

# Good for You

## Philemon 1: 10-19

### I. Good for Me vs. 10-12

- a. My Child v.10
  - i. Begotten v.10
    - 1. Begotten - by exercising the role of a parental figure
    - 2. The relationship between Paul and Onesimus was strong, like a father and son
    - 3. The term “child” in v. 10 shows Paul’s close relationship with Onesimus.
- b. Useful v.11
  - i. Useless to you
    - 1. Useless- **to not serving any beneficial purpose**
  - ii. In Prison
    - 1. For the Gospel v.13
  - iii. Useful to Me
    - a. Useful Once Onesimus was “useless”; now he was “useful.” The name “Onesimus” means *profitable*, and perhaps the play on words continues. Some point out that Phrygian slaves were notoriously useless as a class
    - 2. Keep with me to minister v.13
      - a. Keep – to desire
        - i. Paul (not Onesimus) who remained so undecided for so long. Likewise *πρὸς ἑμαυτόν* might be better translated “for myself,” indicating that Paul’s appreciation of Onesimus’s “usefulness” could all too easily in Paul’s mind have outweighed the more speculative usefulness of Onesimus to Philemon (v. 11).
        - ii. The language Paul chooses suggests that the decision to send Onesimus back was not easily or quickly made. The imperfect tense (“I was wanting”) implies a period during which Paul weighed the consequences of his action and during which the value of Onesimus’s presence was a considerable factor in his deliberation
    - b. Minister - suggests that Onesimus can be used by Paul on assignment in behalf of the gospel

- c. Paul saw many ways Onesimus could be of service to him in his imprisonment. Their fellowship was good, and he lifted Paul's spirits at a difficult time. Paul wished he could have kept Onesimus in Rome
  - iv. I sent My very Heart – the feeling of love v.12
    - 1. I sent
      - a. Some point out that the term "I send" connotes a legal environment. The word often has the meaning of "send up" rather than "send back." They suggest that the term fittingly described an appeal to a higher court or a higher authority. It fits well with the many financial and legal terms of the passage which, according to some, make the letter formal and legal
    - 2. My heart
      - a. Paul's strong ties with Onesimus were described as "bowels" ("heart," NIV), the word for strong emotions.
        - i. Was it a sign of his effectiveness in prison
      - b. This is another miracle of Christianity: a runaway slave and (possible) thief became the joy of the aged apostle. Paul's words convey a note of intensity. He sent him even though it was like sending Philemon his heart

## II. What is Good vs. 13-15

- a. For the Gospel v.13
  - i. Onesimus traveled home with Tychicus, one of Paul's companions (Col 4:7), and on the way they delivered the letters to Ephesus, Colossae, and Laodicea.
  - ii. "In chains for the gospel" is another not too subtle attempt to remind Philemon that Paul's need (of Onesimus) was greater than Philemon's since Paul was in prison in chains: Onesimus could make up for some of Paul's lack of freedom of movement. Furthermore, Paul's commission to forward the gospel (see on Col. 1:5) was still active, and Onesimus could assist Paul in this in different ways. His usefulness to Paul "in chains for the gospel" outweighed his value to Philemon as a house slave. Passages from Ignatius are regularly quoted in comparison, particularly *Ephesians* 11:2: "In him I carry about my chains, the spiritual pearls in which may it be granted me to rise again through your prayers"
  - iii. Onesimus traveled home with Tychicus, one of Paul's companions (Col 4:7), and on the way they delivered the letters to Ephesus, Colossae, and Laodicea.
- b. For Onesimus

- i. Onesimus - Onesimus” means literally “useful.” This allows Paul the appropriate pun,
  - 1. Paul makes it clear that he is sending Onesimus back not because of such legal obligations, but because of Onesimus’s new status: wrongs done among fellow believers had to be sorted out as among fellow believers (v. 16; cf. 1 Cor. 6:1–8). It had been particularly hard for Paul to take this step, being as isolated as he was in prison (cf. vv. 23–24 and Col. 4:10–14), and because Onesimus had come to mean so much to him. Here Paul screws the emotional intensity to a new pitch, calling Onesimus his very heart a part of myself”
- ii. Without Consent - in the sense *without your input*
  - 1. First is a contrast between “I would have liked to keep him with me” and “I did not want to do anything without your consent.” The first term, *eboulomēn*, means to “will,” and the second, *ēthelēsa*, means “to wish.” Any difference in meaning, however, comes from the construction and context of this passage. There is a contrast in tenses: *eboulomēn* is imperfect; *ēthelēsa* is aorist. The tense contrasts an ongoing tendency with a decisive action, and it impacts semantics. By the first word (*eboulomēn*), Paul meant a process of wishing; by the second (*ēthelēsa*), he meant an act of choosing.
- c. For Philemon v.15
  - i. Free Will
  - ii. Back Forever
    - 1. The verse suggests that Onesimus stole from his master. For most interpreters that means both money and the labor Philemon had a right to expect from a slave. Forgiveness meant money, and money meant life. Paul asked Philemon to share his life with his runaway slave. Forgiveness also meant providing him the opportunity for a new start. Paul anticipated that in vv. 15–16

### III. Make Good vs. 16-19

- a. Appeal – v.10
  - i. “appeal” occurs (vv. 9, 10), and though it carries many shades of meaning, here it means *ask* or *beseech*
- b. No longer a slave
  - i. Beloved brother
    - 1. Paul looked beyond this earth and its relationships to other more important relationships. Onesimus was family—a brother
  - ii. In most cases, the relationship between servant and master suffered irreparable damage. This was different. Onesimus ran away, but now he would be a better servant—he would be more profitable and, therefore,

an asset to Philemon in time, as well as a brother for eternity. Paul assumed what he taught in Col 3:22–4:1. Christian slaves were better slaves because they worked for their heavenly Master. It was a triumph of God's grace that a disgruntled slave ran away and then voluntarily returned a better person, willing to serve both his earthly master and heavenly Master for good.

- c. Accept Him
  - i. Regard me as a Partner
  - ii. Philemon like Paul put the work of the gospel and care of the churches among his highest priorities, that gave Paul the stronger confidence that Philemon would know how to put the righting of Onesimus's wrong in its proper perspective
- d. Charge His wrongs against me
  - i. Wronged- *if he has caused you any loss*
  - ii. **to charge with a financial obligation, charge to the account of someone**
    - 1. His "account," therefore, meant that he was willing to assume an indebtedness for his newfound Christian friend. This assured Philemon that Paul fully expected him to forgive Onesimus his wrongs. He was prepared to get involved in the process financially, if necessary, for the reconciliation of the two men.
    - 2. Paul served as the agent of reconciliation. Perhaps in his mind his relationship to Christ demanded it. There is no better picture of what Jesus did for humanity than what Paul did and offered to do for Onesimus. He brought the offender to a point of reconciliation, and he embodied that reconciliation since both parties were intimately related to him.
- e. I will Repay it
  - i. Repay- **to make compensation, pay damages**
  - ii. The legal character of the procedure is put beyond doubt by Paul's use of ἀποτίνω, which occurs only here in the New Testament, but, once again, is common in the papyri as a legal technical term meaning "make compensation, pay the damages". Paul was not content to make promises and provide mere reassurances; rather, he undertakes the formal legal responsibility to make good whatever wrong Onesimus has done Philemon.
  - iii. The thought of indebtedness reminded Paul of Philemon's spiritual debt to Paul. Paul had taken the gospel to Philemon. This reveals Paul's perspective regarding material and spiritual matters

## The Purpose of the Letter

The letter makes clear the occasion for writing. Onesimus, slave of Philemon who was wealthy Christian convert in the Lycus valley, had run away from his master. After leaving his master, Onesimus became a Christian through his contact with Paul while Paul was in prison. He served Paul faithfully for a time (v. 13) but determined to return to Philemon to put his past life in order. Philemon was also converted to Christ by Paul, presumably while Paul was in Ephesus since Paul had not personally evangelized in the Lycus valley. A strong friendship developed, and Paul wrote to his good friend, urging him to forgive and accept Onesimus. Paul reminded Philemon of their relationship and suggested that his Christian commitment required such loving actions. Onesimus traveled home with Tychicus, one of Paul's companions (Col 4:7), and on the way they delivered the letters to Ephesus, Colossae, and Laodicea.

Paul wrote Philemon to implore him to forgive and receive his runaway slave, Onesimus (v. 10). No doubt when Onesimus determined to get matters straight at home, some fear entered his heart. Even though his master was a good man (vv. 4–7), as a runaway slave, Onesimus deserved punishment. If nothing else, he could be made an example to other slaves. Paul took the role of a mediator, imploring Philemon to have mercy on this new Christian. Perhaps the friendship between Philemon and Paul provided an avenue of approach.

