

“Philemon” by Eric Barreto

Review by Shanell T. Smith, Hartford Seminary

This is not your usual commentary on Philemon. Eric Barreto, following Fortress’ new interpretive model, seamlessly blends the historical context, the scholarly interpretive tradition, and contemporary concerns related to Philemon all in one article. In so doing, he highlights not only that context matters—both of the biblical text and that of the flesh-and-blood reader—but also what we do with the text matters.

Barreto asserts that answers to fundamental questions such as the occasion of the letter and Paul’s relationship to Philemon and Onesimus predetermine contemporary interpretation. He provides a helpful discussion of slavery, including its distinctions in antiquity and today, and how interpreters continue to wrestle with the implications of slavery in both time periods. Barreto couples this discussion with a thorough exegetical analysis of the text incorporating scholarly discussion. He examines pertinent issues such as the misnaming of the letter, Paul’s constant reference to his authority despite his explicit verbal “flattening of hierarchies,” the probability that Onesimus was, in fact, not a slave, and the underlying notion of mutual belonging (to name a few). But what Barreto does next is what I find most impressive. He asks the more pressing question: What *exactly* did Paul do, ethically speaking? Did he oppose slavery or uphold the status quo of ancient times? By posing this query, Barreto compels the contemporary reader to consider the historical and cultural distance between then and now when interrogating the text in light of present-day ethical concerns.

Racial inequality persists, as do forms of modern-day slavery. How one interprets this text can very well inform the ways in which one will comport oneself in a society that makes such detestable phenomena a reality. Paul’s rhetoric is “subtle”; he doesn’t come down on either side of the slavery debate “in a full-throated way.” This has led interpreters, who are influenced by their own agendas, to claim that Paul either sanctions slavery or appeals for liberation. Thus the main ethical and theological question that arises in the interpretive moment, and what Barreto aptly calls the interpreter to consider is: How can we follow God’s call to unity as communities of faith when societal and cultural pressures to survive and succeed at any cost lead to division and the creation of social stratification?

Barreto provides the reader with the historical, scholarly, and contemporary information needed to make an informed opinion about the text, what the editors refer to as “responsible biblical interpretation,” but in the end, the choice is ours. He rightly asserts, however, that this text, which has been tragically misread, poses an ethical demand that we as interpreters rethink human relations “in light of wider societal pressures to embrace destructive hierarchies,” and reimagine a new way of relatedness.