

SCHOOL OF THE WORD
Exploring St Paul
8. Philemon
 Kieran J. O'Mahony, OSA
www.tarsus.ie

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1. INTRODUCTION

This is the shortest letter we have from Paul. It will serve as a reminder both of letter-writing and rhetoric and well as provide a window on the social world of the Pauline mission. The letter has been much studied in recent decades in an attempt to resolve the puzzles in even so short a text. It was not always a magnet for scholars because of the lack of a theological argument. We hear the voice of Paul in a different key. The letter is quite personal although not really private.

Task: at this point it would be useful for the student to read this short document and wonder about it.

2. PLACE IN ST PAUL'S LETTERS

The Pauline authorship has not been seriously questioned. People did wonder, in the fourth and fifth centuries, why so slight a text should be part of the Bible. Later in the nineteenth century, some scholars thought the work novelistic and unreal and so hardly genuinely from Paul. In these approaches, the presuppositions are as interesting as the results!

It has been shown from vocabulary alone (and indeed from rhetoric) that the letter is indeed genuinely from Paul. The form of Jesus Christ is reverse order—Christ Jesus—is typically Pauline and found in Plmn 1 and 9. Other typically Pauline expressions are “co-worker” (Plmn 1 and 24), “in the Lord” (16 and 20) and the phrase “to say nothing of” (Phlm 19).

What context can we imagine for this short document and what history lies behind it? It may help to begin with the *dramatis personae*.

- Paul – who is in prison
- Timothy, Paul's fellow worker
- Philemon, the leader of a house church
- Onesimus, a slave, mentioned also in Col 4:9; the name means profitable, giving rise to a pun in the letter.
- Archippus, mentioned in Col 4:17
- Apphia, a woman, not mentioned elsewhere
- Five who append greetings: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke

Lots of questions arise. Where was Paul at this time? When was the letter written? Was Onesimus actually a runaway slave and was Paul the good Roman citizen, returning him to his owner? Are there other possibilities within the social context? How was it that this slight letter survived and found its way into the New Testament? To some of these questions we can give no answer and to others only a probably answer.

It seems probable that Philemon's house church may very well be in Colossae, given that Archippus and Onesimus live there. It could be that Apphia is the wife of Philmeon and Archippus a family member, perhaps his son.

The traditional reading was the Paul was in Rome at this stage. This is perhaps unlikely because he hopes make a return visit, which seems impossible because Paul's purpose in being in Rome was to go on to Spain. Different locations have been proposed and the most probably place for the writing of the letter is Ephesus, from where it would be very easy to get to Colossae. There no mention in the Acts of an imprisonment in Ephesus but it is not impossible (see 1Cor 15:32; 2Cor 1:8-11).

Perhaps the most plausible reconstruction is the also the least dramatic. It was not unknown for slave to run away, not to escape permanently, but find a friend of his / her owner so as to negotiate better conditions. This would explain why a slave "ran away" to a prominent friend of his owner. It would also account for the tone and content of the letter. In the course of his time with Paul, Onesimus fell under the influence of the apostle and converted to Christianity. In the letter, Paul does not hesitate to use this fact to encourage Philemon to be extra generous not only because of Paul but because Onesimus is now a brother in the Lord.

3. PHILEMON AS A LETTER AND AS A SPEECH

As a letter, Plmn is the one Pauline document which really resembles a typical Hellenistic letter. It is short and shows all the feature of such a letter. At the same time, it breathes a powerful air of compact persuasion and it is no surprise to learn that it can also be analysed using the structure of rhetoric.

Verses	Letter	Speech	Content
1-3	Superscript		Senders, recipient, greetings
4-7	Thanksgiving	Introduction	Praise for Philemon's faith and love
8-22	Body	Proof (8-16) Conclusion (17-22)	Appeal on behalf of Onesimus Amplification of the appeal
23-25	Postscript		Greetings from five others

We will see in the comment below how the different parts function in this letter. Before that, there is one further peculiarity. It is possible to make a chiasmic reading of the letter, along the lines of ABBA. This is best seen by observing the text itself.

