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A Resource Reading Guide to Philippians

Ken Berry

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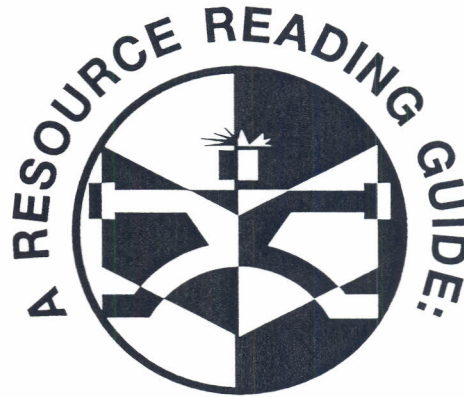
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TO PHILIPPIANS



By Ken Berry

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In 1983, when I first took an exegesis course on Philippians, the required text was J. B. Lightfoot's classic commentary on the Greek text, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (12th ed., London: Macmillan, 1913; reprinted by Zondervan, 1953), first published in 1868. Ralph Martin's New Century Bible commentary, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976; rev. ed., 1980), was suggested as a supplement for its interaction with twentieth-century scholarship. Jean-François Collange's commentary, *The Epistle of Saint Paul to the Philippians* (London: Epworth, 1979), translated from the 1973 French edition, was regarded by many as the best recent work available in English. The focus of scholarly work on the letter was the so-called "Christ hymn" in 2:6–11, the identity of the opponents in chapter 3, and various partition or interpolation theories. In general, however, Philippians was among the more neglected letters in Pauline scholarship. That is no longer the case. Over the past fifteen years, scholars have produced a wealth of new commentaries on the letter, at a variety of levels. Several monographs and collections of essays giving special attention to Philippians have been published as well. In this resource reading guide, I will limit my discussion to works in English, primarily those published since about 1980. That is not to say that earlier works, such as those by H. A. W. Meyer, J. B. Lightfoot, and Karl Barth, should be ignored, but I will allow the more recent works to point readers to others.

Orientation

For orientation to the letter and to recent discussion, I highly recommend the article on Philippians by John T. Fitzgerald in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Other excellent overviews include Luke Timothy Johnson's discussion in *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) and Stanley Stowers' essay, "Friends and Enemies in the Politics of Heaven: Reading Theology in Philippians," in *Pauline Theology 1: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* (ed. J. M. Bassler; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). All three authors propose that Philippians is best seen as a hortatory letter of friendship, reflecting ideals and conventions of Greco-Roman friendship.

I also recommend *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid. This reference work, perhaps the most useful volume published on Paul in this decade, contains a helpful article on Philippians by Hawthorne as well as many articles relevant to the letter's interpretation.

Major Exegetical Commentaries

The works by Gordon Fee and Peter O'Brien are clearly the cream of the crop of recent commentaries. In terms of scope, both are about twice as long as any others. O'Brien's contribution, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), is the longest, at over 600 pages. He gives a 20-page select bibliography and a 40-page introduction, in which he argues that Paul wrote Philippians from Rome as one letter "especially to urge his Christian friends to stand firm for the gospel and to be united in Christian love." For each section of the letter, O'Brien typically includes a detailed bibliography, his own translation, notes on textual problems, an overview with attention to structure, and then verse-by-verse exegesis of the Greek. He gives attention to almost every word and phrase but does not fail to show how the details fit into the larger context. He also takes time to develop important themes, such as fellowship and gospel. He outlines well the various views on disputed issues and argues clearly for his own conclusions, as seen in his treatment of the form, background, authorship, and purpose of 2:6–11. For the most part, his conclusions are not particularly novel. Other commentaries may be more exciting or stimulating, but O'Brien is a careful, sane, and reliable guide.

