

P.B. Decock

Prof. P.B. Decock, UKZN, St Joseph's Theological Institute, Cedara.

E-mail: decockp@ukzn.ac.za
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6724-9420>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v43i1.7394>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2023
43(1):233-237

Date received:

1 February 2023

Date published:

30 June 2023



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons

With Attribution (CC-BY)



BOOK REVIEW

Pointing out persuasion in Philemon: Fifty readings of Paul's rhetoric from the fourth to the eighteenth century

D. Francois Tolmie. (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, History of Biblical Exegesis, 2021). xiv, 383 pp. ISSN: 2748-0313 / eINSS: 2748-0321.

This informative and insightful work reveals the vast field of the history and life of the *Letter to Philemon* after it was written. This approach to biblical texts has received greater attention in recent years when the reader's contribution to the meaning of texts was first recognised. This attention to the reception of biblical texts is the special subject of the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (EBR), which started in 2009 and of which 20 volumes have already been published. This encyclopedia surveys not only sermons and commentaries, but also the various ways in which biblical texts have been received, such as in the creative arts, including paintings, sculptures, novels, films and music. Professor Tolmie's study, however, focuses on how commentators and preachers have "pointed out persuasion" in this Pauline letter. He has selected, as the subtitle indicates, 50 readings of Philemon from three periods, the early church (starting with Ambrosiaster in chapter 1), the Middle Ages (chapter 2), and the period from the 16th to the 18th century (Chapter 3). For each of these interpreters, Tolmie offers a brief introduction and then focuses on the way they explain the rhetorical situation. He then focuses on the way

each author explains the rhetorical strategy by moving through the letter, section by section. Chapter 4, the conclusion, is actually a synthesis, in which Tolmie looks for tendencies in the interpretation of Paul's letter by focusing first on the way the rhetorical situation is imagined and then on Paul rhetorical strategies in the different literary units of Philemon.

Chapter 1 introduces us to the work of eight familiar figures of the Patristic period: Ambrosiaster, Jerome, Pelagius (but not Augustine), Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus, Cassiodorus and John of Damascus. This is followed by a synthesis, entitled as an evaluation. For instance, Tolmie concludes his evaluation of Jerome's treatment as follows:

Finally, his interesting interpretation of Paul's about-turn in verse 19 is worth considering, namely, that the first part ('I will repay') is spoken as if Paul is speaking to a stranger or an outsider, but that the rest of the sentence presupposes the opposite since Paul then returns to his 'rights' (p. 13).

It should be remembered that this commentary of Jerome is largely a translation into Latin of the commentary by Origen. John Chrysostom, as would be expected, is very attentive to the rhetorical aspects of Philemon:

The first feature is the striking extent to which he frames his interpretation of Paul's rhetoric in terms of honour/shame categories (p. 25).

Theodore of Mopsuestia points out that "Paul uses exactly the same word when referring to Apphia, 'beloved', that he uses when he refers to Philemon". According to Theodore, this shows that Paul "did not think there was any difference between men and women when it came to religious matters" (p. 29). Theodoret, commenting on verse 19, claims that

Paul's pledge that he will repay anything that Onesimus owes Philemon implies that the letter thus serves as a contract (p. 38).

The commentators of the Middle Ages (Chapter 2) are generally less well known. This chapter deals with 21 of them and so it can be seen as a brief introduction to the biblical interpretation of that period. These commentators largely continue established interpretative traditions, preserved in the form of excerpts from the patristic writers, and develop them further in their own ways. For instance, Alcuin of York (ca. 735-804 AD) and Claudius of Turin (Bishop of Turin from 810-827 AD) largely follow Jerome and add their own touch. The East Syrian Isho'dad of Merv (9th century), on the other hand, was familiar with other traditions, among them the commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia. According to Isho'dad, one of the purposes of the letter is that "Paul wants Philemon to *honour* Onesimus" (p. 58).

This study continues the historical survey with Sedulius Scottus (active from 840-870 AD), *Pseudo-Oecumenius* (a *catena* which was started in the eighth century and which was developed during the next two centuries) and Atto of Vercelli (who died before 964 AD). Lanfranc of Bec (ca. 1005-1089)

was the first to use the *artes*: One thus finds discussions of aspects such as grammar, logic and rhetoric in the glosses that he adds to the text (p. 69).

What is new here is that he is the first to suggest that the “more” in verse 21 refers to manumission. Bruno the Carthusian (ca. 1032-1101) develops many traditional insights in the rhetorical aspects of the letter, even a comparison between verse 20 and Horace’s *Odes*. Theophylact of Ohrid (ca. 1050-1109), trained in Constantinople, was a master of rhetoric who drew his inspiration from Chrysostom. Interestingly, the *Commentarius Cantabrigiensis* (ca. 1140-1148) most probably preserves for us the lecture notes taken by a student of Abelard’s conferences on the Pauline letters. As usual, commentaries draw on the traditions, but one of the new insights the *Commentarius* puts forward is

that Paul mentions Apphia as a co-recipient [of the letter] since he is aware that women know how to win over their husbands (v. 2)... (p. 91).

