

BOOK REVIEW

Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). xxx + 312 pp. Pbk. US\$38.00.

Having completed socio-rhetorical commentaries on Mark, Acts and much of the Pauline corpus, Ben Witherington now turns to Philippians. The product is at once a thorough and multi-faceted consideration of Paul's discursive strategy; of the epistolary and (more principally) the rhetorical conventions that Paul employed and adapted; of the theological, ethical and sociopolitical issues germane to his argument; and of the possible response the Epistle elicited from its first audience. Witherington so prioritizes Paul's rhetoric here that its stages provide the structure of his book: rather than traditional chapters, the commentary is divided into eight unnumbered sections on the *probatio*, *propositio* and so on. Most of these sections conclude with a few pages devoted to 'Bridging the Horizons', bringing to mind the approaches favoured by such series as the Two Horizons and NIV Application Commentaries, and offering prospective directions for the contemporary proclamation and exemplary application of Philippians.

Witherington's introduction begins with preliminary considerations, from Philippians' distinctive vocabulary (absent of much of Paul's heavier theological terminology, and politically contrasted with 1 Corinthians, 'which is certainly written to a Roman colony city, but probably not from one', p. 1) to the debatable prevalence of the emperor cult, the status of Christianity as 'the other new cult in Philippi focused on worship of a historical person of recent memory' (p. 6) and the prominence of women in the city's Christian community. The author then continues to state his reasons for holding to the traditional view of the letter's provenance (that is, written from Rome, late in Paul's judicial process). He argues for his preference for a rhetorical rather than epistolary analysis of Philippians, and expresses his skepticism regarding partition theories on the Epistle. He then characterizes Philippians as a

‘family letter’ not a ‘friendship letter’, and offers a deeper entree into its rhetorical structure, its use of rhetorical tools (such as exemplification) and its social and auditory context of ‘rhetoric-saturated empire’ (p. 24). Witherington then concludes by critically examining the use of social-scientific models, anticipating a later excursus on E.A. Judge’s similarly critical views.

The first section of the commentary itself is focused on Paul’s epistolary prescript (Phil. 1.1-2). While addressing matters such as Paul’s apparently sole authorship of the letter, the ‘trans-valuation’ of the image of Paul (and, later, Christ himself) as *doulos* and the conjunction of Jesus’ titles in the phrase ‘Lord Jesus Christ’ (at 1.2, 3.20 and 4.23, for example, in a threefold formula resembling that of imperial titles), Witherington also introduces ‘A Closer Look’ at Timothy, the first of ten excurses interspersed throughout the volume. Like the prescript itself, this short section hints succinctly at themes to which the author later returns.

The second section, ‘Exordium: Prayers and Previews (1.3-11)’, notes Paul’s trust in the character of his correspondents (i.e. in contrast with those in Corinth!) and his efforts to build that character further in the course of proclaiming his joy in the midst of shared sufferings. This proclamation fuels Witherington’s questions about what such *koinonia* really looks like ‘when one is separated in time and space from one’s partners in Christ and in ministry’ (p. 69). In this section and elsewhere, Witherington excels at bringing out the rhetorical stages of Paul’s discourse and the relationships among them. For instance, inasmuch as the narratio (1.12-26) ‘provides his audience with one preliminary example’ of model behaviour before he asks them to live gospel-worthy lives (1.27), it ‘not only prepares for the persuasion that follows but participates in it in a preliminary kind of way’ (p. 72). Sufficiently receptive readers might well see this as an instance of Witherington practicing what he (and Paul) preaches: well before he reaches the ‘Bridging the Horizons’ segment following his study of the narratio, he is already offering thoughts that could easily undergird a sermon, illustrating the correspondence between the letter’s structure and its highly participatory theological ethic.

The section on the narratio itself is cogent, particularly with regard to Paul’s call toward the imitation of Christ via his own lived example. Those who choose to skip the excursus on the pedagogy of such mimesis will miss some of Witherington’s brightest interpretive gems, as

when he comments that Paul, in anticipation of the upcoming hymn to Christ, is already ‘holding up for inspection once again the pattern of his [own] life, recounting his behavior under duress and house arrest’ (p. 77). Having emphasized the very public and pedagogical nature of this recounting, it is a pity that Witherington does not dwell a bit longer on potential applications for Christian life today. For instance, given the similarly public stage of today’s social media platforms and the ethical concern of how Christians might present themselves in such contexts so as to point toward Christ, should there not be an ‘app’ for that or a comparable focus among Witherington’s hortatory comments—even if he will later remark that today’s impersonal media are at odds with Paul’s communicative approach? I must admit, however, that the way he mirrors Paul’s own Christocentric single-mindedness here proves a lesson in itself.

In ‘Propositio: Lives Worthy of the Word’, Witherington offers a balanced analysis of the degree to which Paul’s imagery is influenced by (and critical of) Roman imperial paradigms: ‘The problem with all things Roman is that they are on their way to obsolescence in light of Christ’s lordship and eventual return and that Roman citizenship, while still of value, has been eclipsed’ (p. 100). With a deft turn, he considers certain parallels between ancient and contemporary situations in which ‘dual citizenships...become dueling citizenships when their values clash’ (p. 107).

