

Gordon Zerbe. *Philippians*. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Harrisonburg, VA; Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 2016.

For the past two decades, some of the most engaging work on Paul has sought to situate his gospel in the context of Roman imperial propaganda and power. Long assumed to be politically quiescent, the apostle is now more often portrayed as an incisive critic of empire. As Gordon Zerbe puts it, “*Kyrios Iēsous Christos* (Lord Jesus Anointed), Son of God, was in direct competition with the successors of *Imperator Caesar Augustus, divi filius*, for the hearts, minds, and allegiance of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire” (48-49).

This is the interpretive paradigm that underlies Zerbe’s reading of *Philippians* that highlights what he calls Paul’s theopolitical vision of messianic citizenship. For Zerbe, four themes are central to Paul’s letter: citizenship; partnership; high-low inversion; and joy-gladness (32-34). Since his exegesis of individual passages frequently elaborates one or more of these themes, a brief overview of each will serve as a summary of his approach.

Zerbe derives the language of “citizenship” from Paul’s exhortation in *Phil.* 1:27 to “be a citizen and practice citizenship [*politeuomai*] worthy of the gospel of Messiah” (96; cf. 3:20). The term *Christos*, for Zerbe, is not merely a name but a “theopolitical title” designating God’s anointed Davidic ruler. Its force is best captured in English by transliterating not Paul’s Greek but *mašiah*, its Hebrew equivalent (46-49). Loyal to Messiah, the saints in Philippi—a proud Roman colony (25-28)—form an alternate *polis* or citizen assembly (*ekklēsia* [37]) with practices and values distinct from those of the imperial elite (100-102).

One key expression of their alternate citizenship is the *Philippians*’ “partnership” (*koinōnia*) in the gospel (*Phil.* 1:5). Zerbe chooses “partnership” instead of “fellowship” in order to highlight the Greek term’s active and concrete connotations (69-70). The *Philippians* join with Paul in the work of the gospel through their financial support—not least the support recently sent him in prison (4:10-20 [254-57])—but also through their “proclamation and witness, their loyalty to Messiah, and their internal corporate life devoted to practicing the way of Messiah” (61).

Whereas Roman society was preoccupied with the pursuit of honor

(299-300), Zerbe describes messianic citizenship as a mode of corporate life modelled on Jesus's downward-mobility. A central text here is the "messianic encomium" of Phil. 2:5-11, which celebrates Jesus's self-emptying obedience, culminating in his humiliation and death, and his subsequent exaltation by God. This pattern of "high-low inversion" is central to Paul's own self-understanding (3:4-17), is grounded in eschatological hope (3:18-21), and provides the contours of the mind-set he commends as the Philippians face animosity from outsiders and internal strife (2:1-5).

That joy is an important theme in this letter will not come as a surprise. But here too Zerbe sees a theopolitical edge: Joy in Philippians is "a celebrative rejoicing 'in Messiah'—that is, in the deliverance that Messiah has secured and will secure—in direct contrast to the celebratory rejoicing in civic imperial festivals that proclaim the glories of Caesar and the 'salvation' that Rome has given the world" (34).

Insightful and lucidly written, Zerbe's commentary distills the best of recent New Testament scholarship, not to mention recent philosophical engagement with Paul. But this is more than simply a reiteration. Zerbe puts postcolonial criticism as practiced by Pauline scholars into fruitful conversation with the peace church tradition, with stimulating results. The author's focus on "citizenship" is a particularly distinctive contribution. It resonates well with Anabaptist ecclesiology, expressing a communal alternative to prevailing modes of violent, coercive power. It should also serve as a corrective to crude anti-empire readings of Paul that condemn the imperial power of Rome (and thus, by proxy, America) but offer as an alternative vision little more than a vague egalitarianism.

I do fear that occasionally Zerbe's theopolitical interpretive paradigm unduly governs his exegesis. To speak of Paul as a political prisoner (76-78, 86-88), is, I think, anachronistic, and does not account for the implication of Phil. 1:13 that Paul's captors have only recently begun to understand his imprisonment as being "for Christ." Moreover, Zerbe's sharply oppositional language—Paul vs. Rome—at times obscures important cultural dynamics. Certainly the pursuit of honor was central to Roman society; still, it was governed by widely accepted moral constraints. Other voluntary associations also devised policies and discourses meant to constrain rivalrous behavior and the social strife it could cause. Both honor-seeking and

attempts to restrain it were native to the Greco-Roman world; both are also evident in Paul. Attending more carefully to this complexity may provide additional resources for addressing the probing questions Zerbe poses about contemporary ecclesial citizenship (179-80, 212-13, 269-71). Still, this is a very helpful volume that admirably fulfills the aims of the Believers Church Bible Commentary series.

*Ryan Schellenberg*, Assistant Professor of New Testament, Methodist Theological School in Ohio, Delaware, Ohio.

Matthew Thiessen. *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

In a carefully argued study, Matthew Thiessen asserts that Paul, a Jewish apostle to gentiles, had no bone to pick with Torah or with Judaism, but rather with gentiles who wished to be Jewish. Paul insisted not only that gentiles need not be Jewish to be included in God's blessing but that it is by divine decree impossible for them to be Jewish. However, God overcomes the "genealogical gap" between Jews and gentiles by bestowing *pneuma* (usually translated as "Spirit") on them "in Christ." Gentiles thereby not only become Abraham's "genealogical" offspring (seed), and thus partakers in the promise to Abraham, but are given the power to overcome the "gentile problem," namely, an impious and immoral life. Christ-believing Jews remain Jews, and Christ-believing gentiles remain gentiles, with distinct genealogical connection to Abraham.

In five meticulously argued and copiously endnoted chapters, amply sourced in biblical, Jewish, and Greco-Roman literature, Thiessen focuses primarily on Romans and Galatians. There Abraham figures centrally in Paul's argument, particularly the themes of faith (trust), promise, "seed," and the blessing of the nations/gentiles (Genesis 16-21). Importantly, the "encoded" readers addressed in both Romans 2 and Galatians 3-4, for example, are *not* Jews, Thiessen insists against much of exegetical and theological opinion, but *only* judaizers—gentile wannabe Jews. Paul never takes aim at the law per se, nor at Judaism, but only at a fundamental misreading of the divine "solution"