

# Onesimus the Letter Carrier and the Initial Reception of Paul's Letter to Philemon

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## Abstract:

After an introduction to the letter to Philemon this article argues that the traditional identification of Onesimus as the letter carrier is far more plausible than any of the recently proposed alternatives (Tychicus, Timothy, an unknown person). It is further argued that the letter addresses the relationships between Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus, using language reminiscent of the 'letter of recommendation'. Since such letters are both habitually ambiguous and require the letter carrier to continue the conversation initiated by the letter, it follows that Onesimus was trusted by Paul to help Philemon receive the letter. It is further argued on both general and Pauline grounds that it is plausible to think that Onesimus would have resolved the ambiguity inherent in the written communication with a verbal request for manumission.

## 1. Introduction to Philemon: Setting the Scene

The epistle to Philemon is unusual in comparison with the other letters of the Pauline corpus, on account of its relative brevity, the individual specificity of the situation addressed, the apparent lack of an explicit theological basis for the contents of the letter, and the lack of clarity among contemporary readers as to the overall purpose of the letter.<sup>1</sup> The supposed lack of theology may perhaps be attributed to the typical modern reader approaching Philemon at the tail end of the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Recent scholarship has gone round and round in circles in debating the question of what Paul was actually asking for.' N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013), p. 7.

Pauline Corpus, rather than to any intrinsic ‘defect’ in the letter on its own terms. The letter itself is bracketed by opening and closing grace wishes (Philm. 3, 25), it begins in a prayer of thanksgiving to God (Philm. 4), a thanksgiving grounded in the faith, hope and love of Philemon (vv. 5-7); it is in this context that the heart of Paul’s appeal to Philemon is grounded in his apprehension of ‘all the good that is ours in Christ’ (v. 6), and the thought remains tethered to ‘Christ’ or ‘the Lord’ throughout (Philm. 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 16, 20, 23, 25).<sup>2</sup> The setting and background to the relationships between Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon – relationships that are to some extent presumed and implicit within the letter, and which have therefore been reconstructed in different ways in contemporary scholarship – have been much discussed in recent decades.<sup>3</sup> We shall however, argue that scholars, although clearly committed to teasing out from the letter the scraps of information by which the prior history of Onesimus and his relationships with both Paul and Philemon can be reconstructed, have neglected to factor in the one decisive piece of evidence – that Onesimus himself is the named letter carrier who is expected to resolve the ambiguities and uncertainties of the text in personal dialogue with the recipient.

In terms of Paul’s own setting, the letter apparently depicts Paul as imprisoned. Firstly, he describes himself as δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ – ‘a prisoner of Christ Jesus’ (vv. 1 & 9) – I take this to be a genitive of explanation (‘I am a prisoner because of Christ Jesus’).<sup>4</sup> He includes two

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<sup>2</sup> For interesting discussions see M.L. Soards, ‘Some Neglected Theological Dimensions of Paul’s Letter to Philemon’ *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 17 (1990), pp. 209-219; M. Wolter, ‘The Letter to Philemon as Ethical Counterpart of Paul’s Doctrine of Justification’ *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (ed. D. Francois Tolmie; BZNW 169; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 169-179; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, pp. 3-22; J.M.G. Barclay, ‘Koinonia and the Social Dynamics of Paul’s Letter to Philemon’ (Paper presented at Cambridge Senior NT Seminar 14 October 2014).

<sup>3</sup> On recent scholarship see W. Schenk, ‘Der Brief des Paulus an Philemon in der neueren Forschung (1945-1987)’ *ANRW II.25.4* (1987), pp. 3439-3495; D.F. Tolmie, ‘Tendencies in the Research on the Letter to Philemon since 1980’ *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (ed. D.F. Tolmie; BZNW 169; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 1-27; T.J. Bauer, *Paulus und die kaiserzeitliche Epistolographie: Kontextualisierung und Analyse der Briefe an Philemon und an die Galater* (WUNT 276; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), pp. 110-119. A noteworthy feature is the eight commentaries on Philemon alone published since 2000: Fitzmyer, *Philemon* (2000); Barth & Blanke, *Philemon* (2000); Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon* (2003); Nordling, *Philemon* (2004); Wengst, *Philemon* (2005); Reinmuth, *Philemon* (2006); Müller, *Philemon* (2012), McKnight, *Philemon* (2017). For other recent commentaries published alongside Colossians, see e.g. Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon* (2005); Moo, *Colossians and Philemon* (2008).

<sup>4</sup> The variant readings ἀπόστολος and δοῦλος change the unusual term into others found elsewhere in Pauline letter openings, P. Müller, *Der Brief an Philemon* (KEKNT 9/3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), p. 86 n. 7;

references to ‘chains’ or ‘bonds’: ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς (vv. 10 & 13). The first of these relates closely to the introduction of Onesimus by name, ‘my child whom I begot in chains’ (some manuscripts add a clarifying μοῦ); and the second relates closely to Paul’s request for help, and is qualified by a following genitive: ‘so that on your behalf he might serve me in the chains of the gospel (ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου)’ – meaning the chains/imprisonment which came about because of the gospel. In v. 23 he refers to Epaphras as ‘my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus’ (ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) – but this is not decisive in terms of Paul’s current state since in Romans 16.7 he uses the same term for what must be a past (shared) imprisonment (cf. also Col 4.10).

At the same time, alongside this depiction, the letter also suggests that he is relatively free - he has been able to entertain a (fugitive) slave, he is able to offer to reimburse Philemon for any financial claim he had against Onesimus (v. 18), and he apparently expects to visit Philemon so soon that he asks for a room to be prepared (v. 22). Although some scholars have viewed the combination as so difficult as to be impossible, and thus to suggest the inauthenticity of the letter,<sup>5</sup> and others have suggested that the apparent prison references could be taken figuratively,<sup>6</sup> in my

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C.S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul’s Imprisonments* (JSNTSS 130; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), p. 148. In support of a genitive of explanation (cf. Eph 3.1) see M.R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897, 1902, 2<sup>nd</sup> impression), p. 175; P Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon* (EKK; Zurich: Benziger, 1975), p. 29; J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 34C; New York etc.: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 83-4). The alternatives include a subjective genitive (‘Christ Jesus holds me prisoner’, so Soards, ‘Some Neglected Theological Dimensions’, p. 213) or genitive of relation (‘I am bound to Christ Jesus as a prisoner’).

<sup>5</sup> The authenticity and unity of the letter are generally accepted among contemporary scholars, although arguments against Pauline authorship have been made by, for example, F.C. Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ, his Life and Work, his Epistles and his Doctrine, A Contribution to the Critical History of Primitive Christianity* (ET A. Menzies; London: Williams & Norgate, 1875), vol. 2., pp. 80-84 (who among other arguments emphasised words not used in the genuine Pauline letters and the implausible succession of events apparently behind the letter); W.C. van Manen, ‘The Epistle to Philemon’ *Encyclopedia Biblica. A Critical Dictionary of the Literary, Political and Religious history, the Archaeology, Geography and Natural History of the Bible* (ed. T.K. Cheyne & J. Sutherland Black; London: A & C Black, 1902), III, pp. 3693-3697 (who takes the difficulty of the double address – to individual and to the church – and the apparent dependence on other letters, especially the also pseudonymous Colossians, as particular difficulties for Pauline authorship). In support of Pauline authorship see, briefly in each case, W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (ET H.C. Kee; London, SCM, 1975), pp. 349-350; J.D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 299-300; Fitzmyer, *Philemon*, pp. 8-9; Müller, *Philemon*, p. 80; D.A. Campbell, *Framing Paul: An Epistolary Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), pp. 259-260.

<sup>6</sup> R. Reitzenstein proposed that the language of bonds and imprisonment should be understood figuratively against a background of the language of commitment in the mystery religions, as ‘a kind of play on words’ (*Hellenistic Mystery-Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance* (ET J.E. Steely; PTMS 15; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978), p. 258). E.R. Goodenough argued that the letter as a whole assumes that Paul was a liberty – to offer to pay for any defrauding due to Onesimus, v. 18, to be entertaining a fugitive slave, and to expect to visit Philemon soon, v. 22 –

judgement we should take the references as to a real imprisonment, not necessarily without rhetorical purpose and emphasis, of a reasonably open type (for example, a relatively open type of house imprisonment is suggested by Acts 28.16, 30f).<sup>7</sup>

Other general features of the letter include the fact that Timothy is named alongside Paul as co-author (v. 1; as also in 2 Cor 1.1; Phil 1.1; Col 1.1; and with Silvanus: 1 Thess 1.1 & 2 Thess 1.1). After the opening verses, however, Timothy plays no further role in the letter as a whole. The authorial perspective is, from verse four onwards, entirely expressed from the singular and individual perspective of Paul (sixteen verbs in the first person singular, twenty-one singular personal pronouns, and two direct references to ‘Paul’ or ‘I Paul’ in vv. 9, 19).<sup>8</sup> The central double appeal in verse 9 is grounded in the individuality of Paul as ‘old man’ and ‘prisoner of Messiah Jesus’.<sup>9</sup> A second and related feature is that while the letter is addressed primarily to Philemon (v.

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and hence that Paul must be speaking figuratively about his relationship with Christ (‘Paul and Onesimus’, *HTR* 22 (1929), pp. 181-183).

