

RESENSIES/REVIEWS

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Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter, BZNW 169 (Berlin, New York: W. de Gruyter, 2010). Xii + 394 pp. Cloth. ISBN 978-3-11-022173-2. 100€

The present collection of essays had its origin in a conference in August 2008, at the fifth meeting of the *International Colloquium on the New Testament* at the Faculty of Theology of the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. In the essays, “the letter is approached from a very wide variety of perspectives, yielding several new insights into its interpretation” (Preface).

The volume opens with an excellent survey of research on Philemon by D. F. Tolmie, “Tendencies in the Research on the Letter to Philemon since 1980” (1-27). Tolmie summarises research on the exact status of Onesimus, papyrological evidence for ancient slavery, fugitive slaves, legal regulations relating to slavery and the manumission of slaves, studies devoted to epistolographic and rhetorical analysis, sociological analysis and the hermeneutical and theological issues which this short letter raises. These areas have attracted a great deal of attention, and in them important developments have occurred in the last thirty years.

The first three essays following this introductory survey, concern *the epistolary and rhetorical analysis of the letter*. J. A. D. Weima examines “Paul’s Persuasive Prose: An Epistolary Analysis of the Letter to Philemon” (29-60). The analysis proves that Paul’s expressions are carefully contrived: “Paul has skilfully adapted every major unit of this letter – the opening, thanksgiving, body and closing – so that the persuasive force of his correspondence is greatly enhanced and powerful pressure is placed upon Philemon to agree to both the explicit and implicit requests. In fact, Paul’s arguments in this brief letter are at times so strong that some might be tempted to accuse the apostle of moving beyond persuasion to manipulation” (58).

P. Lampe’s discussion in his study “Affects and Emotions in the Rhetoric of Paul’s Letter to Philemon: A Rhetorical-Psychological Interpretation” (61-77), includes rhetorical aggression management and further rhetorical means involving emotions in the letter (“there are additional, more subtle motivations for Philemon to follow the path of aggression management that Paul lays out for him and thus to receive Onesimus back with love”, 70). In “‘You Will Do Even More Than I Say’: On the Rhetorical Function of Stylistic Form in the Letter to Philemon” (79-111), E. Wendland applies form-functional, literary-

discourse analysis and concludes that the salient thematic concepts of the letter are affection, indebtedness, fellow-partnership and service (110).

The essays following the above, situate the letter in its *ancient context*: P. Arzt-Grabner, "How to Deal with Onesimus? Paul's Solution within the Frame of Ancient Legal and Documentary Sources" (113-42). Arzt-Grabner begins with a survey of ancient Roman slavery and of the relation of Philemon and Onesimus as master and slave. Then he discusses the ancient characterisations of useful/useless slaves, fugitive slaves and vagabonds and argues that "Against the background of legal and documentary sources, Paul's description of Onesimus' situation in Philemon 15 does not fit in with the *fugitivus* hypothesis. ... What he did do, however, was to describe Onesimus in terms of the general distinction between *fugitivus* and *erro*, as a truant slave, useless in the eyes of his master (133f). In "The Letter to Philemon in the Context of Slavery in Early Christianity" (143-68) G. F. Wessels investigates Roman legal texts on slavery, offers a social and historical analysis and reconstruction of slavery and identifies fresh implications for reading Philemon. Wessels argues that "Paul's guiding suggestion that Philemon should receive Onesimus back, 'no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother'" (Phlm 16), can best be understood as a request to set Onesimus free" (167).

Two further essays address *theological issues* in Philemon: M. Wolter contributes "The Letter to Philemon as Ethical Counterpart of Paul's Doctrine of Justification" (169-79) and concludes that, in this letter as on other occasions, Paul never demands specific actions; "rather, he gives general guidelines and then leaves it to the members of the Christian communities to transform these guidelines into adequate and distinctive ethical actions" (179). P. de Villiers offers a detailed study of "Love in the Letter to Philemon" (181-203). In the letter, Paul pleads for a loving relationship between Onesimus and Philemon by bringing them to a deeper understanding of the implications of their mutual faith.

The following three essays examine various *ideological issues* in the letter: R. Atkins analyses "Contextual Interpretation of the Letter to Philemon in the United States" [of the 19th century] (205-21). He concludes: "By tracing the linkages of slavery, the use of Philemon to support the *Fugitive Slaves Acts* and the connection to the continuation of new forms of slavery into the 20th century, we observe the power of interpretation to free and to condemn". J. Punt addresses "Paul, Power and Philemon: 'Knowing Your Place': A Post-colonial Reading" (223-50). Punt briefly reflects on slavery and postcoloniality and then discusses the point of departure and methodology involved in a post-colonial reading of Philemon. Punt's own interpretation focuses on the claims to identity and power in the letter, and suggests that "Paul not only subverted the authority and identity of those receiving his letter; he also re-established

both his identity and his authority in a less ambiguous way than his rhetoric may suggest" (250). In "Hierarchy and Obedience: The Legacy of the Letter to Philemon" (251-71), P. J. J. Botha, focuses on practices and values in Philemon. He notes two important parameters for the study of the letter: 1) "It is not satisfactory to merely paraphrase Paul's statements on slavery/slaves; attempts to understand the phenomenon and evaluate his ideas must be made; 2) It is misleading to invoke cultural and historical determination in order to justify or explain the lack of constructive, critical responses to slavery by early Christians" (270). Botha closes with challenging remarks on this latter issue and on current references to it. Paul is criticised for not addressing the underlying issue of violence in ancient slavery.

A final section contains four essays on the *patristic reception of Philemon*: P. B. Decock examines aspects of "The Reception of the Letter to Philemon in the Early Church: Origen, Jerome, Chrysostom and Augustine" (274-87). A. Friedl provides a careful and sympathetic analysis of "St. Jerome's Dissertation on the Letter to Philemon" (289-316), and deals with various aspects, *inter alia* sources, classification of the work, indications of the epistle's Structure, occasion for interpreting Philemon, place of origin and composition of Philemon, prologue, characters mentioned in the epistle, the Latin translation of the Greek text, stylistic peculiarities, rhetorical and psychological strategies used by Paul, theological themes, Jerome and slavery and Jerome's views on the Jews). C. L. de Wet surveys "Honour Discourse in John Chrysostom's Exegesis of the Letter to Philemon" (317). Honour discourse in Chrysostom's homilies on Philemon "functions on two thematic levels, namely wealth distribution (with reference to monastic ideals, and particularly in the context of manumission), and kinship" (331). J. T. Fitzgerald reflects on "Theodore of Mopsuestia on Paul's Letter to Philemon" (333-63) and concludes that Theodore "was especially concerned to prove that Paul's little letter to a particular person about so unimportant a matter had enormous pastoral and hermeneutical implications for the entire church" (362f).

The essays of this volume offer fresh and stimulating perspectives on Philemon. They provide a fascinating insight into the vibrant South African New Testament scholarship and patristic studies, and show their creative and profound contribution to and interaction with international scholarship. The particular context of the conference on which this volume was based, provided a sensitivity in the interpretation of Philemon, in particular to the issue of slavery, that has often been lacking in other contexts. The essays provide a good survey of the methods and questions employed in the current academic study of Pauline literature.

Of related interest is another recent collection of essays on Philemon, namely M. V. Johnson, J. A. Noel, D. K. Williams (eds.). *Onesimus Our*

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Brother: Reading Religion, Race and Slavery in Philemon (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2011).

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