

Philemon - Introduction & Background

Authorship

External evidence for Pauline authorship of Philemon is strong. The book is listed in the Pauline section of the Muratorian Canon. Pauline authorship is also attested to by various church fathers. Among them are Ignatius, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, and even Marcion. *Internal* evidence is equally persuasive. Paul's name is repeated throughout the letter (v1,9,19). Those that are typically associated with Paul are mentioned in the letter (v1,23-24). The description of the writer matches the other biographical information known of Paul. Such descriptions include his age (v9) as well as his imprisonment (v1,9). It also makes sense that Paul wrote the letter since the situation presented in it would require someone with his level of experience and diplomacy. Philemon is also similar to Paul's other letters. For example, the same associates mentioned in Philemon (v1-2,10,23-24) are also associated with Paul (Col 4:9-17). They include Onesimus, Archippus, Epaphras, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. Moreover, the style and language of Philemon 4 is similar to Phil 1:3-4. In addition, Paul typically used "love" and "faith" at the beginning of his letters. These same terms are found in Philemon 5.

Despite the potency of these arguments, many rely upon other arguments to attack Pauline authorship of Philemon. For example, it is alleged that the lack of doctrinal content in the epistle argues for its non-Pauline origin. However, this issue was not raised until the fourth century. Jerome and Chrysostom subsequently and quickly vindicated Pauline authorship of the letter. The issue was not raised again until the 19th century. Others suggest that because of the similarities between Colossians and Philemon (v1-2,10,23-24; Col 4:9-17), Philemon is inauthentic if Colossians is also inauthentic. However, the arguments favoring Pauline authorship of Colossians are strong.

Destination

The destination of the letter is the individual, Philemon, in Colosse (v2). Philemon was a slave owner (v15-16). It is likely that he owned other slaves besides Onesimus. He opened his house for the church (v2). Because he was both a slave owner as well as a homeowner, he was probably a man of means. He was benevolent toward other believers (v5-7). His son Archippus was a leader in the Colossian church (v2; Col 4:17). Not only was Philemon a native Colossian but he was also a convert of Paul (19). He was probably converted during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10,20; 20:31).

Some have challenged this scenario instead postulating that Archippus was the real owner of Onesimus and that Philemon was a general overseer of the Christian work in Laodicea,

Hierapolis, and Colosse. Thus, the letter and Onesimus were actually sent to Philemon so he in turn could exert pressure on his subordinate Archippus to take Onesimus back. According to this theory, the reference to the fulfillment of Archippus' ministry (Col 4:17) would refer to the specific task of releasing Onesimus. Despite the initial attractiveness of this theory, it is fraught with problems. First, Philemon is mentioned first in the letter making it likely that he is the letter's addressee. Second, if the letter was written to Archippus rather than Philemon, verse 2 should read "to the church in his house" rather than "to the church in your house." Third, Archippus' ministry seems to be described in general terms, such as fulfilling his duty in the pastorate (Col 4:17). This text does hint at doing something specific such as setting a slave free.

Place of Writing and Date

Paul alludes to his imprisonment several times throughout the letter (v1,9-10,13,22-23). It is likely that this imprisonment is the same one mentioned in Ephesians (3:1; 4:1; 6:20) and Colossians (4:18). This connection can be drawn because of the overlapping persons and themes between Colossians and Philemon (v1-2,10,23-24; Col 4:9-17). Thus, Philemon was written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:16-31). This position is bolstered by the mention of Luke in Philemon (v24), Colossians (4:14), and the final "we section" of the Book of Acts (28:16).

Although there is no hint of Paul's release in Ephesians and Colossians, Paul hints at his imminent release in Philemon (v22). Thus, Philemon must be dated later than Ephesians and Colossians. However, there is no indication in Philemon that his release would be soon. Because Philippians does indicate that Paul would be released soon (1:19-21, 25, 27; 2:24), Philemon must be dated before Philippians. In sum, Philemon represents the third of Paul's "prison epistles" and should be dated about 61 AD.

Others have proposed other possibilities for the place of writing such as Ephesus or Caesarea. However, Ephesus is an unlikely choice since we have no record of a Pauline Ephesian imprisonment. In addition, there is no "we section" indicating Luke's presence in Ephesus during Paul's third missionary journey. The Caesarean locale is also untenable because it does fit the description of Paul's expectation of imminent release (v22).

