

Notes on the Greek New Testament Week 120 – Philemon

Day 596: Introduction to Philemon

"The letter to Philemon is unique within the New Testament. It is the only genuinely personal, that is, person-to-person, letter, even though the wider community is also in view (explicitly in vv. 2,22, and 25 and in the background throughout." Dunn.

The Recipient

Philemon was probably a successful businessman (vv. 17 & 18) who had been converted through Paul's ministry, perhaps while visiting Ephesus. His home in Colossae was the meeting place of the church (or one of the house churches) of which he was probably the leader. It seems he had also assisted Paul in his evangelistic work in more than the role of a patron (see v.17).

Purpose of the letter

The letter's primary purpose is to intercede with Philemon concerning his runaway slave Onesimus. It seems that Onesimus may have robbed Philemon as well as running away or perhaps had embezzled funds entrusted to him. How he came into contact with Paul is difficult to say. Dunn suggests that Onesimus may have left his master's household with the express purpose of contacting Paul. Having offended his master he seeks for Paul to plead with Philemon on his behalf. Dunn writes,

"This would create an interesting dynamic in the three-way relationship which makes this letter so intriguing... For it would mean that Onesimus, not yet a Christian, had sought out his master's Christian mentor to intercede for him... That tells us at once that it was Philemon's character as a Christian which Onesimus saw as likely to work most effectively in his favour. It also tells us that Philemon's regard for Paul would be well known within his household and that Philemon had not insisted that his whole household adopt his new faith, though conceivably Onesimus had been drawn into one or two of the meetings of the church in Philemon's house... That may suggest in turn, however, that Onesimus was ripe for conversion."

The converted Onesimus had become close to the imprisoned Paul and had proved useful to him. Paul commends Onesimus to Philemon, urging him to receive him back, "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (v.16).

Place of Writing

Opinion is divided concerning the location of Paul's imprisonment when he wrote the letter. Some argue that it was written from Ephesus in the middle of the 50s since Ephesus is close to Colossae and also Paul seems to have been expecting imminent release (v.22). Others think it was written from Paul's imprisonment at Rome. Despite the far longer journey for Onesimus, the links between the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, and the universal tradition of the early church, favour its origin in Rome.

Referenced Works

Dunn, James D G *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996

Day 597: Philemon 1-3**Verse 1**

Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ
Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφὸς Φιλήμονι τῷ
ἀγαπητῷ καὶ συνεργῷ ἡμῶν

δεσμιος, ου m prisoner

As with the letter to the Colossians, this personal letter also includes Timothy as an author.

ἀγαπητος, η, ον beloved
συνεργος, ου m fellow-worker

Philemon is mentioned here alone in the NT. Here he is "numbered in that select and important band whom Paul designates as 'fellow workers,' which includes Prisca and Aquila, Urbanus, Timothy (Rom 16:3,9,21; 1 Thess 3:2), Apollos (1 Cor 3:9), Silvanus (2 Cor 1:24), Titus (2 Cor 8:23), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement (Phil 4:3), Aristachus, Mark, and Jesus Justus (Col 4:11), and Demas and Luke (Phm 24; see also on Col 4:11)." Dunn

Verse 2

καὶ Ἀπφία τῇ ἀδελφῇ καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ
συστρατιωτῇ ἡμῶν καὶ τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου
ἐκκλησίᾳ·

Apphia is probably Philemon's wife.

ἀδελφη, ης f sister, female believer

Archippus is commonly taken to be their son.

συστρατιωτης, ου m fellow soldier

Suggests that he was active in ministry in Colossae.

οἶκος, ου m house, home, household
ἐκκλησια, ας f congregation, church

Cf. Col 4:15 for a similar reference to a church in someone's home.

"The assumption is that the letter would be read openly at a meeting of the house church... Of course, this was a not altogether subtle way of bringing pressure on Philemon, but the very fact that it could be done indicates that Philemon was likely to recognise the church's right to take an interest in and even advise on the internal affairs of his own household...; this was the character of their shared faith (v.6). This is all the more striking since almost certainly slaves (Philemon's or others') would also be members of the house church (cf. Col 4:22-25)." Dunn

Verse 3

χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς
ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

εἰρηνη, ης f peace

Cf. Col 1:2.

