

Introduction to Philemon

Authorship

The authenticity of this letter as a Pauline composition has received little challenge. There is nothing linguistically, historically or theologically about the letter to suggest that anyone but Paul was its author.

Manuscript History

The earliest manuscript dates to the third century. The earliest manuscript is:

P87, or Köln Inst. für Altertumskunde Inv. 12, now housed in Köln, contains Philemon 1:13-15, 24-25. This manuscript has been dated paleographically to the third century.

All of the other many manuscripts date later than this one.

Canon

This letter was included both in Marcion's early collection of Paul's letters and the Muratorian Canon. It was universally regarded as authentic in the early Church.

Setting

The letter was most likely composed while Paul was under house arrest in Rome, about AD 61-63. It was sent to Philemon, a resident of Colossae in Phrygia, to encourage him in a tactful way to receive back into his home one Onesimus, a slave of Philemon's who had run away.

Outline

- I. Salutation (1-3)
- II. Philemon's Love and Faith (4-7)
- III. Paul Pleads for Onesimus (8-22)
- IV. Final Greetings (23-25)

Further Readings

Non-LDS Sources

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Letter to Philemon*. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2000

LDS Sources

Anderson, Richard Lloyd. *Understanding Paul*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983.

Brandt, Edward J., J. Lewis Taylor, and Lane Johnson. "New Testament Backgrounds: Thessalonians through Hebrews." *Ensign* 6 (April 1976): 56-59.

Sperry, Sidney B. *Paul's Life and Letters*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955.

The Epistle of Paul to Philemon

Salutation

¹ PAUL,¹ a prisoner² of Jesus Christ,³ and Timothy⁴ *our*⁵ brother,⁶ unto Philemon⁷ our dearly beloved,⁸ and fellowlabourer,⁹ ² And to *our* beloved Apphia,¹⁰ and Archippus¹¹ our fellowsoldier,¹² and to the church in thy house:¹³ ³ Grace to you,¹⁴ and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philemon's Love and Faith

⁴ I thank¹⁵ my God, making mention¹⁶ of thee¹⁷ always in my prayers, ⁵ Hearing¹⁸ of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints,¹⁹ ⁶

¹ IE from Paul.

² The historical context makes it clear this is literal, not metaphorical. Paul wrote this letter from prison; if from Ephesus, around AD 56 to 57, and if from Rome, some time between AD 61 and 63. (The colophon at the end of the chapter claims that the letter was written from Rome, but such colophons are comparatively late and not determinative of such matters.) Rome is the most likely point of origin of the letter.

³ IE for the sake of, on account of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Paul's most trusted missionary companion; two of Paul's letters to Timothy are preserved in the NT.

⁵ The word "our" is in italics and thus is not lit. present in the GR. The GR simply says "the brother."

⁶ Not lit., but as a term of colloquial affection for a fellow Christian, much as we use the expression brother (and sister) in the Church today.

⁷ The person to whom the letter was directed; a convert of Paul's who lived in Colossae of Phrygia. The name means something like "affectionate one"

⁸ Typical wording for the beginning of a personal letter, much as we continue to use "Dear" in letters today.

⁹ συνεργός *sunergos* fellow-worker.

¹⁰ The GR reads "to Apphia the sister." Therefore, while one cannot tell from the KJV, Apphia was clearly a woman, and may have been Philemon's wife.

¹¹ Otherwise unknown, but possibly a close friend or the son of Philemon and Apphia.

¹² Or "comrade in arms," a martial metaphor, as in "Onward, Christian Soldiers."

¹³ The church at Colossae met at Philemon's home, just as in our day it is common for young branches to meet in people's homes. These are often referred to as "house churches." Note that "thy" is singular, referring specifically to Philemon.

¹⁴ The pronoun "you" is always plural in the KJV, and so includes Apphia and Archippus as well as Philemon. If Philemon alone were meant, the word used would have been "thee."

¹⁵ εὐχαριστῶ *eucharistō* I thank. From this verb we get ENG "Eucharist."

¹⁶ The participle here is probably to be understood temporally, and would be better rendered "I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers," as in the RSV.

