

“Philemon” by Eric D. Barreto  
Review by Francisco Lozada Jr., Brite Divinity School

Eric Barreto’s essay on Philemon not only takes seriously its historical identity but also its reception history and how it has been employed. Barreto sets out to shift the discussion beyond previous studies that read this letter as either embracing or rejecting slavery through Paul’s leadership. Instead, he proposes a reading that maintains that Philemon points to ways readers can re-imagine community. That is to say, in the context of slavery, which leads to destructive ways of relating to others, Philemon illustrates how to overcome such an oppressive way of thinking and being.

Barreto supports this reading of Philemon in three different and important ways. He moves away from readings that correlate slavery between two different historical periods, and instead focuses on how Philemon’s rhetorical aim sets out to build relationships and mutual belonging. Moving away from traditional readings that view Onesimus as a runaway slave, Barreto reads the historical context as one in which Onesimus is transformed from slave to sibling—a brother to his former owner Philemon. Onesimus is a slave but not a runaway slave. Onesimus was sent by Philemon to Paul to care for his needs. Such a reading suggests that the occasion of this letter is about what it means to be a community, particularly in the context of slavery. At the end, for Barreto, the letter provides a theology of community and a pastoral agenda to restore broken relationships.

Second, Barreto discusses how this letter serves as a model of how communities of faith negotiate with one another in a complex world. Barreto, rather than reading Philemon from the outlook of Paul and slavery, suggests that the interpretative tradition instead read Philemon from the perspective of Onesimus. Such a turn will not only move the tradition away from Paul as the center of the discourse and toward Onesimus but also provide various options on how to deal with ethical and theological issues within a perplexing world. By understanding Onesimus’ role in his relationships with Paul and Philemon, perspectives on how to relate to one another are imagined.

Third, Barreto confirms that the letter is centered on a theological question: how do communities relate to one another when the wider culture calls for division and social stratification rather than unity and equality? To address this question, Barreto reads Philemon as an example of the kind of pastoral work Paul was engaged in on a daily basis. That is, Philemon is an exhortation of faith to build community among diversity. Such a reading of Philemon would challenge the consensus view of the letter as well as challenge readers to rethink the institution of slavery and its ramifications. It is a reading that flattens hierarchies as well as calls for a new order based not on a superior/inferior relationship with the other but one built on kinship and equality.

Looking at Philemon from the context of its history, reception, and consumption, Barreto's reading challenges readers to revisit their interpretative reading strategies and empowers them to read Philemon differently.