

Analysis of Philemon
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The Bible is a vast source of information of historical value. It provides guidance for everyday needs as well as major life changing events. It is also a guide for prophetic events. The book of Philemon is unique among the books of the Bible in that it is a personal letter. Though relatively short, it reveals attributes of not only the hopes Paul had for the forgiveness of Onesimus by Philemon, but also his hope for freedom from prison, and his desire to uplift other Christian workers in the ministry. “The big idea” (Rossmann, 2002) of this book is that Onesimus can be accepted as more than a slave, as a Christian brother, despite his past wrongs. This paper examines the entire text of the book of Philemon (verses 1-25).

In the first section of this paper, the historical context of the institution of slavery will be discussed as it existed in the Roman Empire at the time Philemon was written. How this institution was implemented culturally across Roman society and how it provided for the reciprocal needs of the master-slave relationship, will also be discussed. It is important to understand this institution in order to better understand the message Paul was trying to convey to Philemon. The second section of this paper will be an exegesis analysis of the letter covering its greeting, body, and salutation. Just as it is shown in many Bible stories that little is much when God is in it, so to there is much to the little book of Philemon as this analysis will show. The final section of this paper will discuss how Philemon can be applied today.

Outline of the book of Philemon

- I. Paul writes greeting to Philemon (v. 1-3)
 - A. From Paul and Timothy (v. 1a)
 - B. To Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, Church in Philemon’s home (v. 1b-2)
 - C. Paul extends greeting of God’s grace and peace (v. 3)
- II. Paul writes of thanksgiving and prayer to Philemon (v. 4-7)
 - A. Paul thanks God for Philemon in his prayers for his faith in Christ and love of the Saints (v. 4-5)
 - B. Paul’s prays Philemon is active in sharing his faith so he will have full understanding of every good thing in Christ (v. 6)
 - C. Paul’s thanks Philemon for his love has refreshed the hearts of the saints (v. 7)

- III. Paul writes a plea for Onesimus to Philemon (v. 8-12, 17)
 - A. Paul explains he could order Philemon but chooses to appeal on basis of love (v. 8-9a)
 - B. Paul appeals to Philemon for Onesimus (v. 9b-10a)
 - C. Paul explains Onesimus is now saved and where he was useless is now useful (v. 10b-11)
 - D. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon and if he considers Paul a partner, he will welcome Onesimus as if he were me (v. 12,17)
- IV. Paul writes the basis for his plea (v. 13-16)
 - A. Paul while in prison, wishes to keep Onesimus to help with ministry of gospel in Philemon's stead (v. 13)
 - B. Paul requests Philemon's consent so his actions are voluntary, not forced (v. 14)
 - C. Paul explains that Onesimus' absence for a while was for permanent service later, not as a slave but as a brother (v. 15-16a)
 - D. Paul explains Onesimus is dear to him but should be dearer to Philemon as a brother (v. 16b)
- V. Paul writes his commitment for Onesimus and expectations of Philemon if plea is accepted (v. 18-21)
 - A. Paul requests he be charged for any wrongs done by Onesimus (v. 18)
 - B. Paul states he is writing this himself and agrees to any payment even though Philemon owes Paul for his own salvation (v. 19)
 - C. Paul considers it a benefit what joy and encouragement Philemon's love has brought Paul (v. 20)
 - D. Paul expresses he is confident Philemon will do more than what is being asked (v. 21)
 - E. Paul makes a request that Philemon prepare to receive him as he hopes to journey to see him as an answer to Philemon's prayers (v. 22)
- VI. Paul writes a salutation to Philemon (v. 23-25)
 - A. A fellow prisoner, Epaphras, sends his greetings (v. 23)
 - B. Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, sends his greetings (v.24)
 - C. Paul asks the grace of Lord Jesus Christ be on Philemon (v. 25)

Institutional slavery in the Roman Empire

In this first section, the institution of slavery will be discussed within the context of first century Rome and the Roman Empire. An overview of slavery will be provided, how it was implemented in the Roman collectivist culture as a whole, the patriarchal relationship between a master and slave, as well as a discussion of what is meant, if anything, for a slave to be declared free.

