

Philemon

Authorship

Pauline authorship has not been seriously challenged. There are many common features with others of Paul's letters and three times the author refers to himself as Paul.

Date

Philemon has a close connection with the letter to Colossae, perhaps being delivered at the same time by Tychicus who was traveling with Onesimus, the principal character of this letter (cf. Col 4:7, 9). Archippus is also mentioned in both letters (Phile 2; Col 4:17). Paul is a prisoner according to verse 9. This would most probably refer to his first Roman imprisonment, which would make it the winter of A.D. 60/61.¹

Original Readers

Though known as the letter to Philemon, an individual, the salutation also includes Apphia, Archippus and the church that meets in Philemon's house (1:1-2). The contents are mostly directed to an individual, marked by the singular "you," yet the benediction has "you" plural. This is, then, a letter to an individual, yet with the apparent intention that the whole church would be encouraged and instructed by it.

Occasion

Onesimus, an escaped slave from the household of Philemon of Colossae, has been led to Christ by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome, and become helpful to him in the ministry. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon with a request that he be treated as a brother, which in the Spirit he now is.

Theme Statement

Our union in Christ transforms the nature and demands of human relationships.

Outline

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 - A. Paul thanks God for Philemon's love and faith.4-5
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¹ See Appendix: "Dating of the Captivity Epistles"

III. Body: Paul requests respectfully that Philemon welcome Onesimus as a brother.....	8-22
A. Paul appraises Philemon of Onesimus' current status.	8-16
1. Paul resists appealing to Philemon by way of command.	8-9
2. Paul reports on Onesimus' conversion.	10
3. Paul reflects on Onesimus' current condition.	11-16
a. He has become useful to Paul.	11-13
b. He has become a brother to them both.....	12-16
B. Paul appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus as his brother.	17-22
1. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus.	17
2. Paul accepts debts that Onesimus may have incurred.	18-19
3. Paul expects Philemon to grant his request.	20-22
IV. Greeting and Benediction: Paul sends greetings from others and wishes God's grace for Philemon.	23-24

Theme Statement

Our union in Christ transforms the nature and demands of human relationships.

Theme Development

With great sensitivity and tenderness, Paul seeks to redress the loss experienced by his friend Philemon in the person of a slave, Onesimus. This personal letter reveals how the gospel radically transforms human, social relationships. Social conventions and economic considerations, two of life's most restricting factors of relationship, are greatly minimized when by the spiritual conversion.

I. Salutation: Paul, a prisoner of Christ, writes to Philemon, his friend and fellow laborer (1-3).

This otherwise stylized greeting by Paul is greatly personalized by reference to Philemon as his "beloved friend." Paul will appeal to him not out of authority but rather as a brother in the faith.

II. Preface: Paul reflects positively upon Philemon's character and ministry (4-7).

It is characteristic of Paul to begin his letters with a prayer of thanksgiving for the positive qualities of the recipients and for what God has been doing in their lives. This pattern is followed in giving thanks for Philemon's love and faith, especially with respect to the encouragement experienced by the saints (4-7).

III. Body: Paul requests respectfully that Philemon welcome Onesimus as a brother (8-22).

The essence of the letter is that Paul wishes his friend Philemon to receive his run-away slave Onesimus, not as property but as a newly found brother. While a prisoner in Rome, Paul has somehow come into contact with Onesimus and has led him to Christ (10-11). Paul now wants to send him back to Philemon in order to redress the loss that Onesimus has caused his

owner (12, 18-19). However, it is not just a matter of economics or social convention. Onesimus is now a brother in Christ who has become useful to Paul in the ministry (11) and whom Paul wishes to retain as an associate (13). Paul does not feel free to retain his services, though, without the willing consent of his lawful owner, Philemon (14). Paul slants the request in such a way that Philemon might view it as a way to “receive” his slave in a way that could never be severed, that is as a full brother in Christ (15). In addition Paul wishes Philemon to send him back as an investment in his own ministry (16).