Day 598: Philemon 4-11**Verse 4**

Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου πάντοτε μνηΐαν
σου ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου,

Paul's common practice was to follow the greeting with an expression of thanksgiving which commonly follows the pattern exemplified here in vv 4-5: cf. Rom 1:8-9; 1 Cor 1:4; Phil 1:3-4; Col 1:3-4; 1 Thess 1:2-3; 2 Thess 1:3.

εὐχαριστεω thank, give thanks

τῷ θεῷ μου "underlines the personal character of Paul's devotion." Dunn.

παντοτε always

μνηια, ας f remembrance, mention

προσευχη, ης f prayer

"We should not regard this as mere literary flourish...; Paul must have had an extensive prayer list and presumably spent some time each day naming before God all his churches, colleagues, and supporters. This would help maintain and strengthen the sense of a faith shared with 'all the saints' (5-6)." Dunn.

Verse 5

ἀκούων σου τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν ἣν
ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἰς
πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους,

The present tense indicates a regular flow of news. The expression that follows suggests Onesimus must have spoken warmly of his master.

πιστις, εως f faith, trust, belief

ἅγιος, α, ον holy, consecrated, set apart
to/by God; οἱ ἅγιοι God's people

The NIV apportions the love and faith between the phrases which follow in the relative clause, 'your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of the saints', cf. Col 1:4. Dunn thinks this an attractive reading but says it is not demanded by the text.

Verse 6

ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεως σου ἐνεργῆς
γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντός ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ
ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν·

"Slightly awkwardly the purpose clause follows from the subordinate clause of v.4." Dunn

ὅπως (or ὅπως ἄν) that, in order that
κοινωνία, ας f fellowship, sharing in,
participation, contribution

Dunn comments, "The puzzle is whether κοινωνία is something objective (the fellowship brought about by faith) or subjective (the experience of shared faith), and likewise whether πιστις is objective (the fellowship of a shared confession) or subjective (the shared experience of believing)." Dunn thinks the subjective is most likely in both cases. He concludes, "The prayer is that this shared experience of a common trust in Christ might be or become (γενηται) ἐνεργῆς, 'effective, active, powerful' (cf. the other two New Testament instances: 1 Cor 16:9; Heb 4:12; also the verb in Gal 5:6) in the knowledge (ἐπιγνώσις, a term common in Colossians: 1:9-10; 2:2; 3:7; cf. also particularly Phil 1:9) of all the good which was their common lot as Christians... The corporate character of the shared faith is central to the thought; Paul had no desire to promote the idea of religious faith as something private, that which a person enjoys alone and practices as a separate individual. Moreover, the phrase underlines not only the bonding character of this faith, but also the fact that this shared faith was the basis and energy source of their common life and worship."

ἐνεργῆς, ες active, effective
γένηται Verb, aor subj, 3 s γινομαι
ἐπιγνώσις, εως f knowledge,
recognition, consciousness
ἀγαθος, η, ον good, useful, fitting

Verse 7

χαράν γὰρ πολλὴν ἔσχον καὶ παράκλησιν
ἐπὶ τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου, ὅτι τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν
ἀγίων ἀναπέπναι διὰ σοῦ, ἀδελφέ.

χαρα, ας f joy, gladness
πολυς, πολλη, πολυ gen πολλου, ης, ου
much, many
ἔσχον Verb, aor act indic, 1 s & 3 pl ἔχω
παρακλησις, εως f encouragement,
comfort
σπλάγχνον, ου n affections, heart
ἀναπέπναι Verb, perf pass indic, 3 s
ἀναπαυω give relief, refresh