At the time of first century Rome, the institution of slavery was very much ingrained into

the culture. It is believed that half of Rome as well as a large part of the Roman Empire as a whole were considered slaves, many of these were Christians (Halley, 1965). The practice was considered so universal that even Aristotle, who is considered one of the most enlightened men of his time, held that the Creator made the majority of humans for the purpose of slavery (Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown, 1871). Under Roman law, a slave was not considered to be a part of mankind and thus it goes without saying that these individuals had no civil rights. A slave was under the complete control of their master and at that person's will could be sold, given away, tortured, etc. There were no laws that extended any protection whatsoever to a slave (Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown, 1871).

As mentioned previously, the institution of slavery was very much ingrained into the Roman collectivist culture. Each member of this culture saw themselves in terms of the group of which they were classified and generally they lived as they were expected (De Vos, 2001). Some of these classifications included family, race, place of origin, gender, and class. Romans often attributed behavior to people based on their appearance so thus, those of a servile origin were expected to act like slaves (De Vos, 2001). Romans did not believe that legally giving a slave their freedom would in any way alter their basic character or behavior. It can be said that once a person was a slave in this culture, they were always considered a slave (De Vos, 2001).

In addition to the Roman Empire having a collectivist culture, the society was also managed in a very authoritarian manner. Force has often been used in many cultures to coerce slaves into complying with their masters. Roman society in particular was very harsh in their treatment of slaves (De Vos, 2001).

Within the Roman society, day to day activities were run by patriarchies, where men were dominant and their power was gauged by how many others they could dominate (De Vos, 2001). In this patron-client structure the patron or master, through his power, provides goods

and services, and the client, or in this case the slave, reciprocates by acting submissively. This relationship is similar to that between a parent and child.

So, in a society like this, what did it really mean for a slave to be given their freedom? In the first century Roman Empire, the answer is “probably not very much.” When the act of freeing a slave was done, it was usually as a reward for years of loyal service. Of course, the expectation was that the slave should continue to show deference to their former master, to continue to act submissively, and show obedience to his or her former master (De Vos, 2001). In fact, it probably would have been a part of a freed slave’s legal contract with the former master to continue to work for him. It was not uncommon for a freed slave to work under similar conditions that existed before freedom was granted. The freed slave was still subjected to punishments in whatever way the master wished and could still be sold (De Vos, 2001).

Since the act of being granted freedom did not represent a significant change to a slave’s life, was Paul asking for this alone for Onesimus or could he have been asking for much more from Philemon? To answer this question, one must make a more thorough analysis of Paul’s letter.

Exegesis of Philemon

This section of the paper is an exegesis analysis of Paul’s letter to Philemon, which deals with a request from the apostle for the freedom of Onesimus, a runaway slave. By God’s will, Onesimus, after running away from Philemon his master, came to be in contact with Paul while he was in prison in Rome. Onesimus accepted Christ while with Paul as did Philemon some time earlier. Paul understood that Onesimus was another man’s servant and thus sent him back to his master with a letter (Henry, 1721). This letter would have been received with the utmost attention of Philemon, being that it is from one suffering for Christ and his gospel, let alone from an apostle, and is an example of the highest wisdom as to how Christians should manage social

affairs and exalted principles (Henry, 1721).

The letter opens in verses 1-2, as any letter would with a greeting from Paul the Apostle and Timothy, a much younger but respected Christian leader (NIV). The greeting indicates the letter is to Philemon, the primary recipient, Apphia who is most likely Philemon's wife, Archippus who is possibly Philemon's son and a minister, and the Church in Philemon's house. Churches at the time did not have dedicated buildings like today so Christians met in people's homes (Johnson, 1891). In verse 3, Paul expresses "Grace to you..." as a reminder of God's mercy.

In verses 4-7, Paul begins to address Philemon directly (Johnson, 1891). He thanks God for Philemon and provides grounds for his thankfulness by citing Philemon's godly life of faith in Christ and his love of the saints. Paul goes on to say in verse 6 that he prays Philemon communicates his faith and that his fellowship with other believers is showing a life of forgiveness (Johnson, 1891). In verse 7, Paul expresses the encouragement Philemon has given him, probably from the news he has received from Epaphras (Johnson, 1891) of Philemon's active Christian life.

