianic interpretations.” Each of these three chapters is subdivided into the same scheme. Patte starts (1) to make plausible his categorization and ends (2) by illustrating the exegetical consequences that the different interests have for the passage Rom 1:1–32. In each chapter Patte stresses differences as well as common features within the interpretive lines and picks out relevant representatives among New Testament exegetes.
- [8] Whereas part 2 does justice to the two first two aspects of scriptural criticism (analytical textual choices and hermeneutical theological choices), part 3 pays attention to the third aspect, namely, the relevance of an exegete’s historical, cultural, and sociopolitical situation (this is already sketched in ch. 1, 33–39). This hermeneutical feature, as Patte explains, has been recognized for a long time now in exegesis (335–40; see also 4–5). In his own words: “The fact that all interpretations—both receptions and critical exegeses—necessarily involve these three frames requires from us to acknowledge that the forensic theological, inclusive covenantal community, and realized-apocalyptic/messianic interpretations of Romans are not merely framed by interpretive lines of reasoning (or theological hermeneutical frames), but also by contextual frames” (340). Thus, he introduces another threefold distinction (343). To put it another way, Patte points out contemporaneous aspects that can be seen as influential for the most of the three strands

of interpretation that he developed in part 2. With regard to the forensic theological interpretations, Patte sees a connection to an individual-centered setting (6.2). In contrast, the sociorhetorical inclusive covenantal community interpretations are mainly influenced by a community-centered context (6.3). And the historical setting that stands behind figurative realized-apocalyptic/messianic interpretations can be characterized as a religious/heteronomy-centered environment of the exegete (6.4).

- [9] As examples for an individual-centered setting, chapter 7.2, finally, discusses the interpretations of Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther. The community-centered context is illustrated with the help of Clement of Alexandria's and Peter Abelard's approach (7.3). The bearing that a religious/heteronomy-centered environment has is sketched out by the interpretation of John Chrysostom, Eastern Orthodox interpreters, and Pentecostal/Charismatics. In this last chapter, Patte builds upon the receptions studied in the book series *Romans through History and Cultures*. So, this chapter is some kind of supplement to the findings of the RTHC series (see 402). In contrast to this series, however, Patte now focuses on the "ethical discourses that shaped the lives of not only the interpreters/believers who read *Romans* for a Word-to-live-by but also their neighbors" (403). According to Patte, the ethical value is the crucial aspect that leads exegetes to their decision between the different strands of interpretation (see 388–91, 396–404). Patte claims "that any given reception [of *Romans*] is the result of a choice. Besides being an intellectual choice—it must make sense—this choice was an ethical choice.... For better or worse, one of them was viewed as having greater value *in a particular context* in which believers/interpreters interact with their neighbors" (400).
- [10] Consequently, the whole book is built upon a threefold distinction that functions on several levels. The following chart illustrates this distinction.

equally legitimate and plausible influential interpretations factors for critical exegesis ("scriptural criticism")	forensic theological interpretations (ch. 3)	covenantal community interpretations (ch. 4)	realized-apocalyptic/messianic interpretations (ch. 5)
analytical textual frames (part 2)	philological/epistolary (behind-the-text)	rhetorical/ideological (in-front-of-the-text)	thematic/figurative (within-the-text)
interpretive lines of reasoning/ hermeneutical theological frames (part 2)	theological logic	rhetoric and ideological logic	thematic and figurative logic
contextual frames (part 3)	individual-centered	community-centered	religious/heteronomy-centered

