



Bird, Michael F.

Colossians and Philemon: A New Covenant Commentary

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

I can say, without fear of contradiction, that Mike Bird (Lecturer in Theology and Bible at Crossway College in Brisbane, Australia) is one of the most promising NT scholars to come along in a long time. He has his hand in seemingly everything, having published roughly three dozen journal articles, and written, contributed to, or edited dozens of books on Pauline & Gospel studies, Historical Jesus & Christological studies, systematic theology, and more. It's not surprising, then, that Bird would direct his creative efforts toward commentary writing.

I can't recall if *Colossians and Philemon* is the inaugural volume in the New Covenant Commentary Series—of which Bird serves as series editor along with Craig Keener—or if it was Keener's volume that came out first. Whatever the case, Bird's volume offers a concise yet informative look at these two short Pauline letters, and much like Keener's volume on Romans, he pays close attention to the socio-historical features of the material.

The introduction, which comprises 30 of the 147 pages of main text, takes the time to familiarize the reader with the history of Colossae and the social setting from which Paul is writing. Philemon, being the shorter letter, gets the shorter treatment, which I'll summarize: It was written by Paul in 55-56 CE as a result of Onesimus visiting him so that he could mediate between Onesimus and Philemon over a matter that was made public before the Colossian

church. This resulted in Onesimus' conversion, which led to Paul advocating for him in order to bring about reconciliation with Philemon.

The introductory material on Colossians is spread pretty evenly over authorship (Paul with others), provenance (Ephesus), and the Colossian philosophy (a form of missionary minded Jewish mysticism influenced by Hellenistic thought), while taking a little time to examine the relationship of Colossians to Ephesians (Colossians was written by Paul and co-workers; Ephesians was written by a secretary and composed on the basis of Colossians). In all of this Bird provides arguments and counters before drawing his conclusions; an approach I find satisfying.

As for the commentary itself, Bird says that he attempted to "avoid writing a commentary on other commentaries" (vii). It was only after translating and commentating that he consulted secondary literature. This doesn't mean that Bird doesn't interact with secondary literature or other commentaries—such interaction can be found throughout the commentary and the footnotes—he just keeps it to a minimum. If you've ever read a large technical commentary you can see how such an approach is refreshing. Rather than getting bogged down in the minutia of this or that point made by this or that scholar Bird is able to focus on the text and explain it clearly and concisely.

As stated above, Bird provides his own translation of the material (something lacking in Keener's contribution on Romans), followed by concise yet dense (I mean that in a positive way) comments on the passage. Important terms are emboldened throughout, a feature that screams for a glossary in the back matter, but unfortunately doesn't get one. Throughout the commentary there are a number of asides called "Fusing the Horizons" that aim at identifying the contemporary relevance of the text (topics include doctrine, prayer & teaching, worship, common faith, etc.). These asides manage to come across as devotional in nature while not sacrificing any theological integrity.

Now I'll confess to having never had much of an interest in Philemon, and to be sure, I still don't. Not even Bird's many talents as a scholar and commentator were able to change that. But I have long had an abiding interest in Colossians for its rich Christological content. Bird devotes a nice amount of space (47-59) to the so-called "Christ Hymn" in 1:15-20. He's certainly correct to reject a gnostic redeemer myth as the passage's background. Bird sees the "poem" (a position he takes for granted) as a "christological interpretation of Genesis 1," which I agree with, but I think he concedes too much when he "admit[s] that links with wisdom traditions are simply too plain to ignore" (49). While such links are ubiquitous in scholarly literature they are arguably

completely absent from the primary texts (see thorough critiques in Aquila Lee's *From Messiah to Preexistent Son*, Gordon Fee's *Pauline Christology*, and Sean McDonough's *Christ as Creator*).

Bird helpfully reminds us that “[t]he issue is far more than, ‘Is Jesus God or is he only quasi-divine?’ More appropriately, it asks which place Jesus occupies in the cosmological order in relation to the one God of Israel, and to various spiritual entities with varying degrees of power and authority as well” (51). Sadly, the attention to “relationship” (with God and the created order) is often passed over by readers with little more than apologetic interests, which ironically, is the strongest apologetic argument to be made from this passage! The “Fusing the Horizons” section is also well done, noting that this passage doesn’t exist just so we can know the right stuff about Christ, but so that we can see our parts in the story of creation and reconciliation (58).

Bird’s treatment of Colossians 2:8-23 has been very informative for me. Over the years I’ve taken the Colossian philosophy (I’ve always used the term heresy) to have been a brand of proto-docetism given Paul’s reference to the fullness of deity dwelling bodily in Christ in 2:9. Bird has successfully convinced me otherwise by pointing out the rather obvious Jewish features of the passage, e.g., references to circumcision, decrees, feasts, New Moons, the Sabbath, and some less obvious ones such as the worship of/with angels. A local synagogue attempting to lead Christians away through legalism and indoctrination now sounds much more plausible than my original understanding.

If there’s one thing that struck me as odd in this commentary it was the lack of consistency between the use of the terms Messiah and Christ. In the translation Bird always opts to translate *χριστος* as Messiah, and his reasoning for doing so is sound. He says, “I have rendered *Christos Iēsous* as Messiah Jesus, using ‘Messiah’ rather than ‘Christ’ for *Christos* in order to emphasize the Jewish and eschatological connotation of the designation for Paul” (33). Good and well; but then why not consistently use Messiah rather than Christ in the commentary? Does the term not carry the same connotation for Bird and modern readers? Sure, Christ functions as a proper name now, as Bird later admits, but as he also admits, it has “not lost all of its titular significance.” In any event, it was just a little taxing constantly switching off between “Messiah” and “Christ” knowing that they’re equivalent terms and either one would have been fine.

I can recommend this commentary in good conscience to intermediate and advanced readers. I think that Bird might fly (no pun intended) over the head of those just getting their feet wet in theology and Biblical studies, but those who have some familiarity will benefit greatly from this volume’s sharp analysis and theologically sensitive reading of Paul.