"The tense of the verb (ἀναπέπναι, perfect) indicates some past ministry of Philemon which had had enduring results (the parallel with 2 Cor 7:13 is thus particularly close). Possibly some particular visits were in mind which had brought a reinvigoration and refreshment to various churches, which would suggest that Philemon was a fine preacher. Or he had acted in such a way to set various churches on a secure foundation, perhaps by financial aid or legal advice..., thus removing anxieties and giving them peace of mind, which would strengthen the impression that Philemon was a figure of some power and influence in wider society as well as in the church. Whatever the precise circumstances, the more emotional note implicit in the use of σπλάγχνα (rather than the much more common καρδιά) should be noted; the emotional bonds between Philemon and 'the saints' were strong. No doubt Paul hoped that this would be a factor in his favour when he came to make his appeal to Philemon in the next paragraph; hence also, presumably, the repeated mention of Philemon's love (vv. 6,7)." Dunn

Verse 8

Διό, πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν ἔχων
ἐπιτάσσει σοι τὸ ἀνήκον,

διο therefore, for this reason

On the ground of a common faith (v.6) and in knowledge of Philemon's character (v.7).

πολυς, πολλη, πολυ see v.7

"Literally 'I have much in Christ boldness.' Paul could be so confident because he would be speaking 'in Christ,' that is, as one who stood (with Philemon) in a higher or more important relationship ... which took precedence over earthly obligations of client to patron or of subordinate to superior. In other words, the appeal here is not to Paul's apostolic authority vis-à-vis Philemon; the reminder of Philemon's debt to Paul will come later (v.19). As one equally 'in Christ,' Philemon could be expected to acknowledge that an 'in Christ' obligation transcended all others." Dunn.

παρρησια, ας f boldness, assurance

The participle, ἔχων in context here has the force 'although I have' (it is *concessive*), corresponding to the μαλλον of the following verse.

ἐπιτασσω command, order

"But such an abrupt assertion of authority was not Paul's preferred way; he never uses the verb elsewhere and refuses in 1 Cor 7:6 and 2 Cor 8:8 to issue an ἐπιταγή." Dunn.

ἀνηκει impers vb. it is proper or right; το
ἀνηκον the appropriate thing

Being a Christian introduces a new set of obligations and responsibilities – no longer simply those demanded by the mores of society.

Verse 9

διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ,
τοιούτους ὧν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης, νυνὶ
δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ –

μᾶλλον adv more; rather, instead
παρακαλεῶ exhort, encourage, urge

'yet rather, for love's sake, I appeal to you' Hendriksen. "παρακαλεῖν epitomises the quality of discourse which should characterise the church in its discussion and debate – that is, not the demand of rights or threat of sanctions (it here stands in antithesis to ἐπιτασσειν), but the exhortation, the appeal, the request within a community whose members trust and respect each other." Dunn.

τοιούτους, αὐτη, οὗτον correlative pronoun
and adjective such, of such kind
πρεσβυτης, ου old man, elderly man

Though the Greek clearly reads πρεσβύτης 'an old man,' many have argued that πρεσβευτης, 'ambassador' should be read here. The conjecture is unnecessary. The appeal is for the respect a younger member of Christ's family should show towards one who is older.

νυνι (originally an emphatic form of νυν)
now

δεσμιος, ου m prisoner

Paul does not issue commands as an apostle but makes a simple appeal as an old man and now a prisoner.

Verse 10

παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν
ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς Ονήσιμον,

παρακαλεῶ see v.9

σε Pronoun, acc s ου

τέκνον, ου n child

Cf. 1 Cor 4:14,17; Gal 4:19; also Phil 2:22; 1
Thess 2:11; 1 Tim 1:2,18; 2 Tim 1:2; 2:1; Tit
1:4.

γενναῶ be father of, bear, give birth
δεσμος, ου m (& n) bond, chain,
imprisonment, prison

Verse 11

τόν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ [καὶ] σοὶ
καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον,

ποτε enclitic particle once, formerly, at one
time, ever, at any time

ἀχρηστος, ον of little value

νυνι see v.9

ἐμοὶ Pronoun, dat s ἐγώ

εὐχρηστος, ον useful, beneficial

The name 'Onesimus' literally means 'useful,' allowing Paul to make this pun.

Day 599: Philemon 12-16

Verse 12

ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν, τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ
ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα·

ἀναπεμπῶ send, send back

Another epistolary aorist. Onesimus would have returned with Tychicus (Col 4:7-9) along with this letter and the one addressed to the Colossian church.

