

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN STUDY BIBLE PANEL DISCUSSION COMMENTS

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INITIAL COMMENTS

How and why did you join the project as an editor?

I have a long-running interest in reception history. For me, it's an indispensable resource for understanding how God's people hear, obey, and communicate his word today. There's the old saw—attributed to various sources—that's something like “Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it.”¹ That's true. But in addition to the danger of repeating errors, there are also the blinds that our own personal histories and present circumstances inevitably create. Those blinds allow us to see certain things but obscure others. To mitigate these problems, we can also try to see things through our contemporaries' eyes. But this too is ultimately only the trailing edge of reception history.

As to joining the *ACSB* as an associate editor, Paul might know the background better than I do. But one of the other associate editors (Athanasios Despotis) co-chairs the Orthodox perspectives group for SBL. In 2022, I gave a paper for that group exploring John Chrysostom's interpretation of Paul's curious reference to “those who are baptized for the dead” in 1 Cor 15:29 (οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν).² There and elsewhere, I've tried to take seriously H.-G. Gadamer's suggestion to “try to understand how what [a person] is saying could be right. If we want to understand, we will try to make [that person's] arguments even stronger.”³ That is, whether we ultimately agree with Chrysostom's view—or anyone else's—is best kept distinct from the question

¹ “History Repeating,” *ECHO*, 2017, https://liberalarts.vt.edu/content/liberalarts_vt_edu/en/magazine/2017/history-repeating.html.

² For the revised version, see J. David Stark, “John Chrysostom's Interpretation of 1 Cor 15:29 as an Invitation to Intersubjectivity,” in *Fresh Perspectives on St John Chrysostom as an Exegete*, ed. Michael G. Azar, Athanasios Despotis, and James Buchanan Wallace, *Biblical Exegesis from Eastern Orthodox Perspectives 1* (Brill, 2024), 221–43.

³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. and trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed., *Bloomsbury Revelations* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 303.

of what that person's view is and, more particularly, what that view view is *in its strongest possible form*. As best I can guess, this all went well enough in this case for Eugen and Paul to invite me to join the *ACSB* editorial board.

When they reached out, the project's focus obviously piqued my interest. Beyond this, though, I think this is an excellent approach to making the first Christian millennium's exegesis more available to broader circles of Christians. The *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* and other such resources are great. But they're for specialists and enthusiasts. You're not going to see anyone carrying them around or carting them into church. So, the *ACSB* has a great approach to bringing more Bible readers into conversation with other Bible readers from across the Christian tradition's first millennium.

How did you go about recruiting annotators?

The process of recruiting annotators evolved over time. Initially, Eugen and Paul asked simply to inquire about interest from folks we knew who might be good fits. Eugen and Paul would then approve those suggestions. Over time, associate editors made firmer invitations to the project and then just notified Eugen and Paul who had agreed.

From OUP's side, each annotator needs to be approved by a body internal to Oxford University. Since initial agreements went out, we've had a few annotators' responsibilities change for various reasons. So, at this point in the process, we're essentially back to coordinating with Eugen and Paul on each and every change in order to coordinate properly with OUP.

That said, as Paul will agree, we hope to have very few, if any, annotator changes through the balance of the project. It's been a hassle and, as I gather from some of Eugen's comments, also somewhat embarrassing when annotators have agreed to contribute but then backed out. Having things a bit delayed is one thing. But having someone welch fully and create a hole that then needs to be refilled has, to say the least, not been ideal the few times that it's happened.

Does this connect to your work on the Hermeneutics of Unity in Scripture?

Work on the *ACSB* connects to what we're doing in the Hermeneutics of Unity session in a few ways. Five particularly come to mind.