A few commentators have challenged that purpose in writing. Some suggest that the real purpose was for Philemon to allow Onesimus to continue serving Paul. Thus, Paul really was asking for more than forgiveness and restitution: He was asking Philemon to read between the lines of vv. 13–14 and to donate Onesimus to Paul. This view does not fit well with the details of the text. First, Paul's statement of v. 21, "knowing that you will do even more than I ask," implies that his real request had been stated. What more could there be than sending Onesimus to Paul if that had been his concern? Second, in v. 15 Paul stated "that you might have him back for good." Onesimus was to remain at Philemon's house. Third, the four imperatives of the epistle speak to the reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus, never to any benefit Paul might derive from the relationship.<sup>19</sup>

Some scholars point to the idea of *koinōnia* ("fellowship") as the central purpose of the letter.<sup>20</sup> "Fellowship" means *interchange*. In this, Paul first presented the close ties between himself and Philemon (vv. 4–7). Then, Paul developed the strong relationship between himself and Onesimus (vv. 10–14). In this, both men had a debt of friendship to Paul, and both united "in Paul." Because of the close ties between Paul and each of them, close ties between Onesimus and Philemon were natural. This pictures believers and Christ. In different ways, both

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<sup>19</sup> The imperatives are: "welcome him as you would welcome me" (v. 17); "charge it to me" (v. 18); "refresh my heart in Christ" (v. 20); and "prepare a guest room for me" (v. 22). None of these explicitly suggest that Onesimus would have a future ministry with Paul. These insightful objections come from N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 169.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., M. D. Hooker, "Interchange in Christ" *JTS* 22 (1971): 360–61. Wright is supportive of this idea as well, 168.

God and humanity have close ties to Christ.<sup>311</sup> The differing parties come together in Christ, who is the meeting place between them. The interpretation is attractive, and it may reveal why the epistle has been so loved through the centuries.<sup>4</sup>

**8** Paul preferred to speak gently to Philemon. Philemon was a man of Christian character, and Paul approached him out of love (v. 7). Two ideas reinforce that conclusion in these verses: Paul's refusing to use his authority and Paul's situation as an old and imprisoned man.

Paul chose not to use his apostolic and ministerial authority. He did not hesitate to appeal to his calling as an apostle when the need demanded, and on occasion he reminded people that they were brought into the kingdom through his efforts. Here, he hoped for Philemon to respond out of generosity. "Generosity ought to be spontaneous, not forced, and Paul does not want to interfere with the workings of Providence."<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, he reminded him that he had the right to command. The phrase "I could be bold" (NIV) interprets the Greek concessively, "although I could be bold," but that may not be the correct understanding. Literally, it says, "having boldness in Christ to command you." Paul probably did remind Philemon of his rights which he refused to exercise.<sup>62</sup>

Paul could have commanded Philemon to "do what you ought to do." The word this translates, *anēkon*, occurs in Col 3:18 in speaking of the relationship of wives to their husbands. It speaks to what is proper because of the Christian order of things. The Christian realizes that God's economy differs from humanity's and certain things are inherently right. Treating a brother fairly and mercifully falls into that category. No Christian has the right to abuse another human being. Paul did not ask that Onesimus be released. He urged Philemon to respond to his Christian commitments and do what God expected. Paul subtly made his first point regarding accepting Onesimus.

**9** Philemon was to act in a Christian manner, but even that could be coerced. For that reason, Paul based his appeal on love.<sup>73</sup> He had a specific love in mind, that of vv. 5, 7. Philemon's love should prove true in this case, as it had in so many others.

As a second approach, Paul reminded Philemon of his situation as an aged and imprisoned man. Paul probably reinforced one of two truths in this approach. On one hand, he might have

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<sup>311</sup> The teaching of Ps 8 may be recalled here. In Jesus, humanity achieved what it was promised by God. He brought humanity to new heights of honor.

<sup>4</sup> Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 338–339.

<sup>51</sup> C. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon)*, *NClarBib* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 221.

<sup>62</sup> P. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon, WBC* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 287–88, provided a whole range of options with this word. He opted for a translation "openness," stating that "Philemon's fine Christian character ... meant Paul could speak openly and with affection."

<sup>73</sup> The Greek text reads διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην, "on account of the love."

appealed to sentiment. He was old, and his situation was precarious. On the other hand, Paul could have appealed to his authority as an elder and one who suffered for Jesus. Since Paul generally did not complain about his circumstances, but rather prided himself on his self-sufficiency (Phil 4:10–14), it is unlikely that he appealed to sentiment. His appeal was based on age and circumstance, not apostolic calling or ministry.<sup>84</sup> This second aspect, therefore, humbly requested Philemon’s response because of who Paul was *as a Christian* in these circumstances, not because of his position in God’s economy.<sup>95</sup>

## **(2) Paul’s Specific Request (v. 10a)**

### **<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my son Onesimus**

**10a** Paul made his request with six short words in Greek (“I appeal to you for my son Onesimus,” NIV). Twice the verb “appeal” occurs (vv. 9, 10), and though it carries many shades of meaning, here it means *ask* or *besech*. The most perplexing aspect of this verse is that Paul never made a clear request regarding Onesimus. Some take this as a sign that Paul did not seek Onesimus’s release, and some believe that Onesimus was not even a runaway slave because Paul did not clearly state his request.<sup>106</sup>

The appeal coincides with the tone of the letter. Paul already stated that he did not want to be overbearing in his requests. Love would find a way to do right. Paul hoped that Philemon would restore Onesimus without penalty, but he trusted that Philemon would see that from the rest of the letter. Further, Paul had no specific request regarding Onesimus. If he had sought Onesimus as a servant, as some suggest, he would have asked. Paul had faith in Philemon and knew that the matter had to be handled between the slave and his master. In writing, Paul was beseeching *for* his friend, standing by him and urging his master to do what was right.

## **(3) Paul’s Relationship to Onesimus (vv. 10b–14)**

**who became my son while I was in chains. <sup>11</sup> Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.**

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<sup>84</sup> For the translation “old man” see *BAGD*, 700; G. Bornkamm, *TDNT*, 6:683; E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon, Her* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 199. Some disagree with this translation and prefer “ambassador” (πρεσβύτης). See J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 336–37; and A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 201. W. Hendriksen, *Colossians and Philemon*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 217, strongly argues against this position, claiming it violates the context.

<sup>95</sup> This interpretation is not intended to downplay the overtones of authority which Paul often expressed. It is simply to state that Paul did not employ his major expressions of authority like he did at Corinth, for example.

<sup>106</sup> S. Winter, “Paul’s Letter to Philemon” *NTS* 33:1 (Jan 1987): 1–15. That is one of her theses that she develops throughout the article.

<sup>12</sup> I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.

Three statements describe Paul's relationship with Onesimus. Philemon might have wondered how the two met, and certainly he would not know of the change in Onesimus's life. Paul explained these things in order to commend Onesimus, hoping that he would receive a favorable hearing from his master. For Paul, the new life in Christ made a radical difference; when he saw it in someone, he knew it would produce a continuing change.

#### ONESIMUS'S NEW LIFE (vv. 10b–11)

**10b** First, Paul described Onesimus's new life. Somehow Onesimus came in contact with Paul while Paul was in prison. Perhaps he knew of Paul and sought him out. Paul revealed two facts about Onesimus's new life. First, Paul converted him to Christ. The Greek text actually says, "I begot in my bonds."<sup>117</sup> The relationship between Paul and Onesimus was strong, like a father and son. The rabbis often used that metaphor to describe their disciples, and it applied equally to such Christian relationships. The word "begot" is rare for Paul, especially in a spiritual sense.<sup>128</sup> He did not use the word "born again" for the new life. Jesus did use the term that way, and he was followed in that usage by John and Peter in particular. Paul's use of the metaphor simply refers to his part in Onesimus's conversion. The term "child" in v. 10<sup>139</sup> shows Paul's close relationship with Onesimus.

**11** Onesimus had a change of character (v. 11). In describing that change, Paul used a double play on words. Once Onesimus was "useless"; now he was "useful."<sup>1140</sup> The name "Onesimus" means *profitable*, and perhaps the play on words continues.<sup>1151</sup> Some point out that Phrygian slaves were notoriously useless as a class<sup>1162</sup> and that Onesimus proved that proverb to be true, but nothing in the text supports that conclusion. The terminology is appropriate for referring to anyone before and after conversion to Christ. At any rate, the new Onesimus was valuable. Paul knew Onesimus would make a good servant for Philemon, even if he had not been so before. Further, Paul saw a use for him in the service of the gospel (v. 13). There is, thus, an illustration of the change the gospel makes. Useless members of society can become valuable and productive.

#### ONESIMUS'S DESIRE FOR RESTITUTION (v. 12)

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<sup>117</sup> The word is aorist tense, first person singular.

<sup>128</sup> See *BAGD*, 155.

<sup>139</sup> "Child" is more common in Pauline writings: 1 Cor 4:17; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4.

<sup>1410</sup> The Greek is clearer with its "sound alike" endings: ἀχρηστον/εὔχρηστον. These were common among the orators of Paul's day. Lohse, 200.

<sup>1511</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, *TNTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 182, says that the root χρηστός would be indistinguishable from Χριστός, the name of Christ. That produces a "double pun."

<sup>1612</sup> Lightfoot, 310.

**12** The second statement Paul made refers to Onesimus's desire to correct the wrong he had done. Paul said, "I am sending him to you." Paul could not have forced Onesimus to return to Philemon. He had run away before; he could do it again easily. Why, then, did Paul say he sent Onesimus? The wording stresses the change Paul saw in him. The fact that Paul sent Onesimus suggests a sensitivity to Philemon's property. Paul's strong ties with Onesimus were described as "bowels" ("heart," NIV), the word for strong emotions. Perhaps the change that took place in Onesimus had particular significance to Paul. Was it a sign of his effectiveness in prison? Was it because he felt indebted to Philemon in some way and this would help repay him? No answer is available. This is another miracle of Christianity: a runaway slave and (possible) thief became the joy of the aged apostle. Paul's words convey a note of intensity. He sent him even though it was like sending Philemon his heart.

