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978-0-521-03661-0 - Philippians: From People to Letter

Peter Oakes

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This book provides a case-study in modelling the social make-up of an early Christian community, including estimated figures for the various social groups in the model. It explains Philippians (the letter) by thinking about the lives of the Philippians (the people who received the letter). It also shows how much modelling can make an impact on the exegesis of a text. The result is a proposal for reading Philippians as a call for unity under economic suffering. In particular, the story of Christ in Philippians 2.6–11 is read as a reinforcement of this call in the specifically Roman context of Philippi.

The book begins with a discussion of archaeological and literary evidence about the development of the Roman colony of Philippi. It also includes discussion of the likely effects of suffering among various social groups in the church, exploration of Paul's and Christ's roles as models for the Philippians, and comparison of Paul's language about Christ with Imperial ideology.

PETER OAKES is Tutor in Biblical Studies at Northern College, Manchester and Greenwood Lecturer in New Testament Studies at the University of Manchester. He is a member of the Tyndale Fellowship and has made an extensive study of archaeological and literary evidence relating to Philippi. His classical/historical work involves study on site and interaction with leading practitioners in the field. He is currently engaged in research on Rome and Pompeii for a book on Paul's letter to the Romans.

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# Philippians

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In memory of my father,  
STANLEY OAKES

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## PREFACE

How much explanatory power can there be in a study of the historical social context of a church to whom Paul wrote a letter? As I have sat reading archaeological reports, and stood looking at the ruined town in its wide, fertile plain, I have been surprised by how complete a framework the context seemed to provide for understanding Paul's letter to Philippi.

My study led me to two end-points, both of which go against a great deal of current scholarship on Philippians (but which have much in common with the approaches of Stephen Fowl and Wayne Meeks to the letter). The first is that the main thematic structure of the letter is a three-fold parallel between Christ, Paul and the Philippians, a parallel consistently directed towards affecting the attitudes and behaviour of the suffering Philippian church. The second is a reading of Philippians 2.6–11 as a carefully crafted piece of exhortation and encouragement, written specifically for the Philippian situation.

My method has been first to model the development of the town, then the social structure of the town, then the social structure of the church that one might typically expect in such a town. Particularly since this procedure is subject to such a wide range of uncertainty, the resulting model was then tested against the New Testament data about the church at Philippi. The strengths and weaknesses of the model were also compared with those of other possible models.

My next starting-point was a demonstration that the letter indicates that at least some Philippian Christians were suffering. I then used my model of the church and my model of the town to discuss what such suffering would be likely to have involved for the range of types of people in the church. I concluded that the primary long-term form of suffering would be economic.

In the letter, both Christ and Paul model a proper attitude to suffering. In both cases, the way of obedient suffering is seen to be

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the way of salvation. Paul calls the Philippians to this same way of salvation. This call is intertwined with an impassioned call to unity. The economic difficulties, which I think were the most likely primary content of Philippian suffering, provide a context which draws these things naturally together in a way that no other context for Philippians seems to do.

This leaves a question about Christ's exaltation in Philippians 2.9–11. Although it is bound to bring some message to the Philippian hearers that following Christ's way of willingness to lose status and to suffer carries a hope of salvation, it must also do more than this. Christ is not simply rewarded but is raised to the position of universal authority. My conclusion is that Paul presents a pattern in 2.9–11 and 3.20–1 in which Christ is compared with the Emperor, the head of Philippian colonial society. Christ is the one who, by his actions, showed himself to be the one who should be given an authority greater than that of the Emperor. This authority is the basis for his being able, at the End, to return and rescue his people. Such a portrayal of Christ makes his imperatives of unity supersede imperatives of the Philippian social order which would tend to break an economically suffering church apart.

Many scholars have argued that suffering usually promotes unity in groups such as small Christian communities. My study sees Philippians as a letter written at the point where, for this community, that outcome is in question. Will their suffering produce fragmentation or unity? Paul's letter is, I would argue, carefully put together to try to ensure that the outcome of their suffering is unity.

I have benefited from the support of many people during my work on Philippians, particularly Tom Wright, under whose supervision the core of this work formed an Oxford DPhil thesis which was examined in 1996. My examiners, Loveday Alexander and Robert Morgan, offered helpful corrections and advice. Also invaluable at Oxford was the encouragement of Chris Rowland and the members of the faculty and graduate seminars, particularly Crispin Fletcher-Louis and Sean Winter. Simon Price, Peter Pilhofer and Philip Esler generously responded to sections of my research and made suggestions for reading. Conrad Gempf has been a source of encouragement since the early days of my study. In Manchester, I have received steady support from David Peel, Martin Scott and my other colleagues at Luther King House and from George Brooke and other colleagues at the University.

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This book rests on the work of many scholars of Philippians and of Philippi, particularly those of institutions such as the Ecole Française at Athens and the University of Thessaloniki who have excavated the site. I wish to thank the British Academy for funding much of my doctoral research. I also wish to thank the trustees of the British Museum for permission to reproduce photographs of their Roman coins.

I am grateful to Richard Bauckham for including my work in the SNTS monograph series and to Kevin Taylor and the other staff at Cambridge University Press for their work in preparing the book for publication.

I would have struggled to finish my doctoral thesis without the extended hospitality of Jane and Mark Smith. I would have struggled to start without the help of Janet.