

Leveling

Philemon 1:12-19

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I. Legal Property vs. 12-14

- a. Back to Who? Philemon
 - i. He appears to have been converted through Paul (19).
 - ii. He ministered alongside Paul at some point (1, 17).
 - iii. He possibly was the leader of the church at his house, as he had a hand in encouraging other believers (5, 7).
 - iv. A “friend and fellow-worker” of Paul (Phlm 1), and the recipient of the New Testament letter that bears his name. He was an important member of the church at Colossae who was known for his hospitality,
- b. Why Back
 - i. Send Back- 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
 - ii. If Onesimus was a fugitive slave, Roman law would have required his return to Philemon. However, if Onesimus was not on the run and sought intercession from Paul (which we think the more likely), Paul’s rationale for returning Onesimus was not to appease the letter of the law, but to ease the tensions of any apparent relationship troubles reported by Onesimus. It is curious that the book of Deuteronomy, a book that Paul knew quite well (e.g., Rom 7:7; 10:6, 19; 11:8; 13:9; 1 Cor 9:9; 2 Cor 13:1; Gal 3:10, 13; cf. Eph 6:2–3; 1 Tim 5:18, 19), stipulated that “[s]laves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them
- c. My Heart - *love, affection him, my beloved*
 - i. Onesimus- Onesimus, who apparent became a Christian through Paul’s ministry (Phlm 10). Philemon appears to have hosted the church at Colossae, since that is where Paul sends Onesimus (Phlm 2; Col 4:8–9).
 1. After fleeing, Onesimus evidently met Paul and became a follower of Jesus (10–18). This reconstruction is based largely on verse 10, where Paul appeals on behalf of his “child” Onesimus. “My child” (τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, *tou emou teknou*) is the phrase Paul uses for one of his spiritual children.
 - ii. Wished to Keep
 1. Minister to Me During Imprisonment
 - a. 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. Moreover, the infinitive *κατέχειν* would quite properly be translated “to hold back, prevent from leaving 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
 - c. It is interesting to note that Paul used *διακονέω* instead of *δουλεύω* (“to serve as a slave”). The latter term was used of Timothy, who “served with [Paul] in the work of the gospel” (Phil 2:22) and also regularly of “service”
 - d. Paul suggested that although Philemon himself was separated from Paul, Onesimus could serve Paul on behalf of his master. This was, in fact, what Paul “desired” The verb *βούλομαι* occurs in the imperfect tense and is an excellent example of the *conative* imperfect, which describes an action that is contemplated but not yet begun
- d. Consent - Consent – without your input
 - i. Goodness
 - ii. Without Compulsion - *as it were, by pressure*
 - 1. Rather than simply acting in his own interest by exerting his apostolic authority and keeping Onesimus for himself, Paul appealed to Philemon properly so that his actions would be his own and not a matter of coercion. **Although Paul hinted at his desire to keep Onesimus for himself (v 13), by leaving the final decision in the hands of Philemon, Paul counted on the principle of love for which he earlier lauded Philemon (vv 4, 9).**
 - iii. Free Will Free Will - **of one's own volition, voluntary**
 - 1. Likewise, Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon (v 12), not to fulfill the demands of the Roman law, but because of his desire to respect Philemon by allowing him to act without being coerced (v 14). Such an action surely demonstrated the love that was to characterize the Christian community, even in the midst of a difficult circumstance (cf. Phil 2:3–4).

II. More Than Property vs. 15-17

- a. Reason
 - i. Back Forever
 - 1. 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, 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).

2. 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; 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

b. Rightful Place

i. No longer a slave

1. Slave - **male slave as an entity in a socioeconomic context, *slave***

- a. Person owned as property by another, and the relationship that bound the owner and the slave. Slavery was widespread in the ancient Near East, although the economy was not dependent upon it. By Roman times Slavery was so extensive that in the early Christian period one out of every two people was a slave. From at least 3000 BC. captives in war were the primary source of slaves (Gn 14:21; Nm 31:9; Dt 20:14; Jgs 5:30; 1 Sm 4:9; 2 Kgs 5:2; 2 Chr 28:8).