Occasion for Writing

A Colossian slave named Onesimus had stolen goods from his master Philemon's house and had fled to Rome (v18-19). Onesimus traveled to Rome because it was a population magnet. In Rome, Onesimus met Paul and subsequently converted to Christianity (v10). Because Philemon had been converted by Paul (v19), perhaps Onesimus had heard of Paul from Philemon and deliberately sought Paul out. During Onesimus' stay in Rome, he had become useful to Paul by ministering to his physical needs perhaps as a house servant or chef (v11,13). Although Onesimus' name means "useful," he had been useless to Philemon by stealing from him and fleeing. However, after his contact with Paul and the gospel,

Onesimus had become useful again. While he had failed to live up to the meaning of his name in the past, now he would more than live up to it. However, Paul realized that Onesimus had responsibilities to Philemon and thus had to be returned to him (v13-14). Thus, Paul sent Onesimus back to Colosse along with Tychicus (Eph 6:21-22; Col 4:7-9). Perhaps Paul sent the two of them together to minimize Onesimus' vulnerability to slave catchers. Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon with the letter to Philemon. Paul's goal in writing the letter was to explain Onesimus' situation to Philemon as well as explain how Philemon as a believing slave owner should treat the runaway slave Onesimus, who left as a bondservant but returned as a brother in Christ (v15-16).

Purpose

As explained above, Paul's main goal in writing the letter was to explain to Philemon how Onesimus was converted and came under Paul's custody in Rome. Paul also wrote to explain how Philemon as a believing slave owner should treat Onesimus, who left as a slave but returned as a brother in Christ (v15-16). In essence, Paul desired to encourage Philemon to forgive and restore Onesimus (v8-21). Besides these major purposes, Paul had several sub purposes in mind when he wrote.

First, he wanted to commend Philemon for his generosity toward fellow believers (v4-7). Second, he wanted to announce his plan for a future visit (v22). Third, he wanted to send greetings from some of Paul's associates who knew Philemon (v23-35). Fourth, because Philemon was not the only slave owner in Colosse (Col 4:1), perhaps Paul wanted to provide a treatise that would govern the master-slave relationship when both parties are believers.

Theme and Message

The *theme* of the letter is found in Eph 4:32, which says, "And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has also forgiven you." Thus, the *message* of the letter is that Christians should forgive one another just as Christ has forgiven them. In other words, the message of Philemon is how Christians are "to model redemption in a social context."

Unique Characteristics

Philemon boasts numerous outstanding characteristics. First, it contains only 334 words and therefore is the shortest of Paul's letters. Second, it is unique from Paul's letters in that it is written completely in Paul's own hand (v19) without any assistance from an amanuensis. Third, it is the most intimate and personal of all of Paul's letters. Fourth, it expresses Paul's desire to see slaves treated in a humane manner. Although Paul raises this issue in his other letters (Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim 6:1-2), this issue is most overtly expressed in Philemon. In v17, he asks that Philemon receive Onesimus. Then in v21, he expresses confidence that Philemon will do even more than what Paul has requested. What else could "more" mean besides Paul's hope that Philemon will release Onesimus? Fifth,

the letter represents a masterpiece of diplomacy and tact regarding how to deal with disputable issues. Such tact was necessary in addressing the sensitive subject of Christianity and slavery within the Roman Empire.

Sixth, the letter demonstrates the art of persuasion. Paul employs numerous methods in his attempt to persuade Philemon to forgive Onesimus. They include appealing to Philemon's past goodness (v5,7), relinquishment of Paul's apostolic authority (v8), love (v9), Paul's age and adverse circumstances (v9), Paul and Onesimus' spiritual relationship (v10), Onesimus' benefit to Philemon (v11), Paul's attitude toward Onesimus (v12), Paul foregoing of his own preferences (v13-14), Philemon's choice (v14), God's providence (v15), Philemon and Onesimus' spiritual relationship (v16), Paul and Philemon's spiritual relationship (v16), Paul's surety (v18), Philemon's spiritual obligation to Paul (v19), Paul's confidence in Philemon (v20), and Paul's imminent visit to Philemon (v22).

Seventh, Philemon perfectly illustrates the principle that believers are to forgive one another just as they have been forgiven (Eph 4:32). Eighth, the letter illustrates Christian doctrines. For example, the letter furnishes an excellent example of justification, substitution, and imputation (2 Cor 5:19-21). In this illustration, Philemon represents the Father. Onesimus represents the converted sinner (v11,18). Paul represents Christ as he intercedes on behalf of Onesimus (v10-17) and lays aside his own rights for the benefit of Onesimus. Paul's sacrificial acts restore Onesimus to a new relationship with Philemon (v15-16). All of this illustrates what Christ has done for the sinner and how God accepts sinners in Christ (v17). Other doctrines illustrated in the letter include progressive sanctification, adoption as sons, divine sovereignty (v15), equality in the body of Christ (Gal 3:28), and the believer's submission to the state (v12-14; Rom 13:1-7).