Some point out that the term "I send" connotes a legal environment. The word often has the meaning of "send up" rather than "send back." They suggest that the term fittingly described an appeal to a higher court or a higher authority. It fits well with the many financial and legal terms of the passage which, according to some, make the letter formal and legal. They conclude it was a public letter rather than a private correspondence between friends.<sup>1175</sup> Two factors must be considered in light of that. First, Paul lived in a legal environment at this time. He was somewhat preoccupied with his own pending trial, and such legal terms were in the air of the praetorium. Naturally his vocabulary differed from letters written from other locations under different circumstances. Second, language borrowed from a specific milieu does not necessarily mean that the writer wrote from that perspective. Even among friends, Paul may well have used the language. Sometimes too much is made of such evidence.<sup>1186</sup>

#### ONESIMUS'S VALUE IN SERVICE (vv. 13–14)

Paul's third statement commended Onesimus as useful. Each of the three have progressively identified Paul's close relationship with the slave, and this last describes it even further.

**13–14** Paul saw many ways Onesimus could be of service to him in his imprisonment. Their fellowship was good, and he lifted Paul's spirits at a difficult time. Paul wished he could have kept Onesimus in Rome. Some logic could have supported such thoughts. Knowing Philemon as he did, Paul knew he would be in Rome serving Paul if the opportunity presented itself. Further, such service appropriately expressed the father-son relationship, even if it were a spiritual one. Since Philemon could not be there, Onesimus could have served nicely—and appropriately—in place of Philemon. The thought had much to commend it.

Such a procedure would have destroyed everything about the impact of the gospel. Paul had no right to keep Onesimus; Onesimus needed to make restitution for his own sake; and the church needed the opportunity to see such an evidence of Christianity at work. In spite of these

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<sup>1715</sup> See, e.g., Winter, 7, and John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul: A New View of its Place and Importance*, rev. ed. (1935, Nashville: Abingdon, 1959). Winter provides a comprehensive list of such words in her article, 2.

<sup>1816</sup> That certainly is the case of Winter. She reconstructs the epistle's setting entirely based on a new supposition stemming from the vocabulary alone. The vocabulary and its context have been known for centuries, but the traditions regarding the epistle survived.

matters, Paul thought in terms of doing what was right in the proper way. Even seemingly proper ends must be brought about by proper means! Philemon also was a dear friend and child in the faith. Paul had to be true to both of his children and to the Lord.

As a further evidence of the power of the gospel, Philemon had to be free to decide what he would do. The choices varied, but Paul's trust in Philemon remained strong. Two expressions emphasize Paul's decision to urge Onesimus to return. First is a contrast between "I would have liked to keep him with me" and "I did not want to do anything without your consent." The first term, *eboulomēn*, means to "will,"<sup>1199</sup> and the second, *ēthelēsa*, means "to wish."<sup>2200</sup> Any difference in meaning, however, comes from the construction and context of this passage. There is a contrast in tenses: *eboulomēn* is imperfect; *ēthelēsa* is aorist. The tense contrasts an ongoing tendency with a decisive action,<sup>2211</sup> and it impacts semantics. By the first word (*eboulomēn*), Paul meant a process of wishing; by the second (*ēthelēsa*), he meant an act of choosing.

The second expression is the contrast regarding spontaneity and forced responses. Paul knew the value of a Christian mind acting out of Christian conviction. Possibly he anticipated Philemon's response. He used the same word here as in v. 6, "the good" ("favor," NIV). No doubt Paul now made concrete what he prayed earlier, i.e., that Philemon would see the "good" and freely do it.<sup>2222</sup>

## 2. The Providence of God (vv. 15–16)

**<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—<sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.**

**15** In v. 15, Paul turned his thoughts another direction. Onesimus should have been blamed for his actions. They were illegal and unethical. However, rather than dwell on the past life, especially since it had been forgiven by God, Paul looked to the redemptive element. God constructed his plans in spite of, through, and above human events and circumstances. Paul

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<sup>1919</sup> BAGD, 146.

<sup>2020</sup> BAGD, 355–56. Lightfoot, 341, distinguished the two terms by stating that βούλομαι implies "a wishing," while θέλω implies simply "a will." That distinction is seldom maintained today, and little actually supports it.

<sup>2121</sup> This is clear because of their juxtaposition in the same context. Apart from contextual proximity, any conclusions as to the precise force of the tenses is tenuous.

<sup>2222</sup> F. F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *HTR* 71 (Jan–Apr 1978), took an opposing view based on his rhetorical analysis. He states that Paul offered up the motive of honor (Greek σεμνος). "Paul is literally forcing a point of honor. While ostensibly avoiding even the appearance of constraint, his argument is designed to do just that, yet without robbing Philemon of the opportunity to act on his own in a truly honorable fashion" (27). The point may be correct. Yet one wonders how anyone would write or speak a logical piece without being analyzed according to the conventions used in it. The process can be reduced to absurdity by assuming everyone prethought and arranged every conversation.

knew that from personal experience, even as he awaited trial at Rome.<sup>2233</sup> Paul never condoned Onesimus's actions, just as he never called evil good. Yet he saw how God could triumph over sin by grace. Onesimus evidenced that in his life. Paul took opportunity, therefore, to apply this understanding of God's providence to the situation at hand.

Dealing with providence has its own problems. No one knows why things happen as they do, and people can only guess about reasons. This is especially true in the case of evil, where many gaps exist in knowledge.<sup>2244</sup> Many commentators point out the parallel between this statement by Paul and Joseph's comment in Gen 50:20 ("you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good"). Perhaps Joseph's life took on special significance to Paul because of his circumstances—Joseph served a prison term as well! Onesimus's case differed from Joseph's. Joseph suffered unjustly, and he remained innocent. Onesimus deserved punishment. The grace of God appeared, however, in that Onesimus did not get what he deserved. Rather, his circumstances brought him to a new life. God worked through them to accomplish his purposes *in spite of* failures, misunderstandings, and blatant sins. The gospel truly offers good news. Paul's introductory word "perhaps" (*tacha*) seems to warn that absolute knowledge about how and why things happen rests with God alone.

The redemptive side of the situation occupies the rest of the verse. First, a contrast exists between "for a little while" (lit., "for an hour") and "for good" (lit., "for the age"). Paul likely did not mean something as simple as "forever" with this statement. The word "age" (*aiōn*) was Paul's common term for "eternal," and that is consistent with the rest of the New Testament.<sup>2255</sup>

In most cases, the relationship between servant and master suffered irreparable damage. This was different. Onesimus ran away, but now he would be a better servant—he would be more profitable and, therefore, an asset to Philemon in time, as well as a brother for eternity. Paul assumed what he taught in Col 3:22–4:1. Christian slaves were better slaves because they worked for their heavenly Master. It was a triumph of God's grace that a disgruntled slave ran away and then voluntarily returned a better person, willing to serve both his earthly master and heavenly Master for good.

**16** The second contrast occurs between Onesimus's position as "a slave" and "a brother" (v. 16). Paul did not seek emancipation for Onesimus, nor did he assume it would be forthcoming. Paul looked beyond this earth and its relationships to other more important relationships. Onesimus was family—a brother. Before, his position as a slave meant that he was in the household, but he did not enjoy the privilege of sons. Now Paul introduced him as a brother—a full member of the Christian household. In doing this, he spoke to the spiritual realities that transcend earthly physical/economic situations. According to Paul's instructions, slaves and masters can coexist as Christians *even in undesirable economic arrangements*. Philemon was to

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<sup>2323</sup> See his argument in Phil 1:12ff.

<sup>2424</sup> Remember Job's friends who mustered all their spiritual insight only to be proven wrong in the final analysis. Their understanding of providence sadly lacked.

<sup>2525</sup> This derives from the Jewish outlook that eternity was viewed with a time perspective, i.e., it was the future age. Normally, however, the word is plural when it speaks of eternity. Perhaps the singular word here reveals that Paul thought in terms of the remainder of this age and, by implication, into eternity. Paul knew the slim likelihood of a runaway slave willingly becoming a productive servant again.

recognize Onesimus as a Christian and, therefore, as a genuine brother. Their union had three dimensions. They were united in humanity, a brotherhood in itself. They were fellow-Christians and fellow servants of the Lord, a stronger brotherhood. Beyond these, they had the same spiritual parent, a closer brotherhood than most Christians experience with each other.<sup>2266</sup> God supervises all of life—his providence was a foundation for Paul’s confidence.

### 3. Paul’s Relationship to Philemon (vv. 17–22)

**<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup> If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. <sup>20</sup> I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup> Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. <sup>22</sup> And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.**

This last section of Paul’s argument also has three stages. They are noted by predominating commands. The commands are “welcome him” (v. 17); “refresh my heart” (v. 20); and “prepare a guest room” (v. 22). The movements through these verses correspond to them.

#### (1) Welcome Onesimus (vv. 17–19)

**17** The idea of substitution predominates in this section. There is constant interchange between Paul and Onesimus. At times Onesimus represents Paul, and at times he appears “clothed in Paul.” Paul used a favorite word, “partner” (*koinōnon*), in laying the foundation for this section. It is the common word for “fellowship,” but had a much deeper meaning than *mutually satisfying conversation*. The NIV translates it well as “partner.” Philemon and Paul participated in the same effort, getting the gospel to the world. They obviously took the relationship seriously. Now there would be a three-way participation with Onesimus’s inclusion. If Philemon really fellowshiped with Paul, he would honor Paul’s request.