That the communication of thy faith²⁰ may become effectual²¹ by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you²² in Christ Jesus. ⁷ For we²³ have²⁴ great joy and consolation²⁵ in thy²⁶ love, because the bowels²⁷ of the saints are refreshed by thee,²⁸ brother.

Paul Pleads for Onesimus

⁸ Wherefore,²⁹ though³⁰ I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin³¹ thee that which is convenient,³² ⁹ Yet for love's sake³³ I rather beseech *thee*,³⁴ being such an one as Paul

¹⁷ Singular, and thus Philemon specifically.

¹⁸ This participle is probably to be taken as causal: "because I hear of your love. . .".

¹⁹ The Greek prepositions here vary in such a way as to suggest that this passage is meant to be taken chiasmically, as follows:

A your love
B and of the faith which you have
B in the Lord Jesus
A and for all the saints.

That is, he *loves* the saints and has *faith* in Jesus. The GR word rendered "saints" is *ἁγίους* *hagious* holy ones. The word is used, however, simply to mean Christians, without regard to eminent spiritual attainments, which is the way we use the word when describing ourselves as "saints" today.

²⁰ "Communication" here is a KJV archaism. Render either "sharing in your faith" (if the genitive is objective) or "fellowship inspired by your faith" (if the genitive is subjective).

²¹ OR operative, effective.

²² Note that the pronoun is plural and does not refer to Philemon specifically. Further, textual evidence suggests that the pronoun originally at this point was first person, "us."

²³ The GR has a first person singular here, "I." The KJV translators have put the verb in the plural in the royal sense; Paul is the intended subject.

²⁴ OR acquired, got, derived.

²⁵ *παράκλησις* *paraklēsīs* is related to the word translated "Comforter" in the Gospel of John.

²⁶ IE Philemon's.

²⁷ Used metaphorically of the seat of emotion; the equivalent in our culture would be the "heart."

²⁸ IE through Philemon's charitable acts.

²⁹ "For these reasons" or "accordingly," because of the love and faith shown and engendered by Philemon.

³⁰ The participle is properly interpreted by the KJV translators as a concessive.

³¹ OR command.

³² A KJV archaism. Not "easy," but rather "that which is proper, right, fitting, appropriate."

³³ Because Philemon has shown love, and because what Paul is about to ask him to do will require love.

the aged,³⁵ and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ I beseech³⁶ thee for my son Onesimus,³⁷ whom I have begotten³⁸ in my bonds.^{39 11} Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable⁴⁰ to thee and to me:¹² Whom I have sent again:⁴¹ thou⁴² therefore receive him, that is,⁴³ mine own bowels:^{44 13} Whom I would have retained with me,⁴⁵ that in thy stead⁴⁶ he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:^{47 14} But without thy mind⁴⁸ would I do nothing; that thy benefit⁴⁹ should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.^{50 15} For perhaps he therefore departed⁵¹ for a season,⁵² that thou shouldest receive⁵³ him for ever;^{54 16} Not now as a servant,⁵⁵ but above a servant, a

³⁴ OR I prefer to appeal to you. That is, Paul could command Philemon in this matter, but he would rather make an appeal. (As they say, you get more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.) Note that "thee" is italicized and is not literally present in the GR, but is implicit.

³⁵ This could be a reference to Paul being an old man at the time this letter is written (which might support the view that it was written in Rome during the 60's). Some understand the word "aged" to mean "ambassador" and render "an ambassador, and now also a prisoner, of Jesus Christ."

³⁶ OR appeal to.

³⁷ A slave belonging to Philemon who had run away, and the subject of this letter.

³⁸ Not literally, but by converting him. Compare this from the Mishnah: "If one teaches the son of his neighbor the law, the Scripture reckons this the same as though he had begotten him."

³⁹ IE in prison.

⁴⁰ This is a play on the name "Onesimus," which means "helpful, profitable, useful." Onesimus was a common name given to slaves of the time. Onesimus has now become really useful (not only in name), both because of his service to Paul in prison and because he is now a Christian brother.

⁴¹ IE whom I send back [with this letter].

⁴² IE Philemon.

⁴³ OR in other words.

⁴⁴ Comparable to "my own heart" in our culture.

⁴⁵ Paul would have been happy to retain the services of Onesimus for himself.