Fee's volume, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), replaces J. J. Müller's earlier work in the New International Commentary on the New Testament series, which Fee now edits. He provides an extensive general bibliography (over 600 entries in 26 pages). His introduction is noteworthy for its primary attention to the letter's genre. Following in the line of Johnson, Fitzgerald, and Stowers, Fee argues that Philippians is best viewed as a hortatory letter of friendship. He acknowledges the importance of the rhetorical features in the letter, but is not convinced by recent arguments that the whole letter follows a standard rhetorical arrangement for a speech. Fee goes against the dominant scholarly viewpoint by denying that 2:6–11 is a pre-Pauline hymn, asserting that it is better understood as exalted prose composed by Paul specifically for his argument in the letter. In a section called "Theological Contributions," Fee highlights such concerns as the importance of the gospel, the central role of Christ, the eschatological framework, and the cruciform Christian life. Fee's commentary follows the NIV, which he sometimes modifies, but the detailed footnotes give constant attention to matters in the Greek text. Fee often presents his own more literal translation in a schematic arrangement, so as to make clear his analysis of the structure and argument of a passage. He usually closes each section with a paragraph or a page of theological reflection on its significance for the contemporary church. Like O'Brien, Fee writes with thoroughness and clarity, but as is appropriate for this letter, he also writes with vigor, passion, and even charm, so that I found him more engaging to read than O'Brien. If possible, buy both Fee and O'Brien. If you can afford only one heavyweight commentary on Philippians, I recommend Fee, perhaps one of the best all-around commentaries available on any book.

Gerald F. Hawthorne's *Philippians* (Word Biblical Commentary 43; Waco: Word, 1983) was the most detailed recent English commentary on this letter until O'Brien's appeared. Hawthorne, of Wheaton College, follows the familiar format of the WBC series. For each section of the text there is a bibliography; his own English translation; text-critical notes; treatment of form/structure/setting; "comment," or verse-by-verse exegesis of the Greek; and "explanation," usually a summary of the comment section. Hawthorne preserves a great deal of information and interacts with a wide range of scholarly views. Sometimes he adopts views that have not found widespread

agreement. He argues that the letter was written from Caesarea and that the opponents in chapter 3 are not Jewish Christians, but Jews. Hawthorne is also not afraid to pursue a completely independent course. For example, he argues that 2:6–11 is based on a tradition of Jesus acting as a servant in washing the disciples' feet, one similar to that recorded in John 13. I must say that I have not found Hawthorne as consistently reliable or persuasive as O'Brien or Fee. Hawthorne's work is certainly worth consulting, but with Fee and O'Brien available, it may now be passed over for purchase by most.

Hawthorne also wrote a companion volume, *Philippians* (Word Biblical Themes; Waco: Word, 1987). Now out of print, its aim was to give "an overview, in personal and practical terms and expressed in understandable language, of what this letter says to today's church and world" and to "bring together in one place, into some kind of order, the various theological themes that are scattered everywhere throughout the letter": the character of God, the providence of God and the problem of evil, the person of Christ, the Christ hymn, salvation, the Christian life, and joy.

Another major commentary deserving attention is Moisés Silva, *Philippians* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT; Grand Rapids, 1992; original ed., Moody, 1988). Silva, who now teaches at Gordon-Conwell, is editor of the series for which this commentary was the inaugural volume. The commentary is based on the Greek text, but provides English transliterations and translations for Greek words and phrases at their first occurrences and thereafter uses transliterations except in the notes. Silva does not attempt to be comprehensive or exhaustive, but attempts "to focus exclusively on the thrust of the text itself, to ask what is *distinctive* to Philippians, to determine how each passage contributes to the argument of the letter as a whole, to avoid being distracted by extraneous problems, and to communicate clearly the results of [his] research by means of uncluttered exposition." Silva provides his own translation, which he describes as an attempt at a "full rendering, largely a paraphrase, that seeks to summarize the results of the exegesis." The commentary proper consists of "exegetical essays" on carefully defined units of thought rather than a verse-by-verse treatment. There are additional notes at the end of each unit on particular words, points of syntax, and textual variants. Silva's expertise in linguistics, especially in lexical semantics, is put to good use. The introduction is noteworthy

for its discussion of the letter's textual and exegetical history. The latter contains a critical summary of selected commentators who have been particularly influential, including Chrysostom, Aquinas, and Calvin. Silva often cites Chrysostom and Calvin with insight. At times, Silva may allow his Reformed background to skew his presentation of Paul's thinking, such as when he entitles 1:27–2:30 "A Call to Sanctification." The strengths and format of Silva's work make it very valuable and readable for those who know Greek, particularly if O'Brien or Fee seem too long to read in full.

