HONOURING EPAPHRODITUS: A SUFFERING AND FAITHFUL SERVANT WORTHY OF ADMIRATION

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Introduction

The apostle Paul had many traveling companions whom he mentions briefly within his letters. One of these was Epaphroditus, who is mentioned only in Phil 2:25 and 4:18. He traveled with Paul and was the delegate sent by the Christian community in Philippi to Paul with a financial gift during a time of imprisonment. What is of particular interest with Epaphroditus is that Paul commands the Philippian church to honour him in Phil 2:29. It is one of the few times in his writing where he ascribes specific honour to one person.1 The purpose of this article is to explore why Paul encourages the Philippians to honour Epaphroditus and men like him.

Fresh investigation into honour and Paul’s colleagues is important particularly in the light of the discussion of authority in Pauline literature. Some see the section in which Paul commends Epaphroditus as filled with power terminology and enforcement. In his monograph entitled Rediscovering Paul, Norman R. Petersen sees power involved when he refers to the Phil 2 passage concerning Epaphroditus remarking, “Paul urges subordination to those who perform certain jobs in the local churches.”2 R.W. Funk sees Phil 2:25–30 as one of a number of sections that emphasize Paul’s presence and thus enforce apostolic authority and power within the church.3 In her comments about Phil 2:19–30, Carolyn Osiek sees power language and finds such wording to be manipulative and

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1 Cf. Stephanus in 1 Cor 16:5–18. P.T. O’Brien, The Epistle to the Philippians (NIGTC; Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans, 1991), 341. In 1 Thess 5:12, Paul encourages the Thessalonians to honour those who labour amongst them, but he does not provide the name of a specific individual.


patronizing. Some see an elevation of particular Christians as a means of power enforcement. For example, Elisabeth Castelli has specifically raised this when Paul calls his followers to imitate him. Such an argument has been extended to others beyond Paul within early Christian literature.

Not everyone focuses on power language within Phil 2. In contrast, Reidar Aasgaard views the language of Phil 2:25–30 as a means to emphasize solidarity and mutuality with the Philippians. Other scholars see this passage as a means to “provide [the Philippians] with still another striking illustration of the self-sacrificing service that is demanded of all Christians.”

The following will examine the evidence that is available concerning Epaphroditus. It will specifically consider the way that Paul describes Epaphroditus in Phil 2:25–30 and in relation to the broader epistle. It will also consider a Greco-Roman viewpoint on honour and also Paul’s viewpoint of suffering. Together these will provide good reason why Epaphroditus is worthy of honour.

Honour for Epaphroditus in Philippians 2

Epaphroditus was a Gentile Christian emissary sent to Paul from the Philippians church in order to help him in his time of need. Epaphroditus was a Gentile. His “name occurs very frequently in inscriptions both Greek and Latin, whether at full length Epaphroditus, or in its contracted form


9 While Epaphroditus’s name appears in Phil 4, the passage merely mentions him as the bearer of a gift.