

Philemon

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As the briefest member of the Pauline corpus, the epistle to Philemon is a letter of recommendation for the sake of reconciliation in which the apostle Paul brings the gospel truth of mutual participation in the body of Christ to bear on an estranged relationship – making a delicate request of his friend Philemon to receive back a certain Onesimus into full fellowship as a brother in Christ.¹ Comprehension of the passage’s contemporaneous Greco-Roman epistolary landscape facilitates a knowledgeable analysis of its constituent parts.² Subsequently, the interpretive insights yielded by this examination facilitate an application of the letter to the contemporary Christian church.

Greco-Roman Letters

Originally referring to “an oral communication sent by messenger,” the Hellenistic ἐπιστολή eventually encompassed a wide variety of documents – from commercial to legal, political to personal.³ As Greidanus notes, the basic form of a Greco-Roman letter was tripartite, consisting of introduction/opening, body, and conclusion.⁴ The first section named the sender and addressee, often including a brief greeting and “a wish for good health.”⁵ Most difficult to analyze formally, the body of Hellenistic letters was flexible enough to encompass content suited to each writing’s particular communicative act.⁶ Finally, “greetings to persons other than the addressee, a final greeting or prayer sentence, and sometimes a date” comprised a typical conclusion to Greco-Roman epistles.⁷

In contrast to literary essays and official documents of the day, written to general audiences apart from any relational context, Paul’s letters are more private and personal – exhibiting his pastoral concern for those to whom he was a representative of Christ and an elder in the faith.⁸ Nevertheless, the Pauline epistles arguably exceed their contemporaneous correspondence in length, structure, and didactic intent.⁹

¹ Philemon is categorized as a letter of recommendation by D. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 211-2 and W.W. Klein, C.L. Blomberg and R.L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. Ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004) 431. This paper assumes the “consensus view” of the epistle’s provenance: namely, that the apostle Paul is addressing Philemon of Colossae regarding the estranged slave and now convert, Onesimus. The creative reconstruction of J. Knox, in which the extant epistle to Philemon is the “letter from Laodicea” (Col 4:16) which was written by Paul to Archippus (Philem 2), master of Onesimus, is here ignored; cf. J. Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul* (New York: Abingdon, 1959). For critical responses to Knox’s claims from the consensus view, see F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 198-202; G.B. Caird, *Paul’s Letters from Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 217; and N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*, TNTC (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1986; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 164-6.

² Unless otherwise noted, “Greco-Roman” and “Hellenistic” are used synonymously.

³ P.T. O’Brien, “Letters, Letter Forms,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. G.R. Hawthorne and R.P. Martin; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 550.

⁴ S. Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 315; cf. W.G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 27; O’Brien, “Letters,” 551.

⁵ Greidanus, *Modern Preacher*, 315.

⁶ Doty, *Letters*, 34-5.

⁷ Greidanus, *Modern Preacher*, 315.

⁸ O’Brien cites the intensely personal letter to the Galatians and Paul’s emphasis on apostleship at Gal 1:1, 15, 16; 5:2. O’Brien “Letters,” 551.

⁹ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 426.

Although Paul understandably followed the prevailing Greco-Roman form in his own letters, he nonetheless freely adapted the epistolary conventions of the day to suit his own purposes. For example, as O'Brien notes, although "on occasion the more intimate letters of the Hellenistic period began with a thanksgiving to the gods for personal benefits received," Paul expanded and developed the introductory thanksgiving/blessing section in his writings more often than any writer of his day, yielding a mix of Hellenistic form with Jewish and Christian content which is present in most of his letters.¹⁰ Similarly, Paul often modified the Greco-Roman form by including a concluding paranetic section of exhortation after the body of his letters.¹¹

