



**Eckey, Wilfried**

***Die Briefe des Paulus an die Philipper und an Philemon: Ein Kommentar***

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This commentary on Paul's letters to the Philippians and to Philemon is one volume in a series of commentaries on diverse books of the New Testament that Wilfried Eckey has been publishing for some years now (the commentaries on Mark, Acts, and Luke are already published). One may regard these commentaries as the *summa* of his scholarship and the fruit of several decades of teaching at the Bergische Universität Wuppertal.

The volume contains two commentaries, on Philippians (1–144) and on Philemon (145–221), followed by a structured bibliography (222–41). This arrangement already reveals that Eckey—justifiably—considers Philippians and Philemon as more closely related than Colossians and Philemon, which are treated in a single volume in quite a number of commentary series (e.g., HNT, KEK, NIGTC, ÖTBK, WBC).

The commentary on Philippians begins with a relatively extensive introduction (1–39). First, Eckey gives a short but well-informed historical survey about the ancient city and Roman colony of Philippi (3–8). After a brief sketch of the letter's line of thought (9–10), he comes to the most hotly debated introductory questions concerning Philippians: the literary integrity (10–20) and the place from which Paul wrote the letter(s) (20–31). Then

follow some remarks on what can be known about the Christian community in Philippi in the first and early second centuries C.E. (31–39).

As to the question of literary integrity, Eckey favors the theory that Philippians consists of three originally independent letters: A (4:10–20); B (1:1–3:1; 4:4–7, 21–23); and C (3:2–4:3, 8–9). He begins his treatment of this topic by imposing the burden of proof upon those who vote for literary integrity. For his basic decision—Philippians as a compilation of three originally independent documents that are now so complexly intertwined with each other—Eckey refers to a number of other scholars who also hold this view; he gives his own argumentation on some debated details, such as the status of Phil 4:21–23. Although this reviewer remains skeptical about such complicated partition theories, this rather small commentary is certainly not the place to develop at length the arguments for and against the literary integrity of Philippians.

As to localization (and date), Philippians (rather: Philippians A and B) and Philemon are treated together, since both letters were written in the same situation of captivity. So the search for a place of composition is at the same time the search for a place where Paul spent some extended time in prison. Eckey discusses all the relevant arguments for and against Rome, Caesarea, and Ephesus as places where the prisoner Paul might have composed Philippians and Philemon. In the end, he opts for Ephesus, since this solution best fits the situation presupposed in the two (or three) letters, and the only serious objection, Luke’s silence about an imprisonment in Ephesus, does not positively exclude the imprisonment (30: “Lukas wußte vermutlich mehr, als er aufgeschrieben hat”).

After these controversies, Eckey sketches the history of the Christian community in Philippi, for which he relies on Philippians, on Acts, and on what is known from the excavations in Philippi. The letter Philippians C finds a place in this history: Paul wrote it after the second visit to Philippi, while he was in Corinth; hence Philippians C is almost contemporaneous with Romans. The introduction is concluded by a few words about the Christian community in Philippi in the early second century, for which, however, only Polycarp’s letters are available as sources.

In the exposition proper, Eckey draws the logical consequence from his literary-critical decision and comments on each of the supposed three letters separately: Philippians B (40–103), A (104–12), and C (113–44). He consistently understands them as addressed to a community in a given historical situation, that is, to Christians in a Roman colony in the Greek-speaking East—in the Macedonian “little Rome,” as he puts it. However, one may question whether Phil 1:27–30 really betrays a situation of pressure amounting to persecution (69–73); the passage could also be understood as referring to Christian adversaries, a reading that would give some thematic coherence to Philippians as a whole

(i.e., Phil 1:1–4:23). Not only the exposition itself but also numerous excursuses shed light on the Roman, Hellenistic, or early Jewish background of certain motifs and topics, such as the office of ἐπίσκοποι (45–46) or the use of metaphors from the field of sports (128–29).

The commentary on the letter to Philemon likewise begins with an introduction (147–55). Since the place and date of composition have been discussed in connection with Philippians (see above), Eckey here deals only with the destination, which he, like most other exegetes, identifies with Kolossai (153–55). The larger part of the introduction, however, is concerned with the background of the letter, with the question whether Onesimus was to be considered a *fugitivus* in terms of Roman law and with the question why he left his master and met Paul in prison. With regard to the latter, Eckey openly and soberly reveals how much we do *not* know and can only presume.

The exposition (156–79) again considers the cultural, geographical, and legal contexts; the letter to Philemon is interpreted as one piece in a larger communication. As seems to become usual in commentaries on Philemon, Eckey adds a number of additional reflections. First, there is a chapter “Skopus und Stellungnahme” (179–91), where he gives a guess as to how the story could have continued (180–82); then follow two substantial excursuses on similar cases of intercession for slaves or freed-persons (182–83) and on attitudes toward slavery in antiquity (183–91). Second, Eckey tries to elaborate Paul’s view on slavery by comparing the letter to Philemon with 1 Cor 7:21–24 (191–98). Paul’s attitude appears pragmatic and flexible. While he neither advocates nor denounces slavery in itself and gives to Christian slaves the general rule to remain in their state (1 Cor 7:21a, 24), he encourages them to use the new opportunity in case they should be set free (1 Cor 7:21b: ἀλλὰ ... μάλλον χρῆσαι), and he seems to expect Philemon to set Onesimus free (esp. Phlm 21). Third, there is an appendix (199–221) with a number of early Christian texts dealing with Christian slaves and their masters—Col 3:22–4:1; Eph 6:5–9; 1 Tim 6:1–2; Tit 2:9–10; 1 Pet 2:18–25; *1 Clem.* 55:2; Ignatius, *Pol.* 4:3; *Did.* 4:10–11; *Barn.* 19:7; the account of the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.1–63)—and a glance at slaves as holders of church offices. Thus, this part of the volume is not only a commentary on the letter to Philemon but also a short repertory of source texts about slavery and slaves in early Christianity.

As to the commentary as a whole, the reader can clearly perceive that this book is written by someone who has been professionally concerned with the formation of teachers of religious education. Eckey avoids unnecessarily technical language and explains the technical terms he uses. At times his language even becomes colloquial, such as when he translates Ἐχάρην δὲ ἐν κυρίῳ μεγάλως (Phil 4:10)—not incorrectly—with: “Ich habe mich im Herrn riesig gefreut.” On the other hand, however, his sentences are sometimes

rather lengthy. He often draws mostly instructive parallels to modern social conventions or figures of speech. Greek words and phrases always appear together with a translation, sometimes with a transcription as well. Consequently, the commentary is a helpful tool also for readers who are not so fluent in Greek or never learned it at all—and for those who, in school or pastoral service, have become somewhat out of touch with “hard” scholarly exegesis. All in all, with this commentary a retired academic teacher has met the needs of his former students who might look for some concise exegetical treatment of and background information on a biblical text to be dealt with in the classroom. Let me warmly recommend this book to their critical, perceptive, and open-minded reading.