Only after the careful crafting of this new perspective does Paul actually make his request of Philemon to receive Onesimus (17), promising to repay out of his own account whatever Onesimus might rightfully owe (18). Paul expects Philemon, on the basis of the power of the gospel to transform attitudes and relationships, not only to grant his request but to go beyond it (20-22).

IV. Greeting and Benediction: Paul sends greetings from others and wishes God’s grace for Philemon (23-24).

Paul concludes with a characteristic greeting and benediction. Philemon is part of a fellowship that extends far beyond human conventions, sustained by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who himself has paid the debt that we owned in order to redeem us from the slavery of sin.

The importance of this short letter lies not in how it deals with the social issue of slavery, but in the revelation of the power of the gospel to transform human relationships by changing master and slave into brothers in Christ.

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Appendix

Dating of the Captivity Epistles

The reason that Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon are called prison, or captivity, epistles is because of the explicit references to the author's bonds (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Phil 1:7, 13, 14; Col 4:18; and Phlm 1, 9). Since the author had relative freedom to receive visitors and carry on extensive correspondence "captivity" rather than "prison" may be the best descriptive term for grouping these works. Furthermore, three of these may be grouped as coming from the same time and place, namely Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon. This is due to the mention of Tychicus as being the bearer of two of the letters (cf. Col 4:7 and Eph 6:21) and the mention of Onesimus as being Tychicus' companion (cp. Col 4:9 with Phlm 10–12). In addition Archippus is greeted in the salutation of Philemon (v. 2) and addressed in the epilogue of Colossians (4:17). On the basis of this internal evidence Harrison summarizes: "These three epistles, then, emanated from the apostle at the same time and must have originated at one place."² Besides the lack of such links with Philippians, that letter is also set off from the other three by its much more positive tone with respect to Paul's expectation of imminent release (Phil 1:25).

The dating of Ephesians has been complicated in modern times by questions about its authenticity and its destination. Guthrie summarizes the traditional arguments for Pauline authorship as being (1) its self-claims (Paul's naming of himself and the many first person references) (2) its external attestation (its general acceptance as a work of Paul and wide circulation by the middle of the second century) (3) its Pauline structure (4) its language and literary affinities (5) its theological affinities and (6) its historical data.³ With respect to the last evidence, Guthrie notes that the lack of reference to the fall of Jerusalem (which would be *apropos* to the Jew and Gentile discussion) and "the absence of a developed ecclesiastical organization" point to an early rather than latter date.⁴ After examining the arguments against Pauline authorship,

² Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 293.

³ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. revised (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 496-99.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 499.

Guthrie concludes, “that the weight of evidence is inadequate to overthrow the overwhelming external attestation to Pauline authorship, and the epistle’s own claims.”⁵

However, Pauline authorship notwithstanding, there are still difficulties in identifying the destination of Ephesians. This is due to the lack of the words ἐν Εφῆσῳ (en Epheso) in the salutation of some manuscripts, the seeming lack of familiarity with the readership (cf. 1:15; 3:2; 4:21) and the absence of reference to specific individuals in the concluding section (6:21–24).⁶ Two possibilities for the textual variant are either that the destination reference was dropped, particularly in Egypt, for liturgical reasons or that it was originally intended as a circular letter.⁷ Whatever the exact destination, the close connection with Colossians argues for a Roman captivity origin. Harrison puts the three connected letters (Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon) around the middle of the Roman detention⁸, which would be, according to the chronology worked out above, the winter of A.D. 60/61.