The partnership meant two specific truths related to the situation. First, Philemon would welcome Onesimus as though he were Paul himself. The foundation for such action was laid in that Onesimus had been called Paul’s child. Second, Philemon would forgive Onesimus as though he were Paul himself. This posed a deeper problem. The verse suggests that Onesimus stole from his master. For most interpreters that means both money and the labor Philemon had a right to expect from a slave. Forgiveness meant money, and money meant life. Paul asked Philemon to share his life with his runaway slave. Forgiveness also meant providing him the opportunity for a new start. Paul anticipated that in vv. 15–16.<sup>2277</sup>

**18–19** Would Philemon be able to accomplish such Christlike attitudes and actions? If not, Paul was prepared to pay (vv. 18–19). Again the language of the financial world surfaced as Paul

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<sup>2626</sup> Paul’s expression “both as a man and in the Lord” suggests the tie to humanity and the spiritual relationships which transcend it.

<sup>2727</sup> The language there sounds like Paul expected Onesimus to remain with Philemon as his slave.

used the words “charge,” “account,” “repay,” and “writing this with my own hand.”<sup>2288</sup> Apparently, Paul owed Philemon nothing. His “account,” therefore, meant that he was willing to assume an indebtedness for his newfound Christian friend. This assured Philemon that Paul fully expected him to forgive Onesimus his wrongs. He was prepared to get involved in the process financially, if necessary, for the reconciliation of the two men.

The thought of indebtedness reminded Paul of Philemon’s spiritual debt to Paul. Paul had taken the gospel to Philemon. This reveals Paul’s perspective regarding material and spiritual matters. Paul saw close relationships between each aspect of life, with the Lord in control of it all. Here that perspective surfaced again. Spiritual relationships predominate. If they were in order, other matters would take care of themselves. Even so, Paul was prepared to assume financial obligations in order to teach and live by spiritual truths. Reconciliation between Christians meant that much to him. Further, spiritual indebtedness (to the one who brought the gospel) could be handled in kind by material service. Paul easily and naturally conceived of the world as unified under the lordship of Christ. Jesus was Lord of everything—it all fit together in his economy.<sup>2299</sup>

In this magnificent section of Scripture, one final truth emerges. Paul served as the agent of reconciliation. Perhaps in his mind his relationship to Christ demanded it. There is no better picture of what Jesus did for humanity than what Paul did and offered to do for Onesimus. He brought the offender to a point of reconciliation, and he embodied that reconciliation since both parties were intimately related to him. Paul practiced the mind of Christ in everyday relationships.<sup>3300</sup> His study of Jesus’ role in reconciliation of persons and God no doubt taught about reconciliation. Further, his service to Christ motivated him to reconcile persons to God and to each other. Christ demands this type of humble, Christlike service.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>2828</sup> This is the equivalent of writing an I.O.U., which would be legally binding. It is the best example of the metaphor which underlies Col 2:14.

<sup>2929</sup> Colossians 1:15–20 expresses this in hymnic form as Paul presented Jesus’ rule over the natural order and the spiritual.

<sup>3030</sup> See the commentary on Phil 2:5–11.

<sup>31</sup> Richard R. Melick, [\*Philippians, Colossians, Philemon\*](#), vol. 32, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 358–367.

10 παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Ὀνήσιμον. After the buildup, now comes the appeal itself, the repeated παρακαλῶ underlining the character of the approach being made. It is for<sup>3220</sup> Onesimus, whom Paul calls “my own son.” Paul uses the term elsewhere to denote those converted through his ministry (1 Cor. 4:14, 17; Gal. 4:19; cf. Phil. 2:22; 1 Thes. 2:11; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1; Tit. 1:4). The verb γεννάω could be used equally of a mother “bearing” her child and of a father “becoming father of” his child (BAG<sup>33</sup>D); so again elsewhere of Paul (1 Cor. 4:15; cf. the striking Gal. 4:19—Paul suffers the labor pains!). The imagery of father and son was a natural one to describe the relation of pupil to teacher (cf. 2 Kgs. 2:12; Matt. 23:8–9) or one in a state of religious dependence on priest or sect leader (1QH 7:20–21) or mystagogue.<sup>2341</sup> In this case Paul had been instrumental in bringing Onesimus to faith in Christ Jesus while Paul himself had been chained in prison. For the circumstances in which Paul had met Onesimus see pp. 303ff. above; and for what custody in manacles and/or fetters meant see B. Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 25–28, 31, 206–9.

Paul leaves the name of the one being interceded for to the end, though (*pace* Caird 221 and Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 213) Philemon must have been in no doubt as to whom he meant—Onesimus had brought the letter! Onesimus was one of the most common names throughout this period, typically (though by no means always) denoting a slave or someone of servile origin (Lightfoot 308; BAG<sup>35</sup>D s.v. Ὀνήσιμος; *NDIE*<sup>36</sup>C 1.89; 4.179–81; 5.113, 147), for obvious reasons (see on v. 11). Since the name appears to have been particularly common in Ephesus (*NDIE*<sup>37</sup>C 4.179) the plausibility of the suggestion that this Onesimus later became bishop of Ephesus (Ignatius, *Ephesians* 1:3; 2:1; 6:2) is considerably weakened (argued by Knox 85–92 and Harrison 290–93; viewed with some sympathy by Moule, *Colossians and*

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<sup>3220</sup> For περὶ in this sense, that is, designating the one to whom the request refers, not yet its content, see, e.g., Bjerkelund 120–21; Lohse 199 n. 23; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 290; and Wolter 261. In contrast, Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 212–13; Winter, “Letter” 6–7, follow Knox 19–20 in suggesting that the appeal is “for my own child” in the sense “I am appealing to you to give me my own child”; but see Greeven 374 and Nordling 110–12; cf. Schenk 3466–67 n. 66.

<sup>33</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>3421</sup> F. Büchsel, *TDNT* 1.665–66; Str-B 3.340–41; for Qumran see Stuhlmacher 38 n. 81; for the mysteries see G. Schrenk, *TDNT* 5.954; Dibelius 105; see also Daube.

<sup>35</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>36</sup>*NDIEC New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, ed. G. H. R. Horsley, et al. (Macquarie University, 1981–)

<sup>37</sup>*NDIEC New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, ed. G. H. R. Horsley, et al. (Macquarie University, 1981–)

*Philemon* 21; Stuhlmacher 19; Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 200–202, also *Paul* 402–3, 406; but see Lightfoot 309, 314; Gnilka 6). See also Col. 4:9 and pp. 302ff. above.

**11** τὸν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ καὶ σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον. “Onesimus” means literally “useful.” This allows Paul the appropriate pun, though if the experience of those whose names allow such puns today is anything to go by, Onesimus must have been heartily sick of it by this time.<sup>2382</sup> For similar wordplays using the same words see BAG<sup>39</sup>D s.v. ἄχρηστος and Lohse 200 n. 35; ἄχρηστος occurs only here in the New Testament, εὐχρηστος elsewhere only in 2 Tim. 2:21 and 4:11 (of Mark). There may also be a pun on the name Χριστός, which could be pronounced like χρηστός: to be useful is to be like Christ (Lohmeyer 186; Lohse 200; Winter, “Letter” 4–5). In this case the language does not throw much more light on Onesimus’s history. He had once been “without use”—that is, presumably, as an errant slave (though Callahan 361 points out that such disparagement of slaves is typical of slaveowning societies). But now (simply a temporal and not eschatological antithesis: see on Col. 1:22; cf. particularly Hermas, *Visions* 3.6.7) he was indeed of “good use” (as a Christian) to Philemon as well as Paul. The “good use” to Paul is further indicated in v. 13. What the “good use” to Philemon was is less clear. Possibly it is indicated also in v. 13: Onesimus had acted for Philemon, fulfilled Philemon’s obligation of service to Paul (“on your behalf”; see on v. 13). But more likely what was in mind was the service Onesimus would be able to give to Philemon on his return, whether within his household or as a “beloved brother” in church (see v. 16), or indeed as Philemon’s agent once more with Paul (vv. 13–14). “Perhaps the word-order emphasizes that Philemon will have to satisfy himself that Onesimus has become a different person” (O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 292).

**12** ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν, τοῦτ’ ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα. Philemon should be in no doubt as to Paul’s personal involvement in what might otherwise have been simply a legal relation between master and slave, with the slave legally in the wrong and liable to serious punishment in consequence. Paul makes it clear that he is sending Onesimus back not because of such legal obligations,<sup>2403</sup> but because of Onesimus’s new status: wrongs done among fellow believers had to be sorted out as among fellow believers (v. 16; cf. 1 Cor. 6:1–8). It had been

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<sup>3822</sup> Onesimus was a Phrygian (from Colossae—so Col. 4:9), and, as already noted, Phrygian slaves were notoriously unsatisfactory (Lightfoot 310 n. 2). Ὀνήσιμος, synonymous with χρηστός, is derived from the verb ὀνίημι, “profit, benefit, help”; see further on v. 20.

