

“Philemon” by Eric D. Barreto
Review by Amy Peeler, Wheaton College

Succinct, fresh, and challenging, Barreto’s commentary on Philemon invites the thoughtful reader to mine the depths of this rhetorically savvy little letter with historically large influence. Right away, Barreto acknowledges that Philemon has been a battleground text in the debate about slavery, but won’t allow its misreadings to usurp the powerful message it brings for the reimagining of community.

Barreto begins by presenting several different options for interpreting the backstory of the letter to Philemon. While the majority of interpreters argue that Onesimus is a runaway slave being sent back to his owner by Paul, Barreto introduces new scholarship that calls those assumptions into question. He also delineates the similarities and differences between slavery in the first-century Greco-Roman world and the slavery of modernity. Both constitute ownership of another human, yet they are not exactly the same. Understanding these differences helps interpreters remember the cultural gap between their time and that of Paul.

When Barreto focuses on the text, he notes the art of Paul’s “rhetoric of persuasion.” Paul walks a delicate balance, neither “forcing the hand of Philemon, or leaving the critical matter to chance.” He also answers one of the primary critiques against this letter, namely that Paul does not robustly speak out against slavery and even sends a runaway slave back to his master, by presenting the new interpretation that suggests Onesimus was sent to Paul by Philemon to care for his needs. If that is the case, then Paul is not sending back a slave who wanted to escape, but simply sending back the messenger of comfort. When he does so, however, he artfully asks Philemon to look at Onesimus differently. Hence, Barreto is able to hear in the text a powerful call to “a new form of community and belonging.”

In the second major section, Barreto engages with the history of interpretation of this letter and acknowledges that both slaveholders and abolitionists found support for their own positions in the letter. More recently, interpreters have suggested that readers focus neither on Paul nor Philemon, but the silent but central character of Onesimus. To read from his perspective (especially if we entertain the historical possibility that he went on to become Bishop of Ephesus), opens up new avenues for interpretation.

To those avenues Barreto turns in the final section when he reminds us that this letter represents the majority of Paul’s work—pastoral care in real and complicated situations. Paul was wrestling with the ethical question that faces us today: how should those of faith live together? We might not be able to change the world, but we can live differently, where the structures and oppression of the world system are not allowed inside the doors of the new community. Paul does not, however, set up a new set of rules. Instead, he “posits a theological imagination around kinship.” This letter has been used in dangerous ways, and so the threat of misappropriation

should keep us cautious, but if we hear all the voices in the text, we might be able to live, as Paul so passionately desired, as brothers and sisters in the family of God.