REVIEW OF LARRY J. KREITZER. *PHILEMON*. READINGS: A NEW BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

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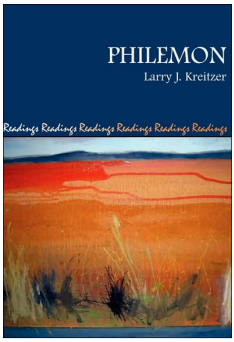

Kreitzer's commentary on Philemon marks the latest milestone in multiple current trends in biblical studies. First, it is the latest work by Professor Kreitzer and, as one would expect from his former work, it is another virtuosic display of his broad erudition and his eclectic but always provocative exegesis of biblical text. Second, the volume marks the latest entry in Sheffield Phoenix's new 'Readings' series (under the general editorship of John Jarick). As such, it adds to the series in every way, producing a commentary series that is more than 'just the same' repackaged footnotes and arguments and adds to an increasingly engaging catalogue for Sheffield Phoenix; this press, in a relatively short time span, has quickly become one of the presses worth watching closely. Third, the commentary is the latest in a slight upsurge in interest in Philemon, particularly since the publication of Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke's *Letter to Philemon* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary, 2000). Finally, this volume is an excellent example of a current trend in New Testament studies toward analysis of the use of biblical text in popular culture and politics (as well as analysis of reception history or biblical 'afterlives'). Kreitzer, long at the vanguard of such work, has produced a commentary that is very

much a writing of the moment, an excellent encapsulation of the state of the field at present and the interests of the contemporary scholar and reader.

The commentary divides, essentially, into two major parts. The first – roughly the first four chapters – is a fairly traditional introduction to Philemon along with commentary treating the normal cultural, philological, grammatical, lexical and textual issues surrounding the received epistle (as well as a general history of critical scholarship). The second – essentially the final four chapters – is a remarkable survey of the history of reception of Philemon and Philemon's role in Western culture, theology and exegetical debate. As to end-matter, readers are aided by a concluding bibliography and indices for citations and references (though no subject index). The volume also contains just over 20 illustrations and photographs (most of artwork or film cells depicting scenes from Philemon).

This even-all, two part division I've just described, however, is a bit of an overstatement. Chapters one to three address general introduction matters (author, date, text), verse-by-verse commentary, a closer examination of the characters named in the letter, and then an exploration of the 'standard' patristic interpretation (Paul is returning Onesimus, an escaped slave). The final three chapters explore the role of Philemon in the nineteenth century abolitionist debates, Philemon as a figure in literature, and, finally, film versions (yes, 'versions', plural) of Philemon. Kreitzer's central two chapters form a bridge between the traditional-commentary content and the latter reception history materials; the two chapters focus first on the Goodspeed / Knox hypotheses (which argued that Onesimus went on to become a bishop, the collector of the corpus Paulinum, and author of Ephesians – a summary cover letter for the volume) and move to nineteenth-century critical reconstructions. The book's chapters move along a continuum, two ways. The first chapters are obsessed with nuance and minutiae in the biblical text; the last chapters are only interested in the cultural impact of the biblical text. The first chapters deal with 'what the text means'; the latter chapters with how the text has been used. In some ways, as the book progresses, the chapters become less and less interested in what Philemon might 'mean' and more and more invested in how Philemon has been used. Beyond even just content, the very style of composition varies from the earliest chapters to the latest. The first chapters are *amazingly* conventional – so much so that a reader could be forgiven surprise at the latter chapters (which are also *amazingly* astute and erudite on the Cultural Studies impact of Philemon) having been written by the same scholar as the first. Kreitzer is equally skilled as a 'conventional' historical-grammatical scholar as he is talented as critic of cultural studies/history of scholarship.

The result is a juxtaposition familiar to any old readers of Kreitzer, and very likely frustrating to some new ones. Readers who are interested in 'the content of the biblical text' will likely give up on the book by chapter four or five. Readers who want to read about the history of Philemon's impact will most likely skip to the middle after reading only a few pages. If so, then both readers have missed one of Kreitzer's most fundamental points: for Kreitzer, one cannot focus on either 'exegesis' or 'hermeneutics' to the exclusion of the other; the 'meaning' of a text cannot be discussed without the full integration of each. What a text 'says' is as important as what scholarship has said that it says, which is as crucial as what artists have drawn from its images and words. What a text 'means' is only recoverable from the confluence of all three of these streams.