Witherington subdivides the probatio (2.1–4.3) into four appeals. The first (2.1-18) pivots on the hymn to Christ, where the author leaves his reader the translational option of ‘stripped/emptied himself’ and stresses the orality of confession in the rendering, ‘every tongue might confess publicly’ (2.7, 11; p. 114). To Witherington, Christ’s cruciform paradigm functions more paraenetically than soteriologically (voiced repeatedly on pp. 136, 149, 154, 167; perhaps *christological* categories, rather than expressly *soteriological* ones, would have effected a compromise here). It also highlights such features as the distinction between rank and status, heavenly and earthly identity and allegiance, the pre-existence of the Son (on which the related stories of Rom. 5.12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15 are silent), questions of personal and communal salvation and of course the intended effect of Christ’s example of humility unto death—provocatively summarized as ‘the shock and awe of death on a cross’ (p. 168). The second appeal, 2.1-30, forwards Witherington’s discussion of the overlapping function of *sending* epistles and fel-

low ministers like Timothy and Epaphroditus. For the third (3.1–4.1), the author elaborates the irony of Paul’s warning as a reversal of the warning *cave canem*: ‘the Philippians should not allow the dogs *into* their houses and house church meetings, rather than a literal dog keeping such people out’ (p. 188, italics original). Here he also questions Paul’s use of *synkrisis* without an immediately apparent crisis at hand, and studies his employment of the language of ‘gaining’ Christ before returning to the image of citizenship once more. Another ‘Closer Look’ asks, cleverly, ‘Will [Wayne] Meeks Inherit the Earth?’ with regard to the state of social-scientific criticism (pp. 220-25). On the fourth and final appeal, 4.2-3, Witherington writes eloquently of Paul’s concern for Euodia and Syntyche as important female leaders in the Philippian church.

Highlights from Witherington’s consideration of the peroratio (4.4-9) include a meditation on Paul’s phrase ‘the Lord is near’ (4.5) and its intertextual counterparts, a comparison between Paul and other ancient moralists and a reflection on the peace of Christ over against the Pax Romana. When he turns at last to the postscript (4.10-20), Witherington notes how memorable and often abused is 4.13, which he renders first as ‘I have strength (to endure) all things in him who empowers me’ and later as ‘I am able to face (or cope with/endure) all these things in the One who strengthens me’ (pp. 271, 276). As he says in the final ‘Bridging the Horizons’ section (postponed until the end of the following chapter on Paul’s final greetings and grace-giving, in order to apply the two together), this ‘so-called Superman verse’ is about divinely supplied *endurance*, not superhuman feats of strength. The last ‘Closer Look’ posits that Paul’s reference to Caesar’s household (4.22) relates to greetings exchanged between freedmen in the emperor’s service in Rome and their counterparts in Philippi, concluding (less speculatively) that these Romans ‘became Christians before Paul ever visited Rome’ (p. 287) and that their presence in Philippians makes Rome still more likely as the letter’s provenance.

From the acknowledgments onward, Witherington is quite clear as to which previous studies substantially influence his own work. Instead of providing a bibliography at the book’s end, he lists the monographs and articles he found most helpful in writing the commentary, drawing special attention to a select few that focus on the social, historical, and rhetorical aspects of Philippians—aspects that he feels have been too often neglected in even the most recent studies. The footnotes bear out his

acknowledgments, as references to Fee, Fowl, Bockmuehl and older studies like that of Lightfoot are frequent. Inevitably, there are some unacknowledged parallels with these and other commentaries: Witherington's point on the possible political sense of being 'in Christ' (i.e. preceding and perhaps eclipsing the state of being 'in Philippi', p. 46) repeats Fowl's point in *Philippians* (Two Horizons New Testament Commentary Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 19.

While generally readable and certainly less daunting than lengthier commentaries, a few minor changes could have made Witherington's book more accessible to a wider audience of pastors as well as theologians. The simplest alteration might have been the traditional addition of bold-faced type when addressing a new topic, term or verse in sequence, for easier reference. Although Witherington compares notes with pre-modern exegetes, often with illuminating results, there is little to no mention of modern translations of Scripture, so those who wish to compare and contrast other renderings with Witherington's, or to fathom the reasons for their divergence, must fend for themselves. And pertaining to the orientation of the commentary and the 'Bridging the Horizons' sections in particular, I had hoped to see more development in Witherington's socio-rhetorical hermeneutic as his series grows. That is, how exactly does he see the horizons in question being bridged?

Finally, it is a shame that this book could not benefit—presumably because of the timing of its publication rather than an oversight on the author's part—from interaction with John Paul Heil's recent study, *Philippians: Let Us Rejoice in Being Conformed to Christ* (Early Christianity and Its Literature, 3; Atlanta: SBL, 2010). Like Heil, Witherington listens carefully to the auditory impact of Paul's rhetoric, so when the latter notes that Paul's opening emphasis on 'grace and peace' recurs 'near the end in promises of the peace of God', the 'God of peace', and 'the grace of the Lord Jesus' such that 'the whole discourse is contained within this stress on grace and peace' (4.7, 9, 23, pp. 49-50), he echoes the type of comments to which the former is prone. The same observation applies to Witherington's hypothesis that Paul 'chose messengers to deliver and *perform* these letters with some consideration of their speaking abilities' so that the emotive nuances would not be neglected (p. 112, italics original). One wonders, however, whether his concern for aural impact is undercut somewhat by his insistence on a rendering of each section of *Philippians* that results 'not in fluid English prose but seeks, rather, to give as clear a sense in English as possible of

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the vocabulary and syntax of the Greek' (p. 41 n. 1, following explicitly the example set in his earlier socio-rhetorical commentaries). Helpfully amplified as this style may be, does it not risk obscuring the very oral and aural textures on which Witherington is otherwise so keen?

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