Shorter Exegetical Commentaries

The work by Collange, mentioned above, was at one time my favorite on the letter. Though concise compared to the more recent works just noted, its approximately 160 pages are densely packed and include extensive interaction with other scholars. It is quite stimulating and offers many fresh insights, even if some of Collange's views must be rejected. He sees Philippians as a compilation of three originally different letters. Regarding Paul's dilemma in 1:21–26, Collange argues that Paul was considering whether to get out of prison in Ephesus by revealing his Roman citizenship. Though it is now somewhat dated and, unfortunately, out of print, I still give it high marks.

Moving on to somewhat less technical works, I would mention first of all Ben Witherington III, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians* (The New Testament in Context; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994). Although its title might suggest a monograph with more specific concerns, this volume is actually a medium-sized commentary on the entire letter. Witherington offers what he calls a socio-historical commentary that brings insights from both social history and the study of Greco-Roman rhetoric to bear on the letter's interpretation. The basic textual discussions are meant for a general audience, with more detailed discussions for advanced students and scholars confined to endnotes or special sections set apart in smaller type. Witherington argues that Paul's primary task in the letter is to produce concord or unity in the congregation and that, to that end, Paul primarily uses deliberative rhetoric. Witherington suggests this rhetorical outline: epistolary prescript, 1:1–2; thanksgiving and *exordium* (introduction), 1:3–11; *narratio* (background), 1:12–26; *propositio* (thesis), 1:27–30; *probatio* (proof), 2:1–4:3; *peroratio* (summation), 4:4–20; and epistolary closing, 4:21–23. This

work offers very interesting reading and many fresh perspectives, even if one is not totally convinced by the rhetorical analysis. As the series title would indicate, the book does not try to suggest contemporary applications or homiletic approaches. Nevertheless, I recommend it as probably the best choice, and certainly the most up-to-date, among commentaries under 200 pages.

Ralph P. Martin has written two commentaries on Philippians. The first, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959; rev. ed., 1987), offers a running exegesis of the letter. The 1987 revision adapted the text to the NIV instead of the KJV, updated some footnotes, and added a sentence or paragraph here and there. The most substantive changes involved moving away from referring to Christ as an “example” in 2:5–11 and identifying the opponents in chapter 3 more specifically as Jewish Christian gnosticizing teachers with antinomian tendencies. In contrast to Martin’s Tyndale commentary, his previously mentioned New Century Bible commentary tends to be more a collection of isolated comments on particular words and phrases, and it also interacts more with scholarly literature. Most readers will probably prefer the first volume.

F. F. Bruce offers a solid, straightforward exegetical commentary on the letter in his *Philippians* (New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989). The commentary, originally done in 1983 based on the Good News Bible, was adapted for Hendrickson’s series to the text of the NIV with few, if any, other substantive changes. The commentary runs about 180 pages and is divided into 33 sections. Each begins with a brief summary of the passage, followed by verse-by-verse commentary, then additional notes on particular words or phrases. Discussions of textual problems or of Greek syntax and references to secondary literature are confined to the notes. One weakness is that the division of the letter into such small sections for comment does not help one sense the letter’s overall structure or flow of argument. The reasonable price makes it a good value for the church member building a basic library.

Abilene Christian University professor Anthony L. (“Tony”) Ash has written the most recent commentary on Philippians from someone in our Restoration tradition: *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (College Press NIV Commentary; Joplin, MO, 1994). His nontechnical work is rather modest in size, about 110 pages on Philippians, but should prove useful to the general reader.