What meanings emerge from this 'full court press' method of interpretation are difficult to clarify; indeed, in many ways, they cannot be articulated without the process of the explication. Clearly, readers come away with a sense that they have a firm, general grasp of the text under review – understanding both its contents and its impact. Kreitzer's work, in general, can be difficult and demanding. He is a complex thinker and critic, surprising conservative scholars with his interest in the Bible's use in modern film, fiction, art and politics, but surprising other critics with his own earnest convictions that the Bible, properly read, is integral for Christian faith and is best interpreted by the determination of the original author's intended meaning. In many ways, I find him among the most complicated and interesting scholars of Paul currently working.

Which makes it all the more frustrating when he stops short of giving any tentative conclusions to several provocative questions that his work generates. In his opening chapters, Kreitzer articulates in extraordinary detail the textual history, canonical debates, authorship concerns and the absolutely ethereal date and setting for Philemon. His survey aptly demonstrates how many characters, contexts, and scenario can be drawn – all with equal textual support – from what might initially seem a simple and short personal letter. Kreitzer also centralises the problem of Philemon's ethical challenges. If patristic interpretations are correct, Philemon endorses slavery or, at minimum, does not assert that it is always/already immoral to own another human being. Both of these positions are pretty challenging to conventional or evangelical biblical scholarship. Either the readings provided by the church are unsubstantiated and merely hypothetical or they are flagrantly immoral. Kreitzer's work seems to inflict the fatal wound, but to draw back from the final *coup de grace*. Indeed, in his early chapters he lauds the potential of new, digital search tools to analyse the Greek text and to offer 'the possibility, at least, of determining more precisely the original meaning and authorial intent of the letter, thereby resolving some matters of long standing debate' (p. 8). In his final chapter, a survey of film re-

presentation of Philemon, Kreitzer unveils some highly sophisticated observation of ways Philemon and Onesimus' stories have been retold (and how race and class effect the retelling), yet, again, he stops short of any explanation of *why* the stories were retold as they were.

In his chapter on 'Pauline Biographies, Fictional Histories and Contemporary Conversations' (pp. 107–48), Kreitzer raises, again and again, the very knotty problems that Philemon presents to Pauline biography and the impossibility (at least, the failure to date) of any one reconstruction to become truly definitive. Yet, once again, he stops short of the final argument that *any* reconstruction of a 'Historical Paul' is impossible. He implies, but never openly asserts (let alone explicate) how the needs of the interpreter effect the interpreter's final reconstruction. Kreitzer, for example, after quoting from Brook Pearson's critique of conventional arguments for the context of Philemon ('this, like many historical "reconstructions," has led readers… to think that more is known about the situation… than is actually the case', 62) concludes that 'nagging questions remain, notably about whether the tradition reading is simply a scholarly assumption that is brought to the text' (p. 69). He then quits. Apparently, the question doesn't nag him enough to draw out an answer.

As a reader, I'm struck again and again by how fertile Philemon has been for speculative 'scholarly' reconstruction of context. I think this occurs because of the presence of such seemingly concrete data (names, places, dated plans etc.) alongside the complete absence of any constraining facts or clarification. Clearly, Kreitzer is struck by the same. His chapters are layered with paragraphs like:

> According to J. D. G. Dunn… Paul was probably between 50 and 60 years old when he wrote Philemon, if the term *presbutes* in v. 9 is any indication. Similarly, Philip Dodderidge… suggested Paul was about 53; F. Godet… gave his age as about 55; and Joachim Gnilka… suggested Pal was slightly older than 55. Onesimus, on the other hand, was probably in his early twenties, well before the emancipation threshold of 30, the age at which many slaves were manumitted by their masters. (p. 46)

The absolute, totally raw conjecture of other scholars is displayed in ways that seem to suggest Kreitzer is about to point out how speculative it all has become, and then he not only leaves off comment, but adds to complexity. Further, Kreitzer never directly considers what it might *mean* that so many defensible meanings could 'legitimately' be

drawn from one, brief letter (even using one methodology). Indeed, he seems to shruggingly accept the ubiquity of conventional, patristic reconstruction of context, even as he offers equally compelling alternatives to it.

What the book does offer, however, is a remarkably extensive introduction to many aspects of Philemon and its importance. The volume is much stronger in collection and exploration than upon analysis. Kreitzer provides the best brief analysis of the role of Philemon on ante-bellum American biblical criticism I've ever read. His treatment of Philemon in film is the only one I'm aware of. The initial grounding in the book's contents works wonderfully well in orienting readers toward the more nuanced differences among later interpreters. It also offers multiple points for reflection on scholarly methodology, historical development of Biblical Studies, and the intersection of Bible and culture. Highly readable on its own terms, the book would be a highly useful 'study case' supplement reading for courses on New Testament interpretation or introduction.