Analysis

An appreciation of Pauline epistolary form in Greco-Roman context yields important interpretive insights relating to both the parts and whole of the letter to Philemon, in which Paul displays remarkable tact as he advances his request for reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus.¹² Although lacking a definite section of paranesis, the epistle is composed of an opening greeting (Philem 1-3), thanksgiving/prayer (4-7), body (8-22), and closing (23-25).¹³ Of immediate note, Paul atypically refers to himself, in the midst of an otherwise standard greeting, not as an apostle (cf. Gal 1:1) or servant (cf. Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1), but as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (Philem 1; NRSV) – perhaps best explained by his desire throughout "to entreat rather than command" (cf. 8-9), but also to stress Onesimus' usefulness to him in his captivity (cf. 11-13).¹⁴ Sender ("Paul...and Timothy"; Philem 1a), and addressee ("Philemon...Apphia...Archippus...and the church in your house"; 1b-2) thus identified, Paul's signature

¹⁰ Although notably absent from the epistle to the Galatians. P.T. O'Brien, "Benediction, Blessing, Doxology, Thanksgiving," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. G.R. Hawthorne and R.P. Martin; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 69; O'Brien, "Letters," 551-2; Cf. 1 Cor 1:4-9; 2 Cor 1:3-4; Rom 1:8-10; Eph 1:3-14; Phil 1:3-11; Col 1:3-14; 1 Thess 1:2-3:13; 2 Thess 1:2-12; 2:13-14; Philem 4-7.

¹¹ Greidanus, *Modern Preacher*, 316; cf. 1 Cor 16:13-18; Rom 15:14-32; Doty, *Letters*, 27; *pace* Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, who include thanksgiving and paranesis in "the fairly typical [Greco-Roman] structure," claiming that NT thanksgiving sections "performed what all writers considered a common courtesy." Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 430. While a definitive stance is impossible sans a comprehensive study of Hellenistic epistolary literature, it seems best to emphasize the *distinctiveness* of Pauline thanksgiving and paranesis.

¹² See A. Patzia, "Philemon," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. G.R. Hawthorne and R.P. Martin; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 706. As a letter of recommendation, the passages closest extant parallel is perhaps a letter from Pliny the Younger to a certain Sabinianus, requesting that he mercifully receive a penitent freedman. Pliny, *Letter*, 9.21; cited by Aune, *New Testament*, 211 and J.B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 318-9.

¹³ *Pace* Doty's suggestion that Philem 21 contains the formulaic paranesis. For robust examples of Pauline paranesis, see Rom 12:1-15:13; Gal 5:13-6:10; 1 Thess 4:1-12, 5:1-22, the other examples cited by Doty, *Letters*, 43.

¹⁴ Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, 333; cf. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 205; Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 172. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version [NRSV].

greeting of *χάρις καὶ εἰρήνη* (3) functions as a benedictional transition to a section of thanksgiving and prayer (4-7), which – as elsewhere in the Pauline corpus – introduces the letter’s main themes.¹⁵

As Bruce notes, “the ground of the thanksgiving and the substance of the prayer are closely related to the purpose of the letter.”¹⁶ Paul gives thanks to God because of Philemon’s love, faith, and refreshment of “the hearts of the saints” (Philem 5, 7). The content of Paul’s subsequent prayer, then, is that “the sharing of [Philemon’s] faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ” (6; ESV). However, the phrase *ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου* is better translated as “the mutual belonging which is proper to your faith,” referring to, as Wright puts it, “the mutuality of the Christian life which, springing from common participation in the body of Christ, extends beyond mere common concern into actual exchange” – a mutual belonging which lies at the heart of Paul’s argument and requests throughout the epistle.¹⁷ In addition to introducing the key themes of love/heart (cf. *ἀγάπη*, 4,7,9; *σπλάγχνα*, 7,12,20) and mutual participation (cf. *κοινωνόν*, 17), the thanksgiving/prayer rhetorically establishes mutual goodwill as an exordium in which Paul emphasizes characteristics of Philemon to which he can then appeal.¹⁸

The main request of the letter’s body – of noteworthy length in its Greco-Roman context – is that Philemon should receive Onesimus just as he would receive Paul (17b).¹⁹ Although Paul makes use of every persuasive tactic at his disposal – including concession of apostolic authority (8; 19b), emotional appeal (9, 12), pun (11), and appeal to honor (14) – the main thrust of the argument depends on the “mutual belonging” (6) between Philemon and Onesimus now that the latter has become a Christian during Paul’s captivity (10).²⁰ Regardless of the exact nature of the past estrangement (about which Paul remains virtually silent), Philemon is urged to interpret the seemingly unfortunate state of affairs as an

¹⁵ “Grace and peace” is a modification of the Hellenistic greeting *χαίρειν*, designed both to affirm the grace and peace of God which his readers already possessed and to pray that they might enjoy/embody such blessings more fully; O’Brien, “Letters,” 551. On the epistolary function of Pauline thanksgivings, see O’Brien, “Benediction,” 70.

