

# **Book Review: *Favor and Gratitude: Reading Galatians in Its Greco-Roman Context.***

Okorie, Ferdinand. 2021. *Favor and Gratitude: Reading Galatians in Its Greco-Roman Context*. Lanham: Lexington Books. xii, 143 pp. ISBN: 978-1-9787-0702-3. Approx. 1593 ZAR (87.03 USD). Hardcover.

Ferdinand Okorie is a member of the Claretian Missionaries. He is Vice President, Academic Dean, and Assistant Professor of New Testament Studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He received an M.Div. and an M.A. in Theology with a concentration in Biblical Languages and Literature from Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. He also obtained a Ph.D. in New Testament and Early Christianity at Loyola University, Chicago. In *Favor and Gratitude: Reading Galatians in Its Greco-Roman Context*, Okorie presents an updated version of his Ph.D. thesis. The book examines the Greco-Roman setting of Paul's message to his gentile audience in the regions of Galatia. Okorie argues that Paul intentionally uses Greco-Roman cultural values associated with benefaction to appeal to the Christian community in Galatia. According to Okorie, Paul does this to dissuade his readers from accepting Jewish Law observance as a necessary condition for Gentile Christ-believers to fulfill.

Okorie presents Galatians as Paul's intentional appeal to Greco-Roman benefaction conventions in order to elucidate how he wants the Galatians

to understand their faith and express it toward God and fellow believers. In his letter, Paul thus advocates his message about God's relationship with humanity through faith in Christ which is contrasted with the message of his rivals. Paul's opponents advocate circumcision and the observance of Mosaic Law for Gentile Christ-believers in Galatia. Okorie demonstrates that Paul's appeal follows the contours of divine benefaction and the motif of reciprocity in response to divine favor since "the believer's life of faith in action honors God's gift in Christ" (p. 54).

*Favor and Gratitude* contains six chapters. In his introductory chapter, Okorie provides an overview of Galatians and defines πίστις terminology within the context of the patron-client relationship of benefaction. He notes that πίστις denotes *loyalty* in the Greco-Roman world while χάρις suggests *favor*. The term χάρις is defined as the goodwill or favor the benefactor freely bestows on the beneficiary. It also identifies whatever the gift recipient does in gratitude to the giver.

In chapter 1, Okorie investigates the benefaction conventions of the Greco-Roman world. He explores the possibility of understanding these conventions as the basis for Paul's message of the gospel which he articulates as the bestowing of favor by God on humankind. Okorie places an emphasis on the ethos of reciprocity as an essential aspect of benefaction in the Greco-Roman setting. Paul's aim in Galatians is then to convince the addressees to reject the teaching of his opponents. As Okorie notes, "unlike Paul, his Jewish-Christian opponents are convinced that the Sinai Covenant does not cease to be relevant with the coming of Christ. They firmly teach that the ministry of Christ is in continuity with the Mosaic Law; Jesus Christ fulfils rather than upends the law" (p. 2). Therefore, Okorie identifies Paul's exhortations as a call to reciprocate the favors Paul's readers have been granted by God and by others in the community of believers. They are to accomplish this through the concrete actions of loyalty to Christ, and love and goodwill to one another.

Chapter 2 parses the language of *χάρις* within the context of divine-human benefaction. Okorie here draws on similarities between the divine benefaction Paul presents in Galatians and the benefactions deities like Isis and Heracles are said to bestow on humanity. He rightly notes that the death of Christ on the cross is a self-giving love and represents God's favor to humanity in ways that do not parallel the wider Greco-Roman context. He also notes another distinguishing factor in that God's benefaction entails the divine gift of the Spirit to anyone who has faith in the death of Christ. This, Okorie notes, forms Paul's central argument which the Galatians will recognize as "an aspect of the patronage system in their social location" (p. 33). He asserts that Paul begins his list of the "fruit of the Spirit" with love, thus cueing the readers to recognize "the virtue of love" as being crucial in the relationship of benefaction Paul presents in his letter to the Galatians (p. 33).

