

BOOK REVIEW

Matthew V. Johnson, Sr, James A. Noel, Demetrius K. Williams (eds), *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012. 184pp. \$39. ISBN 978-0-800-66341-4 (hbk).

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Cultural literacy consciousness is the perspective from which, I contend, the book *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon* is written. Cultural literacy consciousness is knowledge of place, whereby the dominating and exploitative influences and agenda at work in the socio-geographic space are known. In other words, in being culturally literate, one is aware that the social circumstances of one's social location do not come about by irruption but are caused. As such, cultural literacy consciousness is extended to mean not only knowing the class position, marginalized identity and status of persons, but also what shapes a person's indignity. Indignities flow from person's class position, marginalized identity and status. It is experienced indignities that form the bridge between persons' condition and consciousness.

The work identifies the specificity of slavery in the New Testament period as the exploitative influence and agenda at work in the letter. In so doing, Mitzi Smith, in her chapter, is able to denote the similarities and differences between unfreedom in antiquity and racial slavery in the modern period. For Smith, every political economy of slavery, however benign a case is made out to be, has a triangulated relationship: an oppressor, the oppressed and the oppression. In this triangulated relationship, slaves' bodies were used for production and satisfaction. As Smith further notes, ideas and ideals of absolute and perpetual control over human property to exact utility and productivity were the pillars on which the economy of slavery stands. Slave owners expected nothing less than complete submission from slaves and their resignation to their inferior status.

Within the context of the political economy of slavery, whether in antiquity or the modern period, those reduced to slave status experienced their bodies as being whipped, sexually abused and branded. This violation of the human body, argues James A. Noel, throws up a paradox and problem. *Paradox*: a contradiction between socio-political oppression and religious faith or relevance of the Christian conception of God for a people who were oppressed by those who claimed

to be Christians. *Problem*: how to live faithfully within the context of lived experiences of oppression wherein suffering challenges faith and faith challenges suffering.

Given this dilemma, Noel sees the voluntary return of Nat Turner, a Mulatto enslaved rebel, to his former master after a maroonage escapade, as a result of his belief that a Black faith could be reconciled with White religion. In other words, Turner returned to establish a new relationship with Whites based on Christian fellowship, an impossible project as within a slave political economy Whites are more equal than Blacks.

Through the lens of gender, Margaret Wilkerson sees in Philemon another triangulated relationship, which spots another exploitative plank and schema within slavery. In this triangulated relationship, Wilkerson sees both Black and White women as victimized. Black women were brought into slavery through force; White women traded their relative freedom for protection and privilege. In this trade, White women, convinced of the superiority of their White skin, bought into a life of control by men, a life that devalued the sanctity of their bodies. Black males did not have the same command over White females that White males had over Black females. So, there was no reciprocity in the use of bodies to satisfy sexual appetites and fantasy. In either case, both Black and White females were dehumanized. With no exchange, it is the Black female who feels the brunt of the robbery of her dignity and humanity. In either case, exchange or no exchange, Black or White, humanity is degraded.

In these circumstances of exploitation, dehumanization and victimization, Wilkerson contends that Paul's use of the term "useful" is problematic. The term "useful" works against the "I-Thou, I am because you are" relationship Paul is advocating in persuading Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother. A useful slave is a disadvantaged human being, unable to pursue their own interests. Useful is an impediment to the human agenda if it does not inspire mutuality and reciprocity.

Furthermore, though Allen D. Callahan considers it skewed, the proslavery use of Paul that establishes the "Pauline Mandate," to return runaway slaves, makes Paul an "ambivalent" witness and source of freedom. For Callahan, one needs to read Paul within the context of his canonical correspondence and career as represented by his ministry in the Acts of the Apostles. Notwithstanding, a case can be made for Paul as an ambiguous witness, if not ambivalent, when Galatians 3:23–29 and 1 Corinthians 7:20–24 are studied in tandem with the Philemon letter. In asking for Philemon to accept Onesimus no longer as a slave but a brother, Paul is dealing with slavery on both the institutional and systemic levels. Here it is recognized that one can be free but not equal; but one cannot be equal without being free, an issue unresolved in the Pauline corpus.

Any concentration on the oppressor and oppression must by necessity focus on the oppressed. Works on Philemon are unaccustomed to focussing on Onesimus; it is always Philemon and Paul. In this work, Onesimus is given agency. The work takes a voiceless Onesimus as largely the work of Western biblical criticism and attributes this voiceless Onesimus to the influence of Enlightenment thought and ideals with its emphases on order, reason and proofs. However, liberation movements of the 1970s and '80s and voices from marginalized groups

freed the study of the Scripture from such Euro-American and “enlightened” interpretive biases. Western readings fail to make adequate comparisons and contrasts between colour/race/rhetoric and power and thereby fail to examine how the social existence of people influenced the production of the texts found in the Bible. Consequently, a number of reading strategies emerged that posed questions out of their contextual interests about the relationship between colour/race/rhetoric and power.

For Demetrius K. Williams, the interpretation history of Philemon betrays the socio-political commitments and socio-cultural moorings of the readers more so from the early Church to the Reformation and less so from the period after the Reformation to the 1990s. Thus, Williams reads Philemon from the perspective of the enslaved and the marginalized in the Greco-Roman imperial context. History, for Williams, is not only the story of the rulers but the ruled.

