

Cassidy, Richard J. *A Roman Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. New York, NY: Crossroad, 2019. viii + 219 pp. Hardcover. USD 89.95.

Richard J. Cassidy is a professor of sacred Scriptures at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, Michigan. He is also an ordained priest of the Detroit Archdiocese of the Catholic Church. In 2002, he wrote a book on the five letters that the apostle Paul wrote while he was “in chains,” entitled *Paul in Chains: The Impact of Roman Imprisonment upon the Letters of Paul*. During his writing, Cassidy realized that the Letter to the Philippians needed more attention and analysis, so he decided to compose a full commentary on it. This was how this book came about. This new commentary by Cassidy is very helpful in explaining the Roman historical background information relevant to the interpretation of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, especially regarding slavery, the military, the emperor cult, and so on (vii). Cassidy's demonstration of the sharp contrast between the Roman emperor and the Lord Jesus Christ in the Letter to the Philippians is impressive and intriguing. He clearly shows that Paul is arguing that Jesus Christ, rather than the Roman emperor, is the only true and glorious Lord of the universe.

There are three main sections to this book: the introduction, the body of commentary, and the appendixes. One characteristic that makes this book special is its very long and comprehensive introduction. It is forty-three pages long, and that is one-fourth of the contents of the book. It is comprehensive, having nineteen subsections in total, covering many aspects of the Roman context, which include “Titles of Exaltation in the Eastern Provinces,” “*Maiestas*,” “The Military History of Philippi,” “The Roman Character of Philippi,” Roman citizenship, the emperor cult, slavery, Paul's ministry at Philippi, the Christian community of Philippi, and others (vii). This comprehensive and valuable introduction lays a firm foundation for the second section, the main body of the commentary.

Having divided the Letter to the Philippians into sixteen parts, Cassidy delves into each using two subtitles, “Introductory Comments” and “Tracing the Train of Thought” (46), to provide an overview and a coherent verse-by-verse commentary of the text. Just as the title of this book suggests, in his comments, Cassidy puts a major emphasis on the Roman background of the text, by which he makes Paul's words come to life again. At the beginning of the commentary, Cassidy points out that by calling himself a servant of Jesus Christ (1:1), Paul probably had three meanings in mind: first, he belonged to Jesus Christ like a slave belongs to his master; second, he was a slave because he was physically chained; and third, Christ came to the world as a slave (48). Then Cassidy argues that the way “Jesus came to be with the Father in glory” is one of the central themes in Paul's letter to the Philippians (54). Cassidy devotes nineteen pages of the analysis to Phil 2:6–11, which is called the “‘peak’ section of the letter” (99), undoubtedly indicating its importance. He argues that this

pericope is composed by Paul “as a ‘Christ drama’ while in Roman chains” (81). He claims that there are “two *acts*” in this drama, 2:6–8 and 2:9–11, and in each act, there are “four *scenes*” (81). He also notes that the first act deals with Jesus’s descent, where Jesus is “the leading actor,” and the second act deals with Jesus’s ascent, where the Father leads the scene (81).

Moving to Philippians 3, Cassidy argues that “the enemies of the cross of Christ” (v.18) refers to “the Roman authorities,” especially the Roman emperor Nero (121–122). Following this argument, Cassidy suggests that the phrase ἡ κοιλία in v. 19 means “the male sex organ” rather than the “visceral appetite,” as some commentators suggest (123). Discussing Philippians 4:4–9, Cassidy points out that Jesus Christ’s advent will be considerably more glorious and significant than the arrival of the Roman emperors (135). If the “imperial arrival” inaugurated a new year in the Roman Empire (135), imagine the advent of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the whole universe! Addressing Paul’s response to the gift sent by the Philippians (4:10–20), Cassidy interestingly says that because Paul learned that there were “imperial images” on the coins that Epaphroditus brought to him, so believing that those coins were “contaminated by the Julio-Claudian propaganda,” Paul rejected them (142). At the end of this commentary, Cassidy reaffirms that the predominant theme of the Letter to the Philippians is “lordship” (145), that “Jesus Christ and the Father,” rather than the Roman emperors, are the true source of “all power, all benevolence, all majesty, all glory” (147).

Five appendixes follow the main body of the commentary and include pictures and information on cartography, Roman coins, slaves, and Paul as a prisoner, as well as Cassidy’s acknowledgment of those who helped him in the production of this book (148–172).

This commentary offers many positive contributions. First, the comprehensive introduction lays a firm foundation for the main body of the text. As one reads through it, they become more familiar with the Roman world, making it easier for the person to understand the later contents. Secondly, it is essential knowledge to the interpretation of this epistle, Cassidy points out, that the city of Philippi was used by the emperor Augustus “as a settlement location for military veterans,” and after Rome, it was the second “most ‘Roman’ city” that Paul visited (8). This description indicates that in the study of the Letter to the Philippians, the Roman background information is exceedingly significant. Also, Cassidy’s description of “slavery in the Roman empire” provides useful insight into Christ’s death. He mentions that “the ultimate punishment” for a slave was crucifixion according to the master’s will (18). This makes the willing death of Jesus Christ on the cross even more striking.