- [11] There is no doubt that Patte's study reminds exegetes of the often-ignored fact that every interpretation of a text is contextual—their own as well. He encourages exegetes to learn from one another, not only from other exegetes but also from receptions in the broadest sense. The exegetical discourse definitely will profit if more interpreters “hold positive assumptions regarding receptions” (31), as Patte tries to do it. Too often, exegetes quickly abandon other receptions (in a broader sense) and even interpretations of other learned exegetes as dim-witted. Stressing the dependency of one's own exegesis on the historical, cultural, and sociopolitical situation in which one lives, Patte offers good reasons to take on this moderate attitude.
- [12] At the same time, Patte is well aware that his assumption that every critical exegesis is equally legitimate and plausible will not be uncontested (see 13, 31). His attempt “to overcome the illusion that a text has single legitimate meaning” (20–21) and to abandon “the illusion that the intentional meaning of a text is to be privileged” (28–30) does not mean, however, as he clarifies several times, that he speaks in favor of “an *anything goes* attitude” (31; see also, e.g., 337). Readers must decide for themselves whether Patte succeeded to walk this narrow road between anything goes and the traditional view of exegetes. It is questionable, however, whether Patte's empirical argument, referring to the different effects of a lecture about racism in 1986 (see 28–29), suffices to abandon the exegetical approach that searches for the one intention of an author. Moreover, one gets the impression that Patte's abandonment of a traditional exegesis is primarily caused by his interdisciplinary work in the SBL Seminar. On page 32, Patte states, “without this openness it was impossible *for us* to work as a *community* of scholars respecting each other.” To be sure, in order to do justice to other receptions or interpretations, one must put on hold one's own position. Patte is also right that a text can have an effect that contradicts the proper intention of an author. However, neither of these observations necessitates leaving aside the traditional exegetes' quest for the one intentional meaning of a text.
- [13] Furthermore, Patte's study raises the question of how to deal with the “methodological explosion” (3) that detonated in the last decades of biblical scholarship. According to Patte, it is not possible to incorporate the three main lines of exegetical research he presupposes throughout his book into a single interpretation that uses their exegetical methods or lines of thought in a balanced manner. Having tried this unifying attempt by himself, he soon gave up. Necessarily, as he sums up, one must privilege one of the three methodological ways and relegate the two others to a secondary status (3). Otherwise, the interpretation would not be plausible (336). “In practice, each interpretation . . . is hybrid, in the sense that it calls upon a particular mix of several methodologies, even though one always predominates and frames the given exegetical interpretation” (25). In Patte's view, this is confirmed by his long and informed research about the reception of Romans.
- [14] Superficially, this is convincing, especially if one interprets a single passage. However, a text such as the Letter to the Romans is so multilayered (a fact that Patte pays attention to in ch. 2.1) that there should be an ongoing discussion in how far the many options of methodologies can be merged together in order to clarify the meaning(s?) of the text. The premise of Patte's proposal that must be questioned here is the assumption that commentaries “must privilege and follow *one* critical exegetical method and *one* interpretative line of reasoning in order to be coherent and consistent” (57). It is questionable, however, whether exegetes and their interpretation can be or have to be put into such a close corset. Why should it not be possible for one exegete to refer to different exegetical methods within the full length of a commentary, following several lines of interpretative logic without subordinating all the methods and interpretive lines of thought applied to one

privileged method and privileged interpretive logic? Actually, Patte himself seems to do this in this volume, when he stresses throughout the book that all the interpretations are *equally* legitimate and plausible. Moreover, when he illustrates his assumption with Douglas Moo's commentary, Patte even states: "One can hold on to the Reformers' forensic theological interpretation of 'justification by faith alone,' while accepting the new information about the covenantal framework for understanding what Paul says about the Law and Judaism" (62).¹ Thus, there seems to be no incoherence in consequence of Moo's merged lines of reasoning. Yet Patte continues that Moo ultimately is "*integrating* in its particular interpretive line of reasoning nuggets of insights found in other interpretations that followed totally different interpretive lines of reasoning" (62, emphasis added). This subordination, however, is not caused by reasons of logic or method but due to the literary genre of commentaries, "which demands such hybridity" (62). Obviously, Patte wavers between two explanations for his assumption that any interpretation must privilege one line of interpretive logic. One is arguing in terms of logic and coherence; the other is arguing with commentaries' literary genre. If the latter holds true, it is questionable whether a combination of different exegetical methods and lines of interpretive logic necessarily must result in a "confusing vertigo" (3). If the former holds true, the broadness of exegesis's methodological instruments seems to come out as disadvantage. Having chosen one of the three strands seems to be irreversible within one interpretation. In fact, however, the opposite should be true: within an interpretation, the variety of methodological options helps the exegetes to do justice to the different characteristics within a text by accommodating and adopting different tools of textual analysis.