Preaching-Oriented Commentaries

Frank Thielman, who has written two earlier books on Paul, pursues a new approach to commentary writing in *Philippians* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). Following the series format, commentary for each paragraph of the letter is divided into three parts: original meaning, bridging contexts, and contemporary significance. Having one New Testament scholar move from exegesis through hermeneutical reflection to application proves to be more effective than assigning exegesis and exposition to separate authors, as in the old Interpreter’s Bible. The three-part approach may be a bit repetitive at times, but I suspect that most ministers and Bible teachers will applaud the fuller consideration given to application, in contrast to that of most commentaries, which leave the reader in the first century. Pairing Thielman with Fee or O’Brien would make an excellent combination for most preachers. I might note that I was surprised to see Thielman quote Alexander Campbell on baptism in the section on 3:1–11 and associate him with the Judaizers as an example of someone effectively denying faith’s sufficiency for salvation.

I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Epworth Commentaries; London: Epworth, 1991), based on the Revised English Bible, is especially intended both to encourage and to help preachers preach from this letter. Marshall has become convinced that the commentator’s task should involve not only exegesis, but also teasing out the message of the text for today, so as to provide some guidance for preachers and teachers in the church. So, interspersed throughout the exegesis are about 40 short sections of exposition or application. Marshall leaves to the preacher the matter of presentation, that is, “how to prepare and preach the sermon in such a way that it is interesting, instructive and persuasive.” The work is 176 pages in all, with a brief bibliography but no footnotes.

Marshall has also written a useful survey of the letter’s theology in a book co-authored by Karl P. Donfried, *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters* (NT Theology; Cambridge University Press, 1993). He employs a building metaphor in organizing his discussion: (1) Exploring the building site—introductory questions; (2) Laying the foundation—the gospel and Jesus Christ (focusing on 2:6–11); (3) Building the walls—how believers are related to Christ: in Christ, with Christ, knowing Christ; (4) The shape of the Church—the character of the Christian community; (5) Philippians and its architect—relation to the theology of other Pauline letters; (6) A building that lasts—

the letter's significance for today and its distinctive contribution.

Fred B. Craddock, who taught New Testament and preaching at Emory, has written the briefest commentary that I will mention: *Philippians* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1984). The 84-page commentary takes the form of expository essays on paragraphs of text. The aim of the series is to create an interpretation faithful to the text and useful to the church for those who preach and teach. Craddock, however, does not make specific suggestions for sermon outlines. He emphasizes how Paul's relationship with the Philippians controls this letter of "intimate distance." The work is a delight to read, and those who have heard Craddock speak will be able to hear him speaking the words as they read. This hardcover volume is a bit expensive for its size, so one might try to borrow it from a nearby library for a quick read.

Popular Expositions and Sermons

J. Alec Motyer offers a popular-level exposition in *The Message of Philippians: Jesus Our Joy* (The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove: IVP, 1984). The preface for the series describes the volumes as expositions that are designed "to expound the biblical text with accuracy, to relate it to contemporary life, and to be readable." The author makes few references to secondary literature. He divides the letter into short sections but gives no overarching outline of the letter's structure. Subsections of the exposition have homiletic-style titles or headings, usually concise and symmetrical, often alliterative. Motyer uses the first person plural regularly throughout. Church members without any formal training in biblical studies will find this work accessible and engaging.

Evangelical New Testament scholar D. A. Carson provides a brief popular exposition in *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). The chapters were first prepared as a series of Bible conference messages: (1) Put the Gospel First, 1:1–26; (2) Focus on the Cross, 1:27–2:18; (3) Adopt Jesus' Death as a Test of Your Outlook, 1:27–2:18; (4) Emulate Worthy Christian Leaders, 2:19–3:21; (5) Never Give Up the Christian Walk, 4:1–23.

Among the many collections of sermons on the letter, the two volumes by the well-known British preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones stand out: *The Life of Joy* and *The Life of Peace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989). This series of sermons was delivered in London in the late 1940s.

Forthcoming Commentaries

Additional commentaries on Philippians are now in preparation, including those by John Reumann (Anchor Bible), N. T. Wright (International Critical Commentary), Morna Hooker (New Interpreter's Bible), Duane F. Watson (Eerdmans), and another by Fee (IVP NT Commentary).

