

Background to Philemon
John Whittaker

1. Who was Philemon?

Christian slave-owner, apparently part of the Colossian Church--apparently the wealthy patron who opened his home for the church to meet in (see v. 1).

2. Who was Onesimus?

Philemon's slave who is now a Christian but apparently wasn't until his encounter with Paul in Rome (see v. 10).

3. Where was Paul?

Best answer = Rome, at 1,000 miles away.

Before asking anymore questions directly related to Philemon, let's discuss the reality of slavery in the Roman empire.

Slavery in the Roman Empire

1. Slaves employed in every facet of society.
2. Apparently even some of Paul's converts owned slaves.

In purely practical terms, slavery was such a part of the fabric of the Roman Empire that a call to free all slaves would have been tantamount to a call for complete economic and social collapse of the Empire.

If you released your slaves and worked for public service, you would be forced to employ them.

We only know of two groups who rejected use of slaves outright: The Therapeutae and Essenes, both of whom were desert isolationists.

"In the normal run of life, where the time honored structure of society seemed unchangeable, it was impossible to imagine a slaveless society, except in an utopian dream-world, where food cooked itself and doors opened of their own accord." (John Barclay, 177)

4. How did Onesimus end up with Paul in Rome?

The possibilities are reducible to the following (Rapske, 187):

- 1) the messenger Onesimus is sent to Paul by his master and the church
- 2) the fugitive Onesimus is captured by the authorities and imprisoned with Paul;
- 3) the fugitive Onesimus is found by one of Paul's associates and is brought to Paul;
- 4) the fugitive Onesimus, because of lack of success in providing for himself or because of pangs of conscience, secretly steals to Paul;
- 5) Onesimus runs to Paul's place of imprisonment in a bid to find asylum from his master there; and finally,
- 6) Onesimus, in a bid to be happily restored to his estranged master, runs to Paul who is his master's friend.

3 Basic Questions:

- 1) Was Onesimus sent as a messenger?
- 2) Was he a fugitive?
- 3) Was he intending to return after Paul interceded for him?

A. A Messenger

- Seems unlikely
- v. 10-not a Christian
- v. 11-useless
- v. 18-wronged or owes
- Doesn't seem to be the type that slave a master or the Church would commission on an errand to Paul.

B. A Fugitive

- A common view
- Leaving as a runaway slave, thus becoming a fugitive.
- In Roman Law, being a fugitive or not being a fugitive depended on your intent--if you intended to return you were not a fugitive. This is doubtless what Philemon thought when he learned that Onesimus was gone.
- Punishments might include:

- Whipping and imprisonment
- Loss of Position
- A slave evidencing the tendency to runaway repeatedly might be branded on the face, placed in bonds, wear a metal collar, or broken legs, to the mines, death.
- If Onesimus is a fugitive, how did he meet Paul?
 - Captured and imprisoned - but he would have been put into a slave prison, far from Paul's sort of custody
 - Perhaps brought to Paul - the legal obligation of anyone discovering a fugitive was notifying the nearest magistrate of his whereabouts.
 - Harboring a fugitive slave = theft.
 - Perhaps he sought out Paul's place as asylum - but that required Paul to be able to demonstrate the connection between where he was staying and the family cult (this is unlikely since it wasn't his house and if it was a pagan's their idols would have been intolerable to him), as well as be able to post bond for Onesimus.

C. Running to a friend of the master, intending to return.

- This freed him from being a fugitive.
- This would suggest that Onesimus feared harm from Philemon.
- Disappear until the master's anger abated or go to someone able to calm the master and reconcile him to the slave.
- To do this successfully the slaves needed to flee to a well-known friend of the master who had the influence to persuade him (having a greater social status).

5. What were Paul's expectations of Philemon?

What is Paul's request? Paul's requests aren't as clear as we like, and they aren't all that we would expect.

- Don't mistreat him.
- Treat him as a Christian brother.
- He then suggests that there is more Philemon could do:
 - Release him? (v. 21)
 - Leave him to Paul? (vv. 10, 13-14)

6. Should Philemon release his now brother Onesimus?

Extremely lenient treatment of a disobedient runaway who has been useless -- far from being whipped and branded -- he gets released!

- What would other slave owners have thought?

- What about the other slaves. There would be "quick conversions" who would expect release and all would be outraged.
- If he releases all of his slaves he destroys his own economy and possibly the community's.
- He would no longer be able to house the entire Church.
- It may not even have financially benefited Onesimus to be released!
- Yet it would be extremely difficult for Philemon and Onesimus to have a "brother" relationship and a "slave/master" relationship simultaneously, unless slaves and masters obeyed and gave up threatening as Paul enjoined in Ephesians 6:5-9.

Philemon

In Laodecia was found an inscription erected by a freed slave dedicated to a Marcus Sestius Philemon (McRay, Archeology in the New Testament, 247)

Much of this material is dependent upon:

Barclay, John M. G., "Paul, Philemon, and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-ownership," NT Studies 37 (1991), 161-86.

Rapske, B. M., "The Prisoner Paul in the Eyes of Onesimus," NT Studies 37 (1991), 187-203.