Abson Joseph
Indiana Wesleyan University
Marion, Indiana

Onesimus Our Brother is the fruit of the collaboration of seven scholars in the fields of religion, ethics, biblical studies, African American studies, and literature. Their primary concern is to present a reading of Philemon from the perspective of the African American experience. The book comprises seven chapters plus the introduction and conclusion.

The introduction calls attention to the marginalization of Onesimus in the body of the epistle itself and in the scholarly discussion on the letter. It offers an indictment on biblical criticism in the West for its role in sustaining “Onesimus’ silence and enslavement” (1). In addition, it traces the development and characteristics of traditional biblical criticism over against newer, postmodern approaches that paved the way for scholars to read from the margins (2–5). Therefore, the contributors undertake this project in hope of “hearing from Onesimus and reading from his marginalized position” (7).

In chapter 1, “‘No Longer as a Slave’: Reading the Interpretation History of Paul’s Epistle to Philemon,” Demetrius Williams explores new options for reading Philemon that emphasize the interpretive and practical implications of Paul’s appeal to receive Onesimus “as a beloved brother” (14–15). He surveys the interpretation history of Philemon in order to “expose the ideological commitments of the reading perspectives of
previous interpretive traditions” (14). Williams divides the interpretation history in three main eras: (1) from the early church to the Reformation; (2) the modern era (post-Reformation) to 1990; and (3) from 1990 to the present, when newer readings of Philemon from the margins are attested.

In chapter 2, “Utility, Fraternity, and Reconciliation: Ancient Slavery as a Context for the Return of Onesimus,” Mitzi Smith focuses on “the liminality of slavery” that is evident in Paul’s language. The letter underscores Onesimus’s marginality as well as a degree of social integration. Using examples from antiquity, the Bible, and Greco-Roman society, Smith discusses the issues of slave productivity, familial slavery, and fictive kinship and argues that the fictive kinship language did not change the social reality of the slaves, nor did it ameliorate the oppression they suffered (54). Further, manumission was an instrument of exploitation. She argues that the ambiguity that is “inherent to the practice of slavery—a ‘social death’ that nevertheless left the slave as part of society—highlights the tension in Paul’s own appeal for Onesimus” (58).

In chapter 3, “Nat Is Back: The Return of the Re/Oppressed in Philemon,” James Noel situates his reading of Philemon within the context of the antebellum South and raises the programmatic question “What would have happened had a slave in the antebellum South returned with Paul’s letter to Philemon in hand and invited his or her master to apply it to their immediate relationship?” (59) He crafts an answer to the question by discussing the nature of slavery in the Greco-Roman world, Paul’s use of slavery in his letters as a metaphor for humanity’s predicament in relation to sin, and the occasion that gave rise to the letter to Philemon. Noel uses the example of Dred Scott to demonstrate how the American legal system handled a runaway slave whose return was demanded by his owner and argues that the church participated with the state in maintaining the status quo, driven in part by the misreading of Paul by proslavery advocates (73). He also uses the example of Nat Turner, who returned voluntarily to his master because of newly found religious convictions. There he proposes that Turner’s decision likely stemmed from having privileged texts that are different from the “paradigmatic text for black and other forms of liberation theology” (80). Instead, he developed his social praxis by using “the very same texts privileged by slave owners to justify their oppressive social praxis and to pacify their slaves” (80). Noel concludes his discussion by underscoring how impossible it is to accomplish what Paul is trying to persuade Philemon to do, “without also confronting white supremacy’s root cause at its terrifying depths” (90).

In chapter 4, “Onesimus Speaks: Diagnosing the Hys/Terror of the Text,” Matthew Johnson bemoans the silence of Onesimus in the text. This, he argues, is symptomatic of how Christianity has missed the mark. Paul’s voice alone should not signify the text; Onesimus needs to be heard. Johnson dismisses as nonsense the notion, deduced from
the text, Paul’s plea, that “true brotherhood was possible between the subjected and the subjugator” (95). He makes a distinction between what Paul is saying and what God may be saying and argues that in the text God is actually speaking primarily through Onesimus’ silence rather than through Paul (94).

In chapter 5, “‘Ain’t You Marster’: Interrogating Slavery and Gender in Philemon,” Margaret Wilkerson wrestles with the meaning and relevance of the text of Philemon for today’s society. She formulates a number of questions and explores the meaning of the text through the lens of five works or art: *Dutchman, The Drinking Gourd, A Black Woman Speaks, Banished*, and *Traces of the Trade*. According to Wilkerson, these works of art “allow us to probe the silences that pervade the Philemon text” (103).

In chapter 6, “Enslaved by the Text: The Uses of Philemon,” James Perkinson takes issue with “the Bible slave.” He uses this term to describe “the enslavement embraced by those chained up inside an exegesis, or more accurately, inside the Bible as a text of mastery” (122). Perkinson surveys the way Philemon has been appropriated for exegesis, for preaching, and in discussion on abolition, then underscores the letter’s emergence as “a polemic lightning rod” in the proslavery versus abolitionist debate (124). A sermon by Charles Colcock Jones to a slave congregation in 1833 and their reaction to the sermon serve as a case in point.

In chapter 7, “Brother Saul: An Ambivalent Witness to Freedom,” Allen Callahan underscores the ambiguity that is found in Paul’s letters. On the one hand, many have considered Paul “the patron saint of the master class” (143). On the other hand, some have remarkably found in Paul a “compelling voice of freedom” (143). Callahan demonstrates how some have overcome this ambiguity either by hearing Paul selectively or by using the teachings of Jesus to trump Paul. As such, Paul remains an ambiguous figure in the imagination of African Americans. This is an ambiguity that they have not only appreciated but also have shared with him (156).

The conclusion offers a brief summary of the main argument of each chapter and makes the final assertion that the letter of Philemon “should no longer be read in isolation from other letters of the Pauline corpus or from the political economy of modern slavery” (159).

The authors have done a commendable job in demonstrating the many facets of reading Philemon from ideological perspective of the African American experience. The book is quite informative and raises awareness on how the concept of slavery, which permeates Paul’s letters and is pervasive in his language on redemption, is more than simply a spiritual metaphor. The authors did well to wrestle with the contemporary implications of
reading Philemon, to challenge today’s reader to rethink some of the interpretations that have been proposed, and to reevaluate how one’s social location and political and economic interests may affect one’s reading of the text. By appealing to evidence gathered from art, the legal and political arenas, and wider practices in society, the book effectively demonstrates how the Bible can and should intersect other spheres of life.

However, the book struggles at times to shake free from the “hermeneutic of suspicion” that is often observed in ideological readings of texts. The arguments often go beyond addressing the text to offering an indictment on the interpreter’s agenda that gave rise to a particular reading. For example, Nat Turner’s reading is deemed un-African American because it is does not align with the author’s ideology. Further, the act of reading nineteenth-century events, artwork, and socioeconomic and political realities of America in Philemon often creates anachronistic readings of the text.

Nevertheless, the value of this book needs to be appreciated as an effort to read the message of Philemon from the margins and a worthy enterprise to make Onesimus’s voice heard in the conversation.