<sup>7</sup> Paul himself speaks elsewhere of multiple imprisonments (2 Cor 6.5; 11.23), and Acts speaks of several actual imprisonments (Acts 16.23-27: in a prison or jail [φυλακή / δεσμοκτήριον] in Philippi, with τὰ δεσμὰ ; 21.33: bound with ‘two chains’ [ἀλύσει δυοῖ] in Jerusalem [22.29 looks back to this]; 23.18: Paul is described, by a Roman centurion, as ‘the prisoner Paul’ [ὁ δέσμιος Παῦλος]; 23.35 & 24.23 in Caesarea; 28.16, 30: house arrest in Rome); in addition Paul was later remembered as regularly imprisoned (seven times according to *1 Clem.* 5.6 which may in fact depend on Acts here). On this basis, given that a shift to a purely figurative meaning does not seem plausible on Paul’s part, it seems preferable to think of an actual imprisonment in this case as well; so M. Barth & H. Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 244-5; P. Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon* (PKNT 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), pp. 70-2; G. Kittel, ‘δεσμός, δέσμιος’ in *TDNT* 2, p. 43 (‘there can be no doubt that the actual imprisonment of Paul everywhere underlies the usage’); Wansink, *Chained in Christ*, pp. 149-150 (and generally in the commentaries).

<sup>8</sup> In the address to Philemon as ‘our beloved and co-worker’ (v. 1) and to Archippus as ‘our fellow-soldier’ (v. 2), it is natural to think of the plural pronoun as including Paul and Timothy. The only other departures from the singular first person voice occurs in two widely inclusive plural pronouns in v. 3 ‘Grace and peace to you from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ and v. 6: ‘every good thing that is ours in Christ’ (NB the v.l. here). Cf. in support, Barth & Blanke, *Philemon*, p. 250. It has been suggested that the naming of Timothy as co-sender is an indication that Paul regards the letter not as simply a private letter (Müller, *Philemon*, p. 86; R. McL. Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* (ICC; London & New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), pp. 331-2).

<sup>9</sup> This is plausibly related to the authority of age, with J. Gniska, *Der Philemonbrief* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1982), p. 43 (citing Lev 19.32); M. Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser. Der Brief an Philemon* (OTKNT 12; Gütersloh / Würzburg: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1993), pp. 260-1; for background see J.M.G. Barclay, ‘There is Neither Old nor Young? Early Christianity and Ancient Ideologies of Age’ *NTS* 53 (2007), pp. 225-41. R.F. Hock suggests that the idea evokes the social convention of the need for children to care and support for their elderly parents: Paul is an old man and prisoner in need of support from his child Onesimus, ‘A Support for his Old Age: Paul’s Plea on Behalf of Onesimus’ *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L.M. White & O.L. Yarbrough; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), pp. 67-81, at p. 79. Following the manuscripts here in reading πρεσβύτες, with J.N. Birdsall, ‘πρεσβύτες in Philemon 9: A Study in Conjectural Emendation’ *NTS* 39 (1993), pp. 625-630 (against Bentley’s famous conjecture – πρεσβευτής, or ‘ambassador’, which was approved by [B.F. Westcott & F.J.A. Hort, ‘Appendix 1. Notes on Select Readings Orthography’, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1896), vol. 2, p. 136), Hock, ‘A Support for his

1), this particular address to Philemon the individual is framed by an address to two other named individuals, Apphia and Archippus, and the church in his (Philemon's) house (v, 2).<sup>10</sup> The predominant use of singular forms with reference to Philemon in particular occurs throughout the body of the letter (vv. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23), but is framed by introductory and concluding plural forms (vv. 3, 22, 25).<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, towards the close of the letter greetings are sent by Epaphras, about whom additional information is given (v. 23) as well as Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, listed and described as 'my co-workers' (v. 24).<sup>12</sup> The

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Old Age', pp. 69-73 (addressing both the conjectural emendation and the lexical proposal that πρεσβύτες can mean 'ambassador'). S.M. Solomon notes that Bentley's reading does in fact occur in three minuscule manuscripts, all of which exhibit considerable general vowel confusion (62 1311 2718), *The Textual History of Philemon* (PhD, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), p. 552.

<sup>10</sup> The obvious reading is to take the singular genitive pronoun in verse 2 (σου, anticipating the following singular forms) as referring to Philemon as the first named person addressed in verse 1 (and not Archippus, against J. Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul: A New View of its Place and Importance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1935; London: Collins, 1960), pp. 49-61; Campbell, *Framing Paul*, p. 254 & n. 2), see C.F.D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon. An Introduction and Commentary* (CGTC; Cambridge: CUP, 1962), pp. 16-7; Fitzmyer, *Philemon*, p. 89; Gnllka, *Philemonbrief*, p. 16 (and more generally in the commentaries). In support of this view, Theodoret claims that Philemon's house was in Colossae 'and his house remains there up to the present time' (PG 82.872A; Greek text cited in U. Huttner, *Early Christianity in the Lycus Valley* (AGAJU 85; Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 81 n. 2; brief discussion in A.H. Cadwallader, 'Refuting an Axiom of Scholarship on Colossae: fresh insights from new and old inscriptions' in *Colossae in Space and Time: Linking to an Ancient City* (ed. A.H. Cadwallader & M. Trainor; NTOA/SUNT 94; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), pp. 151-79, at p. 169). On Knox's wider thesis see especially D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990, 4<sup>th</sup> edition), pp. 660-664; H. Greeven, 'Prüfung der Thesen von J. Knox zum Philemonbrief' *ThLZ* 79 (1954), pp. 373-8; E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 186-7.

<sup>11</sup> Addressing a personal letter to the larger audience reflects something of Paul's persuasive strategy, see J.A.D. Weima, 'Paul's Persuasive Prose: An Epistolary Analysis of the Letter to Philemon' *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (ed. D.F. Tolmie; BZNW 169; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 29-60, esp. pp. 36-38 for discussion of this point in dialogue with the commentaries; cf. also Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 313; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 187, 190; J.M.G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 103-11; U. Wickert, 'Der Philemonbrief – Privatbrief oder apostolisches Schreiben?' *ZNW* 52 (1961), pp. 230-8; N.R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 267-70 (who sees the letter as conveying a thinly veiled threat of a public nature); cf. also more generally F.F. Church, 'Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon' *HTR* 71 (1978), pp. 17-33.

<sup>12</sup> In 1909 E. Amling proposed a single-letter emendation to read Ἰησοῦς rather than Ἰησοῦ at Philm. 23. This emended name is then included in the lists of those who send greetings, and this results in complete agreement between those sending greetings in Col 4.10-14 and those in Philm. 23f ('Eine Konjektur in Philemonbrief' *ZNW* 10 (1909), pp. 261-2). T. Zahn had already suggested that Philm. 23 may have originally read ΘΙησου=φ, without clarity about the process: 'it is possible to suppose that an original Ἰησοῦς, as indicating him [i.e. Jesus Justus], has disappeared in the Ἰησοῦ of ver. 23', *Introduction to the New Testament* (3 vols; ET by M.W. Jacobus et al. from 1906-1907<sup>3</sup>; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909), vol. 1, p. 451). On this basis the passage would read: 'Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ greets you; (as do) Jesus, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my co-workers'. In support Amling observed that in Philemon the normal expression is simply 'in Christ' (cf. v. 8, 20), and that Paul is not consistent in always adding 'Jesus' in such expressions concerning terms like 'prisoner', 'slave', or 'fellow-prisoner' (Rom 1.1; Philm. 1; cf. 1 Cor 7.22; Gal 1.10; Eph 6.6; Rom 16.7). This conjecture was supported by Lohse (*Colossians and Philemon*, p. 207: 'highly probable', and note 16); W.-H. Ollrog (*Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter: Untersuchung zu Theorie und Praxis der paulinischen Mission* (WMANT 50; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979), p. 49: 'höchstwahrscheinlich'); Knox (*Philemon*, p. 13: 'plausibly argued'), and most recently Campbell (*Framing Paul*, pp. 280-1: 'seems highly plausible'). However, despite the advantages which result from

cumulative effect of these three features – the double sender, the multiple addressees, and the greetings from co-workers – certainly evokes a wide range of external participants interested in the outcome of the letter.<sup>13</sup>

The main point of the letter is to make an appeal on behalf of Onesimus, who was a slave of Philemon,<sup>14</sup> and who has now become a brother, newly born, a Christian believer, through Paul (v. 10, 16).<sup>15</sup> Onesimus has clearly departed from Philemon (v. 15), met up with Paul in prison (v. 10-13), and is now returning to Philemon (v. 12, 17), but the nature of each of these relationships is unclear. The terms on which Onesimus departed from Philemon are not specified, although the reference to his earlier ‘uselessness’ (v. 11) and the possibility that he had wronged or defrauded

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this reading, and the simplicity of the proposal (concerning only a single letter); against it stands not only the general caution against adopting conjectural readings (especially those which smooth an obvious interpretive difficulty) – hence the description of the proposal as ‘arbitrary’ (Fitzmyer, *Philemon*, p. 124) or ‘Willkür’ (Gnilka, *Philemonbrief*, p. 92), or as standing against the whole textual tradition (Stuhlmacher, *Philemon*, p. 55; confirmed recently by Solomon, *The Textual History of Philemon*, p. 562); but also the specific problem that in Pauline circles, and especially in a greeting, it is most unlikely that an undisambiguated ‘Jesus’ would stand for the personal name ‘Jesus Justus’, so Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 343 n. 2 and Gnilka, *Philemonbrief*, p. 92 n. 8 (cf. the broader issues canvassed in R.J. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 67-84).