In verses 8-12 and 17, Paul begins to make his plea for Onesimus' freedom and acceptance as a Christian brother. Paul explains in verse 8-9a that in his position as a leader in the faith, he could order Philemon to act but he would rather appeal on the basis of love. In verses 9b-11, Paul states his plea for Onesimus, who recently became a Christian and where Onesimus was useless, he is now useful. In verses 12 and 17, Paul indicates he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon and if he considers Paul a true partner in the Faith, he will welcome Onesimus as if he were Paul.

In verses 13-16, Paul lays out the basis for his plea. Paul explains in verse 13 that while he is in prison, he desires to keep Onesimus' help with the ministry of the gospel in Philemon's

stead. But Paul in verse 14 wants Philemon's consent in this matter and for his actions to be voluntary. In verses 15-16a, Paul explains that Onesimus' absence for a while was for permanent service later and not as a slave but as a brother. Paul concludes that Onesimus is dear to him but should be dearer to Philemon as a brother in Christ.

In verses 18-21, Paul then commits to Philemon, that if Onesimus is granted what he is asking, he will make restitution. In verse 18, Paul requests that he be charged for any wrongs Onesimus has done. In verse 19, Paul states he is writing this himself rather than the letter being transcribed, as a compliment to Philemon (Jamieson, 1871) and agrees to pay Philemon but reminds him that he owes Paul for his own salvation. In verse 20, Paul reminds Philemon what an encouragement his love has brought him. In verse 21, Paul makes the crucial statement that he is sure Philemon will do more than what is being asked. This together with verse 16, and the background into slavery provided in the previous section, seems to indicate that Paul was asking for much more than for Onesimus to be freed from slavery. For Philemon to consider Onesimus a true equal would be counter to the norm of Roman society, but consistent with Christ's teachings that everyone is equal in God's sight. This was no simple request made of Philemon. A decision for Onesimus would mean that Philemon would be acting counter to all the cultural norms of his day. For example, freedom was bestowed to a slave only after years of loyal service whereas Onesimus was a thief and a runaway. To free a slave is one thing, but to treat him or her as an equal is another situation entirely. On the other hand, for Philemon to go against Paul would not have been easy either. The Bible does not reveal what Philemon's final decision was but tradition says Onesimus was granted his freedom (Halley, 1965).

In verse 22, Paul asks Philemon to prepare to receive him [Paul] as a guest as an answer to Philemon's prayers. Paul was confident in all of his letters written during his first imprisonment that he would regain his freedom (Jamieson, 1871).

And finally, verses 23-25, Paul writes the salutation to this letter. Paul mentions Epaphras in verse 23, noting that he is also a prisoner with him. He was probably cast into prison out of suspicion (Jamieson, 1871). He also mentions Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

Application of Philemon

For today's believer, slavery is obviously not an issue, but suppose one individual is concerned with another individual's lifestyle, for example. Paul's letter to Philemon serves as an example of how Christians can deal with the approach to sensitive issues in a way that does not do damage to their relationships with each other. Just as Paul has shown in his letter to Philemon, one can present the truth in a loving and supporting manner rather than by being demanding and condescending. The parties can achieve a resolution as friends in Christ rather than as adversaries. By doing this, we are following Christ's teaching that we are all equal before God..

Conclusion

This paper has discussed slavery as it existed in the context of the first century Roman Empire. This society had developed views and classifications of people and locked them into whatever roles they chose. Someone who was determined to be from a servile group would most likely always be treated as a slave, regardless if they had formally been given their freedom or not. If freedom had been extended, their lives would not have been all that different from how they had lived as slaves. An exegesis analysis of Paul's letter to Philemon was provided and important points discussed with particular attention paid to what Paul was really requesting from Philemon. "The big idea" (Rossmann, 2002) of this book is that through Paul's intercession to Philemon, Onesimus can be accepted as more than a slave, as a Christian brother, despite his past wrongs.

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