<sup>39</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>4023</sup> On the law governing runaway slaves see Bellen; Gnilka 71–81; p. 304 above. In Jewish law Deut. 23:15–16 pointed in a different direction (see discussion in Str-B 3.668–70). Moule, *Colossians and Philemon* 145; Houlden 230–31; and Winter, “Letter” 7 (following Knox 21); also Gnilka 46, think that the verb here has the technical sense of “refer back” or “refer up,” as when a case is passed on to another tribunal (this is its force in all the other New Testament uses: Luke 23:7, 11, 15; Acts 25:21), but it is more likely that Paul plays with nicely judged sensitivity on the ambiguity of the term (cf. Nordling 108).

particularly hard for Paul to take this step, being as isolated as he was in prison (cf. vv. 23–24 and Col. 4:10–14), and because Onesimus had come to mean so much to him. Here Paul screws the emotional intensity to a new pitch, calling Onesimus his very heart (J<sup>41</sup>B's and NE<sup>42</sup>B's "a part of myself" is inadequate, despite Moule, *Colossians and Philemon* 146 and Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 214), using again the intensely emotive term σπλάγγνα (v. 7; see on Col. 3:12).<sup>2434</sup> Even though others had remained loyal to him during his imprisonment, Onesimus had won a special place in Paul's heart (Caird 222), though no doubt the point is stressed here for Philemon's benefit. As one who had "refreshed the σπλάγγνα of the saints" (v. 7), Philemon would find it difficult to treat Paul's σπλάγγνα with anything but consideration and care (see also v. 20). Here again it would be too easy to accuse Paul of emotional blackmail: he was a man of deep emotional strength, as Philemon would no doubt be aware, and it would be natural if at this point in the letter's composition, where Onesimus's (and Philemon's) future hung in the balance, emotion should well up, expressive of both Paul's trepidation and his depth of feeling. Jang 65–70 notes the importance, at this point in the letter particularly, of the thought of "being for one another" as an expression of Paul's ecclesiology.

**13** ὃν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῆ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου. The language Paul chooses suggests that the decision to send Onesimus back was not easily or quickly made. The imperfect tense ("I was wanting") implies a period during which Paul weighed the consequences of his action and during which the value of Onesimus's presence was a considerable factor in his deliberation (cf. Lightfoot 339). The ἐγὼ ("I") indicates that it was Paul (not Onesimus) who remained so undecided for so long. Likewise πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν might be better translated "for myself," indicating that Paul's appreciation of Onesimus's "usefulness" could all too easily in Paul's mind have outweighed the more speculative usefulness of Onesimus to Philemon (v. 11). Moreover, the infinitive κατέχειν would quite properly be translated "to hold back, prevent from leaving" (BAG<sup>44</sup>D s.v. κατέχω 1), implying in turn that it was Onesimus who was anxious to return to make amends to and peace with his master and that Paul, far from pushing him to do so, was delaying his departure as long as he could because he found Onesimus so useful.<sup>2455</sup> If such inferences are fairly to be read, they need not indicate mere selfishness on Paul's part ("for myself"), understandable in the circumstances, but again a real concern that Philemon might be unwilling or prevented (by social pressure) from treating Onesimus in a kindly manner.

The "for myself" is filled out. Onesimus would have continued to render Paul service (present tense). What that service might have been is not indicated, and the word could cover a

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<sup>41</sup>JB Jerusalem Bible

<sup>42</sup>NEB New English Bible

<sup>4324</sup> "The I of Paul is enclosed in the thou of the slave" (Lohmeyer 187, who also cites *Testament of Joseph* 17:7 in comparison).

<sup>44</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>4525</sup> The alternative, that κατέχειν evokes the use of κατοχή for a god's detention of one who had fled to the god's temple for sanctuary (Gnilka 48), is more remote from the present context.

wide range of acts of help and aid (see on Col. 1:7—διάκονος; Col. 4:17—διακονία). Possibly it retains something of its original imagery (“to wait on someone at table,” BAG<sup>46</sup>D s.v. διακονέω 1), thus indicating that Onesimus brought Paul his food and perhaps was even able to act in some degree as his personal slave. But the imagery would also cover a whole range of ministrations, including companionship and communication (Stuhlmacher 40). If the relatively limited description of Onesimus in Col. 4:9 is anything to go by (“faithful and beloved brother,” not “beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow slave,” as in 4:7), we may deduce that Onesimus’s role was as Paul’s helper, not having a regular ministry in church worship or evangelism apart from Paul (cf. Wickert 232 n. 6; Ollrog 104 n. 44—“as a helper in the work of mission”; Gnilka 48—“as servant in the gospel”; Winter, “Letter” 9, ignores the μοι).

Ὑπέρ σοῦ adds a further twist. The implication cannot be that Onesimus had been sent to Paul as a gift from Philemon, to serve Paul as he served Philemon; in that case a letter full of such trepidation and pleading would have been unnecessary. And to see it as a rebuke to Philemon, that Onesimus filled the role which Philemon himself had failed to provide, is not necessarily implied either (though see Vincent 186–87). In either case, the rendering “a substitute for you” (J<sup>47</sup>B/NJ<sup>48</sup>B), “in your place” (GN<sup>49</sup>B; similarly NI<sup>50</sup>V) may be an overtranslation (but see A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* [New York: Doran, 1927] 335 n. 4; M<sup>51</sup>M s.v. ὑπέρ 1[a]; H. Riesenfeld, *TDN*<sup>52</sup>T 8.512–13). All that Paul probably meant is that Onesimus’s service to Paul while a slave of Philemon could and should be regarded (in kindly light) as done on Philemon’s behalf and at Philemon’s willing behest. The formulation probably reflects something of the debate that Paul (and Onesimus) had had on the subject—a decisive point being that Onesimus could not continue to serve Paul “on behalf of” Philemon without Philemon’s explicit approval; which in turn required a mending of fences between Philemon and Onesimus.

“In chains for the gospel” is another not too subtle attempt to remind Philemon that Paul’s need (of Onesimus) was greater than Philemon’s since Paul was in prison in chains: Onesimus could make up for some of Paul’s lack of freedom of movement. Furthermore, Paul’s commission to forward the gospel (see on Col. 1:5) was still active, and Onesimus could assist Paul in this in different ways. His usefulness to Paul “in chains for the gospel” outweighed his value to Philemon as a house slave. Passages from Ignatius are regularly quoted in comparison, particularly *Ephesians* 11:2: “In him I carry about my chains, the spiritual pearls in which may it be granted me to rise again through your prayers” (see further Lightfoot 339–40).

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<sup>46</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>47</sup>JB Jerusalem Bible

<sup>48</sup>NJB New Jerusalem Bible

<sup>49</sup>GNB Good News Bible

<sup>50</sup>NIV New International Bible

<sup>51</sup>MM J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder, 1930)

<sup>52</sup>TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)

14 χωρίς δέ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδέν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθὸν σου ἢ ἄλλὰ κατὰ ἑκούσιον. The impression given by v. 13 that Paul had taken some time to make up his mind on this affair is strengthened by the contrasting use here of the aorist ἠθέλησα, “I resolved” (BAG<sup>53</sup>D s.v. θέλω 2; Winter, “Letter” 8–9). Having deliberated for so long over what was the best and right thing to do, he came to his decision: that however much he wanted Onesimus to remain, it was more important to gain Philemon’s consent. Γνώμη is well known in the sense “judgment, opinion” (LS<sup>54</sup>J III). But the idea of “consent” is present in a number of instances (2 Macc. 4:39; Josephus, *Antiquities* 7.60; Ignatius, *Polycarp* 4:1; 5:2; see also R. Bultmann, *TDN*<sup>55</sup>T 1.717; Lohse 202 n. 15) and makes best sense here. At any rate what is implied is Paul’s recognition of the need for a considered, emphatic, and favorable judgment on the subject by Philemon. The language may also suggest that Paul had reviewed other possible courses of action open to him, but in the end realized that without Philemon’s willing agreement nothing that Paul decided with regard to Onesimus would be satisfactory or right.

The last inference is clarified a little further by the ἵνα clause. Among Paul’s deliberations, perhaps chiefest among them, had been uncertainty on how best to approach Philemon (see also vv. 8–9). The resolution achieved had been in effect to throw himself (and Onesimus) on Philemon’s mercy, limiting the pressure he brought to bear on Philemon to that of strong urging and emotive appeal. It was important not to provoke a confrontation, in which Philemon might have to choose between accepting Paul’s authority (and thus losing face among his own circle of the influential well-to-do) or maintaining his social status at the cost of a rupture with Paul. Paul thus merely hints at the “compulsion” he might have brought (κατὰ ἀνάγκην; BAG<sup>56</sup>D s.v. ἀνάγκη 1; see again v. 8), perhaps all too conscious of how weak that authority might be in such a confrontation. At all events, in terms of good relations and of how believers should act toward one another, it was more important that Philemon’s consent should be given voluntarily, willingly (κατὰ ἑκούσιον; cf. 2 Cor. 9:7 and 1 Pet. 5:2; further Lohse 202 n. 53 and Wolter 267; “spontaneous” in J<sup>57</sup>B/NJ<sup>58</sup>B and NI<sup>59</sup>V is misleading).