Outline

I. Greeting (Philemon 1:1-3)

- (1) Senders (1:1a-b)
 - (A) Paul (1:1a)
 - (B) Timothy (1:1b)
- (2) Audience (1:1c-2)
 - (A) Philemon (1:1c)
 - (B) Apphia (1:2a)
 - (C) Archippus (1:2b)
 - (D) The church (1:2c)
- (3) Salutation (1:3)

II. Praise of Philemon (Philemon 1:4-7)

- (1) Thanksgiving (1:4-5)
 - (A) General thanks (1:4)
 - (B) Reason for thanks: Philemon's benevolence (1:5)

(2) Prayer (1:6-7)

- (A) Prayer for Philemon's understanding (1:6)
- (B) Reminder of Philemon's past benevolence (1:7)

III. Paul's request of Philemon (Philemon 1:8-21)

(1) Paul's appeal (1:8-17)

- (A) Basis of Paul's appeal (1:8-9)
 - (a) Reminder of Paul's apostolic authority (1:8)
 - (b) Basis of appeal (1:9)
 - (i) Love (1:9a)
 - (ii) Age (1:9b)
 - (iii) Imprisonment (1:9c)

(B) Onesimus as the object of the request (1:10-11)

- (a) Paul's child (1:10a)
- (b) Begotten in prison (1:10b)
- (c) Name: Onesimus (1:10c)
- (d) Transition from worthless to profitable (1:11)

(C) Paul sending Onesimus back (1:12-14)

- (a) Paul's action: sending Onesimus back (1:12)
- (b) Paul's preference: to keep Onesimus (1:13)
- (c) Paul's motive: to honor Philemon (1:14)

(D) God's providence (1:15-16)

- (a) Onesimus' departure (1:15)
- (b) Onesimus' salvation (1:16)
 - (i) No longer a slave (1:16a)
 - (ii) A beloved brother (1:16b-c)
 - (a) To Paul (1:16b)
 - (b) To Onesimus (1:16c)

(E) Paul's request: accept him as you would me (1:17)

(2) Paul's pledge (1:18-21)

- (A) Promise: to pay Onesimus' debts (1:18)
- (B) Collateral: Paul's ministry to Philemon (1:19)
- (C) Wish: to be refreshed by Philemon (1:20)
- (D) Confidence: Paul's confidence that Philemon will respond (1:21)

IV. Closing (Philemon 1:22-25)

- (1) Paul's imminent release (1:22)
- (2) Paul extends greetings (1:23-24)
 - (A) Epaphras (1:23)
 - (B) Mark (1:24a)

- (C) Aristarcus (1:24b)
- (D) Demas (1:24c)
- (E) Luke (1:24d)
- (3) Paul's benediction (1:25)

Introduction

This epistle is the only strictly private letter which has been preserved, but greetings at the beginning and end imply it was intended for public hearing. The model of tact and courtesy, it nevertheless makes it clear that Paul expects Philemon to do even more than he asks (v21). Notice Paul's subtle craftsmanship...

Paul intercedes for his runaway slave Onesimus, who has, apparently, robbed his master and headed for Rome. Instead of finding refuge in the crowded city, he came in contact with Paul and was converted. Once worthless, he began to live up to his name, "Profitable" (v11). Although Paul would have liked to have kept him as his friend and helper, he insists he return to his wronged master in Colossae. But since he left as a pagan, and returned as a Christian, Philemon is asked to receive him as a "brother beloved" (v16). It can be assumed that Philemon did, indeed, respond to Paul's appeal, since he would not have circulated a letter he refused to obey.

This all occurred about the time that Paul received news from Epaphras of the threat to the faith in Colossae, which gave rise to the epistle to the Colossians.

Paul entrusted Tychicus with the responsibility to protect Onesimus from arrest by slave catchers on the return journey and delivering the letters to the Laodiceans (Ephesians?) and Colossians, in addition to this letter to Philemon (Laodicea and Colossae were only about a mile apart).

The letter appears to stop short of asking Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom, but the social conditions of the time might have relegated this to the freedom to starve...

Slavery

Estimates suggest that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire; men and women were traded like pieces of chattel or merchandise. The average slave sold for 500 denarii. (One denarii was a day's wage for a common laborer.) Educated and skilled slaves were sold for as much as 50,000 denarii. A master could free a slave, or a slave could buy his freedom if he could raise the money (Acts 22:28).

If a slave ran away, the master would register the name and description with the officials and the slave would be on the "wanted" list. The law permitted a master to execute a rebellious slave. While some masters were cruel, many of them were reasonable and

humane. A slave was an expensive and useful piece of property and it would cost the owner to lose him.

Philemon would be facing a dilemma. If he forgave Onesimus, what would the other masters (and slaves) think? If he punished him, how would it affect his testimony?