

# GIVING AND RECEIVING IN PAUL'S EPISTLES<sup>1</sup>

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This thesis treats Greco-Roman social conventions regarding reciprocity and the extent to which the apostle Paul accepted or rejected these conventions. Special attention is given to Paul's financial relationship with the Philippian church as seen in Philippians 4:10-20. Several other passages are studied which help to illustrate and expand on the conclusions drawn from the Philippian material.

It is suggested in the Introduction that for a proper understanding of Paul's financial relationships with his churches the relevant New Testament documents must be studied in their social context. Further, in order to understand the social conventions of giving and receiving in the ancient world, one must establish a model of interaction based on the relevant ancient documents.

Chapter 2 illustrates the conventions of giving and receiving with texts from the Old Testament and selected Jewish literature, demonstrating that social reciprocity has roots in the ancient Jewish world as well as in the Greco-Roman world. From the texts surveyed in this chapter several conclusions are drawn. First, in the Old Testament the giving of material help to those in need is considered praiseworthy and deserving of reward. Didactic texts in particular make this clear (Deut. 14:29, 15:10, 24:19). These texts also assert that Yahweh is the one who will reward the giver. He plays a special role in the transaction between the giver and the receiver, making it not bipolar but triangular (Prov. 19:17).

Secondly, social reciprocity, the obligation to respond to a gift or good deed, not only with verbal gratitude, but also with material gratitude (a counter-gift or favour), can be detected in the Old Testament, especially in narrative texts (cf. 1 Sam. 25). Yet this social expectation is not taught, even in

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didactic texts. There is thus a point of tension between the taught and the practised morality.

Thirdly, in later Jewish literature social reciprocity as a convention is not only described but prescribed quite explicitly. In Ben Sirach, Philo and Josephus, the expectation of a return for good is quite clear. The one who receives the goodwill of another, goodwill that is seen in a favour or gift, is obligated to return goodwill in the same form. Consequently, there is reason to believe that social reciprocity as a convention was at least widespread among Jews of Paul's day.

Fourthly, moving from the Old Testament to later Jewish literature and finally to Philo and Josephus, there is an ever decreasing reference to God as the one who will repay. Rather, the reward comes down to a human level. In Philo and Josephus references to God repaying the charitable person are rare. These authors are only a small step away from Greco-Roman thinking.

The clearest and most informative background material is found in chapter 3—Giving and Receiving in the Greco-Roman Context. This chapter demonstrates that the conventions of giving and receiving were basic to the society from which Paul's congregations were drawn. Patronage relationships, friendship and relations between family members (especially between parents and children) all contain elements of social investigation of the Pauline texts are presented in this chapter.

Further, chapter 3 notes the reciprocal obligations and the transactional character that attend giving and receiving. This characteristic of social reciprocity meant that terminology commonly found in commercial contexts to describe commercial transactions was also used in social contexts to describe the transactions of giving and receiving. Thus, it is concluded that the phrase ἐκοινώνησεν εἰς λόγον δόσεως καὶ λήψεως (Phil. 4:15) is not primarily a financial expression, but rather a social metaphor. Such expressions are common in the first-century Greco-Roman world.

Chapter 3 also points out that gratitude, in the form of a return, is very important in Greco-Roman society. Verbal gratitude on the other hand, played quite a different role than it does in twentieth century western society. An expression of gratitude might be seen as solicitation for further benefits.

Application of findings from the background chapters begins in chapter 4. Here the 'giving and receiving' of Philippians 1-2 is considered. It is seen that Paul had a unique relationship with the Philippians which he defined as partnership in the gospel. This partnership was established through giving and receiving. This chapter offers the following conclusions: first, in his introductory thanksgiving Paul gives thanks to God for the Philippians' remembrance of Paul through gifts (1:3), for their partnership with him in the gospel (1:5), and for the certainty that God will continue to work in them (1:6). Secondly, this partnership in the gospel is not mere common belief in the gospel message, but entails work for the advance of the gospel in Philippi and elsewhere through financial sponsorship of the apostle. Such a working partnership is seen from such passages as 1:12, 1:27-30, 2:15-16 and 2:22. Thirdly, a very close conceptual and verbal relationship is seen between Philippians 1:3-11 and 4:10-20. In addition to other things, this similarity supports the view that canonical Philippians is a unity.

To describe more fully the unique relationship which the apostle enjoyed with the Philippians, chapter 5 is devoted to giving and receiving in Philippians 4:10-20. This passage, with its use of what are commonly called technical commercial terms and its lack of the verb εὐχαριστέω, has been a source of vexation to exegetes and has evoked erroneous theories. This chapter shows how the conventions of giving and receiving shed light on the meaning and significance of Paul's 'strained' response to the Philippians' gifts. The social conventions regarding gratitude, particularly verbal gratitude, made Paul's written response to their gifts particularly sensitive. In this chapter the following conclusions are made. First, labelling this section of Paul's letter a 'thankless thanks' is to misunderstand Paul's purpose in the section and the function of thanks in the first century. Secondly, Paul's terms are not to be understood as technical commercial terms but as the common parlance of social reciprocity. Thirdly, Paul's response is deliberately crafted to prevent possible misunderstandings regarding the meaning of his receiving this gift from Philippi. Fourthly, the response Paul offers is thoroughly Jewish, finding its basis in the Old Testament. Fifthly, the contentment of Philippians 4:11 is not to be equated with stoic contentment.

Two full chapters are devoted to canonical Philippians because of Paul's essentially positive relationship of giving and receiving which he enjoyed with the Christians in Philippi. Since Paul's opportunities for giving and receiving were not restricted to his relationship with this particular congregation, chapter 6 expands the study. Considered here are relationships of giving and receiving in selected Pauline writings outside Philippians which allow further conclusions to be drawn regarding the apostle's acceptance or rejection of the conventions of social reciprocity.

From selected texts in 1 and 2 Corinthians (2 Cor. 6:13, 11:9-15, 12:14-16) it is concluded that Paul rejected the Corinthians' offers of gifts in order to avoid playing the inferior role of a receiver, which, in Paul's view, would hinder the gospel. Rather than act in this role Paul prefers to maintain his status as a benefactor and parent to the Corinthians.

Study of Romans 15:25-31 yields the conclusion that the phrase *κοινωνίαν τινὰ ποιήσασθαι* of 15:26, commonly translated 'make a contribution' is better rendered 'establish fellowship'.

Philemon 17-19 demonstrates that Paul considers the gospel to be a gift which brings obligations on the part of the receiver. Paul's spiritual child Philemon owes the apostle a great deal and this debt is considered very real, not simply metaphorical. Paul calls on Philemon to repay the good he has received and to let Onesimus be the one benefited.

The author of 1 Timothy 5:4 asserts that Christians should learn to put their religion into practice by repaying their ancestors. Such a demand on children is common in the Greco-Roman world where parents are considered to be the greatest of benefactors in relation to their children.

Finally, this study supports the view that the good man spoken of in Romans 5:7 is a benefactor.

In addition to conclusions and a summary offered in chapter 7, four appendixes offer selected texts from Seneca's *De Beneficiis*, as well as short treatments dealing with various uses of *δόσις* καὶ *λήψις*, J. Paul Sampley's *Pauline Partnership in Christ*, and the support of wandering preacher/philosophers.