1. Philemon is a letter about a certain kind of unity. It doesn't use Israel's Scriptures, but it does exercise a hermeneutic of unity.
2. The Hermeneutics of Unity project asks the particular questions (a) How has Genesis been appealed to in different contexts in order to foster unity? and (b) What do these particular appeals tell us about their—and our own—hermeneutical underpinnings when we do the same, whether for good or ill? So, the Hermeneutics of Unity project is essentially a sub-set of reception history.
3. With the Hermeneutics of Unity project, one of the things we've been quite conscious of is *not* setting a firm definition for what "hermeneutics" or "unity" means. Instead, the charge that we've given to contributors to that project has been to describe "hermeneutics" and "unity" as they play out in whatever sources

they're examining. Similarly, the *ACSB* aims to *summarize* the first Christian millennium's engagement across the biblical text. In the Hermeneutics of Unity session, we do encourage contributors to assess whether what they see in their examples is good or bad. But that assessment rests on the basis of first understanding the sources themselves. The Hermeneutics of Unity project and the *ACSB* are obviously very different. But they do share (to pull another quotable line from Gadamer) in the distinct "rigor" that characterizes "hermeneutical experience"—namely, "that of uninterrupted listening."⁴

4. I first got connected with some *ACSB* contributors through the Hermeneutics of Unity project, Stone-Campbell Journal Conference, SBL meetings, or the like. By the same token, over time, I imagine we'll end up soliciting input on the Hermeneutics of Unity project from folks I've initially worked with on the *ACSB*.
5. Some annotators are indeed treating Genesis. For this, we're particularly grateful to Paul (chs. 1–12), Laura (chs. 12–37), and Samuel Pomeroy (University of Tennessee at Knoxville, chs. 38–50). (Alas, we were already into the publication process for *Reading for Unity in Genesis 1:1–11:9* before I got connected with Paul.) But for Gen 11:10–25:11, Laura gave a very fine paper on Hagar in 2023. So, her section of the *ACSB* will doubtless benefit from that essay, and vice versa.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION

What has been most challenging or rewarding about the project?

As an *ACSB* associate editor, I'm responsible for managing a group of colleagues. Given how I tend to focus on the use of Israel's Scriptures by Paul, the rest of the NT, and other early Christian sources, I drew a shorter straw in the editorial department. So, the group of annotators I'm working with is charged with Hosea–1 Maccabees. This is certainly enriching because it's pulling me into material and questions I wouldn't normally grapple with. But—speaking honestly—it's on this front too that I've found the main challenges in my involvement with the project. I've already noted how we've had some annotator turnover. Beyond that, the so-called Pareto principle is clearly at work.⁵ About 20% of the annotators require about 80% of efforts from me and the other members of the editorial board. So, if you feel that you tend to have better success than most in such large group projects, I'd certainly welcome the opportunity to learn what approaches you've found useful.

As an annotator, I'm responsible for Philemon.⁶ And in this, I've found the work uniformly interesting. In particular, I've been aware of Chrysostom's homilies and

⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 481.

⁵ See Richard Koch, *The 80/20 Principle: The Secret to Achieving More with Less* (1999; Doubleday, 2008).

⁶ For interim progress reports, see J. David Stark, "Where Can You Actually Find Philemon in the Earliest Centuries?" *J. David Stark*, 23 February 2026, <https://j davidstark.com/where-can-you-actually-find-philemon-in-the-earliest-centuries/>.

Jerome's commentary on Philemon. But I hadn't realized that Ambrosiaster's commentaries covered all of the Paulines or that Theodoret of Cyr also has a commentary on Philemon. I'm still working through these and the other principal sources where Philemon appears, but so far as I've gotten, it's been very enriching.

Why do you think the Stone-Campbell is relatively well-represented in this project? What might draw us to patristics?

Some of the ACSB's Stone-Campbell representation may be flow-on effects from (1) Paul's participation as one of the principal editors and (2) my participation as an associate editor. We both naturally know more potential contributors in Stone-Campbell circles.

The question of interest in patristics from individuals affiliated with the Stone-Campbell movement is an interesting one. In one respect, it's a bit odd. The church's fathers and, where preserved, mothers are—apart from a few possible edge cases definitively later than both the NT and its literature.⁷ And according to Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*, “Nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the church ... that is not as old as the New Testament.”⁸

Taken strictly and in isolation, perhaps the church's fathers and mothers *should* hardly be relevant. They either say what the NT says, in which case they're redundant. Or they say what the NT doesn't, in which case they're wrong and should be discarded. The study of their writings is only valuable where the NT church's restoration can proceed by placing—in large capitals—a *sed contra* over where the fathers and mothers have gone wrong.⁹

But practice has, thankfully, proven to know better than this theory. And the theory is, in itself, a misunderstanding of Campbell. In the *Declaration and Address*, Campbell also reflects “as to creeds and confessions,” which are demonstrably later than the NT. Of these, Campbell says,

⁷ E.g., see David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁸ Thomas Campbell, “Declaration and Address,” in *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address: Text and Studies*, ed. Thomas H. Olbricht and Hans Rollmann, ATLAMS 46 (Scarecrow, 2000), 19.

