Witherington, Ben, III

*The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles*


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The prolific New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III turns his attention, in this volume, to the Pauline captivity epistles of Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians. These letters are grouped together because of their textual interconnections: Philemon likely belonged to the Colossian church; Onesimus, the subject of the letter to Philemon, is mentioned in Col 4:9, thus linking these two letters; the literary connections between Colossians and Ephesians are notoriously extensive. Witherington has left Philippians out of this collection, in which it is typically included, since he has already written a separate commentary on it (2).

While these Pauline letters do not enjoy the same scholarly attention as the so-called *Hauptbriefe*, the recent decade or so has seen some healthy publications treating them at length. In addition to a smattering of academic publications on Ephesians, one thinks especially of the commentaries by Andrew Lincoln, now nearly two decades old but indispensable, Ernest Best in the ICC, Harold Hoehner in a stand-alone volume, and Peter O’Brien in the Pillar series. Colossians and Philemon have also been covered recently by the thorough commentaries of James Dunn and Markus Barth. For the most part, these treatments have been detailed exegetical and historical works, but we have also had very recent works treating the letters from angles of approach that have gained
momentum in recent scholarship, such as the excellent volume on Colossians and Philemon in the Two Horizons Commentary by Marianne Meye Thompson and the just-released work on Ephesians and Colossians by Charles Talbert in the newly christened Paideia series. After being able to speak of a situation where the Pauline prison letters, especially Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, were not well-covered by extensive commentaries, this situation, even just within the last five years, has improved quite dramatically.

Witherington’s volume, a very welcome addition, represents something of a departure from these aforementioned works. It is not a detailed exegetical treatment but is something more of a bird’s-eye view by a seasoned Pauline scholar, which ends up being eminently helpful and refreshing, especially for pastors and theological students. In some cases, commentary introductions can get to the point where they miss the forest for the trees, focusing so myopically on narrow points as to lose all sense of proportion. One finds this particularly in the case of discussions of authorship, in which various considerations for and against take on an importance that they would not if the person weighing the issue took a few steps back to gain a broader view.

Reading Witherington is, as I have said, quite refreshing on this score. Authorship issues do indeed come into play in discussions of Ephesians and Colossians, and while Witherington takes a “conservative” position, opting for Pauline authorship, he does not do so for any defensive or reactionary reason. His discussion notes the difficulties inherent in positing non-Pauline or post-Pauline authorship, and he claims that given the variety of rhetorical situations faced by Paul, it only makes sense that there be some small measure of variation across his letters to various churches (11–12, 223–24). With regard to the rhetorical style of these letters, especially Ephesians, Witherington finds that Paul’s employment of “Asiatic” rhetoric (4–6) is a key to unlocking the mystery of why this letter—regarded by some as quintessentially “Pauline”—is so often taken as from the pen of a Pauline disciple.

The format of the commentary is easy to follow. A general introduction is followed by the commentary upon each letter, beginning with a briefer introduction and overview. Following the commentary on each letter is a concluding section called “Bridging the Horizons,” in which Witherington discusses the contemporary significance of each letter for Christian identity. Witherington’s writing style is brisk and light, covering essentials but avoiding onerous discussions of technicalities.

Paul’s letter to Philemon is an example of Asiatic rhetoric, designed to convince Philemon to set Onesimus free, forgiving him for whatever wrong he has done (6). Witherington strongly leans toward viewing Paul’s plea as urging manumission (vis-à-vis mere
forgiveness and/or some sort of restoration). He does not entertain at any length an alternative to the historical relationship between Philemon and Onesimus being one of master-slave. He discusses alternative proposals briefly in an excursus (62–64) but dismisses these, citing Mitchell’s work and the weight of the history of interpretation. The difficulty here is that the only piece of textual evidence in favor of this reading (that Philemon and Onesimus are master-slave) is found in verse 16, the same passage in which Philemon and Onesimus are referred to as being brothers “in the flesh.” Surely more work needs to be done in explaining how Paul can say this of them if they are not actually blood relatives. Witherington’s discussion of this phrase in verse 16 is unconvincing, but the same can be said for most commentators, who remain largely baffled by Paul’s expression.

Witherington does not view Colossians as written to respond directly to any cohesive threat but, in line with much recent opinion, to respond generally to “some sort of esoteric and mystical Jewish philosophy, perhaps lightly influenced by Greek philosophy” (110). It may be that Witherington’s Wesleyan heritage allows him to do justice to Paul’s exhortation to persevere in hope in 1:23, a passage that gives him an opportunity to inveigh against a “once saved always saved” sort of impulse that often makes a mess of things here (140–41).

The *stoicheia tou kosmou* in 2:8 are a set of rudimentary teachings to which Paul is opposed rather than supra-human cosmic rulers (154–55). Witherington dismisses this latter option on the ground that nowhere else in Greek literature does *stoicheia* mean “spirits” or “beings,” although this seems to neglect a fairly overwhelming amount of evidence that takes into account both a Jewish and Greco-Roman worldview in which angelic beings manipulate and oversee, to varying degrees, the spirit of the age. Further, this seems to result in a fairly redundant translation of verse 8, where Paul has already warned against philosophies that have human origins. Lastly, cosmic figures whom Christ has defeated in his death and resurrection are mentioned in verse 15, which is a continuation of the thought in verse 8, so it may be that these are not so far from view as Witherington supposes.

Witherington classifies Ephesians as epideictic rhetoric (7–10) meant to function as a homily, aimed not toward critics with whom one is engaged in debate but hearers who are open to being persuaded to think and act according to the direction of the speaker (216). This explains the lofty rhetoric and the long-standing scholarly opinion that Ephesians is intended for a worship setting.

Ephesians 2:1–22 is treated along with 3:2–13, which is highly unusual. The latter passage is something of a digression from the second prayer report, begun in 3:1, broken off in
verse 2, and resumed and concluded in 3:14–21. Witherington does this because he classifies these two major sections of text as narratio, statements of fact pertinent to the discourse: 2:1–22 discusses how God has acted in Christ to save the church and unite Jews and Gentiles; and 3:2–13 discusses how all this intersects with God’s work in Paul’s life and ministry (250–51). This is, as I indicated, quite unusual, since most commentators regard Paul’s discussion in 3:2–13 as having more to do with an apostolic defense (reading this passage in terms of Paul’s defense of apostleship in other epistles, such as 2 Corinthians and Galatians). Witherington rightly places these two passages together, however, treating the second prayer report separately.

It’s fairly simple, of course, to quibble over interpretive issues, but none of this diminishes the value of Witherington’s commentary. The volume will have the most payoff for pastors and students, although scholars would do well to take into consideration Witherington’s insights regarding rhetoric and the occasional nature of New Testament letters, very basic notions that often get lost when one stands before the various sacred cows of scholarly consensus.