¹⁶ Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 208.

¹⁷ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 175-6; cf. 2 Cor 1:6-7; 4:10-15; Col 1:24; T.G. Gombis, *Paul: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010) 40; *pace* suggestions of *κοινωνία* here as evangelism (so NIV, Philem 6) or vague generosity (so Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 208-9; and Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, 335). The concept of Christian mutual belonging can be seen to have its roots in the “fellow Israelite” laws of the Pentateuch – the example par excellence being Leviticus 19:18’s injunction to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

¹⁸ Aune, *New Testament*, 211. The theme of mutual belonging is also expressed in the use of fellowship terminology in the epistle’s opening and conclusion: *ἀδελφός* (1), *συνεργῶ* (1), *ἀδελφῇ* (2), *συστρατιώτῃ* (2), *συναιχμάλωτός* (23), and *συνεργοί* (24).

¹⁹ Doty, *Letters*, 35.

²⁰ Although Patzia rightly acknowledges the “continuing questions of interpretation” relating to the location of Paul’s imprisonment (Rome, Ephesus, or Caesarea) and the timing/nature of Onesimus’ conversion, neither issue is central to the discussion at hand of mutual belonging in Christ; Patzia, *Philemon*, 705. Rhetorical arguments noted by Aune, *New Testament*, 211. As Patzia notes, per rhetorical criticism the epistle can be structured into exordium (4-7), proof (8-16), and peroration (17-22). Patzia, “Philemon,” 704.

opportunity for eternal reconciliation (15-16), transferring any debts that Onesimus had incurred to Paul's own account instead (18). In receiving back Onesimus, Paul's "very heart" (12b), as "a beloved brother" (16), Philemon would continue his refreshment of the saints' hearts (7) by refreshing Paul's heart (20).²¹ Here, then, is an analogous microcosm of the gospel itself – a fulfillment of Paul's prayer for *κοινωνία* (6) and of the cruciform "ministry of reconciliation" of 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Colossians 1:24-29.²² As Wright notes, just as in Christ God reconciles the entire world to himself (2 Cor 5:19), "God is in Paul reconciling Philemon and Onesimus" – who both owed a debt, so to speak, to the apostle for their conversion (Philem 10, 19b).²³

Confident of Philemon's compliance with his reconciliatory request (21), Paul makes an additional request for lodging based on Paul's hope for release from imprisonment and subsequent travel to Colossae to be present with his audience (22) – an epistolary structure known as the "apostolic parousia," revealing Paul's consideration of his writings as substitutes for his physical presence.²⁴ Finally, Paul reports the greetings of his gospel co-workers to Philemon (23-24), before reverting to the plural to include the other addressees (2) in his concluding benediction.²⁵

Application

If the consensus interpretation that Onesimus is Philemon's runaway slave is correct, then Deuteronomy 23:15-16 would seem to mandate that Paul not return the fugitive to his estranged master.²⁶ However, the reality of their mutual belonging in Christ compelled the apostle to facilitate the reconciliation now possible due to the Messiah's death, burial, and resurrection (cf. 2 Cor 5:16-21). Nevertheless, Lightfoot reveals a potential hurdle for modern readers of this ancient text when he notes that, though "the word 'emancipation' seems to be trembling on [Paul's] lips...he does not once utter

²¹ Aune, *New Testament*, 211-2.

²² By "the gospel," I am primarily referring to the atonement as the act in which God fulfills his creative purposes by bringing his attributes to bear on our sinful condition through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah in order to save a people to robust unity with himself, each other, and the entire creation. See A.J. Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation: The Theological Basis of the Unity and Diversity of the Atonement in the Theology of Karl Barth*. (New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

²³ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 181, 186-7; cf. Paul's use of sonship as a metaphor regarding conversion: 1 Cor 4:14-15; 2 Cor 6:13; Gal 4:19; Phil 2:22.