<sup>13</sup> So also P. Lampe (‘Affects and Emotions in the Rhetoric of Paul’s Letter to Philemon: A Rhetorical-Psychological Interpretation’ *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (ed. D.F. Tolmie; BZNW 169; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 61-77, at p. 66) who adds that Christ is also invoked as a witness of Philemon’s behaviour (vv. 6, 10, 25); C. Frilingos, “‘For my Child, Onesimus’: Paul and Domestic Power in Philemon” *JBL* 119 (2000), pp. 91-104, esp. pp. 99-100.

<sup>14</sup> A.D. Callahan has argued that Onesimus was not a slave but Philemon’s brother; the letter concerns the estrangement of two blood brothers, Philemon despised Onesimus for a past injustice for which he had never been compensated. In this context the comparison with slavery is introduced in v. 16 not as describing an actual state of affairs but using ‘the antitype of a blood relative’; see ‘Paul’s Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum’ *HTR* 86 (1993), pp. 357-76 (citation from p. 362); *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity PI, 1997). This view can hardly make sense of the introduction of the term slave (*doulos*) in v. 16 (Callahan’s view of v. 16a is rejected by Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 335; Fitzmyer, *Philemon*, p. 114 [cf. pp. 18-20]; Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon*, p. 84), nor the use of ‘brother’ in v. 16 (considering elsewhere it refers to a Christian brother, Philm. 1, 7, 20; and even in v. 16 applies no less to Paul, μάλιστα ἐμοι, than to Philemon), nor the language of ‘usefulness’ and ‘service’ in v. 11 and 13. Against Callahan’s view that the runaway slave theory originated with Chrysostom see M.M. Mitchell, ‘John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look’, *Look’ HTR* 88 (1995), pp. 135-48 who finds additional, and earlier evidence for this view in the early church, in Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Marcionite Prologues, Ambrosiaster etc. (see further J.A.D. Weima, ., ‘Review of Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus*’ *Trinity Journal* 19 (1998), pp. 107-10). Recently Huttner, emphasising the ongoing obligations of a freedman to his former owner, has proposed that Onesimus was a former slave who had previously been freed by Philemon (*Early Christianity in the Lycus Valley*, pp. 104-9). This view, however, does not account for either the ἀρχηστον ... εὐχρηστον word play in v. 11 or the ‘no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave’ rhetoric in v. 16, both of which seem to belong firmly to the social context of slavery (one might expect different plays and comparisons in dealing with a freedman).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. most closely 1 Cor 4.15: ἐν γὰρ Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ διὰ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ἐγὼ ὑμᾶς ἐγέννησα (cf. also Gal 4.19; 1 Thess 2.11)

Philemon (v. 18) suggests that Onesimus was a less than ideal slave, and not sent as an emissary of either Philemon or Archippus.<sup>16</sup> But the manner of Onesimus' departure, the means by which he came into contact with Paul, and the location of Paul's imprisonment are not clearly indicated within the text, and hence a wide variety of view-points have been represented in the literature.

An earlier view broadly took the view that Onesimus was a runaway slave who accidentally/providentially met Paul in Rome and became a Christian through that encounter.<sup>17</sup> More recently a number of scholars have taken the view that Onesimus may have sought out Paul deliberately as someone who could mediate a resolution with his master.<sup>18</sup> Increasingly, scholars have associated this with an imprisonment of Paul in Ephesus, rather than Rome.<sup>19</sup> We may presume that Paul thinks that some of this information is either already known to Philemon, or readily filled out in conversation between Onesimus and Philemon.

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<sup>16</sup> Against, for example, S.S. Elliott, who has recently proposed (one could hardly say 'argued') that Onesimus was sent to Rome by Philemon; but sent back by Paul so as to avoid the patronage implications of Philemon's action, "Thanks, but no Thanks": Tact, Persuasion, and the Negotiation of Power in Paul's Letter to Philemon' *NTS* 57 (2010), pp. 51-64, esp. p. 58 for Elliott's attempt to deal with v. 11, and p. 62 for his attempt to deal with v. 18. For a related earlier perspective see S.C. Winter, 'Paul's Letter to Philemon', *NTS* 33 (1987), pp. 1-15, at p. 3. U. Roth builds on Winter's argument in a different direction, arguing that Onesimus was in some respects jointly owned by Paul and Philemon. The two men, in her reading, had entered into a *κοινωνία*, 'a private (voluntary) association of two or more members that aimed at the pooling of resources for a specific goal' ('Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus: A Christian Design for Mastery' *ZNW* 105 (2014), pp. 102-30, at p. 105). Their partnership agreement involved the deployment of Onesimus to aid Paul, and the purpose of the letter is to urge that the partnership be continued. Among other problems, this view requires an implausibly one-sided, non-theological, and non-contextual reading of the use of the term *κοινωνία* in verse 6; cf. for a discussion of the range of possible meanings in the documents see J.M. Ogereau, 'A Survey of *κοινωνία* and Its Cognates in Documentary Sources' *NovT* 57 (2015), pp. 275-94.

<sup>17</sup> For a statement and then a defence of the traditional view see Guthrie, *Introduction*, pp. 660-4.

<sup>18</sup> This view is especially associated with P. Lampe, 'Keine "Sklavenflucht" des Onesimus' *ZNW* 76 (1985), pp. 135-7 and was extended by B.M. Rapske, 'The Prisoner Paul in the Eyes of Onesimus' *NTS* 37 (1991), pp. 187-203.

<sup>19</sup> So e.g. J.M.G. Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-ownership', *NTS* 37 (1991), pp. 161-86; see p. 163 n. 9: 'the current consensus places Paul in Ephesus' (w.r.t. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 188; Gnika, *Philemonbrief*, pp. 4-5); Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, p. 7: 'with the majority of contemporary scholars'; Müller, *Philemon*, p. 81: 'die grosse Mehrheit der Exegeten spricht sich für eine Abfassung des Briefes in Ephesus aus' (w.r.t. Stuhlmacher, Lohse, Gnika, Binder, Wolter, Lampe). The supposed consensus is strong among German-language scholars; in other circles even the idea of a consensus in favour of Ephesus is contested, e.g. by Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 307: 'the debate between [Ephesus and Rome] remains as divisive as ever'; Barth and Blanke, *Philemon*, p. 121: 'no agreement exists concerning time and location of the writing'. For helpful discussions of the possibilities see P.T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC 44; Waco, TX: Word, 1982), pp. xlix-liv; Barth and Blanke, *Philemon*, pp. 121-6 (leaning towards Rome); Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 307-8 (leaving the location question open); Fitzmyer, *Philemon*, pp. 9-11 (leaning towards Ephesus). The location of Paul is not determinative for the following discussion.

## 2. Identifying the Letter Carrier

### 2.1 The Tradition: Onesimus

There is a perhaps surprisingly solid consensus of scholarship, both ancient and modern, in support of the identification of Onesimus as the letter carrier of Paul's letter to Philemon. Barclay, for example, describes Onesimus' return to Philemon with the letter as part of 'the usual understanding of the story'.<sup>20</sup> Among patristic writers this seems to have been the universal view, certainly so for the influential writers Jerome and Chrysostom, both of whom mention his role as letter carrier without argumentation.<sup>21</sup> The subscription to Philemon in the Byzantine manuscript tradition identifies Onesimus as the letter carrier.<sup>22</sup> Kreitzer shows that it has been widely presumed in popular literature, iconography, biographies of Paul and cinematography about Onesimus.<sup>23</sup> It is held by classic nineteenth-century commentators like Alford, Lightfoot, and Vincent.<sup>24</sup> This was

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<sup>20</sup> Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon, and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', p. 163. So also, within an exposition of 'the traditional interpretation', J. Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery* (RRBS 3; Sheffield: Phoenix, 2008), p. 119.

<sup>21</sup> Jerome: F. Bucci, *Commentarii in Epistulas Pauli Apostoli ad Titum et ad Philemonem* (CChr.SL 77C; Turnhout, 2003), 85, pp. 101-13, 122-3 (A. Friedl, 'St. Jerome's Dissertation on the Letter to Philemon', *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (ed. D.F. Tolmie; BZNW 169; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 289-316, at p. 302); T.P. Scheck, *St. Jerome's Commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 360; Chrysostom, *Hom. on Philemon*, preface: 'For if Paul bestows so much concern upon a runaway, a thief, and a robber, and does not refuse nor is ashamed to send him back with such commendations; much more does it become us not to be negligent in such matters.' PG 62.703 (#773), ET: NPNF vol. 13, p. 546 (see C.L. de Wet, 'Honour Discourse in John Chrysostom's Exegesis of the Letter to Philemon' *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (ed. D.F. Tolmie; BZNW 169; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 317-31; M.M. Mitchell, 'John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look' *HTR* 88 (1995), pp. 135-48; *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (HUTh 40; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000)); for Origen see R.E. Heine, 'In Search of Origen's Commentary on Philemon' *HTR* 93 (2000), pp. 117-133.