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<sup>53</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>54</sup>LSJ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. H. S. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, <sup>9</sup>1940; with supplement, 1968)

<sup>55</sup>TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)

<sup>56</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>57</sup>JB Jerusalem Bible

<sup>58</sup>NJB New Jerusalem Bible

<sup>59</sup>NIV New International Bible

What precisely Paul meant by τὸ ἀγαθὸν σου, “your good deed” (NRS<sup>60</sup>V), “your kindness” (NE<sup>61</sup>B/RE<sup>62</sup>B), “act of kindness” (J<sup>63</sup>B/NJ<sup>64</sup>B), is unclear (NI<sup>65</sup>V’s “favor” is less satisfactory). The term itself is unspecific, covering any action that would be generally approved of (cf. Rom. 2:10; 7:19; 12:9, 21; 13:3; 14:16; 16:19; Gal. 6:10; 1 Thes. 5:15; see further Gnllka 49, and also v. 6). Here it could refer to Philemon’s willingness to receive Onesimus back as a brother, as he would receive Paul himself (vv. 16–17). It could refer to his readiness to wipe the slate clean over all that had passed (v. 18), that is, to forgive Onesimus and to take no further action against him, as he was fully entitled to do. Both actions would count as a single “good deed.” That Paul also hinted at the possibility of Philemon returning Onesimus to Paul (so, e.g., Jang 34 and Gayer 241, 243–44) depends on what the final clause of v. 15 has in view, and v. 21 probably gives a broad hint that Philemon should also free Onesimus.

It should not escape notice that the language constitutes a gentle acknowledgment from Paul that if things went wrong he would be unable to bring any finally effective compulsion to bear on Philemon. Should Philemon respond positively to Paul’s appeal it would be an act of goodness on his part. Those who see in Paul’s earlier appeal a form of emotional manipulation should also acknowledge here that Paul in effect confesses his vulnerability and complete dependence on Philemon’s goodwill. In the social relationships of a church existing in an unequal society there is a particular responsibility on the part of the powerful to act toward others in a spirit of goodness rather than standing on their rights.

**15** τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὦραν, ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχησθαι. Nothing has been said thus far about the breach between Philemon and his slave Onesimus—nothing, that is, beyond the pun on Onesimus’ name (v. 11). The strategy is, presumably, that the appeal to Philemon’s love for Paul (v. 9), with its stress on how much Onesimus had come to mean to Paul (vv. 10, 12), and Paul’s nicely judged deference to Philemon’s rights in the matter (vv. 13–14) would mollify Philemon and soften the sense of hurt and anger he must have felt when Onesimus’s wrongdoing was recalled. Now, however, Paul begins to grasp the nettle, but gently (Lohmeyer 188)!

He speaks soothingly—τάχα, “perhaps, possibly” (elsewhere in biblical Greek only in Wis. 13:6; 14:19; Rom. 5:7). He suggests that all that has happened so far has had a greater purpose behind it: ἐχωρίσθη, “divine passive,” with God as implied subject; διὰ τοῦτο ... ἵνα, “for this reason ... in order that”—God’s ways are ever mysterious (Gen. 50:20 is regularly cited as a parallel; cf. also Rom. 8:28). He introduces the thought of the breach between Philemon and Onesimus first as a “separation”—ἐχωρίσθη (the absolute use unusual in the New Testament

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<sup>60</sup>NRSV New Revised Standard Version

<sup>61</sup>NEB New English Bible

<sup>62</sup>REB Revised English Bible

<sup>63</sup>JB Jerusalem Bible

<sup>64</sup>NJB New Jerusalem Bible

<sup>65</sup>NIV New International Bible

but well enough attested in wider usage; BAG<sup>66</sup>D s.v. χωρίζω 2b; J<sup>67</sup>B/NJ<sup>68</sup>B's "deprived of" forces the sense somewhat).<sup>2696</sup> And he plays it down by emphasizing its brevity: πρὸς ὥραν, "for an hour, a short time" (John 5:35; 2 Cor. 7:8; Gal. 2:5; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 11:2).

In contrast, the prospect for Philemon is that he will now (Onesimus stands before him as he reads the words) have back a highly useful (v. 11) Onesimus αἰώνιον, which is presumably to be taken adverbially in the sense of "forever, permanently." The ambiguity of the αἰώνιον is part of Paul's "softly, softly" strategy. It is not clear whether he refers already to the new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, consequent upon the latter's conversion, as one that will last beyond death ("forever"; so most, particularly Gnika 50–51), or rather to the restored and henceforth assuredly permanent relation of master to now dutiful slave ("permanently"; Moule, *Colossians and Philemon* 146, refers appositely to Exod. 21:6; H. Sasse, *TDN<sup>70</sup>T* 1.209, to Deut. 15:17: οἰκέτης εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, "slave for life"; Stuhlmacher 42; Binder 60). The verb shares in the ambiguity, since one could both "have" (that is, possess) a slave, and "have" a brother or a friend (BAG<sup>71</sup>D s.v. ἔχω 2). The prefix (ἀπέχω) suggests a conscious echo of its technical commercial sense, "receive in full" (cf. Phil. 4:18; BAG<sup>72</sup>D s.v. 1; M<sup>73</sup>M), especially in view of the strong commercial imagery used in vv. 17–19; but that still leaves unclear whether what Philemon will receive back is a better slave or a loyal freedman (having been freed by Philemon) and client.

The uncertainty as to what it is Paul was asking of Philemon can never finally be settled. Perhaps Philemon knew well enough; there may be hints and allusions in the language of which the modern commentator is completely ignorant. Or possibly Paul felt that he could do no more than indicate a range of options in the hope that Philemon would act with the greatest generosity of heart. What Paul expected the *character* of the restored relationship to be certainly becomes clearer as Paul grasps the nettle more and more firmly. Initially, however, it

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<sup>66</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>67</sup>JB Jerusalem Bible

<sup>68</sup>NJB New Jerusalem Bible

<sup>6926</sup> "The word is chosen with rare tact. He does not say 'he ran away,' which might excite Philemon's anger; but 'he was separated,' and, by use of the passive, he puts Onesimus' flight into relation with the ordering of Providence" (Vincent 188); similarly the recent studies of Nordling 109 and Barclay 164.

<sup>70</sup>TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)

<sup>71</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>72</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>73</sup>MM J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder, 1930)

was enough to highlight the contrast between the brief separation (“for an hour”) and the constancy of the restoration (“forever”). The prospective highly favorable outcome would make the memory of past wrongs diminish in significance.

16 οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλ’ ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, πῶσω δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ. What this reunion of Onesimus with Philemon should mean begins to be spelled out along with the extent of the demand Paul was putting before Philemon. Once again, however, we have to ask: What was Paul asking for? A literal reading would suggest that he wanted Philemon to free Onesimus: “no longer as a slave” (Lohmeyer 189; Friedrich 196; Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 217; S. S. Bartchy, *AB<sup>74</sup>D* 5.308 and 6.71).<sup>757</sup> But it is just as possible to read the request as a plea for a transformed relationship between master and slave—still between master and slave, but transformed by the faith they shared in common (so particularly Schulz 416 and Binder 36–40).<sup>768</sup> This latter alternative is strengthened by a possibly deliberate allusion to Exod. 21:6/Deut. 15:17 in v. 15 (“have back forever”; see on v. 15; and note also v. 11: more useful than ever), by the implication of the end of this verse that their relationship will continue to have a double dimension (“in the flesh and in the Lord”), and by the broader implication of such passages as Gal. 3:28 that relationships “in Christ” transcended even if they did not abolish distinctions of race, status, and gender (see also on Col. 3:11 and 4:1; cf. the also ambiguous 1 Cor. 7:20–24). “The renunciation of any punishment is obviously included and need not be expressly mentioned” (Gnilka 51).

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<sup>74</sup>*ABD The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992)

<sup>7527</sup> Against the too hasty generalization of Moule, *Colossians and Philemon* 147, and Lohse 203 n. 63 (that in the mystery religions “a slave who had undergone the same initiation rites as his master, was no longer considered a slave, but stood alongside his former master as a free man”), see Stuhlmacher 46–47: “the mystery religions knew no programmatic abolition of slavery ... a certain religious equality in the context of the cult community, but no more”; see also Gnilka 51–52; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 297.

<sup>7628</sup> Lohse 203 n. 59; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 297 cite H. von Soden, *Die Briefe an die Kolosser, Epheser, Philemon, die Pastoralbriefe* (Hand-Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 3.1; Leipzig: Mohr, <sup>2</sup>1893) 76: the particle “‘as’ (ὡς) expresses the subjective evaluation of the relationship without calling its objective form into question.” See also Lightfoot 341; Vincent 188–89; Scott 110; Merk 228; Gayer 234–37; Wolter 233–35, 271–72: “according to Paul’s view of things the legal relationship between master and slave remains undisturbed by the conversion of both to Christianity” (267); contrast the unrestrained comment of Preiss 40. Contrast still more the argument of Callahan 362–65, 368–76, who draws on mid-nineteenth-century American debate on slavery in maintaining that Onesimus was *not* Philemon’s slave, but his *brother* (ἀδελφὸν ... ἐν σαρκί); but that hardly explains the οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον (ἀδελφόν = ὑπὲρ δοῦλον), as the parallel with Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 6.4.7 (cited by Callahan 371) itself confirms.

