CHAPTER 21

LETTER TO PHILEMON

That Paul wrote this letter is not seriously disputed even by those who contend that he did not write Col, a letter that has the same setting and many of the same dramatis personae as Phlm. Frequently their assumption is that from the genuine Phlm a pseudonymous writer drew the context for Col. Inevitably the question arises as to why both letters might not be pseudepigraphic; but the counterquestion is why would someone bother to create Phlm, a note with such a narrow goal, and attribute it to Paul. Such speculation leaves much to be desired; but in this *Introduction,* one goal of which is to familiarize readers with what seems reasonable to a centrist scholarly majority, Phlm will be accepted as genuinely from Paul, independently of the position taken on Col. After the *Background* and the *General Analysis,* subsections will be devoted to the *Social import of Paul's view of slavery, From where and when,* the *Subsequent career of Onesimus, Issues for reflection,* and *Bibliography.*

The Background

This is the shortest of the Pauline letters (335 words), and in format closest to the pattern of ordinary Hellenistic letters, especially to those making intercession.[1] One should be careful, however, not to evaluate it simply as a letter from one individual to another asking for a favor. As one who has lived a long life[2] and suffered much in the service of Christ, Paul is writing to the head of a Christian house-church, or even to a church in the person of its host (since Paul anticipates communal pressure on Philemon). He writes as a prisoner, i.e., one who has sacrificed his freedom for Christ, to ask for another's freedom; and in every line just beneath the surface is the basic challenge to the societal rank of master and slave offered by the changed

[1]It is comparable to the shorter letter of Pliny the Younger appealing to Sabinianus for a young freedman who sought refuge in Pliny's home; Pliny offers reasons for Sabinianus to be clement (9.21; in English and Latin in Lohse, *Colossians* 196–97). As for length, there are 245 words in II John, 219 in III John; their shorter length is generally thought to have been dictated by the size of a sheet of papyrus.

[2]In v. 9 the reading *presbytēs,* "old man," is found in all mss., although some prefer to read or substitute *presbeutēs,* "ambassador."

Summary of Basic Information

DATE: *ca.* 55 if from Ephesus; 58–60 if from Caesarea (unlikely); 61–63 if from Rome.

TO: Philemon, with Apphia (his wife?), Archippus, and the church at Philemon's house.

AUTHENTICITY, UNITY, AND INTEGRITY: Not seriously disputed.

FORMAL DIVISION:

A. Opening Formula: 1–3
B. Thanksgiving: 4–7
C. Body: 8–22 (21–22 can be considered a Body-Closing or part of the Conclusion)
D. Concluding Formula: 23–25.

DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS (and Rhetorical Structure):

1–3: Address, greeting
4–7: Thanksgiving serving as an *exordium* to gain Philemon's good will by praise
8–16: Appeal offering motives to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus (*confirmation*)
17–22: Reiteration and expansion of appeal (*peroration*)
23–25: Concluding greetings, blessing.

relationship introduced by the gospel. Literary criticism and sociology have enriched the study of the letter (Petersen), but Soards is correct in insisting on the primacy of the theological dimension.

Since this letter deals with a slave, a few general remarks about slavery in Paul's time may be appropriate before we look at the specific situation. Society in the provinces of the Roman Empire where Paul conducted missionary activity was highly stratified. At the upper level would have been the Romans appointed by the Senate or the emperor to administer the province politically, fiscally, and militarily; next would come the local privileged class (through heredity or money); then the small landowners, shop owners, and craftspeople. These would have been followed in social rank by the freedmen and freedwomen who had been released from slavery through the action of their masters or by their own purchase of freedom; and then at the bottom would have been the immense number of slaves with whose existence the economic welfare of the Empire was intimately involved. (The dire results of the revolt of the slaves in Italy led by Spartacus in 73–71 BC show that any proposal of the abolition of slavery would have had Empire-shaking potentialities.) People became slaves in various ways: Many were prisoners taken in war; others were kidnapped by slave hunters; still others were enslaved through debt; and, of course, there were the children born to slaves. The slavery many English-speaking readers of the Bible are most familiar with is that of the blacks in America, but the Roman situation was more