ἐμος, η, ον 1st pers possessive adj my,
mine

σπλάγχνον, ου n see v.7

The awkwardness of the Greek has given rise to various 'improvements' in the course of transmission, particularly the addition of προσλαβον, 'receive.'

Verse 13

ὃν ἐγώ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν κατέχειν,
ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς
τοῦ εὐαγγελίου,

βουλομαι want, desire, wish, intend, plan

"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." Dunn.

ἐμαυτὸν Pronoun, acc s ἐμαυτου myself

κατεχω hold fast, keep

διακονεω serve, wait on, care for

δεσμος, ου m (& n) see v.10

εὐαγγελιον, ου n good news, gospel

Verse 14

χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα
ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ
ἀγαθόν σου ᾗ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον.

χωρις prep with gen without, apart from
σος, ση, στον possessive adj. your, yours
γνώμη, ης f purpose, intent, decision

Here, 'consent.'

οὐδείς, οὐδεμία, οὐδέν no one, nothing
 θελω wish, will

The aorist here in contrast with the imperfect of the previous verse – after a period of consideration Paul reached a decision.

ποιῆσαι Verb, aor act infin ποιεω
 ἀναγκη, ης f necessity, compulsion
 ἀγαθος, η, ον good, useful, fitting
 ἦ Verb, pres subj, 3s εἰμι
 ἔκουσιος, α, ον willing

Verse 15

τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὥραν
 ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχης,

ταχα adv perhaps, possibly
 ἐχωρίσθη Verb, aor pass indic, 3 s χωριζω
 separate; pass. separate oneself, be
 separated, be taken away
 ὥρα, ας f hour, moment, period of time
 αἰώνιος, ον eternal, everlasting

"The ambiguity of the αἰώνιον is part of Paul's 'softly, softly' strategy. It is not clear whether he refers already to the new relation between Philemon and Onesimus, consequent upon the latter's conversion, as one that will last beyond death ('forever'...), or rather to the restored and henceforth assuredly permanent relation of master to now dutiful slave ('permanently')." Dunn. There may be an allusion to Ex 21:6 and Deut 15:17 which refer to 'a slave for life.'

ἀπέχης Verb, pres act subj, 2 s ἀπεχω
 receive, have back

Paul sees the hand of God at work in the illicit flight of Onesimus.

Verse 16

οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλὰ ὑπὲρ δοῦλον,
 ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, πόσω
 δὲ μάλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ.

οὐκετι adv no longer, no more

There seems to be an element of ambiguity here. Is Paul hinting that Philemon should free Onesimus or is the meaning 'no longer *merely* a slave ...' The latter seems more likely in view of the possible allusion to Ex/Deut in v.15 and the final clause of this verse.

δουλος, ου m slave, servant
 ἀγαπητος, η, ον beloved
 μαλιστα especially
 ποσος, η, ον how much(?)
 μαλλον adv more; rather, more than that
 σαρξ, σαρκος f flesh, physical body,
 human nature

In both the 'fleshly' relationship of servant to master and in the spiritual one of brother in Christ, Philemon would find Onesimus now a blessing to him.

Day 600: Philemon 17-25

Verse 17

Εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ
 αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ.

κοινωνος, ου m partner, sharer

Here perhaps more than a reference to being fellow Christians, perhaps also to them as fellow workers. So Dunn who says "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."

προσλαβοῦ Verb, aor midd dep imperat, 2 s
 προσλαμβανομαι welcome, accept,
 receive

Verse 18

εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ
 ἐλλόγα·

"The 'if' has ... 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 ...'" Dunn

ἀδικεω wrong, harm; be an offender
 σε Pronoun, acc s συ
 ἢ or
 ὀφειλω owe
 ἐμοὶ see v.11
 ἐλογγεω and ἐλογγαω charge to one's
 account

"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. 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." Dunn

Verse 19

ἔγω Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω· ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις.

γραφῶ write

ἔμος, ἡ, ον see v.12

χειρ, χειρος f hand, power

ἀποτίσω Verb, fut act indic, 1 s ἀποτινω
pay (someone) back

Paul's signed guarantee.