In chapter 3, Okorie examines in more detail how Paul employs the language of *χάρις* in his letter. According to Okorie, Paul alludes to divine-human benefaction to describe the intimate friendship between God and believers. He also explores the significance of the notion of *χάρις* within Paul's persuasive strategy which he argues entails an appeal to the readers' experience of divine *χάρις* and the motif of reciprocity (pp. 51–57). According to Okorie, Paul does this in light of the cultural understanding of Christians in Galatia which would enable him to ask them to respond appropriately to God's benefaction since they would grasp what he was communicating. In this regard, Okorie identifies Paul's calling as well as that of the readers, and also Abraham's experience of God's promise, as instances of humans experiencing God's favor. Receiving God's favor in turn necessitates a response of gratitude expressed through *πίστις*. As Okorie notes, "the Galatians' faith in action is their gratitude to God for the gift of divine favor granted to them through Christ" (p. 57).

Chapter 4 is an analysis of the language of *χάρις* in the context of human-to-human relationships. Okorie discusses Paul's portrayal of a picture of friendship among the believers in Galatia including his initial encounters with them (4:12–20). He asserts that Paul is again appealing to the Greco-Roman relationship of benefaction, particularly, the mutual giving and receiving of favor in accordance with the conventions of friendship. Such benefaction in human-to-human relationships calls for partnership expressed through mutual goodwill towards one another (5:1–6:10; pp. 71–76). This includes Paul's attempt to encourage "the relationship of giving and receiving benefits" among the believers in Galatia as well as between the Galatians and the church in Jerusalem demonstrated through the Jerusalem collection (2:10). Okorie thus places Paul's arguments within the context of Greco-Roman friendship-based benefaction conventions, which places a premium on reciprocity. So, Paul "presents the friendship relationship of giving and receiving benefits among believers on the principle of love, fellowship and equality." At the same time, he is "subverting" the social hierarchy of Greco-Roman patronage that places a socially inferior client under obligation (p. 61; see also, pp. 82–84).

Chapter 5 explores the contrast between Paul's appeal to the language of *χάρις* in defining the gospel message on divine-human and human-human relationships (p. 89). The chapter brings together arguments made in the previous three chapters. In this chapter, Okorie identifies Paul's opponents as Jewish Christ-followers who place circumcision and Torah observance along with faith in Christ as the basis on which humanity is to relate to God through Christ. For Paul, when non-Jewish Christ-followers observe the Law and get circumcised, it amounts to engaging in the "non-beneficial experience under the elemental spirits of the world" which marked their former sinful life of cultic devotion (p. 102). It also violates the appropriate response to God's gift of the cross and the "Spirit of the Son of God" and

puts in danger “believers’ only sure hope of experiencing eternal reward and life with God” (p. 114). He notes that Paul’s appeal for friendship with one another and faithful living in Christ as a response to divine benefaction stands in sharp contrast to the demands Paul’s opponents are making.

The sixth and final chapter summarizes previous chapters and presents Okorie’s conclusion. After a brief summary of Paul’s presentation of God’s gift in and through Christ’s self-giving, Okorie affirms that God’s favor to humanity is identified in Galatians as “a bond of intimate relationship with the features of a family tie” (p. 121; see Gal 4:5–6; 3:26). His emphasis here is on the human response to divine benefaction which finds expression in a life of faith. Faith in Christ, which is a mark of the relationship between God and those who have experienced his benefaction, entails serving one another (Gal 5:13c) and “harvesting the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ in their lives (Gal 5:22–23)” (p. 122). In contrast to the benefaction relationship between Greco-Roman gods and their devotees, Okorie notes that in Paul’s message, divine benefaction through Christ and the giving of the Spirit requires believers in Christ “to reciprocate God’s favor by a worthy way of life appropriate to their relationship with God” (p. 123). Such a life is to be marked by a relationship with one another built on the foundation of love, unity, fellowship, and equality (p. 125).