2. More than a slave

- a. Paul appealed that Philemon be reconciled with Onesimus. Onesimus is to be regarded οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον (“no longer as a slave”), but contrastingly (ἀλλά) as “more than a slave” (ὑπὲρ δοῦλον). The construction οὐκέτι ... ἀλλά indicates that the former condition was to cease and that the latter was to prevail (cf. Matt 19:6; John 16:25; Rom 7:17, 20; esp. Eph 2:19).

ii. Beloved Brother

1. Beloved Brother Beloved - **to one who is dearly loved, *dear, beloved, prized, valued***

- a. Brother - **viewed as a brother in terms of a close affinity, *brother, fellow member, member, associate*** fig
- b. In any event, Paul still called for something radical. Onesimus was to be treated as “a beloved brother.” Although this is the only NT instance where a slave is clearly called “brother,” two OT passages refer to “brothers

2. In the flesh

3. In the Lord

- a. Yet, in Onesimus’ newly converted status, the “fleshly” relationship would also have to be accommodated to a relationship “in the Lord.” Thus, Paul appears to maintain that his status in the sphere of Christ should influence his status in the sphere of the flesh; that is, in the present world

- b. From a theological perspective, then, we may observe that the letter is about how Onesimus left his former situation as a slave possessed by Philemon, but he returned to Philemon as a slave possessed by God. The mutuality of Christian “brotherhood” could only be wrought through Christ, who unites the unlikely (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11) and breaks down social barriers (Eph 2:14–16)
 - iii. As a Partner
 - 1. Partner -2 Cor 8:23 **one who takes part in with someone, companion, partner, sharer**
 - a. Elsewhere in the NT, this term was used to indicate partnership with others in an action (Matt 23:30; Luke 5:10; 1 Cor 10:18, 20) or a circumstance (2 Cor 1:7; Heb 10:33; 1 Pet 5:1; 2 Pet 1:4). Most illuminating for the present usage is 2 Cor 8:23, where Titus was described as a κοινωνός (“partner”) and a συνεργός (“co- worker”) of Paul (cf. Phlm 1); that is, one who takes a share in his work

III. Charge Me vs. 18-19

- a. Wronged
 - i. Such a statement would be odd if there was not some sort of debt between Philemon and Onesimus. Nevertheless, interpreters of the letter should be careful not to overextend the grammar of these conditional sentences as though Paul had meant “since” instead of “if.” By constructing his sentence in this way, Paul carefully evoked whatever issue(s) may have been festering with regard to the slave and his master.
 - ii. The verb ἀδικέω has the meaning either of “do wrong to someone, treat someone unjustly” or “to cause damage to or mistreat.” more regularly it is used of unjust treatment of humans. The NT usage almost exclusively follows the latter category (cf. Col 3:25; Rev 22:11, both influenced by LXX texts),
 - iii. 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
- b. Owed
 - i. In the NT, it was used to refer to financial obligations (Matt 18:28[2x]; 18:30, 34; Luke 7:41; 16:5, 7), obligations associated with oaths (Matt 23:16, 18), and duties that a slave owed to a master (Luke 17:10). Whereas the use of the verb ἀδικέω indicated that Onesimus had wronged Philemon in some way, the use of ὀφείλω stresses that Onesimus “owes” Philemon something.
 - ii. 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;
- c. Charge it to my Account
 - i. Thinking how we treat others it is not just a request but an action charge it to your account

- ii. By stating that he would repay whatever it was that Onesimus owed to Philemon, Paul positioned himself as a broker. To broker this deal, he used the decorum of commercial language. The verb ἐλλογέω, although quite rare in the NT (2x: Rom 5:13; Phlm 18), has a robust backdrop within commercial language of the first).
 - iii. Whatever Paul's financial circumstance at the time of writing, he here offered to pick up the tab, as it were.
 - iv. 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.
 - v. 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
 - vi. 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 used the words “charge,” “account,” “repay,” and “writing this with my own hand
- d. 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.