<sup>22</sup> πρὸς Φιλῆμονα ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Ονησιμοῦ οἰκέτου. This is the simple form of the subscription in the Byzantine texts according to NA27 (K 075 0142 from K. Wachtel & K. Witte, *Das Neue Testament auf Papyrus. II Die Paulinischen Briefe Teil 2* (ANTTF 22; Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), p. 242); the content seems to have varied with some manuscripts including the other addressees, and others adding Tychicus to Onesimus as agent of delivery (1739 1881 *al* – L should probably not be included here, despite NA27, given the text as presented in Wachtel & Witte, *NTP*, p. 242). 1739 omits the final word identifying Onesimus as an οἰκέτης, or household slave; while 1881 substitutes the word φυγάδος (from φυγάς 'a fugitive'), presuming the 'traditional' view of the situation of the letter.

<sup>23</sup> For images (and discussion) from popular literature, iconography, biographies of Paul and cinematography depicting Onesimus as the letter carrier see L.J. Kreitzer, *Philemon* (Readings; Sheffield: Phoenix, 2008), p. 47, 51-2, 115=6, 154-5 (respectively).

<sup>24</sup> H. Alford, 'Prolegomena', *The Greek Testament* (4 vol.; Cambridge: Deighton, Bell & Co., 1871), vol. 3, p. 113 ('it is borne by Onesimus'); C.J. Ellicott, *St Paul's Epistles to the Philippians, the Colossians, and Philemon* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1865, 3<sup>rd</sup>), p. 213; Vincent, *Philippians and Philemon* (1897), p. 158; J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (*The Epistles of St. Paul*; London: Macmillan, 1897), pp. 314-5 (implied, but not explicit).



generally presumed by twentieth-century commentators;<sup>25</sup> and by most of the twenty-first century commentators and scholars as well.<sup>26</sup> Generally this viewpoint has been assumed or stated without significant argument. We shall consider three other approaches to the identity of the letter carrier of Philemon.

## 2.2 Oesterley: Tychicus

Oesterley suggested that the letter was carried by Tychicus, on the basis that he is named as carrier for other letters going to the same area (he specifically mentions Colossians and the letter to Laodicea).<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that if Colossians is regarded as both authentic and contemporaneous with Philemon then Onesimus and Tychicus must be travelling together, and that the presence of Tychicus, named as the primary letter carrier of Colossians, will be a factor in the reception of Philemon, but to name him as letter carrier when he is not named in the letter itself would seem rather unusual if there is an available candidate named within the letter.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul*, p. 9: 'When Paul sent the slave Onesimus back to his owner, he placed in his hands what is universally acknowledged to be one of the most charming letters ever written.' Cf. also F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 177; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 187; L.T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), pp. 353-4; O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 267; S.R. Llewelyn, 'A Petition Concerning a Runaway: Paul's Letter to Philemon' *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* 6 (1992), p. 59; Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 328.

<sup>26</sup> So, for example, Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon*, p. 59 cf. 'Onesimus erro: Zur Vorgeschichte des Philemonbriefes', p. 131; J.G. Nordling, *Philemon: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture* (CC; Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), p. 231, cf. 'Some Matters Favoring the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon' *Neotestamentica* 44 (2010), pp. 85-121, at p. 86; The identification of Onesimus as the letter carrier is assumed (without argument or discussion) in C. Frilingos, "'For my Child, Onesimus": Paul and Domestic Power in Philemon' *JBL* 119 (2000), pp. 91-104, at p. 99; S.S. Elliott, "'Thanks, but no Thanks": Tact, Persuasion, and the Negotiation of Power in Paul's Letter to Philemon' *NTS* 57 (2010), pp. 51-64, at pp. 58, 61; U. Roth, 'Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus: A Christian Design for Mastery' *ZNW* 105 (2014), pp. 102-30, at pp. 111-2, 114; Barth & Blanke, *Philemon*, p. 148: seem uncertain: Onesimus 'will have started homeward voluntarily, whether or not he carried Paul's letter to Philemon in his own hand or pocket'; cf. also Fitzmyer, *Philemon*, p. 24 ('possibly'); E.J. Epp notes that Philm. 12 & 17 imply 'that Onesimus carried the letter to Philemon' 'The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament' *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis. Second Edition* (eds M.W. Holmes & B.D. Ehrman; NTTSD 42; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2012), pp. 1-39, at p. 15 n. 42.

<sup>27</sup> W.E. Oesterley, 'The Epistle to Philemon', *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910, vol. 4), p. 207: 'The letter in which St. Paul intercedes for Onesimus was sent by Tychicus, who was going to Colossae and Laodicea with other letters from him to the churches there.' This is stated in the 'Introduction'; in the commentary however on Philemon 12 he writes 'It is clear from these words that Onesimus himself was the bearer of the letter' (p. 214). S. McKnight varies in the opposite direction, suggesting Onesimus in the 'Introduction': 'Paul sends Onesimus to Philemon with the letter' (*The Letter to Philemon* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), p. 40); but he is more hesitant in the commentary: 'We do not know the courier, but it is probably Tychicus or perhaps Onesimus' (p. 77).

<sup>28</sup> J. Murphy-O'Connor takes Tychicus as letter carrier for both Colossians and Philemon, with Onesimus as his guide: 'In returning to his master he could serve as the guide in the Lycus valley for Tychicus, who no doubt carried

### 2.3 Tite: Timothy

More recently Tite has suggested that the naming of Timothy and his identification as ‘brother’ ‘may simply serve as a brief recommendation for the bearer of the letter, which has simply been assimilated into the epistolary prescript’.<sup>29</sup> Despite the doubly claimed ‘simplicity’ of this proposal there is little to be said in favour of it. Indeed in a supporting footnote Tite offers no supporting evidence or argument for Timothy as letter carrier, beyond the negative argument in relation to Onesimus that ‘there is nothing in the letter that necessitates identifying him as the letter carrier’.<sup>30</sup> None of the other secondary authors of the Pauline letters, even those also introduced as ‘brother’, would seem to have been involved in the personal delivery of the letter (cf. Sosthenes the brother, 1 Cor 1.1; Timothy the brother, 2 Cor 1.1; Timothy, Phil 1.1; Timothy the brother, Col 1.1). Tite further suggests ‘it is possible that Timothy travelled with Onesimus back to Colossae and therefore both the letter and Timothy (as letter carrier) would have reinforced Paul’s petition to Philemon, with Timothy potentially offering further oral arguments to supplement the written letter.’<sup>31</sup> While we agree of course that a letter carrier could reinforce and supplement the message of a letter, the evidence of antiquity and of Paul’s normal practice would suggest that such a letter carrier would be named within the body of the letter.<sup>32</sup> There is certainly no evidence to suggest that Timothy made the journey with Onesimus.

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both Col and Philemon in addition to the letter to the Laodiceans (Col 4:16)’, ‘Review of E.R. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*’, *Rev Bib* 112 (2005), pp. 628-33, at p. 630; B. Reicke takes Tychicus to be the letter carrier of Philemon, as well as Colossians and Ephesians, *Re-examining Paul’s Letters: The History of the Pauline Correspondence* (ed. D.P. Moessner & I. Reicke; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), p. 83; cf. also somewhat more fully (but still without supporting evidence or argument) in ‘The Historical Setting of Colossians’, in *Re-examining Paul’s Letters*, pp. 126-7.

<sup>29</sup> P.L. Tite, ‘How to Begin, and Why? Diverse Functions of the Pauline Prescript within a Greco-Roman Context’, *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form* (ed. S.E. Porter & S.A. Adam; Pauline Studies 6; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 57-99, at p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> Tite, ‘How to Begin, and Why? Diverse Functions of the Pauline Prescript within a Greco-Roman Context’, p. 79, n. 53.

<sup>31</sup> Tite, ‘How to Begin, and Why? Diverse Functions of the Pauline Prescript within a Greco-Roman Context’, p. 79, n. 53.

<sup>32</sup> P.M. Head, ‘Named Letter-Carriers among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri’ *JSNT* 31 (2009), pp. 279-99.