In his book *Favor and Gratitude*, Okorie presents a clear and interesting reading of the notion of *favor* in Galatians that is well-structured, informative, and engaging. The book also provides a reading of the language of *χάρις* in Galatians which explores the efficacy of grace in transforming and shaping believers, a feature of Galatians Okorie rightly identifies as a prominent aspect of Galatians (pp. 89–118, see Gal 1:11–12; 6:11–18). By providing a commentary on several passages in Galatians, Okorie’s book is equipped to contribute to a better understanding of Galatians in particular, and the shaping of Pauline thought in general.

However, although the book has much to commend, there are a few oversights. For instance, in arguing that the Greco-Roman context of benefaction should be seen as the backdrop of Paul’s use of *χάρις* in Galatians, Okorie bases his reading of benefaction in antiquity that does not engage the Jewish context. Although Paul’s addressees are Gentiles that reside in the region of Galatia and are located within a Greco-Roman cultural context, Paul himself reworks the Jewish notion of divine benefaction in light of the Christ-event as demonstrated by his use of citations and allusions to Scripture.

Moreover, as James Albert Harrill (2012, 76–94) convincingly argues, Paul often uses Roman rhetoric and ideologies to craft his own Jewish and Greco-Roman Christocentric discourse. He cites as an example the discourse on authority Paul invokes in Romans. In Romans 13:1–7, where we find the first instance of a discourse on authority in the New Testament, Paul speaks within his Jewish and Greco-Roman context when appealing to the divine will to exhort believers to obey Roman governing authorities. This shows his embeddedness in the culture of the ancient Roman world while maintaining his identity as a Jewish thinker (Harrill 2012).

Rather than drawing an antithesis between Judaism and Hellenism to depict the cultural and social world of Paul, Harrill (2012, 91–94) depicts the cultural complexity of a Jewish thinker whose cultural world is embedded within the Greco-Roman world. Like many of his contemporaries, Paul, who had a Greco-Roman education in classical rhetoric and allegory, had to negotiate his Jewish identity within the cultural setting of the Greco-Roman world. He did this by appropriating some elements, rejecting others, or reconfiguring certain others. This would have been necessary in order to maintain his identity as a Jew and as a Greco-Roman (Harrill 2012, 75). This means that both contexts need to be engaged to fully comprehend the shaping of his thoughts and the grammar of his gift-theology in the letter

to the Galatians. This is despite the fact that the addressees were culturally non-Jews.

Paul, whose words represent a reflection of the world he inhabited and the identities he occupied, will need to be understood in light of his contemporaneous culture. Put differently, his theology of divine benefaction and its outworking in the addressees' life of faith is likely to be shaped by Roman *and* Jewish ideologies. In this regard, an exploration of where Paul stands within Second Temple Judaism and how his understanding of divine favor as a Jew fits within the multifaceted views of divine favor in Second Temple Jewish texts would have enriched Okorie's exploration of the Greco-Roman setting for Paul's interpretation of *χάρις* in Galatians.

In this regard, the Hodayot, 4 Ezra, Pseudo-Philo, and other texts provide a Jewish perspective on *χάρις*. Such insight can serve to nuance our understanding of how Paul, with his multicultural setting as a Jew and Greco-Roman, shapes the social world of first-century Christ-followers through his Christocentric configuration of incongruous grace. Paul does this in ways that are similar but also different from his fellow Jews, some of whom, like Paul, had both a Greco-Roman *and* Jewish culture.

In addition, Okorie's reading of Galatians does not engage the plurality of meaning embedded in the conferring of favor within Greco-Roman context of human-human relationship. He argues that Paul's appeal to reciprocity "subverts" Greco-Roman benefaction relationships by placing the experience of giving and receiving of favor on friendship, and not on the "superior/patron, and inferior/client relationship" that characterizes benefaction relationships in Antiquity" (p. 82). However, in antiquity, *χάρις* is a multivalent word that can be conceived of outside the matrix of hierarchy.

