

Ryan S. Schellenberg, *Abject Joy: Paul, Prison, and the Art of Making Do*.

Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Christopher B. Zeichmann, Toronto Metropolitan University

There is no need to bury the lead: *Abject Joy* is among the most exciting scholarly monographs about the New Testament in recent years and I would strongly encourage anyone interested in affect, emotion, Pauline biography, or the social history of early Christianity to read it. Although many have difficulty finding a point of entry into the study of emotion and affect—fields of study that often feel incompatible with the philological and often crypto-positivist tendencies of biblical studies—Schellenberg has provided a considerable service in making an accessible, interesting, and innovative point of entry for those less familiar with theory-driven scholarship into the complexities of emotion and affect. This accessibility is aided by his orientation toward the sort of social historical questions that continue to be of wide interest within the field of New Testament scholarship. These issues come to a head in Philippians, which leads to Schellenberg’s principal question: what does it mean for Paul to write a letter expressing both joy and a desire for death? To rephrase, what on earth was Paul feeling when writing the letter to the Philippians?

Philippians is historically significant, independent of its status as Christian scripture. This letter provides a rare instance of a first-person account of a Roman prison, an account laden with language of emotion. Schellenberg identifies a handful of commonplaces within interpretation of Philippians that warrant rectification, but the issue that recurs most frequently throughout *Abject Joy* is how the Acts of the Apostles has played too large a role in scholarly interpretation of the letter. Acts’ depiction of Paul as a man of distinction and honour is at considerable odds with the presentation of the apostle in his own letters. Moreover, Acts encourages its readers to admire the experience of prison, as opposed to eliciting the feelings of pity or contempt that would be expected. Resisting Acts’ tendentious narrative, Schellenberg locates Paul firmly at the margins of society.

But for all the importance of imprisonment to Paul’s letters, the topic of ancient prisons has been neglected both by ancient historians and biblical scholars, except for a brief surge of interest in the 1990s. In making sense of Paul’s emotional state in Philippians, Schellenberg draws upon a range of sources, from Ptolemaic epistolary papyri to Roman novels to recent anthropological work on prisons. Regarding this final source, Schellenberg discusses the emotional state of prisoners in antiquity and modernity without presuming an identical emotional/affective regime, avoiding a possible anachronism that comes with the use of such theoretical work in the context of biblical studies.

Schellenberg’s reading of Philippians comes in five chapters. The first chapter raises the obvious and underexplored issue of why Paul was imprisoned in the first place. Answers to this question are few and tend to either reiterate the narrative of Acts or suppose that the anti-Roman content of his letters were the source of his legal problems. Schellenberg instead proposes that Paul ran afoul of local (not imperial) authorities in his missionary activity: encouraging women, slaves, and

other marginal figures to abandon their gods and adopt a peculiar form of Judaism. It is easy to imagine heads of household complaining to local authorities about Paul leading such people astray.

The second chapter considers Paul's desire for death (Phil 1:23). Here again Acts looms large in the history of interpretation, as it has been common to explain away Paul's statements as mere rhetorical formulations that one might expect of a sophisticated Roman – Paul does not *actually* wish to die, but puts on a literary performance to make one or another point to his Philippians readership. Schellenberg instead argues that Paul's desire should be interpreted as a response to the physical abasement of the prison experience: the prospect of no longer experiencing such pain was in fact appealing to him.

Chapter three considers imprisonment as an authorizing strategy (i.e., a way to claim authority for one's self, particularly while in a context that mitigates against it), how people claimed the abuse of their body in one or another matter. Most notably, Paul does so with the image of the prisoner of war (e.g., Rom 16:7, Phlm 23), but also his precarious gospel—with many of his claims regarded with suspicion by his ostensive sympathizers—that he continues to preach in “boldness” (e.g., Phil 1:7). Schellenberg locates Paul among other prisoners whose claims to be divine heralds of one or another sort were validated among their sympathizers precisely by such imprisonments.

Chapter four takes an axe to the tendency to read Paul's claim of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*, *autarkes*; Phil 4:10-14) by drawing upon Stoic use of the term. Schellenberg demonstrates that the technical, philosophical usage of the term had fallen out of use by the 1st century CE and instead denoted a broader notion of independence. Paul accordingly uses the term as form of “non-duplicitous posturing” (148), clarifying that he is able to get by just fine, despite his circumstances, with the apostle likely overstating the comfort of his situation.

Finally, chapter five takes up the initial question: what could Paul possibly mean when he says he takes joy, despite his clear state of abjection? Scholars have been hesitant to describe Paul's joy as an actual emotion, instead reading it as a disposition or a corollary of his theology. Schellenberg suggests that Paul celebrates material gifts of the Philippians and encourages the Philippian assembly to celebrate with him in an act of solidarity.

If I might name one point of tension throughout the book, it would be Schellenberg's shifting approach to Paul's sincerity. Schellenberg is generally critical of “rhetorical” readings of Paul that locate him among the learned and imagine any expression of his difficulty or dismay to be overstated. Rather, he deems it preferable to take the apostle at his word when it comes to these matters. Schellenberg briefly elaborates on his reasoning for this, noting that whereas “modern discourses of the self are preoccupied with authenticity and ... suspicious of performance,” ancient writers instead operated with an “objective-participant” view of the human subject (88-89; cf. 159). At other times, though, Schellenberg is content characterizing Paul's self-descriptions as rhetorical formulations that mischaracterize the reality of his situation (notably in chapter four). At least to my eyes, there seems to be a methodological tension here, such that it's unclear when we are to take his claims about his situation at face value and when we might regard it as a bit of spin. Perhaps there is a consistent through-line in Schellenberg's way of assessing the matter, but it eludes me and might have warranted greater elaboration.

Even so, the book is accessibly written and will be useful across a range of readerships, firmly grounded in a close reading of whatever text he is discussing at any given point. University libraries should purchase this book, as should any scholar interested in the issues discussed throughout. If your library already has a copy, please do yourself a favour and check it out next time you visit. Even social historians, philologists, and those otherwise uncertain about the value of emotion and affect for biblical studies will find the volume of considerable use.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)