## 2.4 Winter: not Onesimus

The fullest alternative to identifying Onesimus as the letter carrier has been presented by Winter.<sup>33</sup> As one part of a larger argument which sees the letter to Philemon as a request by Paul to keep Onesimus with him, Winter argues that  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu\alpha\pi\epsilon/\mu\pi\omega$  σοι in v. 12 does not mean ‘whom I sent back to you’; but that  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu\alpha\pi\epsilon/\mu\pi\omega$  is used here in its legal sense of ‘referring or remitting a case’ to a higher authority: ‘Paul is not sending Onesimus back, but is referring his case to the proper, higher authority.’<sup>34</sup> She has two additional strands to the argument. Firstly, considering that in her view the case of Epaphroditus is very similar to that of Onesimus – both having been dispatched by a church to aid Paul in prison – the differences between Phil 2.25-30 and Philemon are significant; both in language - Phil 2.25 has  $\pi\acute{\epsilon}\mu\pi\omega$ , ‘a different verb’, and a prepositional phrase,  $\pi\rho\acute{o}\varsigma\ \upsilon\mu\acute{\iota}\nu$ , rather than a simple dative; and in substance – Phil 2.25-30 reviews Epaphroditus’ commission, details why Paul is sending him back, recommends a warm welcome and repeats Paul’s high estimation of Epaphroditus. Secondly, Paul elsewhere is more explicit in giving instructions for the reception of people (Rom 16.1-2; 1 Cor 16.10-12, 15-18; Phil 2.19-24; 2.25-30).<sup>35</sup> Winter later argues in connection with the language of reception in Philm. 17,  $\pi\rho\omicron\sigma\lambda\alpha\beta\omicron\upsilon\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu\tau\omicron\nu\ \acute{\omega}\varsigma\ \acute{\epsilon}\mu\acute{\epsilon}$ , that ‘ $\pi\rho\omicron\sigma\lambda\alpha\beta\omicron\upsilon$  is not to be taken in the physical sense but in the figurative sense as in the three other occurrences of this verb in Paul’s letters (Rom 14.1, 14.3, 15.7).’<sup>36</sup>

None of these arguments are particularly compelling, even if we isolate them from the other lines of Winter’s argument.<sup>37</sup> To begin with the verb  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu\alpha\pi\epsilon\mu\pi\omega$ , Winter is right to note that it

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<sup>33</sup> S.C. Winter ‘Paul’s Letter to Philemon’, *NTS* 33 (1987), pp. 1-15, esp. p. 7 (cf. also ‘Methodological Observations on a New Interpretation of Paul’s Letter to Philemon’ *USQR* 39 (1984), pp. 203-12).

<sup>34</sup> Winter, ‘Paul’s Letter to Philemon’, p. 7. With claimed support from LSJ and all the other NT usage: Luke 23.7, 11, 15; Acts 25.21; 27.1 *v.l.*

<sup>35</sup> Assuming that Rom 15.1-2 is a typo (Winter, ‘Paul’s Letter to Philemon’, p. 7).

<sup>36</sup> Winter, ‘Paul’s Letter to Philemon’, p. 14 n. 50 (actually there are four other occurrences since it occurs twice in Rom 15.7). In her view Paul uses  $\pi\rho\omicron\sigma\delta\acute{\epsilon}\chi\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$  (Rom 16.2; Phil 2.29) when he means ‘welcome someone who is physically present’ (same note).

<sup>37</sup> For a general discussion/critique of Winter’s view see Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 301; Barth and Blanke, *Philemon*, pp. 227-8.

sometimes has a legal sense, but is rather selective in her use of the lexica, since LSJ proposes ‘remit, refer to higher authority’, and the meaning appears never to be ‘to refer or remit a case’, since in such contexts it means ‘to refer or remit’ whatever is the direct object of the verb.<sup>38</sup> In any case only one of the NT examples involves referring a person to a higher authority (‘sending up’; Acts 25.21); the other cases involve a recognition of alternative authority, so explicitly in Luke 23.7; or more likely simply a ‘sending back’ (so Luke 23.11, 15). In any case there is no reference to ‘a case’ as somehow separate from the person, and it is perhaps unsurprising that Winter does not attempt a translation of the phrase in Philm. v. 12, since it is difficult to know how she would render the phrase. The differences between Onesimus and Epaphroditus are of little significance. The supposed parallel between their two situations is itself a product of Winter’s singular hypothesis that Onesimus was sent to Paul by the church in Colossae to help him in prison. This is in principle unlikely and does not fit with the data of the letter; indeed the contrasting case of Epaphroditus shows up the implausibility of a church sending an unbelieving slave of questionable reliability to take money and support to Paul.<sup>39</sup> Paul never devolves to purely formulaic and repetitive language when speaking of such matters as the reception of envoys and letter carriers; the fact that he uses different language (to some degree) in Philemon does not itself tell against Onesimus as letter carrier. That v. 12 refers to a sending back of Onesimus is also confirmed by the following verses: ‘I was wanting to keep him with me ... but I decided to do nothing without your consent’ – to keep Onesimus with him would be to gain him from Philemon by compulsion.<sup>40</sup>

Winter’s final assertion as to a ‘figurative’ meaning for προσλαμβάνω is also rather unclear, as if Paul’s call for the Roman Christians (Rom 14.1; 15.7) to welcome one another involved a

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<sup>38</sup> LSJ, p. 115.

<sup>39</sup> So also B.M. Rapske, ‘The Prisoner Paul in the Eyes of Onesimus’ *NTS* 37 (1991), pp. 187-203, at pp. 188-9; Barclay, ‘Dilemma’, p. 164: ‘it appears that when he left Philemon’s house Onesimus was not a Christian and was regarded by his master as useless: that, surely, is hardly the sort of person whom Philemon or his church would commission to serve or assist Paul.’

<sup>40</sup> To be fair, Winter also proposes an additional unusual reading of v. 13f (‘Paul’s Letter to Philemon’, pp. 7-10), which involves a very selective treatment of the key phrases; cf. Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 331.

‘figurative’ welcome. Exactly what this would mean, if it did not involve any physical proximity is not clear. In addition Winter’s argument isolates one word from the whole phrase, προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ, which evokes the concepts of representation using language generally associated with the use of envoys representing the sender.<sup>41</sup>

### *2.5 Onesimus as Letter Carrier*

Despite the popularity of this view, the grounds for it are nowhere discussed explicitly in the commentaries I have looked at. At this stage we can suggest the following considerations, building on our earlier general discussion:

- a) Onesimus fills the basic requirements in that he is understood to be present with the author during composition and anticipated to be with the recipient on reception of the letter;
- b) Onesimus is the only one among those named in the letter who fulfils these requirements;
- c) Onesimus is named in the letter in the context of a recommendation passage using vocabulary and ideas drawn from recommendation and representation, including the use of ‘sending’ language;
- d) Onesimus is named before the closing travel plans and greetings;
- e) It is hoped and anticipated that Onesimus might return to Paul
- f) Onesimus is identified as letter carrier in early commentaries and subscriptions.

But what of the role of Onesimus as letter carrier? Petersen describes the issue from one perspective when he speaks of the crisis which Paul engineers for Philemon. He uses this to introduce his extensive closing metaphor of Onesimus and Philemon meeting over the threshold to Philemon’s house:

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<sup>41</sup> ‘The first principle that can be isolated about envoys in first-century antiquity is that proper reception of the envoy necessarily entails proper reception of the one who sent him.’ M.M. Mitchell, ‘New Testament Envoys in the Context of Greco-Roman Diplomatic and Epistolary Conventions: The Example of Titus and Timothy’ *JBL* 111 (1992), pp. 641-62, from p. 645.

When he is confronted with Onesimus's presence on his doorstep, and after having read Paul's letter, he is confronted not only with having to decide whether or not he will receive his slave as his brother, but also whether or not *he* is and wants to be a brother, a slave of Christ, and a son of God. Paradoxically, the critical decision to be made concerns himself, not Onesimus, for Onesimus *is* a brother, a slave, or rather a freedman of Christ, and a child of God-to-be regardless of what he, Philemon, decides. But the paradox is also not without irony, for the doorstep on which Philemon and Onesimus stand is the threshold of the church that meets in Philemon's house. If Philemon slams the door of his house in Onesimus' face in rejection of Paul's "appeal" he will be tacitly excluding himself from the house church into which he has retreated. Onesimus stands on the threshold of Philemon's house, waiting to be invited into his, Onesimus's, church, but Philemon stands on the same threshold with the choice of making the invitation or of having himself invited to leave. For at least a fleeting moment, perhaps Philemon wonders just whose house it is. A good question, but whether or not he asked it, one thing is certain. Standing there on his own doorstep, Philemon is a man on the threshold between two worlds.<sup>42</sup>

### ***3. Philemon as a Letter of Recommendation? Onesimus and the letter to Philemon***

This image of Onesimus on the threshold of Philemon's house, posing in his own person the question of how Philemon should respond to him, leads fairly readily into a discussion of the genre

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<sup>42</sup> Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*, pp. 269-70; R.F. Hock envisages a similar scenario (more briefly), 'A Support for his Old Age: Paul's Plea on Behalf of Onesimus' *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L.M. White & O.L. Yarbrough; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), pp. 67-81, at p. 76. Cicero recognised the crucial moment of reception of the letter of recommendation. On one occasion he mentions that he has discussed this moment with the carrier, commenting on it in detail in a letter to D. Brutus before turning to introduce the carrier and the topic of the letter (May/June 43 BC):

'A great deal depends on when this letter is delivered to you – whether at a time when you have something on your mind or when you are quite free from anxiety. I have accordingly instructed the bearer to watch for the right moment to hand you his charge, for a letter delivered unseasonably often annoys us like an inopportune visitor. But is, as I hope, you will have nothing to worry and distract you and my messenger chooses a sufficiently tactful and convenient time to make his approach, I am confident that the request I have to put to you will be readily granted.' (*ad Fam.* XI.16.1; ET: D.R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero. Letters to Friends* [Loeb Classical Library Cicero XXVII; Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2001], p. 407.)

of this small letter. Kim, who did primary work on the Greek letter of recommendation among the papyri, argued that the letter to Philemon was best categorised as a letter of recommendation:

‘Philemon is the only Pauline letter of commendation that has been handed down to us intact – that is, the only commendation that has not been included in a larger letter.’<sup>43</sup> He argued both that ‘the letter itself clearly commends Onesimus to his master Philemon’ and that ‘the letter exhibits most of the Pauline forms and structures found in [Paul’s] commendations’.<sup>44</sup> While the letter to Philemon does not exhibit the same form and structure as a typical papyrus letter of commendation, it does contain the typical elements of a Pauline commendation:<sup>45</sup>

a) *the introduction* (v10a) – παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου – with a petitionary verb, in this case restating and thus strengthening the verb from v9.

b) *the credentials* (vv. 10b-13), expressed with a series of relative pronouns (v. 10b, 12, 13) and an articular phrase (v. 11)

c) *the desired action* (v. 17) – προσλαβοῦ αὐτόν ὡς ἐμέ – preceded by a conditional clause

Kim notes that the ‘credentials’ items in Philemon which emphasise Onesimus’ close relationship with, and previous service rendered to, Paul (τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, v. 10; ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον, v 11; τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα, v. 12; ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, v. 16) are broadly very similar to that of many of the papyrus letters of recommendation, where the ‘writer usually identifies the recommended in terms of family relationship or by degree of intimacy, in the hope that the recipient would accept him as if the writer himself were being recommended’.<sup>46</sup> This extends in particular to the identification of Onesimus with Paul (αὐτόν, τοῦτ’ ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα, v. 12; προσλαβοῦ αὐτόν ὡς ἐμέ, v. 17), a feature which is paralleled in the Greek papyri.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> C.-H. Kim, *Form and Structure of the Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation* (Missoula, MT: SBL, 1972), p. 123.

<sup>44</sup> Kim, *Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation*, p. 123.

<sup>45</sup> Kim, *Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation*, pp. 126-8.

<sup>46</sup> Kim, *Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation*, p. 127. The many different examples cited from the papyri (pp. 48-51) suggest that the credential phase expressed the individualism of the particular relationship rather than generic stereotypes.

<sup>47</sup> So, e.g. P. Oslo 55, lines 7-10: καλῶς οὖν ποιήσεις, ἄδελφε, τοῦτον ὑποδεξάμενος ὡς ἂν ἐμέ. (cited from Kim, *Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation*, p. 217; his text no. 62). P. Arzt-Graber adds P. Brem. 6, lines 4-5: ὥστε οὕτως ἔχε πρὸς αὐτόν ὡς πρὸς ἰδίόν μου μέρος. □ ‘How to Deal with Onesimus? Paul’s Solution within the Frame of Ancient Legal and Documentary Sources’ *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (ed. D. Francois

Early support for this general view of the letter to Philemon comes from Jerome's commentary which connects Onesimus as letter carrier with the generic identification of the letter as a letter of recommendation: 'at the same time when Onesimus carried a general letter to the whole church [i.e. Colossians], he took along a private letter of recommendation (*privatas ... commendatrices ... litteras*) of himself to his master.'<sup>48</sup> Jerome also refers to earlier views of the letter which involved rejecting the letter on the basis of its function as a commendation: 'that it contains nothing capable of edifying us; and that it was rejected by very many of the ancients, since it is written merely out of the duty to commend someone, not for teaching.'<sup>49</sup> Chrysostom makes the general point that the letter to Philemon commends Onesimus, without the specific generic identification.<sup>50</sup>

Some scholars, influenced especially by Kim, have supported the generic identification of the letter as a letter of recommendation.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, as Kim also noted, Philemon lacks

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Tolmie; BZNW 169; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 113-42, at p. 135). Kim also notes that it is characteristic of the papyri that '[g]eneral assistance is also requested by compounds of λαμβάνω' (Kim, *Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation*, p. 74 citing four examples, although none of them are προσλαμβάνω).

<sup>48</sup> Jerome, *Comm. on Philemon*, preface; PL. 26.606A: *et eo tempore communem ad omnem Ecclesiam Onesimus epistolam tulerit, quo privatas et sui commendatrices ad dominum litteras sumpserat*; ET from Scheck, *St. Jerome's Commentaries*, p. 352.

<sup>49</sup> Jerome, *Comm. on Philemon*, on vv. 1-3; Bucchi (2003), pp. 77-80; PL. 26.601C: *nihil habere quod aedificare nos possit; et a plerisque veteribus repudiatam, dum commendandi tantum scribatur officio, non docendi*. ET from Scheck, *St. Jerome's Commentaries*, p. 360. Noted in Vincent, *Philippians and Philemon*, p. 159. For discussion see A. Friedl, 'St. Jerome's Dissertation on the Letter to Philemon', pp. 296-7; for Jerome's dependence on Origen in this section see Heine, 'In Search of Origen's Commentary on Philemon', pp. 120-6, and more generally C.H. Bammel, 'Origen's Pauline Prefaces and the Chronology of his *Pauline Commentaries*' *Origeniana Sexta: Origène et la Bible / Origen and the Bible* (ed. G. Dorival & A. Le Boulluec; BETL CXVIII; Leuven: LUP, 1995), pp. 495-513, esp. p. 505: 'Jerome has copied Origen not only by plagiarising from his *Commentary* but also in starting with Philemon.'

<sup>50</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. on Philemon*, preface: 'Paul therefore writes, recommending him to his master (συνιστῶν αὐτὸν πρὸς τὸν δεσπότην), that on every account he should forgive him, and receive him as one now regenerate.' PG 62.701 (#772), ET: NPNF vol. 13, p. 545. And a little later, defending the appropriateness of the content of the brief letter: 'For if Paul bestows so much concern upon a runaway, a thief, and a robber, and does not refuse nor is ashamed to send him back with such commendations (μετὰ τοσούτων αὐτὸν ἐγκωμίων παραπέμψαι); much more does it become us not to be negligent in such matters.' PG 62.703 (#773), ET: NPNF vol. 13, p. 546.

<sup>51</sup> M.L. Stirewalt Jr. states baldly: 'The Letter to Philemon is a letter of commendation.' ('Paul's Evaluation of Letter Writing' *Search the Scriptures: New Testament Studies in Honor of Raymond T. Stamm* (ed. J.M. Myers, O. Reimherr & H.N. Bream; GTS 3; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), pp. 179-96, at p. 191 n. 4). Perhaps a little more cautiously L.T. Stuckenbruck states 'The letter ... adheres closely to the pattern of ancient Hellenistic letter writing, in particular letters of recommendation.' ('Colossians and Philemon', *Cambridge Companion to St Paul* (ed. J.D.G. Dunn; Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp. 116-32, at p. 127); cf. also P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's*



many of the formal, structural, and stylistic features of a typical letter of recommendation.<sup>52</sup> It also contains features that are not normally present in such letters: dual authors, multiple addressees, the framing of the letter within a corporate environment (vv. 3, 25), the extensive thanksgiving section (vv. 4-7), and the extensive description of the complex situation of the letter (vv. 8-22). The genre itself was certainly understood as reasonably flexible, especially when the situation and/or the relationships required it.<sup>53</sup> Paul, of course, had no reason to conform his letters to particular “types”; in the case of Philemon it is preferable in my view to think of Philemon as a significant adaptation and expansion of the letter of recommendation, rather than one that is strictly identifiable within the “type”.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, it seems clear that the network of relationships between the primary characters Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon, is definitely similar to those in the situation of letters of recommendation: Paul and Philemon bound in friendship and patronage by earlier common experiences and connections; Paul in this case re-introducing Onesimus to Philemon in an attempt to forge a new relationship between Philemon and Onesimus – a relationship on the different footing as brothers in the faith. Two particular features of the mode of operation of such letters are also of interest. First, if we consider the letter to Philemon as to some degree influenced by the letter of recommendation, then it is natural that the purpose of the epistolary introduction, the actual matter for discussion, would be somewhat vague and not at all explicit.<sup>55</sup> Secondly, the social

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*Relations with the Corinthians* (WUNT 2.23; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1987), pp. 147-150. Cf. also R.F. Collins, ‘Reflections on 1 Corinthians as a Hellenistic Letter’ *The Corinthian Correspondence* (ed. R. Bieringer; BETL CXXV; Leuven: LUP, 1996), pp. 39-61, at p. 41: ‘Paul’s letter to Philemon bears the customary characteristics of the commendatory genre’; Arzt-Grabner notes a series of parallels between the specific vocabulary of Philemon and other examples of the recommendation letter (παρακαλέω v. 9 cf. P. Oxy 292 (AD 25) line 5; νυνὶ δὲ [καὶ] σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον v. 11 cf. P. Oxy 743 (2 BC) line 35; προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὥς ἐμέ v. 17 cf. P. Oslo 55 (AD II/III) line 9; ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι v. 12 cf. SB V 8005 (AD II) line 7) *Philemon*, pp. 59-61.

<sup>52</sup> Kim, *Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation*, pp. 124-6. As Kim notes, the differences of form and structure mostly correspond to characteristic Pauline preferences: in opening address, salutation, thanksgiving and letter-body.

<sup>53</sup> So, e.g. S.K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (LEC 5; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), p. 153.

<sup>54</sup> With, e.g., Fitzmyer, *Philemon*, p. 24: ‘related to letters of recommendation’; Stowers, *Letter Writing*, p. 155: ‘Philemon contains several phrases and topical and formal features of introductory and intercessory letters.’