Whether manumission (e.g., Jang 61–62; Koester 135) or simply forgiveness (Gülzow 39–40; Nordling 113–14) was in view (and again Paul may have been sufficiently uncertain of how much he could hope to sway Philemon as to leave the options open to Philemon, implying that either outcome would be acceptable), it is clear that Paul was much more hopeful that the new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, since they were now both Christians, would be the determinative relationship: ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, “more than a slave” (see BAG<sup>77</sup>D s.v. ὑπὲρ 2), “a beloved brother.”<sup>789</sup> After all, even if Philemon freed Onesimus, the latter would almost certainly have had to remain in a state of financial dependence on Philemon as his client (“have back forever”): under Greek law freedom might be only partial and limited with regard to employment and movement;<sup>790</sup> and economically there might be little difference between the secure relationship of the slave of a good master and the subservient client relationship of the impoverished freedman (Sabinianus, for whom Pliny pleaded, was actually a freedman; see pp. 302ff. above with n. 1<sup>802</sup> on p. 304). Either way, and this is the important point, whether as master to slave or as patron to client, the relationship of “beloved brother” (see further Wolter 272 and above on Col. 1:1 and 4:7) should be paramount. That would not change the social relationship of Onesimus’s dependence on Philemon, but it would relativize it, infuse it with a family warmth, and make for heightened respect and consideration on both sides; Col. 4:1 and 1 Tim. 6:2 give some idea of what that would mean in practice (see further Stuhlmacher 42–45, 48; Barclay 177–82; and the fuller discussion in Bartchy, ΜΑΛΛΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ).

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<sup>77</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>789</sup> The degree to which Christianity accepted slaves as brothers, equal members of the body of Christ, was exceptional for the time (Gayer 237–40); for ἀδελφός see on Col. 1:1 and for ἀγαπητός see on Col. 1:7.

<sup>790</sup> S. S. Bartchy, *ABD* 6.71:

Freedom was broken down into four elements: to represent oneself in legal matters; to be secure from seizure as property; to earn one’s living as one chooses; and to live where one desires. More than ¼ of the 1,000+ manumission contracts inscribed on the sacred wall at Delphi fix limitations on at least two of these freedoms, usually of movement and employment, by means of a so-called *paramone* clause that remained valid for a limited time (usually two to ten years). Such a freed slave could not be sold (and was thus legally a free person), but the freedman was still bound to the former owner in a variety of ways.

For examples of *paramonē* agreements see Wiedemann 46–49 (also 53–56); *NDIEC* 4.98–99. See also Lyall 78–79; Barclay 169 (with further references); the comments above on Col. 3:11.

<sup>8012</sup> Already noted by Buckland 268: “It is not *fuga* to run to a friend of the master to secure intercession, and in this case mere failing to return is not *fuga*: there must be some definite act of flight.” But Lampe’s brief article has brought the point to the fore, going beyond the older view that Onesimus was a *fugitivus* seeking out Paul to intercede for him (as in Gayer 232–34). Lampe’s argument is taken up and developed by Rapske 195–203 and Bartchy, *ABD* 5.307–8.

Paul cannot refrain from adding once again the note of personal involvement: *μάλιστα ἐμοί* (“most of all, especially to me”; for epistolary parallels in the papyri, see *M<sup>81</sup>M* s.v. *μάλιστα*). Philemon was not to be allowed to forget that what was at stake was a three-way relation—Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul—not just that of Philemon and Onesimus. The more Philemon valued his relationship with Paul, the more Paul’s relationship with Onesimus was bound to be a factor in Philemon’s attitude to Onesimus. *Πόσω δέ μᾶλλον σοί*, “how much more to you,” presumably has in view the fact that Philemon had (now) a double relationship with Onesimus (whereas Paul knew Onesimus only *ἐν κυρίῳ*).

Here also the force of the double phrase (*καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ*) is unclear, but it must denote a twofold relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. *Ἐν σαρκί*, as consistently in Paul, describes the world of human relationships, limited by human capacities, and constrained by human appetites and ambitions (cf. particularly Rom. 7:5; 8:8; 2 Cor. 4:11; 10:3; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:22; 3:3–4; E. Schweizer, *TDN<sup>82</sup>T* 7.127; A. Sand, *EDN<sup>83</sup>T* 3.231; see also on Col. 1:22). In this case it certainly denotes Philemon’s relationship to Onesimus apart from their relationship as Christians—that is, as master to slave (cf. Col. 3:22; Eph. 6:5) or patron to client. That relationship continues, though, with Onesimus renewedly “useful” (v. 11) and as a “beloved brother.” The fact that both are (now) Christians does not change the fact of their disparate social status; but clearly the relationship *ἐν κυρίῳ* should be the more important (cf. the repeated “in the Lord” and “Lord” references in Col. 3:18–4:1).

**17** εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ. Somewhat surprisingly Paul now switches his appeal into a sustained commercial metaphor (vv. 17–19). This is no doubt in large part because slavery was itself a commercial transaction—the slave as a piece of property which could be bought and sold or stolen and compensated for. It was not that Paul was willing to reduce the affair among the three of them to the level of a mere commercial transaction (v. 16 was clear enough on that score). It was rather that there was inescapably a commercial dimension to the whole affair, so that the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus could not be restored without the question of financial recompense being dealt with. The fact that Paul delayed raising the issue till this point in his letter suggests a degree of uncertainty as to Philemon’s likely attitude: Would it be Philemon the brother “in the Lord” or Philemon the defrauded businessman (“in the flesh”) who would respond? Paul had evidently not felt confident about raising the issue earlier, before he had “softened up” Philemon with the unstinting praise and emotive appeal of the earlier verses. That he goes on to emphasize with such force that he stood fully behind Onesimus as guarantor to make good Onesimus’s wrongdoing (vv. 18–19; note the repeated use of the first person pronoun in vv. 17–20) confirms that this was the most sensitive area within their whole three-way relationship.

The note is struck by a further use of the *κοινων*-root (see on v. 6). *Κοινωνός* denotes “one who takes part in something with someone”; used absolutely, as here, it means “partner” (as

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<sup>81</sup>MM J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder, 1930)

<sup>82</sup>TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)

<sup>83</sup>EDNT *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. H. Balz and G. Schneider (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–93)

also in 2 Cor. 8:23; BAG<sup>84</sup>D; the usage of Luke 5:10, “partners” in a fishing business, is familiar in the papyri; see M<sup>85</sup>M; cf. *NDIE*<sup>86</sup>C 1.84–85; Wolter 273). Hence the sense “if then you have me as partner” (literally). The echo of legal contracts, with an implication of binding obligations upon the partner,<sup>3871</sup> may be deliberate and ironic, since the appeal is to what Paul and Philemon share in common *as Christians*, and not as those legally bound to each other. The reference could be to their faith (as in v. 6): “partner in the faith” (NE<sup>88</sup>B/RE<sup>89</sup>B), “if you grant me any fellowship with yourself” (NJ<sup>90</sup>B); in which case Paul’s appeal is to Philemon simply, once again, as a brother “in the Lord” (Dibelius 106; Lohse 203–4). But since Philemon has already been designated “fellow worker” (v. 1), the effect of the reference here is to mark Philemon out as Paul marked out Titus in 2 Cor. 8:23: κοινωνὸς ἐμὸς καὶ συνεργός, “my partner and coworker” (Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 218; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 299). The appeal, in other words, is to Philemon as a fellow evangelist or worker on behalf of the churches who looked to Paul for leadership. It is this further dimension of shared experience and shared ministry, with its evocation of mutual trust and collegiality between Paul and Philemon, and its implication that Philemon like Paul put the work of the gospel and care of the churches among his highest priorities, that gave Paul the stronger confidence that Philemon would know how to put the righting of Onesimus’s wrong in its proper perspective.<sup>3912</sup>

The stronger the shared bond evoked in the first part of the verse, the stronger the force of the second: Philemon should welcome (προσλαβοῦ) Onesimus as he would Paul (ὡς ἐμέ; the same appeal is used in the later *P. Oxy.* 1.32 and *P. Osl.* 55, in Deissmann, *Light* 197–98, and Lohse 201 n. 45). Though Onesimus was a slave, and a slave liable to punishment for some misdemeanor, Philemon should receive him into his house (cf. Rom. 14:1; 15:7) as he would Paul his partner.<sup>3923</sup> That implication gives the appeal an added edge, since it was a traditional

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<sup>84</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>85</sup>MM J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder, 1930)

<sup>86</sup>*NDIEC New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, ed. G. H. R. Horsley, et al. (Macquarie University, 1981–)

<sup>8731</sup> Sampley, “Societas” 170–71; *Partnership* 79–81; Winter, “Letter” 11–12, followed by Schenk 3474–75. Despite v. 19, however, it is not so clear that in this image Paul depicts himself as *senior* partner (as urged most forcibly by Petersen 103–8); the tentativeness of Paul’s formulation in v. 17 suggests rather that Paul was conscious of the clash in social status and obligation precisely at this point.

<sup>88</sup>NEB New English Bible

<sup>89</sup>REB Revised English Bible

<sup>90</sup>NJB New Jerusalem Bible

<sup>9132</sup> See again J. Hainz, *EDNT* 2.304.