complicated. Within the general category the most burdensome form of slave life was endured by those who did heavy manual labor, e.g., in the mines, building construction, and the rowing banks on ships. By contrast many who worked in households for understanding masters would not have been much worse off than servants in wealthy British homes at the end of the last century known to TV watchers through "Upstairs, Downstairs." On a particularly high level were the very well-educated slaves who administered their master's estates or businesses, instructed the children, and even earned their own money. These would have been the group from which many emerged by gaining or being given freedom.

The specific slavery situation dealt with in Phlm is well known to Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. Unfortunately presuppositions are not spelled out, and the sequence of events has to be reconstructed from hints. (To judge the situation we must pay attention not only to the personal names used to identify the dramatis personae but the titles given them that indicate their roles as Christians.) A plausible reconstruction is that Philemon was a well-to-do Christian, Apphia was his wife, and Archippus was close to him;[3] Philemon's home served as the meeting place of a house-church. It is not clear that Paul has ever personally encountered Philemon;[4] at least, however, the evangelizing of the area in which Philemon lived was probably the fruit of Paul's mission, perhaps through Pauline fellow-workers (vv. 23–24: Epaphras?). Onesimus was Philemon's slave who seemingly had run away.[5] The language of begetting in v. 10 suggests that Paul had (recently) converted him. In another city was he thrown into prison (but not as a runaway or he would have been sent back), and was it there that he met Paul who evangelized him? Or was the encounter more deliberate: Without being imprisoned, had

[3]Archippus is variously identified by scholars, e.g., as Philemon's son, or the head of the church that met in Philemon's house (Stöger), or even the owner of Onesimus. (The last identification is maintained by J. Knox; also L. Cope, *Biblical Research* 30 [1985], 45–50—then Paul would have written in order to have Philemon, the church leader, present when the request about Onesimus was made to Archippus.) The last two proposals depend on dubious interpretations of the instruction in Col 4:17 to Archippus to fulfill his ministry, e.g., by administering the church or by freeing Onesimus. (In the latter case, why such bluntness in the Col passage after all the delicacy in Phlm?) The variety of proposals illustrates how little is spelled out in Phlm.

[4]Pointing to *no encounter:* v. 5 "I hear"; pointing to an *encounter:* v. 1 "co-worker" (a term used by Paul mostly to refer to people who had been with him personally) and v. 19 "You owe me your very life." Those who favor an encounter generally suggest that the meeting had not taken place where Philemon now lives (because Paul himself had not evangelized Colossae) but perhaps at Ephesus. Would Apphia and Archippus have been with Philemon, or are we to posit different relationships between Paul and the three people addressed?

[5]We have ancient examples of "wanted posters" offering money for the apprehension of runaway slaves, but it is not clear that Onesimus was being legally pursued—perhaps already an indication of a Christian sensibility on the part of the master. Or Onesimus might not simply have been seeking freedom, e.g.: Perhaps while in service Onesimus had done something that caused Philemon to lose money ("Formerly he was useless to you" in v. 11, plus 18–19); and rather than face his master, he had gone elsewhere to look for someone who would intercede for him.

he, as a fugitive, sought help from a Christian group (and from Paul, of whom he had heard his master speak) in a strange city where he was now in trouble? In any case the fact that Paul has been responsible for the new life shared by both Philemon and Onesimus underlies this message designed to work out the effects of that theological reality on the social plane.