Special Studies

Among more specialized works on the letter, Ralph P. Martin's study, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii. 5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (3rd. ed., Downers Grove: IVP, forthcoming 1997; 1st ed. 1967, 2nd ed. 1983), is something of a classic. This passage continues to attract much scholarly attention. The widely held conclusion—defended by Martin—that 2:6–11 was a pre-Pauline hymn has been increasingly questioned in the last decade or so. And, in one form or another, the "ethical interpretation" of the passage—criticized by Ernst Käsemann and Martin—has made a strong comeback in recent years. Consult O'Brien and Fee for recent discussion. Two important recent studies are Stephen Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* (JSNTSS 36; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), with two chapters on the passage; and N. T. Wright, "Jesus Christ is Lord—Philippians 2:5–11," in *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

I will briefly note a few other recent monographs and collection of essays. One monograph that is fairly accessible and well worth reading is Davorin Peterlin, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians in the Light of Disunity in the Church* (NovTSup 79; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), a revision of his Aberdeen dissertation supervised by I. H. Marshall. Peterlin argues that the topic of disunity runs through the whole letter and provides the element that binds it all together. Readers will probably find certain aspects of his interpretation unconvincing or somewhat speculative—for example, that the collection of money for Paul was opposed by some members of the church (a group led by either Euodia or Syntyche).

Craig Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments* (JSNTSS 130; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1996), a revision of his Yale dissertation, provides a survey of evidence for prison conditions and attitudes toward imprisonment in the Roman world and seeks to shed new light on Philippians 1:21–26 and 4:10–20, as well as on Philemon.

Jeffrey T. Reed, *A Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary Integrity* (JSNTSS 136; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1997) is an important new work that uses a linguistic theory of discourse analysis to address the issue of the letter's literary integrity. Reed's first two chapters introduce and explain his approach. Reed then focuses on the epistolary structure of Philippians and offers a critique of attempts to impose a standard rhetorical structure on the letter. Using categories of modern linguistics, he gives a comprehensive analysis of the letter's language and grammar. Reed favors the integrity of Philippians, but argues that Paul had several purposes in writing it rather than a single overarching one. Reed's work is the most technical and challenging of the special studies noted here, using a methodology unfamiliar to most, but I suspect that it will be widely discussed in future works on Philippians.

Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference (JSNTSS 90; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), edited by Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, includes four essays that focus on Philippians from the point of view of ancient rhetoric. John T. Fitzgerald has edited two volumes relevant to the recent trend of interpreting Philippians as a letter of friendship: *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); and *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech: Studies on Friendship in the New Testament World* (NovTSup 82; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996). The latter includes four essays on Philippians, by John Reumann, Ken Berry, Abraham Malherbe, and Fitzgerald. An important aspect of friendship is reciprocity, or "giving and

receiving," which is the focus of G. W. Peterman's recent monograph, *Paul's Gift from Philippi: Conventions of Gift-Exchange and Christian Giving* (SNTSMS 92; Cambridge, 1997).

One recent article deserves special mention: Markus Bockmuehl, "A Commentator's Approach to the 'Effective History' of Philippians," *JSNT* 60 (1995):57-88. It focuses on what Bockmuehl calls the "effective history" of Philippians, that is, how has the letter "actually made a difference, how has it inspired and moved people to action or formed their thoughts and convictions, how has it taken shape, or indeed failed to take shape, in the history of the church?" His preliminary study examines both the influence of the letter as a whole and that of three specific passages (1:21-23; 2:5-11; and 3:20). He argues that although consideration of such "effective history" is too often neglected, it "could provide vital tools for the construction of a hermeneutical bridge from the world of the text to the world of the Christian reader and his or her community."

Of course, reading in connection with Philippians should not be limited to commentaries and other works of New Testament scholarship. There are many classic and contemporary works that touch on themes in Philippians, such as Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

KEN BERRY is a translations consultant with the World Bible Translation Center, Fort Worth, Texas.