⁴⁶ Better, "on your behalf." The suggestion is not that Philemon should personally be serving Paul in prison, but that as Philemon's slave the service of Onesimus to Paul is tantamount to a gift from Philemon to Paul.

⁴⁷ IE in this imprisonment incurred through preaching the gospel (as in verse 1). One should not read this to imply that living the gospel is like being in prison.

⁴⁸ OR without your consent.

⁴⁹ OR goodness.

⁵⁰ The service of Onesimus to Paul counts less as a gift to Paul or as evidence of Philemon's goodness if it comes about by compulsion rather than through the free will of Philemon.

⁵¹ Euphemistic for ran away.

⁵² IE a little while.

⁵³ IE as payment in full.

⁵⁴ An eternal possession, not by legal bond, but in the fellowship of the gospel.

brother⁵⁶ beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee,⁵⁷ both in the flesh, and in the Lord?⁵⁸

¹⁷ If thou count⁵⁹ me therefore a partner,⁶⁰ receive⁶¹ him as myself. ¹⁸ If he hath wronged⁶² thee, or oweth⁶³ thee ought,⁶⁴ put that on mine account;⁶⁵ ¹⁹ I Paul⁶⁶ have written *it* with mine own hand,⁶⁷ I will repay *it*: albeit I do not say⁶⁸ to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self⁶⁹ besides. ²⁰ Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.⁷⁰

²¹ Having confidence⁷¹ in thy obedience I wrote⁷² unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.⁷³ ²² But withal⁷⁴ prepare me also a lodging:⁷⁵ for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.⁷⁶

Final Greetings

²³ There salute thee Epaphras,⁷⁷ my fellowprisoner⁷⁸ in Christ Jesus; ²⁴ Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas,⁷⁹ my fellowlabourers. ²⁵ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.⁸⁰

⁵⁵ A common KJV euphemism for "slave."

⁵⁶ Through the conversion of Onesimus to the gospel.

⁵⁷ This is called an *a fortiori* ("from the stronger") argument. If his conversion to the gospel is meaningful to me, how much more so to you?

⁵⁸ IE as a man and as a Christian.

⁵⁹ IE hold, regard.

⁶⁰ IE one who shares in the faith.

⁶¹ OR welcome.

⁶² OR injured.

⁶³ An oblique reference to the possibility that Onesimus took some of his master's funds when he ran away. This could also refer to reparations to which Philemon would normally be entitled under Roman law.

⁶⁴ OR anything.

⁶⁵ Paul offers to reimburse Philemon for any monetary damage Onesimus may have caused.

⁶⁶ This construction was the equivalent of a signature in antiquity.

⁶⁷ This wording evokes the formal phrasing of a legally binding note.

⁶⁸ This is a rhetorical device called preterition. By effecting *not* to mention it, Paul in fact gives it emphasis.

⁶⁹ Presumably, Paul converted Philemon as well, so Paul reminds Philemon that he owes his very soul to him.

⁷⁰ See notes on v. 7.

⁷¹ A causal participle: "because I have confidence."

⁷² OR I am writing.

⁷³ This may be a gentle hint that Philemon should grant Onesimus his freedom.

⁷⁴ OR at the same time.

⁷⁵ IE a guest room.

⁷⁶ Paul suggests he hopes to be granted his freedom and may be visiting soon, subtly suggesting that he will see for himself how Philemon chooses to deal with Onesimus.

*Written from Rome to Philemon, by Onesimus, a servant.*⁸¹

⁷⁷ The man who introduced the gospel at Colossae.

⁷⁸ Apparently, several men took turns sharing Paul's imprisonment and administering to his needs, rather as was the case with Joseph Smith at Carthage jail.

⁷⁹ This list includes the evangelists Mark and Luke. Aristarchus is one of the men who, like Epaphras, shared Paul's imprisonment. Demas is mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:10.

⁸⁰ A typical farewell benediction.

⁸¹ This last italicized sentence is called a colophon, derived from GR, meaning something like "finishing touch." It gives basic information regarding authorship and place of writing. The colophons printed in the KJV derive from later mss. of the NT books, and it is uncertain to what extent they preserve information appended to the original or earliest mss. If accurate, this colophon reports that Paul wrote this letter in Rome and sent it to Philemon by the hand of Onesimus himself.