

Philippians – Philemon Session Five



Philemon and Baucis, by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1658

The Request; Where Did Philemon Live? Alternate Scenarios; The Driving Force; Philemon 1 - 25

Where did Philemon Live?

Although very different in content, Colossians and Philemon were written in identical circumstances to groups which overlapped considerably. In both letters Paul is a prisoner. In both he is accompanied by Timothy, Epaphras, Aristarchus, Mark, Luke, Demas, and Onesimus. In both Archippus appears among the recipients. *‘These agreements do not occur in the same relationships and formulations, however, so that the thesis is unconvincing that the indubitably Pauline Philemon has been imitated by a non-Pauline writer only in these personal remarks’* [W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, SCM, London, 1975]. Three facts indicate that the house-church of Philemon was at Colossae (1) Epaphras of Colossae knows the recipients of Philemon well enough to send greetings; (2) Onesimus was from Colossae (Col 4:9); and (3) Archippus of Colossae is among the recipients of both letters. Hence information from one letter can be used to supplement the other.

According to the dominant interpretation of Philemon, Onesimus, one of the bearers of the letter to Colossians, was a runaway slave who, after encountering Paul in the city in which the latter was imprisoned, was sent back to Colossae. Where had he taken refuge? It is both unreasonable and unnecessary to assume that he went all the way to Rome. The long journey involving two sea voyages was an expensive undertaking, which can only be made plausible by assumptions regarding stolen funds, or a new employer who just happened to be heading for the center of the empire, which in turn demand other assumptions. In order to be safe, Onesimus did not have to go very far. There was no police force constantly on the alert for fugitives. Once in Ephesus, Onesimus would have been perfectly sure that there was only the slightest chance of being discovered. A chance encounter with an acquaintance of his master was his only danger.

Was it just bad luck that brought Onesimus into Paul's orbit? Or did he go looking for him? P. Lampe has drawn attention to a provision of Roman law which permitted a slave in danger of punishment to seek out a friend of the owner to act as an intermediary in the re-establishment of good relations. Under such circumstances the slave did not become a fugitive in the legal sense. If he went to a friend of the owner, no intention to escape could be assumed.

It seems clear from Philemon 18 that Onesimus had caused some damage to Philemon. It must have been rather serious, because Onesimus recognized the need for not just any advocate but one with considerable influence over his master. Although a pagan, he was aware that Paul had ultimate authority over the new religious group to which his owner belonged. Hence, instead of seeking out a friend of Philemon in Colossae, he went looking for Paul.

The episode must have taken place at a time when the sense of Paul's invisible presence in the church of Colossae was strong, because he was known to be in the vicinity. This was true only when he resided in Ephesus. By the time Paul was in Rome he had been out of contact with the churches of Asia for several years, and it is doubtful that they even knew where he was. Moreover, in the situation envisaged, time was of the essence. The problem had to be solved before the momentary anger of Philemon became permanent bitterness. The delay of a journey to Rome would have made the effort of Onesimus pointless. Ephesus was at the limit of the feasible.

– Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, OP, (*Paul: A Critical Life*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996)

Alternate Scenarios

- 1) One of the earliest interpreters of Philemon was John Chrysostom in the still slave-owning society of the late-fourth century. Chrysostom's interpretation was common at the time and it has become the traditional one: Onesimus is

a runaway slave who fortuitously finds Paul during his flight. Paul baptizes him and convinces him to return to his master with Paul's mediating letter of recommendation. Philemon is thus placed in the awkward position of having everyone in the assembly know what Paul is asking of him, to take back his runaway slave as a brother, even though by custom and law Onesimus should be severely punished. Philemon is under strong pressure from Paul, with the knowledge of the whole house-church for which he serves as patron, to ignore outside social expectations that would prompt him to be severe with a runaway slave, even one who voluntarily returns. If Philemon does not maintain his honor by exacting punishment, however, his neighbors and friends will cry that "family values" are falling apart because proper household discipline is not preserved.

This traditional interpretation is not without problems. It is never expressly said either that Onesimus is a slave or that he has run away. And it is difficult to see how Paul and Onesimus "just happened" to encounter each other and how Paul has the freedom and authority to send back a runaway slave to his owner when this would really be a matter for the authorities. It is possible that Onesimus was captured and is being returned forcibly, but with Paul's letter to mitigate the situation.

- 2) One of the first to question the runaway theory was Peter Lampe (1985) who suggested that Onesimus intentionally sought out Paul. (See Lampe's explanation in *Where Did Philemon Live?* above.)
- 3) More recently (1987) Sara Winter has argued four points. First, because of the large number of legal and commercial terms typical of public documents, the letter is intended for the whole church, not just Philemon or the three named in the prescript. Second, Onesimus, slave not of Philemon, but of Archippus, did not run away but rather was sent to Paul on behalf of the church at Colossae. Third, Paul writes to get Onesimus released from work in Colossae in order to stay in ministry with Paul. Onesimus is not the bearer of the letter back to Colossae. Finally, Paul clearly expects that Onesimus will be manumitted for this new work.

Points one, three, and four have much to commend them, although the arguments are not watertight. The second point, that Onesimus is in fact an emissary of the church to Paul, is difficult to reconcile with verses 11, 15 and 18. It is not clear why Paul would make a negative pun on the "useful" meaning of Onesimus's name if he were an official representative of the church. Nor would Paul refer to a separation between the two if it was planned that way. Most of all, verse 18 with its suggestion of Onesimus's wrongdoing in need of forgiveness does not sit well with his responsibility as agent of the church.

- 4) More recently still, Allen Callahan (1997) has revived an interpretation previously proposed by abolitionists in the antebellum United States that

claims Onesimus is really Philemon's brother who has been grossly mistreated by Philemon. (*This interpretation is discussed in the video.*)

– Carolyn Osiek, (***Philippians Philemon***, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2000)

The Driving Force

⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.

Verse six expresses the content of Paul's prayer for Philemon. *I pray* has been added to the verse to make this clear. But that is virtually the only thing scholars have been able to agree on about this verse. Every element in it seems to throw another set of questions at the modern reader. What precisely is Paul praying for?

The clue to the verse lies both in the fact that it is related to the rest of the epistle as premise to conclusion – i.e., the prayer undergirds the appeal – and, more particularly, in the theological nature of that appeal. Paul's argument is based on what has been called 'interchange', that mutuality of Christian life which, springing from common participation in the body of Christ, extends beyond mere common concern into actual exchange: 'if we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation ... because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort' (2 Corinthians 1:6 – 7). Philemon is to welcome Onesimus as if he were Paul, and to debit Paul's bill as if *he* were Onesimus. The Greek word that says all this is *koinōnia*, and that is the key to verse 6.

This Greek word *koinōnia* is difficult to translate. 'Fellowship' means for many, simply the enjoyment of the company of other Christians: 'sharing' usually implies mutual giving and receiving of material things; 'interchange' itself, useful for highlighting the way *koinōnia* functions, seems a bit mechanical. The idea we need to grasp – the theme that dominates the letter – is that, in Christ, Christians not only belong to one another. But actually become mutually identified, truly rejoicing with the happy and genuinely weeping with the sad. *Koinōnia* is part of the truth about the body of Christ. All are bound together in a mutual bond that makes our much-prized individualism look shallow and petty. This fundamental meaning of *koinōnia* best explains its other uses, particularly that of 'generosity' or 'almsgiving': Christians give to one another because they belong to one another. NIV, which reads *that you may be active in sharing your faith*, introduces a quite extraneous idea, since the phrase 'sharing your faith' is used today to refer to conversational evangelism, which although important, is not what Paul was talking about. *Koinōnia* cannot mean 'sharing' in the sense of dividing something up or parceling it out. Nor is it the language primarily of business. The key idea is 'mutual participation'. The whole

phrase then means 'the mutual participation which is proper to your faith'. The faith is referred to as Philemon's, not because it is different to anybody else's, but simply because it is he to whom the appeal is being made. ...

... The verse as a whole, then, could be paraphrased as follows: 'I am praying that the mutual participation which is proper to the Christian faith you hold may have its full effect in our realization of every good thing that God wants to accomplish in us to lead us into the fullness of Christian fellowship, that is of Christ.' To read the verse in this way does justice to the apparent peculiarities of what Paul has actually written, imports no ideas extraneous to the epistle, and prepares the way exactly and thoroughly for the appeal that is to come.

– N.T. Wright (*Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Il; Nottingham, England, 1986)

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