<sup>9233</sup> Προσλαμβάνω/ομαι itself can have the sense “take on as helper or partner” (LSJ s.v. 3; Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 219 n. 87); but could Paul have meant this (Lohmeyer 190 n. 1)? Bruce (219 n. 88) suggests that Paul was speaking

assumption in Greco-Roman society that such a relationship was only possible between equals, and certainly not between master and slave (Wolter 274–75; note particularly Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 8.11.6–7; Plato, *Leges* 756E-757A; Seneca, *Epistle* 47.2). The appeal, it should be noted, is no longer merely that of strong sentiment (as in v. 12); it is now rather the appeal to one partner to accept the good faith and judgment of the other. Here Paul throws his own estimate of Onesimus into the scale, and does so precisely in his capacity as Philemon’s partner in the business of the gospel. He counters his own uncertainty regarding Philemon’s response by calling confidently on his investment in Onesimus: the returning Onesimus, also bearing Paul’s letter, would be a worthy representative of Paul himself (cf. Preiss 36–37). “Here the real goal of the letter is reached. Everything up to this point prepares for this request” (Gayer 256).

18 εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα. Such an appeal can only be made if the good faith can be demonstrated, should that be necessary. Onesimus had evidently wronged (ἠδίκησεν; the same verb as used in Col. 3:25) Philemon in some way not made explicit, or was financially in debt to Philemon (ὀφείλει; cf. Matt. 18:28, 30, 34; Luke 7:41; 16:5, 7; again regularly in the papyri: M<sup>93</sup>M s.v. ὀφείλω). “If” presumably does not indicate that Paul was treating the matter lightly or that he had any uncertainty that Onesimus had told him the whole story. The letter itself attests to some serious breach between Philemon and Onesimus, and the immediately preceding expression of confidence in Onesimus as Paul’s representative would prevent the “if” from being read as any kind of doubt regarding Onesimus’s trustworthiness. But it neatly serves the purpose of taking for granted Philemon’s view that Onesimus was guilty of serious misdemeanor, without wholly conceding that Philemon’s judgment was entirely correct. The “if” has, indeed, the force of “whatever,” the rhetorical effect being to underline the comprehensiveness of Paul’s guarantee: “whatever wrong he has done or debt he has incurred...”<sup>944</sup> For discussion of what the wrong was, whether something done by Onesimus prior to his flight (?) from Philemon’s household or the flight itself, and whether robbery or some other financial irregularity was involved (so, e.g., Lightfoot 341; Dibelius 106; Caird 222–23; Stuhlmacher 49; Gnllka 84; Wright 187; Nordling 109–10), or simply Philemon’s loss of Onesimus’s services for a time (e.g., Lohse 204; Ernst 136; Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* 167), see pp. 302ff. above.

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“playfully”; but the context is one of solemn seriousness, weighted with legal terminology.

<sup>93</sup>MM J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder, 1930)

<sup>9434</sup> C. J. Martin, “Rhetorical Function” 332–33, and Callahan 374 question whether v. 18 indicates Onesimus’s guilt (even in Philemon’s eyes); but the aorist (ἠδίκησεν) hardly indicates the possibility of Onesimus’s *future* indebtedness (for travel and lodging), and the thesis hardly explains the vehemence of Paul’s repeated assurance that he would repay whatever Onesimus owed.

The resort to commercial technical terms is highlighted still further by Paul's use of ἔλλογέω, "charge it to my account" (once again many examples in the papyri: BAG<sup>95</sup>D, M<sup>96</sup>M). This sustained use of the language of commercial transaction suggests again that Paul was not entirely sure of his ground with Philemon and also that Philemon (not least as a slaveowner) was comfortable with the language of commerce. To leave Philemon as little reason as possible, should he even consider rejecting Paul's plea or dealing with it in a less than generous way, Paul stakes his own reputation for probity and fair dealing on the guarantee given here: whatever justifiable claim Philemon had on Onesimus in financial terms, Paul would meet it in full. This is an astonishing guarantee for someone with as little independent means as Paul, not to mention that he was in prison at the time. It can only mean that he would be able to call on wealthy backers who presumably knew both Paul and Onesimus, should the IOU be called in.<sup>3975</sup> Alternatively, Paul could be so bold because, despite whatever misgivings he still had, he could not believe that Philemon would call in the debt. The issue is sharpened still further by the way Paul proceeds.

19 ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω· ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις. In an unusual step Paul evidently took the stylus in his own hand at this point and both signed his name ("Here is my signature: Paul," NE<sup>98</sup>B/RE<sup>99</sup>B) and wrote out his personal guarantee ("Here, I will write this with my own hand: *I, Paul, will pay you back*," GN<sup>100</sup>B). It would be necessary to state what he was doing since the letter was not purely personal (where change of penmanship would be sufficient visual indication of the author's personal intervention; see Weima 46–47) but was for public reading. The step was unusual for Paul, since elsewhere his personal autograph marks the beginning of the letter's closing (see the introduction to the comments on vv. 8–20). But here it comes as the climax to Paul's appeal to Philemon, where he is pulling out all the stops and putting the full weight of his personal standing behind his words (cf. the "I, Paul" of 2 Cor. 10:1; Gal. 5:2; 1 Thes. 2:18). In this case the personal autograph does not have the function of legitimating the letter as Paul's (see on Col. 4:18), but rather has a legal function as Paul's personal guarantee to Philemon on behalf of

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<sup>95</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>96</sup>MM J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder, 1930)

<sup>9735</sup> Again, the possibility that Paul was speaking in deliberately joking style (Dibelius 107; Gnllka 84, "Philemon must have laughed over the promise of a man who, as a prisoner, possessed not a penny in the world," echoing Oltramare, cited by Vincent 190) fails to give enough weight to the seriousness of the tone as confirmed by v. 19 (cf. Binder 62). Scott 111–12 also thinks that the words were "meant playfully," but notes some indications that Paul had funds at his command: according to Acts, the governor Felix hoped for a bribe (24:26), and in Rome Paul lived for two years at his own expense (28:30).

<sup>98</sup>NEB New English Bible

<sup>99</sup>REB Revised English Bible

<sup>100</sup>GNB Good News Bible

Onesimus.<sup>31016</sup> The legal character of the procedure is put beyond doubt by Paul's use of ἀποτίνω, which occurs only here in the New Testament, but, once again, is common in the papyri as a legal technical term meaning "make compensation, pay the damages" (BAG<sup>102</sup>D, M<sup>103</sup>M). Paul was not content to make promises and provide mere reassurances; rather, he undertakes the formal legal responsibility to make good whatever wrong Onesimus has done Philemon.

However, to make trebly certain, Paul cannot refrain from once again recalling Philemon to the personal bond which held Paul and Philemon together. Only this time it is to remind Philemon not of their shared faith, or partnership in the gospel, but of Philemon's obligation to Paul (προσοφείλω, only here in biblical Greek, but again common in the papyri, "owe besides, in addition," M<sup>104</sup>M). The climax of the appeal in legal terms is matched by the climax of the appeal in terms of personal relationship, albeit expressed still in terms of the commercial language which dominates the section. The effect of the ellipsis (see n. 1<sup>105</sup>2) is to drop in the mention as a kind of afterthought. It is a rhetorical trick, of course, but nonetheless evidences a certain hesitation on Paul's part to lean on Philemon too heavily. Its effect is to leave the main weight on the preceding legal guarantee, so that Philemon's hoped-for positive response would appear more as an act of graciousness on his part than as an unwilling repayment of a debt owed to Paul.

It is universally inferred that the obligation referred to is Philemon's conversion under Paul's ministry (cf. Rom. 15:27). In that case, that Paul does not call Philemon his son or put him alongside Onesimus in this respect (see v. 10) is surprising: Paul seems to pull out all available stops on Onesimus's behalf, and the appeal of Paul to Philemon as a father to a son would have carried great weight. It could be, however, that the influence of Paul on Philemon's conversion was not so direct—through a sermon preached, or even through a letter read, or (less likely as too indirect) through Epaphras's ministry, but not through personal counseling—so that the father-son imagery was less appropriate (Scott 112). The slightly more distant relationship which may thus be implied (cf. v. 5) should also give some cause for hesitation about speaking too glibly of Paul as Philemon's patron, so far as Philemon's Christian standing was concerned. In the world of patron-client networks, a signal act of service by a client to a patron did not necessarily involve a change in the relationship. This may also help explain the slight degree of

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<sup>10136</sup> Cf. G. J. Bahr, "The Subscriptions in the Pauline Letters," *JBL* 87 (1968) 27–41, particularly 31 and 36.

<sup>102</sup>BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>103</sup>MM J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder, 1930)

<sup>104</sup>MM J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder, 1930)

<sup>105</sup>12 It is generally recognized that this final sentence begins with an ellipsis, with a main verb understood—e.g., literally, "I do this, or put it so, in order that I might not say to you that you also owe me yourself" (see Moule, *Idiom-Book* 145; Harris 274; Lohse 204–5 n. 75; against BDF §495.1).

diffidence Paul displays in referring to Philemon's indebtedness to him; despite that indebtedness, Philemon remained a much superior figure socially. It would also explain why Paul so formulates the plea as to leave the main weight on the legal guarantee just provided.

The issue which remains unclear in all this is whether Paul put so much of himself behind his appeal because he was confident of Philemon's response or because he was lacking precisely in such complete confidence. At the very least, such an offer from one "in chains," and from one in whose debt Philemon himself stood in significant measure, would make it hard for Philemon to act churlishly and easier for him to appear magnanimous. The strategy was brilliant—and from the fact that the letter was preserved, presumably successful.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> James D. G. Dunn, [\*The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text\*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 328–341.