<u>Phlm 1</u> Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, <u>2</u> to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: <u>3</u> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.	<i>Names, fellow-workers, greetings</i>	<u>Phlm 23</u> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, <u>24</u> and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. <u>25</u> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.
<u>Phlm 4</u> When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God <u>5</u> because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.	<i>Paul and Philemon pray for each other</i>	<u>22</u> One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.
<u>6</u> I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.	<i>Paul's confidence in Philemon</i>	<u>21</u> Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.
<u>7</u> I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of	<i>Refreshment of heart</i>	<u>20</u> Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the

the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.		Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.
<u>8</u> For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, <u>9</u> yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.	<i>Paul could command but prefers to appeal</i>	<u>19</u> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.
<u>10</u> I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. <u>11</u> Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.	<i>The “useless” Onesimus has become useful</i>	<u>18</u> If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.
<u>12</u> I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.	<i>Paul wants Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he were treating Paul</i>	<u>17</u> So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.
<u>13</u> I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; <u>14</u> but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.	<i>Onesimus now a brother could be very useful to Paul</i>	<u>15</u> Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, <u>16</u> no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

The apparent simplicity of the letter is only a surface observation. In reality, this carefully written appeal, following rule of letter-writing and rhetoric, is also in its own way most artistically composed.

4. COMMENTARY

(i) *Plmn 1-3: Superscript*

Phlm 1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The superscript is warm and personal. If Apphia and Archippus are indeed the wife and son of Philemon, the passage enjoys even more effectiveness.

(ii) *Plmn 4-7: Thanksgiving / Introduction*

Phlm 4 When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5 because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7 I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

These verses fulfill the function of the thanksgiving in all Paul's letters, with the exception of Galatians. As an introduction, it fulfills the three aims of the

introduction: (a) to win the attention of the hearers; (b) to get their good will; (c) to make them receptive to the speaker. Attention and good will are gained by telling Philemon he prays for him. A good feeling towards Paul will be engendered by Paul own experience of joy, encouragement and love through Philemon.

(iii) *Plmn 8-16: appeal on behalf of Onesimus*

Phlm 8 For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9 yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. 10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13 I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15 Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

The thesis is really found in v.10 which states plainly what the letter is about. Paul precedes that clear statement with a typical *captatio benevolentiae*, or gaining of good will again. This is achieved (a) by foregoing the right to command preferring to appeal on the basis of love; (b) by mentioning Paul's age and condition as a prisoner. Each verse is a powerful appeal.

V. 11: a play on the name Onesimus, which means useful.

V. 12: a highly emotional sending—he now represents Paul himself.

V. 13: In Paul's mind, Onesimus represented Philemon himself.

V. 14: Paul prefers free consent to force.

Vv. 15-16: a kind reading of the escape, in the light of Onesimus' conversion.

(iv) *Plmn 17-22: Amplification of the appeal*

Phlm 17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

This section fulfills very well the function of the conclusion or *peroratio*. The purpose of this part of a speech was to summarize, to appeal to the emotions, to amplify slightly the reasons for the appeal. All are present here.

V. 17: a repetition of v.10, the thesis.

V.18: amplification by anticipating any objection on financial grounds.

V. 19: apparently passing Philemon's debt to Paul he emphasizes it.

V. 20: a direct and emotional appeal.

V. 21: This takes us back to the praise offered at the start of the letter.

V. 22: An appeal for prayer that Paul may be released and come to Philemon. It is implied that Paul will thus be able to check on Philemon.

(v) *Plmn 23-25: Postscript*

Phlm 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

The letter closes on a quite personal note, with greetings from many others. This has the effect of making the letter rather more public and of making Philemon's response likewise rather more public!

5. CONCLUSION

This short letter reminds the student of Paul's immense powers of persuasion, his original adaptation of the letter structure, his subtle use of rhetorical devices and the sheer artistry of his writings. We also see in Plmn a very human, very warm side to Paul the old man and now a prisoner.

Today, of course, the question will be asked, what was Paul's attitude to slavery? Slavery in those days exhibited a range of conditions, from unfortunate chained miners to highly educated tutors. Often an attachment grew up, so that owners gave their most beloved slaves their freedom, before their death or in their wills. It must frankly be said that Paul does not take on or criticize the institution of slavery at the time. However, the reality of Onesimus' becoming a Christian makes the old relationship to his owner no longer applicable. In that sense, Philemon is a practical illustration of what Paul said in Galatians,

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:27–29)