²⁴ Doty, *Letters*, 36; O'Brien, "Letters," 552.

²⁵ Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 224-5; Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, 223. The list of names at Philem 23-24 mirrors that found at Col 4:10-17, except for the omission of Jesus Justus (Col 4:11). Of note, though impossible to explain fully, is Epaphras' designation as Paul's "fellow prisoner" instead of a "fellow worker" as the others. However, Bruce notes that, as "the evangelist of the Lycus valley" in which Colossae was located (cf. Col 1:7; 4:12), Epaphras "would be personally known to Philemon," and thus merit distinct mention. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 213-4. The concluding benediction of Philem 25 closely resembles Gal 6:18 and Phil 4:23.

²⁶ Bruce, Caird, Lightfoot, and Wright all adopt the consensus view. Deuteronomy passage cited by Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 197, fn. 19.

it.”²⁷ The first step in resolving this frustration involves the clear delineation between the context of slavery in which Onesimus lived, the transatlantic slave trade of the 16th through 19th centuries, and the modern day slavery of human trafficking and forced labor – for it is far too easy to conflate the three in indignation at Paul’s failure to request Onesimus’ freedom.²⁸ Then, once the anachronism of expecting Paul to be a modern abolitionist is noted, it can be clearly seen that, as Bruce observes, though the epistle to Philemon “throws little light on Paul’s attitude to the institution of slavery,” it brings “the institution into an atmosphere where it could only wilt and die.”²⁹

After all, the same *κοινωνία* that enabled Philemon and Onesimus to be reconciled could not help but destroy the dynamics of slavery within the kingdom of God and body of Christ – where “there is no longer slave or free,” but all are “one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). According to the world, Onesimus belonged to Philemon as a slave. According to Christ, they belonged to one another as brothers. Although here in Philemon, as elsewhere (cf. Col 3:22-4:1), Paul stops short of prohibiting slavery, it is clear that he understood the gospel of Jesus Christ inescapably to transform the divisive condition of humanity into a restored, eternal unity which transcended all temporal divisions (cf. 1 Cor 7:17-24; Col 3:11). Paul’s tactful requests reveal that the bond between Philemon and Onesimus as brothers in the Lord (Philem 16) was far stronger than the social expectations of master and slave.

Transcending the issue of slavery – yet simultaneously striking at its very core – Paul’s masterfully crafted epistle to Philemon reminds Christians in every age to apply consistently the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ to their relationships, in spite of individualism’s siren song, which might tempt them to manipulate and dominate instead of to mutually belong to one another in *κοινωνία*. Furthermore, readers of Paul’s letter to Philemon should follow his peace-making example by seeking to be ministers of reconciliation in their respective contexts – no matter how discordant or seemingly insignificant. This brief letter thus coheres with the biblical theme of unity. Because God is one, his people are called to be one as well – a community of forgiven women and men, Jews and Gentiles, even slaves and masters who forgive each other’s debts and refresh each other’s hearts in the *κοινωνία* of their faith in Jesus their Messiah.³⁰

²⁷ Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, 323.

²⁸ Although an analysis of first century slavery far exceeds the scope of this essay, a potential aid in differentiating between ancient and modern slavery when it comes to Philemon is Gombis’ critique of the consensus view’s failure to acknowledge Paul’s language of ἀδελφὸν...ἐν σαρκί at Philem 16. It is likely that Philemon and Onesimus’ relationship was different than that between a normal master and slave. See T.G. Gombis, “Philemon and Onesimus: ‘Brothers in the Flesh’” (paper presented at the International Meeting of the SBL, St. Andrews, Scotland, 11 July, 2013).

²⁹ Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 197-8. Similarly, Wright notes that, although “inveighing against slavery *per se* [at the time] would have been totally ineffective,” Paul’s subtler message mimics Christ’s approach to cosmic change from the bottom up, from the inside out. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 168-9.

³⁰ Cf. Deut 6:4; John 17:20-23; Eph 4:1-6.