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Kim, *Familiar Letter of Recommendation*, pp. 71-6. He cites three examples: ‘in whatever matter he comes to you for, do it for him on my account’ (P. Merton 62; Kim #44); ‘and in whatever matter he comes to you, do it justly

relations instantiated by the letter of introduction placed a significant weight on the letter carrier, the one recommended, to take advantage of the introduction and move the conversation forward in his own interests, filling out the vague and ambiguous request.<sup>56</sup>

Within the broader context it was commonly understood that the (named) letter carrier has a role in the communication. In addition, the letter to Philemon shares some of the themes and language of the letter of recommendation and serves in part to (re-)introduce the carrier to the recipient. In this case, with an ambiguous text the role of the carrier is even more important - responsible interpretation of the reception of this letter will allow for the important role taken by the carrier. In passing we should note the trust that this implies that Paul has in Onesimus - using him as a letter carrier probably says more about Paul's confidence in Onesimus than any of the positive things he says in the letter. The function of the letter of recommendation is to place the carrier in the presence of the recipient and simply to initiate the conversation that the carrier must himself carry through.

This perspective offers some kind of sequel to the vignette already sketched on the threshold of Philemon's house, and offers an additional perspective to the complaint voiced by Harrill:

Although we can invent stories of Onesimus that help the text seem more moral, the letter gives no hint that Paul or Philemon listened to what Onesimus may have wanted to do; we, in fact, have no evidence of what Onesimus wanted or what decision he made. No matter which story of Onesimus they tell, even the most imaginative modern historians cannot restore to this Christian slave his voice or agency. There is no story that Onesimus tells.

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for him on my account' (P. Oxy 787; Kim #46); 'and if he needs anything of you, do it earnestly for him' (P. Giss. 71; Kim #51).

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, the comment from Claudius Terentianus: 'letters of recommendation have no value unless a man helps himself' (P. Mich 468), cited with supporting discussion in P.M. Head, 'The Letters of Claudius Terentianus and the New Testament: Insights and Observations on Epistolary Themes' *Tyndale Bulletin* 65 (2014), pp. 219-245, at p. 242.

Paul considers Onesimus's wishes to be unimportant, at least not important enough to mention to Philemon.<sup>57</sup>

However, if we see Onesimus as the letter carrier, embedded within the communication assumptions we have outlined earlier, then one of the functions of the letter is precisely to engineer an opportunity for Onesimus to offer his voice and agency to the communication. It is the letter carrier who must resolve that which is unstated and ambiguous in the letter itself. Indeed, Paul, precisely by leaving the letter somewhat open, demands that Onesimus' voice would have been the decisive one.

These preliminary arguments serve our overall argument that the famed ambiguity of Paul's letter to Philemon is related to the normal reticence of letters of recommendation. Further that this ambiguity is understood to be left in the hands of the one introduced or recommended. The function of the letter of recommendation is to initiate a conversation between the one recommended and the recipient of the letter.<sup>58</sup> The final step in the chain of argument is thus to propose that Onesimus himself would be the decisive figure in the earliest reception of the letter.

#### ***4. Onesimus and the question of manumission***

The question before us then becomes the more speculative one: if Onesimus was the letter carrier, how would he expand on the request of the letter? What would he desire the outcome to be?

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<sup>57</sup> J.A. Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), p. 16. T. Nicklas, although offering a wide-ranging critique of Harrill's views, agrees on this point: 'J.A. Harrill surely is correct to write that the letter of Philemon does not provide any clues about Onesimus's private wishes and his own decisions.' 'The Letter to Philemon: A Discussion with J. Albert Harrill' *Paul's World* (ed. S.E. Porter; PS 4; Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 201-20, at p. 219.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon*, p. 59: 'Die Situation ist eine dafür typische: Paulus sendet den Slaven Onesimos mit dem Brief zu Philemon und legt in diesem Brief für Onesimos Fürsprache ein'; Head, 'Named Letter-Carriers among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri', pp. 285-7.

Initially it is worth noting that it should not be assumed that a slave would automatically choose freedom over slavery.<sup>59</sup> In some situations the stability offered by slavery was very attractive, even to those who had been free and sold themselves into slavery. For some the anticipation of manumission would also have functioned as a reason to remain in the state of slavery for the moment. Two points suggest that this was not Onesimus' viewpoint. First, the previous difficulty, to which we have only indirect access, suggests his life as a slave was not one which he was essentially satisfied with. Second, since the letter of recommendation is composed in the presence of the person commended, and since in terms of content it is generally understood to be open to that person (unless steps are taken by the author specifically to prevent access, by codes or physical seals etc.), and since the widespread assumption that the one commended had a role in furthering the conversation initiated by the letter of recommendation, then we can discount the possibility that Onesimus himself would prefer to be re-instated as a slave. If this were so, taking account of his presence at composition, there would be absolutely no reason for the 'more than' language of the letter: 'more than a slave' (v. 16), 'you will do more than I say' (v. 21).

The core request of the letter would seem to be that Onesimus be received by Philemon, forgiven, and sent back to aid Paul. The numerous hints that Philemon could do even more raise the question as to whether Paul is asking for Onesimus to be freed and sent to him as a freedman. We know that letters of recommendation are generally a little vague, leaving the details of any negotiation up to the carrier's interaction with the recipient. If this is so in relation to Philemon what might we think that Onesimus would desire? Most considerations would suggest that he would desire his freedom. Firstly, his previous experience as a slave in Philemon's household was obviously not conducive to harmony, else why would he have run away? Secondly, the ancient sources, although not generally

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. J.A. Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (HUT 32; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1995), p. 100.

offering a first-hand testimony to the thinking of slaves, tend to depict slaves as universally desiring above all their freedom.<sup>60</sup>

We find this expressed as a general rule in a variety of sources including Dio Chrysostom 14.1: ‘men desire above all to be free and say that freedom is the greatest of blessings, while slavery is the most shameful and wretched of states’; cf. Seneca, *De Beneficiis* 3.19 on the ‘general aversion to domination’ and the ‘common hatred of being a slave’; also Epictetus, *Diss.* 4.1.33: ‘It is the slave’s prayer that he be set free immediately.’ (although as noted in what follows this can result in difficulties).<sup>61</sup> Philo discusses Deuteronomy 15.12: ‘When however you have received his services for the fullest term required, namely, six years, and when the truly sacred number of the seventh year is about to begin, grant his freedom to him who is naturally free and grant it without hesitation, my friend, and rejoice that you have found an opportunity of benefiting the highest of living creatures, man, in his chief interest. For a slave can have no greater boon than freedom (δούλω γὰρ οὐκ ἔστι μείζον ἐλευθερίας ἀγαθόν).’<sup>62</sup> Caesar himself notes the desire to maintain their ancestral liberty as motivating alliances among the various Gallic tribes against his own (admittedly rapacious) Roman forces: ‘he knew well enough that almost all the Gauls were bent on revolution, and could be recklessly and rapidly aroused to war; he knew also that all men are naturally bent on

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<sup>60</sup> S.S. Bartchy, *ΜΑΜΜΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ: First-Century Slavery and the Interpretation of I Corinthians 7:21* (SBLDS 11; Missoula, Montana: SBL, 1973), pp. 82-7; Bartchy overplays the contentment of ‘the average slave’, but the general point that slaves desired freedom is affirmed; cf. C.K. Barrett, ‘Review of S.S. Bartchy, *ΜΑΜΜΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ*’ *JTS* 26 (1975), pp. 173-4; Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, p. 167; K.R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 122: ‘the behaviour of Roman slaves illustrated ... a determined and at times very conscious demonstration of defiance of oppression.’ For the elite fear of the rebellious slave see S.R. Joshel, ‘Slavery and Roman Literary Culture’, *The Cambridge World History of Slavery. Volume 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World* (eds K. Bradley & P. Cartledge; Cambridge: CUP, 2011), pp. 214-240, at pp. 225-230.

<sup>61</sup> Epictetus of course was himself born a slave who later obtained his freedom.

