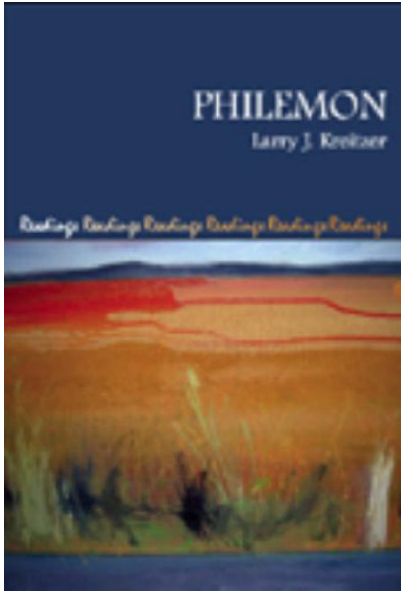


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Kreitzer, Larry J.

Philemon

Readings: A New Biblical Commentary

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The letter to Philemon is the shortest letter of those most probably stemming from Paul the apostle. As it is now in the New Testament, its Greek text comprises only circa 330 words, that is 3/4 of a A4 page. In recent years we have seen an increase in comprehensive studies dealing with this brief letter. In the last decade, for example, no less than three commentaries of 300–500 pages have been published, in addition to several minor ones, and a good number of articles. Now, in this small book of 170 pages (plus an extensive bibliography and indexes), Larry J. Kreitzer has given us a very informative review of how students of the New Testament have treated this letter and the role it has played in theology and church life.

His book comprises eight chapters of different length. After a brief introduction (1–18) providing a brief presentation of the main issues in scholarly studies of this letter during the last hundred years or so (form-critical analyses, linguistic and rhetorical analyses, sociological investigations, Pauline ethics–slavery, and canonical criticism), Kreitzer provides a commentary (19–30) on the text of the letter, pinpointing the main issues and problems of interpretation it contains. The second chapter (31–37) deals with a somewhat neglected issue: all the various characters present in the letter and the relationships

between them. As such, it serves also as an introduction to the issues presented in the following chapters.

Most of the book, of course, deals with the role the Philemon letter has played in the discussion over slavery: chapters 3–6 deal with this issue. In chapter 3 (38–52) Kreitzer deals with the traditional interpretation of Onesimus as a runaway slave but also highlights some issues as Onesimus as a convert of Paul and the later traditions about him as a bishop of Ephesus. The chapter also includes some interesting presentations of pictures of art concerning the characters in the letter that highly enhances the value of this chapter. Chapter 5 (61–69) presents a very brief review of the new challenges posed to interpreters by the suggestions of Onesimus being an asylum seeker, a slave sent from the church in Colossae, or even a brother of Philemon (see v. 16). Chapter 6 (70–106) deals with Philemon as a lesson of morality: Christian ethics and the fight for abolition. Here Kreitzer traverses works on Philemon, focusing especially on literature from the nineteenth century, when the debates raged over the abolition of slavery. In the next chapter (107–48) Kreitzer moves over to Pauline biographies and fictional histories, looking for how the figures of Philemon and Onesimus are presented. This is the largest chapter in the book and a very interesting one, as it deals with works not usually drawn into a presentation of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a biblical book. Finally, in the eighth and last chapter (149–68), Kreitzer presents “Philemon at the Movies,” continuing his study of the letter’s *Wirkungsgeschichte* but now moving over to the world of the movies. Kreitzer surveys first some brief Christian films, then the more professional movies of the cinema. His presentation here of an Arabic movie from 2006 is especially interesting. In a brief postscript Kreitzer even ends up even with a presentation of the role of Philemon in a Nintendo game. The bibliography at the end of this book comprises thirteen pages and certainly enhances the value of the book. The volume ends with indexes of scriptural references and index of names.

I personally found this book very helpful, and I think it will be very useful as an introduction to the letter to Philemon both for students of the New Testament and for lay people in general. I especially appreciate Kreitzer’s integration of scholarly New Testament studies with a presentation of the letter’s *Wirkungsgeschichte* in literature and film. At the same time, I note with some surprise that the parts of the book dealing with its *Wirkungsgeschichte* are larger than the sections dealing with the exegetical and scholarly discussions of enigmatic issues in the letter. That probably indicates Kreitzer’s own preferences in studying the letter.

The somewhat brief sections dealing with the scholarly debates are also characterized by the almost complete absence of any statements of opinion on how Kreitzer himself considers the issues debated. I am not sure if he reveals his own standpoint on any issue.

It may be due to my own reading of him, but I am not sure if he even reveals how he considers A. D. Callahan's thesis about Onesimus. Callahan's suggestion that Onesimus was not a slave at all but rather the brother of Philemon is probably the most challenging thesis set forth in recent years concerning the identity of Onesimus; if validated, it would overthrow much of the other research on this letter. Kreitzer, however, hides his own view behind the statement that "[t]he runaway slave hypothesis has continued to adhere to the traditional suggestion about Onesimus being a *fugitivus*" (67). Perhaps his most revealing statement is the following concerning the runaway slave hypothesis: "it is fair to say that the runaway slave hypothesis is a given when it comes to what is arguably the most significant use made of the letter of Philemon over the years" (69). In this way Kreitzer hides his own opinions in a manner that is not usual in "surveys of recent research." One might also have wanted a more extensive discussion of some of the other hypotheses set forth in recent research. On the other hand, that would perhaps have made this book more difficult for people outside the scholarly guild.

The present volume is the seventh in Readings: A New Biblical Commentary series. The publisher does not state who are the intended readers of the series. If the other volumes are tailored in the same way as this one, they might very well serve a wide range of readers and spark an interest in a further reading of the biblical text itself. That, in my view, is no small purpose and reward at all.