In his examination of reading strategies from the 1990s to the present, Williams sees lived realities as a critical factor in the interpretive process. As such, the social conditions in which biblical texts are produced and in which its readers live must interact in the interpretive process. This reading strategy debunks the idea that a person could be both a slave *and* a brother of a slave owner within the context of the socio-historical experiences of the oppressed. It is impossible for Philemon to accept Onesimus as brother and no longer as a slave without structural inequities and inequalities being addressed. True brotherhood is impossible between the subjected and the subjugator.

Given this impossibility, James A. Noel presses for a reading strategy that accounts for the history of how the institution of slavery functions in modern oppressive contexts. So any reading of Philemon must be situated not only within the Roman Empire’s political and economic context of slavery and colonization but also, as in his case, the United States of America during the nineteenth century. However, it is seemingly a matter of accent between the context of current interpretation and the history of the contemporary context of the interpreter. Noel’s concern is that modern reading strategies tend to repress the history of contemporary oppressive contexts. While slavery was discontinued, its effects were not. Slavery may be discontinued but emancipation is still comin’.

Matthew V. Johnson takes Onesimus as the starting point of his interpretation of Philemon. By starting with Onesimus, it means that interpretation begins from the point of the signified and not the signifier. Johnson gives Onesimus a voice by treating the text of Philemon “as body,” instead of “body as text” as Paul Ricoeur does. Without Onesimus’ voice, the voice of God is muffled in the letter. For Johnson, the problem in Philemon is inaudibility, not visibility. In giving Onesimus a voice, Johnson identifies what he notes as a hysterical dimension of the letter to Philemon: if the oppressed tell their story, then the oppressor is implicated in the crime of oppression. Johnson begins with Onesimus as the starting point of his interpretation of the letter. To start the interpretation of the letter with Philemon is not to see Onesimus as the one who was wronged; it is to start with the symptom and not the cause of slavery. As Johnson notes, hysteria evades the moral question at best and covers up cruelty at worst.

James W. Perkinson gives a real-life application of a reading of Philemon. Perkinson cites the example of slaves walking out on a sermon preached by Charles Colcock Jones, a Presbyterian plantation minister who preached to the slaves from the text of Philemon. In walking out, the slaves re-entered their own Blackness, a condition of oppression and exploitation, and thereby did not limit black to a colour but a social condition. In other words, the enslaved Blacks used their bodies, their socio-historical and spiritual experiences, to judge the text. That is to say, the slaves were culturally literate, aware of the social factors of dehumanization, exploitation and victimization that shaped their context of oppression.

As may be noted from the above, I divided the work into two sections: theology and biblical reading strategies, which makes for a more thematic reading. In its present outlay, though careful attention is paid to the social conditions in which the Philemon letter is produced and those in which it now discloses itself, the work is still separate essays, not grouped under any thematic headings. Even so, the work is of value to all who have an ancestral history of slavery and live in oppressive contexts.

BOOK NOTICES

Jawanza Eric Clark, *Indigenous Black Theology: Toward an African-Centred Theology of the African-American Religious Experience*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 204pp. \$80. ISBN 978-1-1370-0282-2 (hbk).

Clark recognizes the way in which Christian formation has often led Black people in America to an estrangement from their African past. He identifies Christian doctrine as lying at the root of this estrangement and attempts to address this through developing a “doctrine of the ancestors” and a more African-centred theology.

Sandra Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper: How Black Megachurches Address HIV/AIDS and Poverty in the Age of Prosperity Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. 242pp. £16.99. ISBN 978-0-8232-4957-2 (pbk).

In an attempt to move beyond claims that these churches are solely concerned with monetary prosperity, Barnes examines sixteen Black megachurches to discover whether and how these churches are addressing two key issues affecting Black communities in the present day: HIV/AIDS and poverty.

Dwayne A. Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally: Thinking about Metaphysics, Theism, and Antiblack Racism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. 176pp. £32. ISBN 978-0-8232-5160-5 (hbk).

Tunstall critiques Gabriel Marcel on his work addressing the threat of dehumanization in late Western modernity, since he fails to address anti-Black racism, one of its most prevalent manifestations. Here, Tunstall attempts to rectify this omission.

Stan Chu Ilo, Joseph Ogbonnaya, and Alex Ojacor (eds), *The Church as Salt and Light: The Path to an African Ecclesiology of Abundant Life*. Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co, 2012. 170pp. £17.50. ISBN 978-0-2276-8008-7 (pbk).

The title of the book is developed from the theme of the Second Synod on the Church in Africa. Here, several authors attempt to address issues of how the Church can truly be salt and light for the people of the continent.

Cynthia R. Nielsen, *Foucault, Douglass, Fanon, and Scotus in Dialogue: On Social Construction and Freedom*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 232pp. \$85. ISBN 978-1-1370-3410-6 (hbk).

Nielsen examines Foucault's theoretical analyses of "power, resistance and subject-formation," using the insight and experience of Fanon and Douglass and the anthropology of Scotus to validate, develop and also critique his work.

