

12 Philemon. Solidarity With a Slave: The Way to Liberation?

Outline

Paul and Timothy's salutation to Philemon and house-church leaders Apphia and Archippus, 1-3

Paul's thankful prayers for the faith and love of an affluent Christian slave-owner, 4-7

Paul's diplomatic plea for Onesimus's forgiveness and manumission, 8-22

Greetings from Paul's five single male colleagues; benediction, 23-25

1. The Poor and Oppressed. The traditional reading of Paul's letter to Philemon now appears somewhat novelistic: Onesimus, an unbelieving slave and a fugitive from Philemon, a Christian leader in Colossae, robbed something from his owner and managed to travel to distant Rome, where (miraculously?) he finds Philemon's good friend Paul in prison (Acts 28:16-31). Through Paul's preaching Onesimus converts to Christianity, but Paul then sends the slave back to Philemon with this letter asking forgiveness and freedom for the slave. Such an interpretation is not impossible, but in the light of new research an alternative reading appears more probable. According to either reading, the book clearly reflects the perspective of the oppressed and marginalized: Paul is unjustly imprisoned in some city, and the slave Onesimus, property of the affluent Philemon, is returned to his owner, to whom this personal letter is directed, requesting Christian solidarity with Paul the prisoner and with Onesimus, the slave (Matthew 25:31-46).

The novelistic traditional interpretation was based on a limited knowledge of Roman law, which did require that fugitive slaves be returned to their owners (who then usually punished the

slave severely, at times including crucifixion). For Paul, a Jewish Roman citizen, the Roman law stood in direct conflict with God's Law in Deuteronomy:

“Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them.

They shall reside with you, in your midst, in any place they choose in any one of your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them” (Deuteronomy 23:15-16).

Deuteronomy thus expresses the same solidarity with oppressed slaves that God had shown by freeing the Hebrew slaves in the Exodus from Egypt. In Onesimus' case, Paul for some time had obeyed this Deuteronomic law, but now, by returning him with this letter to Philemon, the Apostle appeals to Philemon's conscience and risks submitting himself, along with the slave, to the severe Roman law. Philemon, an affluent Christian, probably was neither a Jew nor a Roman citizen, had a church using his home as a meeting place, and eagerly awaited the visit of his dear friend and mentor Paul. What could he do with such a letter and with his penitent slave Onesimus, now truly “useful” (the meaning of his name, v. 11) and a brother in the faith?

Recent research on Roman law reveals another possible scenario, somewhat similar but less novelistic (that is, without inventing or exaggerating miraculous elements). Roman law refers to common cases of “triangular” situations: a slave having difficulties with his owner seeks out a third party to serve as legal counsel against the angry owner. The slave's goal, then, was not to become a permanent fugitive, but to return to the owner's house with a legal defender's support in order to better his working conditions. In such cases under Roman law the slave would not be punished as a fugitive.

This new scenario better accounts for the details of this letter. We then no longer need suppose that Onesimus somehow encountered Paul by chance in distant Rome. If he really intended to escape as a permanent fugitive, why would he intentionally seek out his angry master's dear friend? Advocates of the revised scenario propose that Paul was jailed rather in

Ephesus, the closest large city to Colossae, and that the letter is one of Paul's earliest (54-55 AD, not from Rome, 60-62, as previously supposed). We have no information concerning Paul's supposed imprisonment in Ephesus (but see 1 Corinthians 15:32; 2 Cor. 1:8); hence others would link the letter to Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea (57-59 AD; Acts 24:26-27), but this appears less likely. Similarly, we may now better understand that Onesimus easily could have pilfered enough to travel by donkey to Ephesus. Much more difficult was the traditional supposition that he stole enough to travel by boat as a tourist all the way to Rome (he was only a provincial slave, not a politician!).