⁹ On the practice of *sed contra*, see especially Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican province, 22 vols. (Burns, Oates, & Washbourne, 1913–1929). Even in the abstract, it isn't especially probable that *sed contra* should be modern readers' primary response to how the church's earliest fathers and mothers. Cf. J. David Stark, “Understanding Scripture Through Apostolic Proclamation,” in *Scripture First: Biblical Interpretation That Fosters Christian Unity*, ed. Daniel B. Oden and J. David Stark (Abilene Christian University Press, 2020), 75–76. There are differences, to be sure, but in practice, there is far more continuity—including as a basis for the fathers' and mothers' differences. See J. David Stark, “Hermeneutics, Unity, and Genesis 1:1–11:9,” in *Reading for Unity in Genesis 1:1–11:9*, ed. Daniel B. Oden and J. David Stark (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2026), 1–22; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Eerdmans, 2007), 19–42.

although we may appear ... to *oppose them*, yet this is ... *only in so far as they [1] oppose the unity of the church*, by containing sentiments not expressly revealed in the word of God; or, by the way of using them, [2] become the instruments of a human or implicit faith: or, [3] oppress the weak of Gods heritage: *where they are liable to none of those objections, we have nothing against them.*¹⁰

Now, Campbell isn't any more canonical than the fathers and mothers. So, perhaps he's off his rocker, but that's another discussion for another time. Here, though, let's imagine that he's essentially correct. Then, let's ask the question,

What's needed to implement this agenda? If we're going to *oppose* creeds and confessions where they produce negative results, what needs to be true? Or if we're going to be successful in *not opposing* creeds and confessions that don't do these things, what's needed?

And as it goes for creeds and confessions, so it goes for the church's fathers and mothers. No doubt, many things might seem necessary to fulfill Campbell's charge. But in the end, is it perhaps only one—namely, a Marian-like “rigor” in “the hermeneutical experience ... of uninterrupted”—and one might add, *uninterruptable*—“listening” (cf. Luke 10:38–42)?¹¹

Any examples of insights from a church father that you think is especially timely or of benefit to churches today?

Yes, and of course, there are too many to tell. So, let me cite here just one example from my work annotating Philemon. To quote Gadamer again,

Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted.... Hence temporal distance ... is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us.¹²

It is this function of the exegetical tradition as providing some of “the light” in which Scripture comes to us that's most been on my mind of late.

¹⁰ Campbell, “Declaration and Address”, p. 26-27; italics added; see also Keith D. Stanglin, “Ecclesial Unity, Biblical Interpretation, and the Rule of Faith,” in *Scripture First: Biblical Interpretation That Fosters Christian Unity*, ed. Daniel B. Oden and J. David Stark (Abilene Christian University Press, 2020), 77–102; Keith D. Stanglin, “The Restoration Movement, the Habit of Schism, and a Proposal for Unity,” CS 28 (2016): 7–20.

¹¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 481.

¹² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 308.

Things look different in different light—whether manuscripts, clothes, motors, plumbing, subjects of photographs, or anything else. Different lighting allows us to see different things in different objects. What this means, then, is that different lighting also *hampers* us from seeing certain things in certain objects.

This phenomenon is no clearer than in Chrysostom’s homilies on Philemon.¹³ As Chrysostom recognizes, Paul does quite a lot to make it very embarrassing for Philemon not to act as generously with Onesimus as Paul wants. But another repeated emphasis of Chrysostom’s is how much Paul does to avoid offending Philemon—including by allowing that Philemon might retain Onesimus as a slave. This interpretation allows Chrysostom to avoid disturbing too much the norms around slavery in his late-antique Byzantine context. Chrysostom urges the maintenance of slaves status as slaves, although mostly with additional admonitions for kindness toward them.¹⁴ For Chrysostom, although Paul isn’t (passive-aggressively?) urging Onesimus’s emancipation, Paul is at least urging Philemon to make Onesimus’s enslavement less onerous than it could be.