Cassidy also mentions that when Josephus was about to be released, Titus and Domitian ordered his chains to be “severed by an axe” instead being unlocked so that the shame of Josephus’s chains could be removed (66). I

appreciate this example because it vividly shows the shame that Paul's chain would have produced during that time.

Cassidy does not let any chance of presenting the Roman background slip away. He even analyzes Paul's name within the Roman context. He notes that Roman citizens usually had three names, "*praenomen*, *nomen*, and *cognomen*," and "Paulus" would have been Paul's cognomen (47). Furthermore, Cassidy suggests that the name "Saul" was probably Paul's fourth name, a "*supernomen*" (47). This information is very interesting, and it can easily draw readers' minds back to the Roman world.

Cassidy has made another big contribution by arguing that Phil 2:6–11 is a "Christ drama" rather than "a preexisting 'hymn,'" as many commentators suggest (81). The structure of "two *acts*" and "four *scenes*," as suggested by him, is beautiful. I was also fascinated by his recognition of Jesus being the "leading actor" of the first act and the Father being the "leading actor" of the second act (81). I found that his analysis of the text has greatly manifested the beauty of the Scriptures. While Cassidy recognizes the traditional view that the purpose of this passage is "kerygmatic and ethical," he also creatively asserts that this passage functions "to counter the propaganda of the Julio-Claudian emperors" (82). According to him, this "Christ drama" is a critique of the Roman authorities:

Similarly, once it is comprehended that Paul envisions the same Roman authorities who perpetrate Jesus' unjust crucifixion (scene 3) subsequently prostrating themselves before the exalted Jesus (scene 5), it becomes clear that a radical critique of these authorities is being presented. The same authorities are also implicitly critiqued when Paul portrays the oppressed slaves of their empire now participating with full dignity in confessing that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father (scene 8) (39).

Based on Cassidy's clear analysis, I can see that Paul's critique is powerful. Paul is emphasizing once again that Jesus Christ is the true Lord of the universe.

Though I found this commentary very helpful and insightful, some aspects of it can be improved. First, an improvement in the graphic design of the book would be helpful, for while the long introduction, in the beginning, is very valuable, when people start to read the main body of the commentary, they may have forgotten some key and relevant information introduced in the beginning. I think that it would have been very useful if in the textual commentary section of the book, there were references (hyperlinks) to the information presented in the introduction that was relevant to the particular section of the epistle under discussion. This should be considered by the publishers in a newer edition, and it would especially be useful in the electronic version, which is already available on their website.

On textual matters, I have a few quibbles. In the commentary on Phil 2:8, Cassidy explains "to whom" and "when" Jesus became obedient

(91), but he does not explain why Paul says that Jesus became obedient. Was Jesus not obedient before? It seems that Cassidy focuses more on the aspects of the Roman background, and he does not emphasize the exegetical analysis very much. This may leave some questions inadequately answered. For his commentary on 2:6–11 as a drama of Christ, which I found fascinating, a chart or diagram of the rich parallel analysis he makes would be helpful. Additionally, Cassidy distinctively asserts that “the enemies of the cross of Christ” in 3:18 refer to “Nero and his confederates at *Rome*” (121). While this insightful interpretation is surely a contribution to the understanding of this passage, Cassidy does not present a detailed explanation of his argument. It seems to me that “the enemies of the cross of Christ” can also refer to other adversaries of the gospel. Still referring to 3:18, Cassidy says that Paul’s tears are “tears of frustration” because he learned that “Nero’s behavior knows no human boundaries” (122). I humbly do not agree with this idea, and this opinion also seems to contradict Cassidy’s overall argument. He suggests many times that Paul is arguing that Jesus Christ, rather than the Roman emperor, is the true Lord of the universe. So with such a strong faith in Jesus, how could Paul weep in frustration? It seems to me that Paul’s tears might be tears of concern about the Philippian believers, appealing and urging them to hold fast to their faith in Jesus Christ and not follow the evil ways of the enemies. Lastly, regarding the gift sent by the Philippians, Cassidy believes that Paul rejected the gift because he was “hypersensitive to the imperial propaganda” promoted by the “contaminated” coins, and he did not want to have anything to do with them (142). This argument seems to be a little radical because the text does not indicate clearly that Paul rejected the gift. Besides, Jews used Roman coins for secular activities. Here also, Cassidy should have provided more convincing evidence.

Although some aspects might need a little improvement, Cassidy’s new commentary on the Letter to the Philippians is an excellent work. It is an insightful, helpful, and intriguing read. It provides a considerable amount of Roman background information as it relates to Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. Some of the information is eye-opening to me. Cassidy has contributed many new and valuable insights for the interpretation of the Letter to the Philippians, and his book is a significant addition to the study of Paul’s letters. I highly recommend this book to every person who is interested in the general Roman context of the NT and/or Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

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