

Intro to Philemon

Traditional Interpretation

- Onesimus stole from his master, Philemon
- Ran away and met Paul in Rome, became a Christian
- Paul sent Onesimus back with the letter appealing Philemon to accept him back

Traditional Interpretation Challenged

- Coincidence in meeting Paul?
- Rhetorical theory - Paul's request for Philemon to release Onesimus as a slave for himself
- Social scientific approach - unlikely that Onesimus is not a Christ-follower in a Christian household

Newer Interpretation

- Onesimus is a believer (cf. v. 10 - became my son - does this mean conversion?)
- There is conflict between him and Philemon
- He runs to seek for Paul to be mediator
- Paul finds Onesimus to be useful, sending him back only to ask Philemon to release Onesimus as a slave and to send him back for Paul (vv. 20-21)

Newer Interpretation

- Onesimus may be a believer
- There is conflict between him and Philemon - perhaps mismanagement in financial transaction (Col 3:22-25? Philemon 18)
- He runs to seek for Paul to be mediator so that he could return to his master under more favourable conditions
- Paul attempts to ask Philemon to reconcile with Onesimus

Pliny the younger

To Sabinianus. Your freedman, whom you lately mentioned as having displeased you, has been with me; he threw himself at my feet and clung there with as much submission as he could have done at yours. He earnestly requested me with many tears, and even with the eloquence of silent sorrow, to intercede for him; in short, he convinced me by his whole behaviour that he sincerely repents of his fault. - *Letters* 9.21

Pliny the Younger

- Pliny pleads with Sabinianus to forgive his freedman, even though as a master, he has every right to be angry
- Pliny wants to request rather than compel Sabinianus to forgive the slave
- Many striking similarities in content and rhetorical strategy in Pliny's letter and Paul's letter to Philemon

Onesimus

- Possibility that Onesimus is a "fugitive" seeking our Paul as someone both he and Philemon would respect to intercede for him.
- His goal is not to run away but to seek help to return to his master under better circumstances

Paul

- Paul endeavours to reconcile both Onesimus and Philemon on the ground of their common relationship in Christ
- Ref to Col 4:1 - "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven"
- Ref to Col 3:22-25 - ref to Onesimus?
- Col 3:11?

Institution of slavery

- How does one become a slave?
 - ▶ being sold into slavery
 - ▶ voluntarily - for upward social mobility
 - ▶ born into family of slaves

Institution of slavery

- How does one redeem oneself?
 - ▶ upon death of the master in his will
 - ▶ slave could buy his own release (typically for household slaves)
 - ▶ pleading with other master to manumit him

Slavery

- The mark of a slave
- The efforts of redeeming oneself from slavery - see the marble reliefs

Lucius Ampudius Philomusus, a freed slave with his wife and daughter (approx. 15BCE-5CE)
On both sides are corn measures, showing that he was a corn trader



Marble relief with portraits of the freedmen Publius Licinius Philonicus and Publius Licinius Demetrius (Rome, 30-10 BCE). On the left are axes used in the ceremony of freeing the slaves. In the pediment are tools of a smith or moneyer. On the right, tools of a carpenter.



Content

- To win Philemon's willing acceptance of Onesimus, Paul writes very tactfully by using word play
 - ▶ useless vs. useful (v 11)
 - ▶ Onesimus (useful/bring profit or advantage) - v. 20 - 'I may have some benefit from you'

Content

- Paul also includes the entire church (including other slaves as well?) in his address (v. 1-2), suggesting that the letter is to be read publicly as well

Content

- The appeal (vv. 4-21) is organized in a way prescribed by ancient Greek and Roman teachers:
 - ▶ to build rapport (vv. 4-10) - ethos
 - v 6 - 'active in sharing your faith' (NIV) corrected in NIV11 - 'partnership with us in the faith' - literally in Greek : κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς (fellowship of faith) - faith that unites in fellowship

Content

- The appeal (vv. 4-21) is organized in a way prescribed by ancient Greek and Roman teachers:
 - ▶ to persuade the mind (vv. 11-19) - logos
 - ▶ to move the emotions (vv. 20-21) - pathos

Content

- Philemon will have Onesimus back not only as a slave, but a brother (v. 16).

Content

- Onesimus is not mentioned until the rapport has been built (v. 10), and the appeal itself is stated only near the end of the section to persuade the mind (v. 17).

Content

- The central meaning and purpose of the letter to Philemon concern the difference the transforming power of the gospel can make in the lives and relationships of believers, regardless of class or other distinctions.
- Master-slave status remains, but how both relate to one another changes.

Group Exercise

Imagine you belong to the following social location in the church that meets in the house of Philemon. After you have heard the letter being read, what would be your response? How do you think this letter would affect and impact you?

- Philemon
- Master of other household
- Slaves in the household
- Onesimus

Questions

- Paul's letter placed Philemon in a difficult situation.
 - ▶ What would be the social implication if Philemon responded positively to Paul's letter?
 - ▶ How would this affect the slavery institution in the Greco-Roman world?
 - ▶ Did Philemon respond positively to Paul?

Ignatius

- Letter from Ignatius to the church at Ephesus:
- "In God's name I have received your whole multitude in the person of Onesimus whose love passes utterance and who is moreover your bishop." (Ignatius, *Ephesians* 1:3)

Theology of Philemon

- New Humanity in Christ - reconciliation with God
- New Humanity as family - use of fictive kinship/familial metaphors - reconciliation with one another
- New Humanity, Masters, and Slaves