The dating of Colossians is closely tied to the evidence for the dating of Ephesians and Philemon. While the material relating to Onesimus and Philemon fit better against an Ephesian captivity as opposed to a Caesarean imprisonment, there is insufficient reason to overthrow the traditional Roman imprisonment view for either of the alternatives. Guthrie, in accepting a Rome origin, thinks that Colossians would have had to have been written during the middle or later half of Paul’s time there in order to allow for the news of his plight to have spread to the Lycus valley communities and for Epaphrus to have sought Paul out (cf. Col 1:7; 4:12).⁹

Philemon is addressed to the owner of the slave Onesimus who had found the way from his native city of Colosse to Rome where Paul was imprisoned. Colossians and Philemon belong to the same period. Guthrie thinks it likely that Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus, was the bearer of both letters to Colosse.¹⁰ The date, then would be the same as that for Colossians, that is winter A.D. 60/61.

⁵ Ibid., 527.

⁶ Cf. Ibid., 528-33.

⁷ Ibid., 529-30.

⁸ Harrison, *Introduction*, 301.

⁹ Guthrie, *Introduction*, 580.

¹⁰ Ibid., 664.

Philippians presents a more complex situation with respect to destination and dating. Paul's close association with the church at Philippi, well established through the record of Acts, leaves very little doubt as to the authenticity and destination of the letter. The real question is the origin of the letter given the nature of the church's interaction with the apostle during the period in question. Paul is clearly a prisoner (Phil 1:7, 13, 16). At issue is the identification of the imprisonment. Rome has always been the traditional opinion, however more recently cases have been made for Caesarea and Ephesus.

Robinson has recently argued for the Caesarean context for the prison epistles.¹¹ However Guthrie concludes that were the Roman hypothesis to prove faulty, the Ephesian alternative would "probably be unchallenged."¹² One of the main reasons for entertaining the Ephesian imprisonment hypothesis as being the context for the Philippian correspondence has to do with the number of back and forth visits reflected in the letter in light of Philippi's relative proximity to Rome versus Ephesus. On the surface there needs to be sufficient time for news of Paul's situation to come to Philippi, Epaphroditus' arrival in Rome with a gift for the apostle, the messenger's falling ill and its news reaching the home church, followed by Paul's receiving a report of the church's concern over their emissary's condition. Guthrie demonstrates the plausibility of such rather extensive travel falling well within Paul's two-year stint in Rome, noting that numerous Roman writers confirmed the contention of Bishop Lightfoot that a month was sufficient time for a journey from Rome to Philippi.¹³

Another problem is the supposed conflict between Paul's statement that seems to indicate that he viewed his death as imminent, on the one hand, and his expectation of receiving word from Timothy regarding the Philippians' welfare on the other (cp. 2:17 with 2:19). This would be problematic with the greater distance involved between Rome and Macedonia. The answer, of course, is that Paul's true expectation is that he will be released (cf. 1:25), the reference in 2:17 being a hypothetical worst scenario with respect to his service on behalf of the church's faith.

Finally, Paul's anticipated itinerary upon release has raised objections to Rome as the place of writing. The record of Acts, coupled with the Roman correspondence, leaves the very

¹¹ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 57-85.

¹² Guthrie, *Introduction*, 555.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 547-49.

definite impression that Paul has his sight set inexorably upon Spain as his next field of missionary endeavor. This seems to go against his stated intention to visit Philippi soon (cf. 2:24). However, Paul's plans had changed more than once in his missionary work (e.g. in his intentions regarding visits to Corinth). There is no necessary conflict between a proposed visit to Philippi upon release from Rome (a movement East) before resuming his long held goal of ministry in the far West. At any rate there are no compelling reasons to deny Rome as the site of Paul's imprisonment on account of distances and itinerary.

The references in Philippians to Caesar's household and the praetorium (1:13), the relative freedom to carry on correspondence and receive companions, and the expression of a sense of imminent acquittal all serve to support the traditional view that Paul wrote Philippians from Rome, probably toward the end of his captivity, likely late in A.D. 61. This conclusion, in turn, leads to, at least, the opportunity for a visit to Spain and the necessity of a final imprisonment, which provides the possible backdrop to the Pastoral Epistles.