- [15] Crucial for Patte's line of thought is the differentiation between interpretations in the sense of critical exegesis and interpretation in the sense of reception(s). This becomes clear at several instances (see, e.g., 336, 338, 393). At the same time, however, Patte understands "each critical exegesis as a particular kind of reception" (339). In any case, because he uses these terms with such a similar but also different meaning and in a decisive way for the whole book, one would expect a terminological clarification in the introduction—as he offers it for his use of the word *methodology* (3 n. 4). Due to the fact that the forthcoming volumes will leave out all the background information given in this volume (xiii), maybe a short glossary would be helpful in order to avoid misunderstandings.
- [16] As already mentioned, Patte takes his readers gently by the hand in order to convince them of insights he won during the SBL Seminar. The portrayal of his experiences in this seminar is easy to read and quite convincing because he adopts a rather narrative style (esp. ch. 1). However, this retrospective fashioned style has also a disadvantageous effect. From time to time, it would be beneficial to offer a more detailed discussion with relevant literature instead of referring to the insights that the SBL Seminar group and Patte achieved during their sessions. For instance, the differentiation that "people in any culture readily conceive of human experience as interrelating three modes of human existence, that is, three broad life-contexts: (a) individual life, (b) community life, and (c) religious life" (341–42) is quite convincing. Yet it seems to emanate from Patte's experience that he explains on page 34: "In my teaching I found that all the above questions can be effectively reduced to a threefold contextual question: *Does the primary problem concern individual-centered or community-centered, or Other-centered (spiritual/reli-*

¹ See also Patte's findings on Moo's interpretation of sin (see 65–67), where he identifies an extensive reference to the realized-apocalyptic/messianic line of reasoning despite Moo's forensic framework. Whether Moo is subordinating the former to the latter, however, seems anything but clear and is strongly dependent on Patte's interpretation of Moo's statements.

- gious-centered) aspects of experience?”* Due to the fact that this distinction frames a huge part of Patte’s study, one would expect a more detailed discussion with relevant literature.
- [17] I dare to name one further point of critique. In chapters 6 and 7, Patte offers an elaborate discussion about the contextuality of every interpretation. This is a basic fact of hermeneutics that should not be questioned. According to Patte, however, the contextual factor that is most influential is ethics. The decision between several interpretative strands primarily depends upon the ethical value an interpretation has in the context of an exegete. This, of course, is convincing as long as one presupposes (as Patte does) that Romans is read as Scripture, thus, as a “Word-to-live-by” (338). These assumptions, however, are problematic in two ways. First, one could question whether the ethical value is the only factor decisive for an exegete’s interpretative decisions. Rather, instead of this ethical limitation in terms of an interpreter’s contextuality, it seems more plausible to speak of the subjectivity of exegetes, which is dependent on far more aspects than simply ethics and the question “how will this given interpretation affect my neighbors and me?” (389) The second problem refers to Patte’s claim that exegetes ultimately interpret Romans as Scripture as well. They “actually and self-consciously contribute to the development of a contextual Word-to-live-by” (338). This, of course, may be correct for some exegetes, yet it is questionable whether “the most secular (and even atheist) exegetes” (338) awareness that many people read Romans as Scripture necessarily results in a primary concern to correct these interpretations and whether by this—presenting alternative “Word-to-live-by” interpretations—these corrections become ethical oriented on their own as well (see 338–39).
- [18] Despite these rather critical aspects, the book under review is an invaluable contribution to New Testament scholarship. Arguing with great transparency and presenting his own position moderately, Patte gives the best practice for what he demands of other exegetes. Patte’s compilation of different exegetical strands offers a splendid starting point for everyone who wants to deal with Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Not only for scholars but also for students, this volume will be enormously helpful to learn how different exegetical traditions approach Paul’s text. Reading this study sensitizes their application of different exegetical methods and lines of interpretive logic. Moreover, Patte’s book is excellent in explaining how key theological and ethical themes and terms can be understood and denoted differently. Students usually find themselves in the middle of nowhere as soon as they are confronted with the innumerable commentaries on Romans as well as the diverging interpretations of its content. With Patte’s book (and the two forthcoming volumes), this loss of orientation is over.

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