ἵνα μὴ λεγῶ σοι ὅτι 'not to mention that ...'

σεαυτου, ἡς reflexive pronoun yourself
προσοφείλω owe, owe besides

Dunn speaks of Paul's words here as a 'rhetorical trick,' adding that it "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."

Verse 20

ναί, ἀδελφέ, ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ· ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.

ναί yes, yes indeed, certainly

ὀναίμην Verb, 2 aor midd dep opt, 1 s

ὀνιναμαι benefit, profit, have joy

Dunn says this is a 'neat pun' on the name Onesimus. He points out that this is the only occurrence of the first person optative in the New Testament as well as the only instance of this verb. The sense is 'Yes, brother, I am asking a favour of you.'

ἀνάπαυσόν Verb, aor act imperat, 2 s

ἀναπαυω give relief, refresh

σπλάγχνον, ου n affections, heart

Verse 21

Πειποιθῶς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι, εἶδῶς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις.

πειποιθῶς Verb, perf act ptc, m nom s

πειθω persuade; perf trust, rely on,
have confidence, be confident

Indicates a "settled trust resulting from previous experience of Philemon as one in whom confidence could be placed." Dunn

ὑπακοη, ἡς f obedience

The meaning is 'heedful hearing.'

γραφῶ see v.19

Again, an epistolary aorist.

εἶδῶς Verb, perf act ptc, m nom s οἶδα
(verb perf in form but with present
meaning) know

ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις suggests Philemon will do more than Paul had asked, "the most obvious alternatives being Philemon freeing Onesimus and/or sending Onesimus back to Paul to continue to serve Paul on Philemon's behalf (vv. 12-14). But it is left entirely to Philemon to decide what is appropriate." Dunn

Verse 22

ἅμα δὲ καὶ ἐτοίμαξέ μοι ξενίαν, ἐλπίζω γὰρ ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν χαρισθήσομαι ὑμῖν.

ἅμα at the same time, together

ἐτοίμαζω prepare, make ready

ξενια, ας f place of lodging

Dunn picks up on the lack of a definite article, suggesting that Philemon has more than one guest room: he is a man of means.

"There is a gentle compulsion in this mention of a personal visit to Colossae. The apostle would thus be able to see for himself that Philemon had not disappointed his expectations." Lightfoot

ἐλπίζω hope, hope for, expect

προσευχη, ἡς f prayer

χαρισθήσομαι Verb, fut pass indic, 1 s

χαρίζομαι grant, give, bestow

The use of χαρίζομαι implies that Paul's release would be a *gracious* act of God. "In other words, Paul's expectations were not high, and in the normal course of events he would have recognised the unlikelihood of his being able to come to Philemon; it would take an act of generosity of God's part, in which their (again plural) prayers would be important." Dunn

Verse 23

Ἀσπάζεται σε Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,

ἀσπαζομαι greet

σε Pronoun, acc s σου

συναιχμάλωτος, ου m fellow-prisoner

See on Col. 4:10-12 for comment on the persons named here and in the following verse, also for the meaning of the term 'fellow-prisoner'. "There is, however, a curious interchange between Epaphras and Aristarchus at this point. In Col 4:10-13 it is Aristarchus who is given first mention, and he who is designated 'fellow prisoner,' with Epaphras following, commended for his 'great labour' (though not designated 'fellow worker'). Here, however, it is Epaphras who is named first and described as 'fellow prisoner,' and Aristarchus is mentioned merely as one, and not even the first, of the following group of 'fellow workers' (v.24)." Dunn

Verse 24

Μάρκος, Ἀρίσταρχος, Δημῆς, Λουκᾶς, οἱ συνεργοί μου.

συνεργος, ου m fellow-worker

Cf. Col 4:10-14. The two letters were evidently written at much the same time.

Verse 25

Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν.

Many MSS include ἡμῶν after κυρίου. Metzger comments, "If the pronoun were present originally, it is difficult to account for its omission, whereas copyists were prone to introduce such natural expansions."

μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν cf. Gal 6:18 and Phil 4:23.