

EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON

Approximate date: 60-62 C.E.

Time period: Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, during an era of runaway slaves

Author: the Apostle Paul

Location of author: Rome (majority), Ephesus or Caesarea (minority)

Target audience and location: Philemon, from Colossae or Lycus Valley

People:

Paul, Philemon, Onesimus, Apphia, Archippus

People mentioned:

Yeshua the Messiah, Timothy, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke (cf. Colossians 1:7)

Places:

Colossae, Rome

Key Themes:

thanksgiving to God for Philemon / appeal to Philemon to forgive Onesimus and treat him as a brother / Paul shows confidence in Philemon

Key Scriptures: Philemon 1:15-16 / **Greeting** (vs. 1-3); **Commentation of**

Philemon (vs. 4-7); **An Apology for Onesimus** (vs. 8-22); **Conclusion** (vs. 23-25)¹

Theological Summary: The author of the letter to Philemon is identified in the text as the Apostle Paul (vs. 1, 9, 19), and there are presently no serious challenges to genuine Pauline authorship of the letter among either conservative or liberal interpreters. The letter to Philemon is commonly classified among the Prison Epistles (also including Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians). The Epistle to Philemon is the shortest of all of the Pauline letters.

Paul writes this letter to Philemon, who was a Greek Believer in the Lycus Valley, adjacent to Colossae. Philemon was a slave owner (cf. Colossians 4:1), but had a fellowship of Messiah followers meeting in his home. According to the traditional view of composition, Philemon's slave Onesimus had either been stolen from him, or he somehow ran away,

¹ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 666-667.

eventually making it all the way to Rome (v. 18).² Later, Onesimus himself somehow encountered Paul while in Rome, and became a Believer in Yeshua. As a slave, Onesimus needed to be returned back to his owner Philemon. Paul writes to Philemon, appealing for him to accept Onesimus as a fellow brother (v. 16), encouraging Philemon that Onesimus is now one who is quite “profitable” (v. 11), as his name means (v. 10). Paul asks Philemon to cancel the debt that has been incurred by Onesimus (vs. 18-20).

The composition of Philemon is directly tied to that of Colossians, as the same company of people are listed as extending greetings to Philemon, as in Colossians (Colossians 1:1; 4:7-17; cf. Philemon 2, 23, 24). This would place Philemon’s composition in approximately 60-62 C.E., and many would agree that it was written from Rome during Paul’s first imprisonment. Some expositors differ, advocating that Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus, or even possibly that this was the letter “written from Laodicea” (cf. Colossians 4:16),³ but the widespread conservative position favors a Roman origin for the epistle.⁴

No scholar or theologian has ever dreamed of proposing a Hebrew or Aramaic origin for the Epistle to Philemon. This is impossible for any number of important reasons. Both Philemon and Onesimus, the runaway slave, would have been Greek speakers. While Paul’s ability to communicate as an able Jewish teacher is present in the text, so is his ability to compose letters in Greek style. “Only recently...have scholars shown the strong influence of Greek rhetorical conventions on Paul’s masterful argumentation in Plmn, in particular the genre of deliberative rhetoric...By use of skillful appeals to the reason, the emotions, and the character of their hearers, rhetoricians sought to establish two motives for action: maintaining honor and gaining advantage” (*ABD*).⁵ What is intriguing about the composition of Philemon is that Paul, as a Jew from the Diaspora and a Pharisee, was able to communicate very eloquently to a wealthy Asiatic Greek, who came to faith in Israel’s Messiah.

The Epistle to Philemon reveals some very important historical data about the early Messianic community, including the fact that they largely met in homes. This was patterned after the Jewish synagogues, which in many Diaspora cities met in homes, with the exception of where there was a large Jewish community.

The Epistle to Philemon has presented many challenges for Christians over the centuries, and even more challenges for those living in the modern age. Roman law in the First Century required strict punishment for any runaway slave. Many questions have arisen when interpreting what Paul means by his letter. Is Paul urging moderation on the part of Philemon toward Onesimus? Does Paul support slavery? Does Paul write this letter so Onesimus can be freed by Philemon? Is Paul indifferent to slavery?⁶ “The letter effectively

² Cf. Carson and Moo, pp 590-592.

³ Cf. M.E. Lyman, “Philemon, Letter to,” in *IDB*, 3:783.

It is the author’s opinion that the actual letter from Laodicea was probably the general epistle that was later designated as “Ephesians.”

⁴ C.J. Hemer, “Philemon, Epistle to,” in *ISBE*, 3:831-832.

⁵ S. Scott Bartchy, “Philemon, Epistle to,” in *ABD*, 5:306.

⁶ Cf. Lyman, “Philemon, Letter to,” in *IDB*, 3:783-784; Hemer, “Philemon, Epistle to,” in *ISBE*, 3:832; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 665-666; Bartchy, “Philemon, Epistle to,” in *ABD*, 5:308-309; A. Patzia, “Philemon, Letter to,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 706; Carson and Moo, pp 593-594.

shaped early Christian attitudes toward slavery for four centuries. On the one hand it supported laws on slavery respecting the return of runaway slaves; on the other it challenged conventional mores by calling for a new sense of brotherhood” (*IDBSup*).⁷

Some Reformed theologians of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries actually used Philemon as a support for the institution of slavery, as Paul did not directly address the issue in his letter. Likewise, many other theologians of the same period used Philemon as a support for abolitionism. Perhaps the question of slavery is not easily answered from Philemon as we have no extant information on how Onesimus became a slave. Did he become a slave because of an indebtedness he was trying to pay off, or was he a slave because of some military campaign against an oppressed people? Likewise, we have no extant data on who Philemon was, other than him being a wealthy man. We do not specifically know how he accumulated this wealth, or what his occupation was.

Because of the lack of information we have on Philemon’s and Onesimus’ backgrounds, many take a moderate stance, which is that Paul’s opinion relating to Onesimus’ state as a new Believer required Philemon to free him.⁸ So, the First Century *ekklēsia* should have freed slaves who came to faith, but not necessarily those who did not come to faith. Of course, any exegesis of Philemon must be tempered by the fact that Onesimus was not a slave like the Ancient Israelites were in Egypt. Rather than helping to run the Egyptian Empire, Onesimus was probably a household servant or field laborer, and his owner saw that all of his needs were met.

There has never been a huge amount of Messianic examination, or even consideration, for the Epistle to Philemon.⁹

Bibliography

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⁷ W.G. Rollins, “Philemon, Letter to,” in *IDBSup*, 663.

⁸ Lyman, “Philemon, Letter to,” in *IDB*, 3:782; Morna D. Hooker, “Philemon,” in *ECB*, pp 1447-1448.

⁹ Consult the author’s commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic* for a more detailed examination of Philemon.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION ON PHILEMON:

1. In light of the Torah's instructions about slavery, what do you think that Paul's position on slavery was? How does Paul handle the issue of Onesimus in light of the Torah, which seemingly permits slavery? (Be honest if you have never considered the subject.)

REFLECTION ON PHILEMON'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading Paul's letter to Philemon: