

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

A Spiritual Economy: Gift Exchange in the Letters of Paul of Tarsus

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New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017 (240 pages)

This multidisciplinary study aims to make visible the “characteristics of the ‘economy’ of gift exchange evident” in Paul’s letters in order to “illuminate Paul” and “to refine and elaborate the study of gift exchange” (5). The study discloses its theoretical provenance: First, it is published in the Synkrisis series, which aims to compare rigorously “the controlling logics” expressed in the “discourses of Greco-Roman and early Christian writers,” in order to help “refine and correct the theoretical and historical models” scholars use. Second, it adopts Jonathan Z. Smith’s desiderata for studying religion by comparing the discourses and practices of Paul with pertinent Greco-Romans and then redescribing Paul’s discourses and practices to elaborate and refine contemporary theories of gift exchange. The study fulfills its interpretation of these desiderata well.

Faulting Derrida’s skepticism (a pure gift is impossible) for ignoring actual gift exchange in hybrid or fully nonmercantile social economies, the introduction suggests the thick description by which the texts are read and then asserts key theses: first that more-than-mercantile gifts, while free, call for a potentially unending circular reciprocity that creates and shapes social relationships, and second that in the case of Paul’s letters many gifts are nonmaterial, discursive, and therefore symbolic.

Chapter 2 describes an “economy of [religious] symbolic goods” whose currency is human language that claims to mediate divine benefits (15–16). In the first century, Seneca’s *De Beneficiis* (“On Benefits”) describes the ubiquitous system of reciprocity that ancient gift exchange expresses, arising from this principle: “a gift given elicits a return from the

recipient.” The returned gift, regardless of form or material value, should express the most fundamental virtue, gratitude. Seneca’s insights apply to Paul’s letters: the collection for Jerusalem evinces the reciprocal exchangeability of material and symbolic goods (Rom. 15:26–27; 2 Cor. 9:6–15); the gift from Philippi is at once monetary for Paul and also a (symbolic or material or both?) “fragrant offering, a sacrifice” to God (Phil. 4:18); and wealthy Philemon’s salvation (a symbolic good because it is only an assurance of a promise yet to be realized) indebts him deeply to Paul, the poor prisoner who expects to receive the services of Philemon’s Onesimus as partial repayment (Philem. 17–20). “For Paul, such reciprocal interactions constitute the *sine qua non* of the spiritual enterprise” (26).

Chapter 3 examines Paul’s “shocking breach of etiquette” (according to Seneca) by calling attention to the “‘gift of salvation’ . . . he claimed to mediate” to Philemon, but it evaluates the breach favorably in the contrasting economic circumstances of poor Paul and wealthy Seneca. Chapter 4 asks whether Paul’s unremunerated labor is a gift or a commodity: the answer depends not on objective characteristics of the transactions but on agents’ negotiating, classifying, and reclassifying them for their purposes. Designating his labors some ten different ways, Paul classified them finally as gift. While they merited compensation, he boasts that he forgoes pay in order to give the gospel freely. But such a gift entails justly the expectation that recipients in his churches will give back gratitude, honor, and prestige; partnership with his mission; and obedience to him, their apostle of Christ.

Chapter 5 probes the “politics of classification”: Paul names his labors one way (as “gift” involving “theft” from Philippian believers to benefit Corinthians) and names the labors of rival evangelists another way, as “parasitic.” Second Corinthians makes clear that Paul’s critics and rivals contest this naming, showing how a specific exchange system expresses the sociopolitical wrestling occurring in its context. It also shows how Paul’s refusing a gift (likely friendship hospitality) threatened his mission among the Corinthians, while his naming himself their spiritual father aimed to defuse this threat by replacing friendship gift-exchange expectations with the very different expectations of parents and children.

Chapters 6 and 7 compare the views of Pliny the Younger and Paul regarding positional status, yielding the new insight that such status may be granted as a gift: for Pliny, from highly placed patrons, including an emperor; for Paul, from the “god of Israel.” Paul describes his status in Pliny’s world as “like the world’s dirty dishwasher, everyone’s soap scum” (1 Cor. 4:13), but he asserts an opposing hierarchy of high status set by “gifts of the spirit,” ordered here in descent: apostle, prophet, teacher, and glossalist. None of these high-status positions in Paul’s ranking corresponds to imperial high status that rested on wealth, kinship, education, rhetorical skill, official position, and that influenced the Corinthian assembly, despite Paul’s advocating his spiritual, inverted hierarchy. Chapter 8 summarizes and suggests further study.

This study benefits gift exchange studies by redescribing scholarly understandings of Paul in terms of gift exchange and then rectifying such studies by demonstrating that such spiritual economies exist; that in them nonmaterial, symbolic gifts work as cur-

rency as well as material gifts of service and goods; and that in such economies agents who claim to mediate spiritual, nonmaterial gifts may affect the material significantly, “binding parties into social units and spurring the transmission of goods, currency, and labor services” (140).

Reading as a New Testament scholar, however, I find the study prompts conflicting evaluations: positively, it is done well according to its method; however, the method excludes from serious consideration extratextual phenomena to which the texts refer, phenomena that should influence the analysis more. The study’s perspective seems to be that discourse is all there is; and no extratextual phenomena—such as the nondiscursive experiences of Paul and others these texts name—add to the efficacy of discourse. This presumption gives rise to a curious lack of curiosity: the study never asks why Paul’s gift discourse would appeal to a wealthy Philemon and to poor Macedonians, as well as to Corinthians, and occasion their conviction-conversion. The study reduces Paul’s gospel to “assurances of a salvation from an [imminent] apocalyptic judgment and the promise of eternal life” (7–8). But how did proclaiming only that enable a rhetorically bumbling, culturally ill-fitting, poor Jewish evangelist to gather increasingly non-Jewish congregations devoted to a crucified Jewish messiah (1 Cor. 2:1–5)? Was there no extratextual existential reality (no “demonstration [*apodeixei*] of the Spirit and of power”) of this future salvation that amplified the effect of Paul’s gift discourse? Paul obviously used discourse but subordinated it: “the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20); and he refers often to nondiscursive, existential realities of the gospel and salvation (Rom. 5:1–5; 8:23–39; 14:17; 15:18–20; 2 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 3:1–5). The study thus explicates some dimensions of Paul’s discourses without adequately acknowledging this power and these existential realities and their pertinence to the efficacy of his discourse. This inadequate consideration of Pauline spirit and power may not limit the study’s contribution to a naturalistic view of gift exchanges, but it truncates the redescription of Pauline religion and gives us a cut-flower Paul. In this regard, the critique with which the study began—of Derrida’s failure to acknowledge actual gift exchanges in various social settings—seems to me to apply by analogy to this otherwise strong study. It would be even stronger were it to weigh more heavily the extradiscursive dimensions inscribed into Paul’s symbolic world.

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