

12b. Letter to Philemon



*The Shortest of Paul's Letters, Philemon Is
Elusive and Its Contents Controversial*

Occasional Situation of Philemon



Cast of Characters and Situation



- ☞ **Onesimus**: Seemingly a slave (*onesimos* in Greek means “useful!”), he has been converted by Paul
- ☞ **Philemon**: recipient of the letter, he is a prominent citizen of the city of Colossae in Asia Minor and seems to have hosted a house-church in his home
- ☞ **Apphia**: probably Philemon’s wife
- ☞ **Archippus**: an associate in Colossae, perhaps Philemon’s son
- ☞ Onesimus is with Paul but previously **somehow wronged or displeased Philemon**, who may have been his master
 - ☞ Does this necessarily mean that Onesimus has run away? Could he instead have been sent to Paul by Philemon as the Philippians had sent Epaphroditus?
 - ☞ *Although Paul has found Onesimus “useful” and would like to keep him, he has decided to send him back Philemon*

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Slavery in the Ancient World

- ☞ **Jewish Slavery**
 - ☞ Recognized in the Law of Moses (do not covet neighbor’s slaves)
 - ☞ Not Racial
 - ☞ Temporary (6 years unless the slave decided to remain permanently)
 - ☞ Unequal but not necessarily abusive (ex. of Abraham and Eleazar)
- ☞ **Roman Slavery** (Greek practices largely conformed in this period)
 - ☞ Not Racial
 - ☞ causes included debt, kidnapping, war, birth in slavery
 - ☞ some 10 million slaves out of a population of 60 million
 - ☞ **Master owned the slave and the slave’s labor**
 - ☞ *Onesimus’ truancy was costing his master money!*
 - ☞ Various Degrees of Hardship and Oppression
 - ☞ Labor-intensive slavery – mines, agricultural gangs – was severe
 - ☞ **Domestic slaves were usually an extended part of the family**
 - ☞ Some slaves were well-educated and hired as tutors
 - ☞ Some slaves were more educated than their masters
 - ☞ Slaves could own property (even their own slaves!)
 - ☞ **Frequently manumitted, after which they became citizens**
 - ☞ Imperial slaves and freedmen (*familia Caesaris*) held important governmental positions

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Overview of Philippians



- ☞ Date and Place of Origin: **Open** (another imprisonment letter)
 - ☞ **c. 56 if from Ephesus**
 - ☞ *particularly likely since Colossae, presumed to be the home of Philemon, is reasonably close to Ephesus*
 - ☞ 58–60 if from Caesarea
 - ☞ **61–63 if from Rome** (or 65–67 if during a “second imprisonment”)
 - ☞ *Many of the individuals listed below are also mentioned in Colossians, a letter more probably written from one of Paul’s later imprisonments*
- ☞ Audience: **Philemon**, head of a house-church; **Apphia** (probably his wife); **Archippus** (perhaps his son), and the branch in his house
- ☞ Form: **An intercessory letter** (more below)
- ☞ Authenticity, Unity, and Integrity: not disputed
- ☞ Purpose: To intercede on behalf of **Onesimus**, a slave, with his master, Philemon

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Literary Questions about Philemon



What kind of letter is it? What kind of writing and rhetoric does Paul use in it? How is the letter structured?

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Tone and Type of Letter



- ☞ Unusually deferential and indirect language and the fact that this is a one-sided conversation makes it difficult to know exactly what is going on
- ☞ Paul uses established **rhetorical** techniques (middle to high level of rhetorical, relatively flowery)
- ☞ As **an intercessory letter** Paul:
 - ☞ Speaks deferentially to Philemon, even flattering him
 - ☞ Speaks obliquely of his own apostolic authority

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Structure of Philemon



- ☞ **Opening Formula** (1:1-3)
- ☞ **Thanksgiving** (1:4-7)
- ☞ **Body** (1:8-22)
 - ☞ **Plea for Onesimus** (1:8-21)
 - ☞ Appeal offering motives to Philemon (1:8-16)
 - ☞ Reiteration and expansion of appeal, a personal favor (1:17-21)
 - ☞ **Personal Request** (1:22)
 - ☞ Asks that a guestroom be prepared for his future visit
- ☞ **Concluding Formula** (1:23-25)

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Content of and Issues Suggested by Philemon



*“For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldst receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?”
(Philemon 1:15–16)*

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Paul's Plea for Onesimus

(1:8–21)



- ☞ “For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 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.**” (1:8-9 NRSV)
 - ☞ Emotional and personal appeals were acceptable and expected in such letters of intercession
- ☞ “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was **useless** to you, but now he has become **useful** both to you and to me. I am sending him – **who is my very heart** – back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me **so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.** But **I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.**” (1:10-14 NIV)
 - ☞ Plays on the name Onesimos or “useful”
 - ☞ What does Paul actually want Philemon to do when Onesimus returns?

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Reiteration and Expansion of Appeal

(1:17-21)



- ☞ “If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.” (1:18)
 - ☞ Some assume that Onesimus had stolen something when he ran away, but this could also be that the master was owed for the lost labor in the time that the slave was away
- ☞ “I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. **I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.**”
 - ☞ Paul is willing to pay what Onesimus owes . . .
 - ☞ . . . But he “passes over” mentioning that **Philemon owes Paul his very salvation** for having taught him the gospel!
- ☞ “I am writing with complete confidence in your compliance, **sure that you will do even more than I ask.**” (1:21 NJB)

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The Bigger Issue: Paul and Slavery



- ☞ Remember the differences between ancient slavery and the racial slavery of the antebellum American South
 - ☞ *For domestics like Onesimus, slavery was more of a contractual occupation*
- ☞ **Apocalyptic approach:** since Christ was coming soon, some unjust societal structures could be allowed to stand **until he returned and abolished them**
 - ☞ *Overturning the massive Roman societal institution of slavery was not feasible in the limited time before Christ came*
- ☞ **Our temporal state is actually not as important as our spiritual state**
 - ☞ *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free (i.e. slave or freeman), there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28)*
 - ☞ *“Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters. **In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.**” (1 Cor 7:20-24 NJB)*
- ☞ Paul will actually have **hinting that Philemon not only receive Onesimus back as a Christian but even free him**
 - ☞ *“I am writing with complete confidence in your compliance, sure that you will do even more than I ask.” (1:21 NJB)*

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Results



- ☞ Paul's "reserving a guest room" (1:22) suggested that he was coming to check on Philemon's treatment of Onesimus
- ☞ **What happened to Philemon and Onesimus?**
 - ☞ "That Philemon reacted generously is almost certain, or the letter would not have been preserved" (Brown *INT*, 506)
 - ☞ **Subsequent career of Onesimus**
 - ☞ Colossians 4:9 has Onesimus serving as one of Paul's official envoys
 - ☞ Ignatius of Antioch claims that Onesimus was bishop of Ephesus in A.D. 110 (Eph. 1:3)
- ☞ **What is there for the modern reader to learn? (exposition)**
 - ☞ Masters and slaves (today, employers and employees) need to be fair and honest in their work
 - ☞ All are servants of Christ, and all should be servants of each other