As Jin H. Lee (2021) notes in his *RBL* review of this volume, "Okorie's understanding of Greco-Roman community life seems limited to the

patronage system, where hierarchical structure was highly maintained and fostered." Private associations in particular, and the relationships that existed in community life in general, represented a flat hierarchy as Lee rightly notes. As John H. Barclay (2015, 92–113) has demonstrated, many forms of gift exchange existed in the Roman era apart from patronage. In non-hierarchical relationships, the response to *χάρις* can be expressed in a number of ways, including with gratitude. Thus, "Paul's way of forming Christ groups was not really subverting the Greco-Roman patronage system but rather complying with the existing social system" (Lee 2021). In this regard, Okorie's work would have benefitted from data that are more representative of the notion of benefaction in the ancient world.

I also found the lack of an in-depth engagement with contemporary works on Galatians, and particularly that of Barclay, to be another shortcoming of the book. Okorie cites Barclay's work in his first footnote noting Barclay's suggestion that grace in Galatians is presented as an incongruent gift (p. 3). In the rest of the book, Barclay is sporadically cited without any substantial or sustained interaction. For example, Okorie does not engage Barclay's view that Paul's description of the patterns of salvation in Galatians can be explained by the subversion incongruity brings on the criteria of fit between God's benefaction and the worth of the recipient (see Barclay 2015, 351–446). Also, how his views differ from or affirm Barclay's reading of the notion of *gift* in Galatians is not clearly articulated. As Richard S. Ascough (2022) also notes, Okorie's work would benefit from contemporary thought on the social world of early Christ-followers as well as rhetorical strategies and conventions.

Furthermore, in his analysis of Galatians 6:9–10, Okorie's reading seems to differ, at least in emphasis, from that of Barclay's in that for Okorie, priority lies in human agency in doing good. Doing good and acting appropriately towards others is an appropriate response of believers who

have received divine favor through the Christ event. Okorie writes that Paul's exhortation for the Galatians to do good toward one another is an invitation for them to respond to the divine benefaction they received by granting favor, showing gratitude, and doing good to one another (pp. 74–76). This perhaps indicates that Okorie places emphasis on human agency in the motif of believers' reciprocity—that is, their ability to do what is noble and good.

Given Paul's idea of *Christ in me* as a description of the believer's life (Gal 2:20; 4:19), and the injunction to *walk by the Spirit* (5:16, 25b), the notion of agency in Galatians is complex. Indeed, as Okorie notes, “while God acts in the gift of divine favor, the believer who has come to faith in Christ befittingly responds in gratitude. God's favor, namely, ‘the Spirit of the Son of God,’ is an enabler; it is a force that moves the believer toward intimacy with God and with others” (p. 29). As Okorie also acknowledges, Barclay notes that divine benefaction is transformative in that divine grace energizes and directs doing good for one another (p. 29; Barclay 2015, 374, 441). A more sustained focus on Paul's thoughts on moral selfhood within the context of reciprocity, and perhaps also the interplay between divine and human agency in Galatians, would have benefited Okorie's helpful discussion of the outpouring of the Spirit.

Furthermore, the nuanced understanding of grace Barclay sets out in his reading of Galatians by employing the idea of the incongruity, priority, and efficacy of grace is particularly helpful. Barclay also provides a helpful analysis of Jewish conceptions of benefaction through an in-depth analysis of Second Temple Jewish texts. An exploration of Paul's theology of grace within the Greco-Roman context, which is Okorie's main task, would benefit from such an engagement as well as the extensive interaction with contemporary Pauline scholars and perspectives on Paul that Barclay emulates. The taxonomic categories Barclay uses in his description of the

perfections of grace provide helpful means to sharpen and nuance the scholarly analysis of benefaction in Paul's letters. Employing these categories would have made Okorie's analysis more precise.

The reading of Galatians presented in this book will undoubtedly benefit scholars and clergy alike. It is a well-structured book that provides a fascinating look into the Greco-Roman system of benefaction. The sustained focus on Paul's overall flow of thought in Galatians and how the different sections of the letter make sense in light of the motif of benefaction and reciprocity will contribute ideas and thoughts to scholars working on Pauline letters and, more specifically, Paul's letter to the Galatians.

## Works Cited

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