That said, even this kindness does not stretch as far as we might imagine. In his second homily, Chrysostom observes how “we bear with masters [δεσπόται] beating their servants [οικέται]” (Chrys., *hom. in Phlm.* 2.moral [NPNF 1/13:553; PG 62:713]).¹⁵

¹³ For summaries and references for Chrysostom’s homilies on Philemon, see [my working draft](#) for the book.

¹⁴ According to Chrysostom,

we ought not to withdraw slaves from the service of their masters. For if Paul, who had such confidence in Philemon, was unwilling to detain Onesimus ... without the consent of his master, much less ought we so to act....

I wish it were possible to bring into the cities those [slaves] who are without. “What,” say you, “if he also should become corrupt.” And why should he, I beseech you? Because he has come into the city? But ... he who is corrupt being within, will be much more so being without. For here he will be delivered from necessary care, his master taking that care upon himself; but there the concern about those things will draw him off perhaps even from things more necessary, and more spiritual. On this account the blessed Paul ... said, “Art thou called, being a [slave] [δοῦλος]? care not for it: but if even thou mayest be made free, use it rather” (1 Cor. 7:21); that is, [—contrary to how modern commentators tend to understand this statement, Chrysostom interprets it to mean that slaves should —] *abide in slavery* [τῇ δουλείᾳ]. (Chrys., *hom. in Phlm.* argument [NPNF 1/13:546; PG 62:704]; italics added)

¹⁵ Chrysostom describes those beaten as οἰκέται. This description could technically include free persons or even, say, children or spouses. Shortly following, however, he refers to the punishment of οἰκείοι ... παῖδες (PG 62:713). If the reference were to minor children, qualifying them as οἰκείοι (“household”) would perhaps be more gratuitous. So, given that the overall context is Chrysostom’s discussion of Philemon, which features the slave Onesimus, Chrysostom is probably referring to the beating of household slaves or, perhaps, employed free persons.

Chrysostom confronts the beating on the basis that masters who want to be shown mercy must themselves show mercy (Chrys., *hom. in Phlm.* 3.moral; Matt 5:7; Jas 2:13). But he seems to think the community's bearing-with these beatings *can be maintained*, as long as the hope for masters to spare their servants *also* inspires hope for God himself to prove merciful (Chrys., *hom. in Phlm.* 2.moral). To fail to draw this conclusion would, in Chrysostom's judgment, be out of place (ἄτοπος; PG 62:713).

I can think of a few more things that seem "out of place" in this engagement with Philemon. Despite my usual appreciation for Chrysostom's exegesis, I find this theme in his interpretation of Philemon *deeply* dissatisfying. Much of the reason is that Philemon comes to me *not only* in light of enslavement practices in the late antique Byzantine empire *but also* in light of

- the Enlightenment,
- the American Revolution,
- the scourge of slavery and human trafficking that continues to oppress an *increasing number and proportion* of the total global population,¹⁶ and
- the incredible legacy of individuals like Harriet Tubman, in whose character Cynthia Erivo poignantly declares, "God don't mean people to own people."¹⁷

Given this tension, I'm grateful for the opportunity also to contribute to the ACSB an essay on reading Scripture with the tradition where I'll reflect more fully on challenges like these. For the moment, however, looking at both Chrysostom and Philemon in this light, I'll make two final observations.

First, as to Philemon, my current impression is that the letter has essentially two aims. One is Onesimus's liberation to equality with Philemon (vv. 15–21). The other is reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon (vv. 17–19). The letter provides nothing like an always-applicable pattern for how to handle all contemporary situations of slavery and human trafficking—as if, somehow, the proper response were always to send individuals back to their enslavers.¹⁸ Instead, Philemon addresses one specific case where

1. enslaver and enslaved are fellow followers of Jesus (vv. 1, 10),
2. Philemon is otherwise a person of good will and good character (vv. 4–7), and
3. Paul can effectively deploy social pressure on Philemon to preserve Onesimus against ill effects of his return.