General Analysis of the Message

The letter, designed to persuade, is astute, with almost every verse hinting at something more than is stated. Indeed some (see Church, "Rhetorical") have detected well-known rhetorical canons and techniques. In vv. 4–7, which constitute a *captatio benevolentiae,* Paul flatters (not necessarily insincerely) by reporting what he has heard about Philemon's Christian love and faith—heard from Epaphras and/or from Onesimus, or because everybody in the Pauline circle knows about such an outstanding figure? Then in v. 8 Philemon is given an oblique reminder of Paul's apostolic authority to command; yet by Paul's preference this letter is an appeal about the fate of Onesimus (10). Although as Paul's child in Christ, he is extremely useful[6] to his Christian father in prison and Paul would have liked to keep him as a co-worker, Paul will do nothing without Philemon's consent (and probably the approval of the house-church). Consequently he is sending Onesimus back with the wish that Philemon will accept him no longer as slave but as beloved brother. Notice how much is being asked: not simply that Onesimus escape the punishment that could legally be imposed, not simply that Onesimus be freed (which we might have expected as a more noble gesture), but that Onesimus be moved to the plane of the Christian relationship: "Receive him as you would receive me" (v. 17). The request is a dramatic example of Paul's way of thinking in fidelity to the change of values brought about by Christ: His antinomy is not simply slave and free, but slave and new creation in Christ. In vv. 18–19 Paul guarantees with his own hand a promise to pay back anything owed;[7] but by emphasizing that he is one to whom Philemon owes (directly or indirectly) his Christian life, Paul makes any demand for repayment virtually impossible. There is a double rhetorical touch in v. 21, where Paul both reminds Philemon that he owes obedience (to Paul as an apostle or to God and the gospel?) and expresses his confidence that Philemon will do more than asked. The "more" is interpreted by some as a hint

[6]The name Onesimus, common for slaves, means "useful" in Greek; Paul plays on that in v. 11 in the contrast between "formerly worthless to you . . . now of good worth to you and to me."

[7]Many have thought that Onesimus stole something when he fled, but this may be simply a reflection of Roman law that a person who harbors a runaway slave is held accountable to the owner for the loss of work involved.

that Philemon should release from slavery Onesimus who is his Christian brother. Paul will visit after being released (an occasion that Philemon has been praying for: v. 22). Is this a subtle indication that Paul wants to see for himself how Onesimus has been treated? That Philemon reacted generously is almost certain, or the letter would not have been preserved.

Social Import of Paul's View of Slavery

Jesus himself had a strong apocalyptic view: The kingdom/rule of God was present in his ministry; decision was imperative in face of a divine invitation that would not be repeated. In the tradition Jesus avoided spelling out a horarium of the endtimes; but even if the precise moment could not be known, the dominant impression is one of the end coming soon. Paul too had an apocalyptic approach in which the death and resurrection of Christ marked the changing of the times. Strong apocalypticism does not encourage long-range social planning. Structures in society that prevent the proclamation of the gospel must be neutralized. Yet precisely because Christ is coming back soon, other structures that do not represent gospel values can be allowed to stand provided that they can be bypassed to enable Christ to be preached. It will not be for long. The implications of the gospel for slavery are clear to Paul: In Christ Jesus "there is neither slave nor free" (Gal 3:28); all are of equal value. All were baptized into the one body (I Cor 12:13) and should treat one another with love. The only true slavery that remains after the change of the aeons is slavery to Christ (I Cor 7:22). Yet to overturn the massive Roman societal institution of slavery is not a feasible accomplishment in the very limited time before Christ comes. Obviously on the worldly level slaves will seek to gain freedom; but if one is a slave at the time of being called and physical freedom is unobtainable, that situation is not of essential importance. "In whatever state each was called, there let that person remain with God" (I Cor 7:21–22).

To some interpreters Phlm reflects a welcome, stronger Pauline position on slavery, one that would eventually move sensitive Christians as a whole to reject it. Here we see that when Paul can hope for cooperation, he challenges a Christian slave owner to defy the conventions: To forgive and receive back into the household a runaway slave; to refuse financial reparation when it is offered, mindful of what one owes to Christ as proclaimed by Paul; to go farther in generosity by freeing the servant; and most important of all from a theological viewpoint to recognize in Onesimus a beloved brother and thus acknowledge his Christian transformation. (Many today in evaluating Phlm might not appreciate the last-mentioned dimension, but for Paul that was the key demand.) Taking such a gracious stance might have

deleterious social implications in the eyes of outsiders and even of less daring Christians. It might make one who acts thus look like a troubler of the social order and a revolutionary; but that is a price worth paying out of loyalty to the gospel.