Notable in this new revised scenario is the transformation of the concept of evangelism, the proclamation of Jesus' Good News to the poor, oppressed and marginalized. According to the traditional interpretation, Onesimus was converted only by Paul's preaching. But we can now see how Paul's verbal proclamation was backed up by his praxis of solidarity with Onesimus: Paul, unjustly imprisoned, risks his friendship with the affluent Philemon in order to serve as the slave's legal defender. The letter is thus remarkably relevant for modern churches that seek numerical growth only through verbal evangelization (preaching, literature, television, etc.). The letter presents an evangelistic paradigm consistent with Jesus' ministry and the Bible in general (see Moses in the Exodus). We may also perceive how Paul not only achieved the slave's conversion, but also addressed the affluent owner, insisting on a just, wise, and merciful solidarity with the oppressed, consistent with Jesus' praxis and teaching.

In light of the newer reading of the letter, we may profitably consider the tragic history of its misinterpretation, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, when Philemon came to be the favorite book of the defenders of cruel racist slavery in the British Empire and in the United States South.¹ This history shows how easily we impose our cultural and ideological prejudices and turn the Bible into an instrument of torture and violence instead of a proclamation of

liberation, justice, and love. Modern study of Philemon uncovers three errors in the use of the book to defend racist slavery: (a) failing to distinguish two different types of slavery; (b) failing to distinguish between letters written by Paul himself (including Philemon), and other writings by his later disciples (the deuterio-Pauline and the pastoral letters); and (c) not appreciating Paul's apocalyptic perspective and theology in opposing oppressive institutions.

a. The recourse to Philemon to defend racist slavery erred from being simplistic, fundamentalist, and cruel; in reality, however, a genuinely literal interpretation was never achieved. Those who misinterpreted Philemon to defend racist slavery failed to perceive that, in spite of using the same word, in the Ancient Near East (including the Bible), "slavery" differed significantly from the racist slavery of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, in ancient times usually one became a slave because of debts, and was not sequestered because of belonging to a certain race; also a slave could save from wages to buy one's own freedom, or could wait a few years and be freed (usually before 30 years of age)--or at least gain freedom when the owner died. Thus, although "slavery" designated systems with common elements (permitting ownership not only of the work but also the body of another, including the right to abuse sexually), the differences were significant.

b. As a letter from Paul himself, we should first interpret Philemon in the light of the Apostle's other letters. (See Galatians 3:28, where being in Christ subverts the differences between Greek and Jew, slave and free, man and woman; and 1 Corinthians 7:21, where slaves are encouraged to seek freedom and where the slave's new identity in Christ transcends social or legal status.) Therefore, nineteenth century defenders of slavery committed a methodological error when they began with the deuterio-Pauline and pastoral letters, with their patriarchal household codes (Colossians 3:18--4:1; Ephesians 5:21--6:9; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; cf. 1 Peter 2:18-25, probably by a later disciple of Peter's). This same methodological error, of

prioritizing the pastorals and deuterio-Pauline letters while neglecting the closer and most pertinent contexts, has created tremendous distortion regarding Paul's teaching about women (see Galatians, 1 Corinthians, Romans 16).

c. A fundamental factor for appreciating Paul's approach to such human institutions as slavery is his apocalyptic theology, according to which the Apostle anticipated Jesus' Second Coming during his own lifetime or shortly thereafter (see 1 Thessalonians and Jude). Consequently, since it was impossible to envision an effective political strategy to abolish the institution of slavery immediately in the Roman Empire, Paul's approach was to establish throughout the Empire house churches that served as counter-culture paradigms anticipating God's expected new just order ("kingdom").

In the long run Paul's strategy, proclaiming Jesus' liberating Good News and establishing ecclesiastical communities in houses throughout the Roman Empire, turned out to be more effective than any violent alternative (in antiquity slave revolts always failed). The early churches sought to transform the lives of people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and unite them in communities characterized by liberty, justice and love. Notably, in this letter, although both Paul and Epaphras are prisoners (vv. 1, 9-10, 23) and Onesimus a slave (v. 16), the only unjust/oppressive act mentioned (v. 18, 'adik-) is that of Onesimus against his owner, not the owner's abuse of his slave! That Paul viewed Onesimus' act not simply as harmful but as unjust is indicated by the apostle's promise to "repay" (v. 19). Such linguistic data does not contradict the fact that Onesimus, as a slave, undoubtedly suffered worse injustices than anything he committed (pilfering and fleeing?). But Paul evidently did not view the institution of slavery as in itself unjust/oppressive, and his linguistic usage here reminds us that virtually everyone has some power (strength, youth, intelligence, sexual attractiveness) and, even though economically, socially and politically disadvantaged, is capable of acts of oppression. If Onesimus had fallen