¹⁶ *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* (International Labour Organization; Walk Free; International Organization for Migration, 2022), https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2022/09/12142341/GEMS-2022_Report_EN_V8.pdf; Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* (United Nations, 2024), https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_BOOK.pdf.

¹⁷ *Harriet* (Focus, 2019).

¹⁸ On terminological nuances (e.g., "enslaver," "master," "slave-holder"), see Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, updated ed. (One World, 2019), 19.

Given the situation's specifics, the letter doesn't avoid or postpone confrontation (cf. v. 13). Instead, it actively brings matters to a head. In so doing, it aims to resolve the situation rather than letting it linger. This resolution requires manumission and a gracious reception from Philemon because Onesimus is a brother "in the flesh and in the Lord" (v. 16; ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ).¹⁹

This same brotherhood, however, implicitly makes demands on Onesimus too. Mostly, these demands are Onesimus's openness to and participation in the process of reconciliation. Onesimus must neither flee Philemon in fear, write him off in bitterness, or avoid him in irresolution. And in one respect, these requirements are unfair additional taxes on Onesimus, who is already the socially weaker party. But in another respect, Onesimus's participation in this way is the shortest, surest route to shifting his relationship with Philemon onto equal footing. As Desmond Tutu said in his address at the opening of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission after apartheid,

Some view the Commission with considerable misgiving and indeed suspicion and even hostility because they have convinced themselves that the Commission is going to degenerate into an Inquisition, a witch-hunt hellbent on bringing miscreants to book and the assumption is that it would be miscreants from one side only.

We must scotch that rumour or suspicion from the outset. We are meant to be a part of the process of the healing of our nation, of our people, all of us, since every South African has to some extent or other been traumatised. We are a wounded people because of the conflict of the past, no matter on which side we stood. We all stand in need of healing. We on the Commission are no superhuman exceptions. We too need forgiving and to forgive....

We are privileged to be on this Commission to assist our land, our people to come to terms with our dark past once and for all. They say that those who suffer from amnesia, those who forget the past, are doomed to repeat it. It is not dealing with the past to say facilely, let bygones be bygones, for then they won't be bygones. Our country, our society would be doomed to the instability of uncertainty—the uncertainty engendered by not knowing when yet another scandal of the past would hit the headlines, when another skeleton would be dragged out of the cupboard.

The letter to Philemon—and Onesimus's apparent accompaniment of the letter—totally disallows Philemon, Onesimus, and the various individuals connected to and caring about them to be condemned to such an "instability of uncertainty."²⁰

Second, as to Chrysostom (and, by extension, others in the tradition), this case particularly illustrates the kind of critical engagement with the tradition that, indeed,

¹⁹ New Testament quotations accord with NA²⁸; translations are mine.

²⁰ Desmond Tutu, "Address to the First Gathering of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Department of Justice and Constitutional Development* (South Africa, 16 December 1995), <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media/pr/1995/p951216a.htm>; cf. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, rev. ed. (Abingdon, 2019).

Thomas Campbell's declaration encourages. That is, this engagement can be neither a wholesale rejection nor a wholesale acceptance. It must principally be an engagement toward understanding the biblical literature. To quote one final, pertinent sentence from Gadamer,

Genuine speaking, which has something to say and hence does not give prearranged signals, but rather seeks words through which one reaches the other person, is the universal human task—but it is a special task for the theologian, to whom is commissioned the saying-further ... of a message that stands written.²¹

Whatever favorites or helpful luminaries we each have, it is *not* our task simply to repeat or reify their insights. We can't be content with such "prearranged signals," with simply regurgitating the perspectives of those through whom the word of God comes to us. Only in coming to grips directly with this word for ourselves can we remain faithful to the commission of "saying-further" the "message that stands written." Only by encountering and being confronted by the word of God in texts like Paul's letter to Philemon can we move beyond perspectives like Chrysostom's to a point where we can see from vantage points like, say, Macrina's when she

persuaded her mother to give up her customary mode of living and her more ostentatious existence and the services of her maids, to which she had long been accustomed, and to put herself on a level with the many by entering into a common life with her maids, making them her sisters and equals rather than her slaves and underlings.²²

²¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (University of California Press, 1977), 17.

²² Gregory of Nyssa, "The Life of Saint Macrina," in *Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, *Fathers of the Church* 58 (1967; Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 168.