To other interpreters, Phlm represents a lack of nerve. On the bottom line, despite his implicit encouragement to release Onesimus, Paul does not tell Philemon explicitly that keeping another human being as a slave factually denies that Christ has changed values. Tolerating a social evil while gently protesting in the name of Christianity is tantamount to condoning it and ensuring its survival. And indeed through the centuries Paul's failure to condemn slavery was used by some Bible readers as proof that the institution was not evil in itself. The question was not asked whether Paul's partial toleration was not so fundamentally determined by his apocalyptic outlook that it could not serve as a guide once the expectation of the second coming was moved to the indefinite future. As we shall see below under *Issues,* the social-morality questions that surround this issue can be extended to other issues as well.[8]

From Where and When?

Paul writes this letter from prison, and so we must survey the same three candidates for imprisonment examined for Phil in Chapter 20: Ephesus, Caesarea, Rome.[9] Yet now the situation is more complicated. In itself this letter gives fewer hints than did Phil: Although Paul wants a guest room prepared for his visit (v. 22), we are never told where the addressees live. Yet one must admit that a request to prepare a guest room if Paul would have to make a long sea journey from either Rome or Caesarea even to draw near the site addressed seems odd.) Several of the key factors (asterisked) on p. 493 above that contributed to determining the place of origin of Phil are verified here; and so, if Ephesus was the more probable candidate there, it might be considered that here as well.

However, one must also take into account the clear relationship of Phlm to Col. The beginning of both letters lists Timothy "our brother" as a co-sender with Paul; and the ending of both is supplied in Paul's own hand (Phlm 19; Col 4:18). Eight of the ten people mentioned in Phlm are men-

[8] Indeed, Burtchaell, *Philemon's Problem,* uses this letter as entrée into issues that constitute the daily dilemma of the Christian.

[9] It is impossible to determine whether this was a confining detention or a type of house arrest where Paul was easily approached. Strangely the 2d-century Monarchian Prologues assign Phlm and Phil to Rome, but Col to Ephesus. In my judgment there is little to recommend Caesarea as the place from which Phlm was sent.

tioned in Col as well.[10] (Nevertheless, it is uncertain that Paul wrote Col, and so details therein may not be factual biography.) Because Onesimus and Archippus are referred to in Col (4:9,17), the vast majority of interpreters assume that Philemon lived in the Colossae region; and that workable assumption[11] favors Ephesus as the candidate of Paul's whereabouts. In terms of a slave's flight that city was only 100–120 miles away, as contrasted with immense distances between Colossae and Rome or Caesarea.[12] There are difficulties, however. The christology of Col is advanced, and if Col is genuinely Pauline, that might favor the Roman captivity (61–63) and the end of Paul's career for the composition of both Col and Phlm. More specifically, of those who were with Paul when he sent Phlm (vv. 1,24), while *Timothy*'s presence favors Ephesus (p. 495 above), *Aristarchus* both was with Paul at Ephesus in 54–57 and set out with him from Caesarea for Rome in 60 (Acts 19:29; 27:2); *Mark* (which one?), *Luke,* and *Demas* are not mentioned in the Ephesus stay, but are later associated with Rome (respectively I Pet 5:13 [Babylon = Rome]; II Tim 4:11 [also Acts 28:16 if Luke is part of "we"]; II Tim 4:10). All this is very uncertain, however; and overall the arguments for Ephesus and composition *ca.* 56 are as good as and even better than those for Rome. Nothing essential by way of interpretation depends on the decision.

Subsequent Career of Onesimus

Presumably Paul wrote a large number of personal letters to individual Christians. Why was this one preserved? The usual and more likely answer is that this letter is more ecclesial than personal, having important pastoral/theological implications (even if, as we have seen, Paul does not determine the future of slavery). But in order to explain preservation, a more romantic proposal, associated with the names of Goodspeed and Knox, has been made. Onesimus was released by Philemon and returned to work with Paul

[10]Timothy, Archippus, Onesimus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke are shared by the two works; Philemon and Apphia are absent from Col. Yet the role assigned to Onesimus in Col 4:9 scarcely corresponds to the role he has in Phlm.