into debt and thus sold himself into slavery, Philemon's purchase might be viewed as more just and compassionate than our modern indifference to unemployment.

2. Women and Sexual Minorities. Patriarchal interpretations assume that Paul addressed a "family": Philemon with his wife Apphia and son Archippus. However, feminist theology points out the probability that Apphia and Archippus were not Philemon's wife and son but other house church leaders who would help assure that Philemon carried out all that Paul proposed. In other words, Paul takes the "private" matter between Philemon and his run-away slave and makes it a public concern for consideration by everyone in the little church community in Colossae, as well as Paul's six male companions in Ephesus (vv. 23-24 + Onesimus, vv. 10-12).

The fact that the letter comes from Paul and Timothy, accompanied by five other single men, supports the interpretation of Apphia and Archippus as individual church leaders, not Philemon's wife and son. Moreover, Paul rarely refers to married couples in his letters (three couples among 29 persons named in Romans 16). The identification of Archippus as a "fellow soldier" hardly suggests that he is Philemon's son. If Archippus is independent and since the house is Philemon's (singular "you" in v. 2), it is unlikely that "sister" Apphia is Philemon's wife (see Priscila and Aquila and "their house," Romans 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; cf. Col. 4:15). The patriarchal identification of Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus as a "family" (a couple with an unmarried adult son) would make them the only nuclear family named by Paul in his letters. In that case, we would have to ask whether the "son" Archippus, an unmarried, mature adult, weren't gay! Paul addresses the male Philemon as "beloved" (literally; see NRSV "our dear friend") and refers to Onesimus as his "child" (v. 10, not begotten, but "birthed" as by a woman; cf. Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7; James 1:18), also deeply loved ("my own heart ["bowels/intestines, literally]," v. 12). The explicit "love triangle" in this letter consists of three men, not any

supposed nuclear family. Quite possibly Onesimus much later became Bishop Onesimus of Ephesus. (Such a leadership capacity could explain in part Paul's zeal to free him from slavery).

Studying Philemon, Paul's shortest letter, together with its ghastly history of racist and patriarchal misinterpretation, can provide us with a helpful shove down the path of divine truth. Black theologian Peter J. Gomes, for example, points out that in contemporary debates concerning sexual minorities, the Church today repeats the same errors in Bible misinterpretation that so many committed in the past when the Bible was used to promote violence against Jews (anti-Judaism), slaves, Blacks, and women. In the light of modern biology and psychology, we no longer believe that our compassion flows from our "bowels/intestines" (literally in Philemon 7, 12, 20; "heart" in modern translations, but that also is prescientific). The presence of such prescientific elements in the Bible (as Galileo demonstrated regarding astronomy/cosmology) warns us against the fundamentalist practice of taking isolated scriptural texts as pretexts to oppress women, Blacks, and sexual minorities.

3. The Sick and Physically Challenged. Although Paul acknowledges being elderly (hence weak, v. 9), in Philemon he makes no other explicit reference to the sick or physically challenged. Quite possibly such persons also participated in the church in Colossae that met in Philemon's house (see Luke, the physician, v. 24 and Colossians 4:14). Healing would be included within "every good thing" (v. 6; cf. emotional healing, vv. 7, 20).

Bibliography (also see Colossians)

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Also see the codes for patriarchal households (Haustafeln) in 1 Peter 2:18-25, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Timothy 6:1-2, Colossians 3:18-25 [+ 4:1, "masters"] and Ephesians 6:5-8 [+ v. 9, "masters"].