The *Glossa Ordinaria* on the whole Bible was finished in 1130, the fruit of collaborative work. Later on, it was enlarged by additions of the *Postilla* of Nicholas of Lyra and *Additiones* of Paul of Burgos. The study continues with Peter Lombard (ca. 1095/1100-1161), Hervaeus of Bourg-Dieu (ca. 1080-1150). The most important contribution of Thomas Aquinas (1224/1225-1274) is his detailed division of the letter, “by far the most elaborate division that has been found in the commentaries discussed so far” (p. 111). Like Aquinas, Pierre de Tarentaise (ca. 1224-1276) proposed his own detailed division of Philemon. Similarly, the very influential commentator, Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270-1349), was preoccupied with the letter’s division. Finally, Denys the Carthusian (1102/1103-1172), famous for his extraordinary familiarity with exegetical traditions, expresses his response to Philemon as “a personal meditative exercise...” (p.121.).

Chapter 3, spanning the 16th to the 18th century, begins with Erasmus (1466/67-1536) and continues with Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558), Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Thomas de Vico Cajetan (1469-1534). Unlike previous interpreters, Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575)

offers an integrated view of Paul’s rhetorical strategy in the letter ... [His rhetorical] interpretation of Paul’s strategy serves as the backbone to the commentary to which theological insights ... are added (p. 154).

Johannes Brenz (1499-1570) aims at appropriating the message of Philemon for the people of his own time; this application takes up about 95% of his commentary (p. 160). The survey continues with John Calvin (1509-1564), Theodore Beza (1519-1605) and Georg Major (1502-1474). Major consistently applies Melancthon's rhetorical categories to the letter; he considers it as an *epistola deprecatoria*. Equally, Lambert Daneau (1530-1595) follows Melancthon's categories in a most exhaustive way. William Attersoll (d. 1640) is especially interested in the doctrines

he finds in the text ... by carefully working out the reasons for a particular doctrine, as well as its 'uses' (p. 194).

Next in the survey, we find Cornelius a Lapide (1567-1637), Gulielmus Estius (1542-1613) and John Mayor (1583-1664). The annotations of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) are characteristically brief and to the point. Unlike Valla, Erasmus and Beza, Grotius uses his philological annotations to "comment on a wide range of issues" (p. 214). These notes were addressed to those who challenged his view that "armed resistance and war were not categorically rejected by Scripture" (p. 214).

David Dickson (ca. 1583-1662), John Trapp (1601-1669) and Abraham Calovius (1612-1686) are discussed next. Calovius's principal aim in his *Biblia Illustrata* was to refute Grotius's exegesis and non-confessional approach.

Calovius objected to the textual improvements that Grotius proposed to the biblical text, as well as to the fact that Grotius understood the biblical writings primarily in terms of their original context, since to his mind, this undermined the message of salvation (p. 226).

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) was interested in the spiritual implications of the text; rhetoric is his starting point and he finds 14 arguments used by Paul in verses 8 to 21. The last three commentators are Georg Michael Laurentii (1670-1724), Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) and Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten (1706-1757). In his well-known *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, Bengel

wanted his *Gnomon* to be a *Fingerzeig* – a (brief) pointer to the text, so that readers could discover the wealth of Scripture themselves... (p. 246).

With regards to Baumgarten, his commentary on Philemon

represents a new approach; in fact, this is the first commentary investigated in this study corresponding to what would nowadays be considered characteristic of a commentary (p. 252).

Chapter 4 aims at discovering lines of development towards consensus, as well as persisting diversity in the history of interpretation. The chapter examines the imagination of the rhetorical situation, as well as the interpretation of Paul's rhetoric. In the final section of this chapter, Tolmie lists first the points of agreement and then the questions on which there is a diversity of views; finally, Tolmie mentions some of the idiosyncratic positions.

Regarding these disputable points, we could mention, for example, that Onesimus "stole from Philemon before he absconded"; "Paul did not expect of Philemon to manumit Onesimus"; "Paul used verses 20 to 21 to emphasise the requests that he made earlier in the letter" (pp. 330-331). Regarding this lack of consensus, "commentators explain the legal aspects underlying verses 18 to 19, as well as Paul's intention, in diverse ways" (p. 332). Tolmie also mentions some negative views of Philemon – for instance, "Trapp suggests that he was covetous ..." (p. 332).

The study is logically structured and surveys a vast number of interpretations from three different historical periods. It can be used as a model for similar studies. Whoever intends examining Philemon in any depth would do well to consult this work. We can only admire Professor Tolmie for this achievement.