[11]Why workable? *If Col was written by Paul,* one can trust the geographical and historical references therein and theorize that Tychicus and Onesimus carried with them to Colossae the letter to Philemon (Col 4:7–9). Yet Col, which contains many greetings to people at Colossae (and Laodicea), makes no mention of Philemon. Was the house-church that met at his home not in Colossae but in a nearby town in the area? (The precision that Laodicea was the town is related to Knox's adventurous thesis that, after being read by Philemon in Laodicea, Phlm was brought to Archippus in Colossae and so was the letter *from* Laodicea in Col 4:16.) *If Col was not written by Paul,* the mention of Onesimus and Archippus therein was most likely inspired by the genuine letter to Philemon, and the direction of the pseudonymous letter may stem from a reliable tradition that connected these people with Colossae.

[12]With difficulty one could argue for a flight by a slave to Rome to become untraceable in the capital of the empire over 1,000 miles away; but there is less plausibility in a flight to Caesarea.

in Ephesus, remaining there as a principal Christian figure once Paul had left. He was still there more than a half-century later when Ignatius of Antioch, using more developed church-structure language, addressed the Ephesian church "in the person of Onesimus, a man of love beyond recounting and your bishop" (*Eph.* 1:3). In that capacity, and out of an esteemed memory of the man who was his father in Christ, Onesimus was well placed to collect the scattered letters of Paul, now long dead. With understandable pride he included among the great writings that the apostle had addressed to churches a small missive treasured all these years since it involved Onesimus himself and made his whole subsequent career possible. Alas, there is virtually no proof for this truly attractive theory. The Onesimus at Ephesus in AD 110 may have taken that name to honor the slave who was converted there by the imprisoned Paul long before. There is no way to decide; but to adapt an Italian saying, *Se non è vero, è ben trovato:* Even if it is not true, it was still worth being proposed.

Issues and Problems for Reflection

(1) It is a worthwhile exercise to list the main characters with the descriptive titles given them in Phlm. To what extent is Paul using titles to make those involved conscious of what they and he are, through the gift of God in Christ? How does this new theological dimension affect their existing relationship?

(2) Often authority is quickly invoked in settling a church issue. Paul is very clear that he has authority, but he prefers to persuade (vv. 8–9; see also II Cor 8:8), even though shrewdly he includes rhetorical and psychological pressure in the persuasion. (A preference for persuasion is also evinced in Matt 18:15–18.) To what extent is such a preference inherent in *metanoia* or "conversion" when that is understood literally as changing one's way of thinking? The NT does use the language of God's commandment(s) in speaking of the coming of the kingdom. What relationship does that have to the gospel's placing responsibility on the individual?

(3) Paul's partial tolerance of slavery may be related to his apocalyptic view in which this world is passing away. The charge is often made that even today Christians with strongly apocalyptic views are less insistent on social justice. Are there examples in Christian history where strong apocalypticism and a strong demand for changing social structures coexist? How might they coexist today?

(4) Related to (3) is the issue of "interim ethics," i.e., ethical attitudes phrased in a context where the present time is seen as quickly passing because Christ will return soon. On the one hand, belief in the imminent return

of Christ allowed toleration of unjust social institutions for the expected short while (provided one could still proclaim the gospel); on the other hand, heroic demands seem to have been made on Christians precisely because things to which they might become attached were not going to last. If in I Cor 7:20–24 a slave can be told to stay a slave on the principle that one might as well remain in the state in which one was called, the same applies to a single person or to a married person whose lives may also be troubled. "The appointed time has grown short; from now on, let those with wives live as though they had none" (7:29). How does one determine what is permanently demanded by the gospel even if that demand was placed with the presupposition of a short interim?

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