<sup>62</sup> Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2.84; for similar sentiments see Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.175.

liberty, and hate the state of slavery.’<sup>63</sup> The history of the slave revolts show the extent some would go to avail themselves of freedom.<sup>64</sup>

A broadly similar perspective is found in Aesop’s fable of the wolf and the well-fed dog, a story which is reprised in both Babrius (Fable 100; LCL, 28-129) and, perhaps more notably Phaedrus (who had been a slave and was a freedman of Augustus), who told the fable in an expanded form as expressing ‘how sweet liberty is’ (Book III, fable 7; LCL, 266-269).<sup>65</sup>

A wolf, emaciated with hunger, happened to meet a well-fed dog. After greeting each other, they came to a stand and the wolf said: “How comes it, do tell me, that you look so sleek? What have you been eating to put on so much flesh? I am much stronger than you, and yet I am starving.” The dog replied frankly: “The same lot may be yours if you can render like service to a master.” “What is that?” said he. “To be the guardian of his threshold and protect his house from thieves at night. Bread is brought to me without my asking; my master gives me bones from his own table; the servants toss out tidbits to me and whatever

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<sup>63</sup> Caesar, *Gallic War*, III.10 (LCL, pp. 150-53): *omnes autem homines natura libertati studere et condicionem servitutis odire* (cf. earlier in this context III.8 regarding ‘the liberty received from their ancestors’ [cf. also VII.1], and other references variously attributed in I.17 [Aedui]; I.51 [Germani]; 2.14 [Diviciacus speaking of the Bellovaci]; V.38 [Ambiorix in addressing the Nervii]; most extensively in the speech of Critognatus: VII.77). For an interesting discussion see R. van Royen, ‘Slavery and Conquest’, *Fear of Slaves, Fear of Enslavement in the Ancient Mediterranean* *Peur de l’esclave - Peur de l’esclavage en Méditerranée ancienne* (Discours, représentations, pratiques). *Actes du XXIXe Colloque du Groupe International de Recherche sur l’Esclavage dans l’Antiquité (GIREA). Rethymnon 4-7 November 2004* (ed. A. Serghidou; Franche-Comté: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2007), pp. 39-54. M. Lavan notes the frequency of such language as well in the reports of those who would resist Roman power throughout Livy and Tacitus, *Slaves to Rome: Paradigms of Empire in Roman Culture* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), p. 73. Lavan argues that ‘the rhetoric of Roman mastery and provincial enslavement’ both reflected and itself helped to shape a ‘widespread acceptance of the ultimately coercive character of Roman power and an expectation of total self-abnegating submission from the subject peoples’ (p. 15 and *passim.*), against e.g. E. Adler, *Valorizing the Barbarians: Enemy Speeches in Roman Historiography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), who sees the historians as incorporating a critique of Roman imperialism.

<sup>64</sup> Diodorus Siculus 36.3.2 describes the situation in 104 BC when the governor of Sicily, P. Licinius Nerva, began to set free citizens of allied states: ‘all who were in slavery throughout the island were agog with hopes of freedom’ (καὶ ἦσαν πάντες οἱ κατὰ τὴν νῆσον δουλεύοντες μετέωροι πρὸς τὴν ἐλευθερίαν) (ET LCL Diodorus XII, pp. 150-1); cf. also 11.36.5 on the inhabitants of the cities of Asia and their desire for freedom. The withdrawal of this anticipated freedom resulted in the second slave war (although Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 27.93 tells the story a little differently). Cf. generally Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, pp. 107-31; *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 B.C. – 70 B.C.* (Bloomington Ind: Indiana University Press, 1998); ‘Resisting Slavery at Rome’, *The Cambridge World History of Slavery. Volume 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World* (eds K. Bradley & P. Cartledge; Cambridge: CUP, 2011), pp. 362-84; T. Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>65</sup> Cf. also Avianus, Fable 37 (J.W. Duff & A.M. Duff, *Minor Latin Poets* (LCL; London: W. Heinemann, 1934), pp. 738-41 concerning a well-fed dog and an exhausted lion, but making the same point; cf. further B.E. Perry, *Aesopica* (vol 1; Urbana, 1952), # 346; and Horace, *Ep.* 1.10 (preferring freedom to free food).

dainties anyone has no taste for. In this way my belly is replenished at no pains.” “Well,” said the wolf, “I’m ready for that all right; at present I have to endure snow and rain, and it is a hard life that I lead in the woods. How much easier for me it would be to live under a roof, and at my ease to sate myself with food in abundance.” “Well then, come with me,” said the dog. As they were going along the wolf noticed that the dog’s neck had been worn bare by a chain. “How did this happen, my friend?” “Oh, it’s nothing.” “Tell me, please, just the same.” “Because they think me restless they tie me up in the daytime, to make me be quiet while it is light and keep watch when night comes. At dusk I am unchained and wander about wherever I please.” “Come now, suppose you want to go away somewhere, are you allowed to do so?” “Why no, as a matter of fact, I’m not.” “Well, dog, go on enjoying the things you praise; I don’t choose to be a king if I can’t be free to please myself.”

Plautus appeals to the same principle in his play *The Captives*. In the second scene Hegio speaks to the slave overseer:

‘Pay Attention, will you? Those two prisoners I bought from among the spoils from the quaestors yesterday, put one of these separate chains on each of them and take off the heavier ones they’re bound with now. Let them walk around outside or inside if they wish, provided they’re watched over very carefully. A free man taken prisoner is like a wild bird: once he’s given a chance of escape, it’s enough – you can never catch him afterwards.’ To which the overseer responds: ‘Well, we’d all rather be free than slaves.’<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Plautus, *The Captives*, 110-119 (ET W. de Melo; LCL 60, Plautus I; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 518-9. Within the play it is also acknowledged that for various reasons not all slaves desire freedom above all else, so e.g. the overseer, #120-128, and his acquiescent advice to the two captives in #195-200: ‘at home you were free men, I suppose: since you happen to be slaves at present, it’s a good idea to accept the situation and a master’s orders gracefully, and make things easy to bear by taking ’em the proper way’; cf. also #270-272 and the introductory speech of Peniculus in *Menaechmi*, 88-14 about the chains of food and drink (ET W. de Melo; LCL 61, Plautus II; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 434-7. For a helpful treatment of the complexity of master-slave relationships in Plautine comedy see R. Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons [Wiley-Blackwell], 2012); cf. also K. McCarthy, *Slaves, Masters, and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

To this general background we can add the specific allowance made by Paul in 1 Cor 7.21.<sup>67</sup> In this passage Paul emphasises the perspective which informs the whole broader context – that believers should not at this time seek to change their marital status (1 Cor 7.8, 10, 12, 25f etc.) – repeating three times the general point: ‘let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned him, and in which God has called him’ (7.17, 20, 24).<sup>68</sup> Paul’s initial advice to slaves (7.21a) comes within, and reinforces this context: ‘were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it.’<sup>69</sup> Notably, however, this instruction ‘do not be concerned about it’, is much less definite than the other instructions in both the immediate and broader contexts.<sup>70</sup> The next clause (7.21b) introduces an alternative to the main thought: ‘But if you can gain your freedom, make good use (of that freedom)

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<sup>67</sup> At a big-picture level we note both that Paul has a generally positive view of ‘freedom’: ‘for freedom Christ has set us free’ (Gal 5.1; cf. 2.4; 4.21-31; 5.13; Rom 6.18, 22; 7.3; 8.2, 21; 1 Cor 9.1, 19; 10.29), for studies of these texts see F.S. Jones, “*Freiheit*” in *den Briefen des Apostels Paulus: eine historische, exegetische und religionsgeschichtliche Studie* (GTA 34; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); W. Coppins, *The Interpretation of Freedom in the Letters of Paul. With Special Reference to the ‘German’ Tradition* (WUNT 2.261; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); generally Jones, ‘Freedom’ *Anchor Bible Dictionary* vol. 2 (1992), pp. 856-859; while also having a positive use for slavery language as a metaphorical description of his relationship with Christ and others (‘slave of Jesus Christ’ Rom 1.1; cf. Phil 1.1; Tit 1.1; also Gal 1.10 etc.), D.B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: the Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1990); I.A.H. Combes, *The Metaphor of Slavery in the Writings of the Early Church: From the New Testament to the Beginning of the Fifth Century* (JSNTSS 156; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 77-92. For the pairing of ἐλεύθερος and δοῦλος see Gal 3.28 (οὐκ ἔνι δοῦλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος ...); 1 Cor 12.13 (εἴτε δοῦλοι εἴτε ἐλεύθεροι ...); Col 3.11 (οὐκ ἔνι ... δοῦλος, ἐλεύθερος ...).

<sup>68</sup> On the chapter as a whole see B. Danylak, *Secular Singleness and Paul’s Response in 1 Corinthians 7* (Cambridge PhD, 2011), who improves on W. Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Cor. 7* (SNTSMS; Cambridge: CUP, 1995), in various ways. On the general structure of 7.17-24 see P. Trummer, ‘Die Chance der Freiheit. Zur Interpretation des μᾶλλον χρῆσαι in 1 Kor. 7:21’ *Biblica* 56 (1975), pp. 344-68, at p. 348; G.W. Dawes, “‘But if you can gain your freedom’ (1 Corinthians 7:17-24)’ *CBQ* 52 (1990), pp. 681-97, esp. pp. 684-5. The repeated contextual emphasis is foundational to the view we do not adopt here, which doesn’t find anything in v. 21 to overturn the emphasis on staying in one’s station, so e.g. C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; London: A & C Black, 1971, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), pp. 170-1 (on which see Bartchy, *ΜΑΛΛΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ*, pp. 20-1); for the importance of this argument among earlier commentators see A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [1961 reprint]), p. 148 (although they support the view here advocated).

<sup>69</sup> Rendering the first clause as a question (with the Byzantine tradition, against NA28; see A.C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 553 for brief discussion).

<sup>70</sup> By comparison in relation to circumcision Paul’s instruction is straightforward: μὴ ἐπισπάσθω ... μὴ περιτεμνέσθω (7.18); cf. also the instructions to ‘remain’ in the current situation; using various forms of μένω: 7.8, 11, 40 (as also 20, 24); or a form or using τὸ οὕτως εἶναι (7.26). W. Schrage notes the similarity with v. 32: Θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς ἀμερίμνους εἶναι, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (EKK VII/1-4; Düsseldorf: Benziger; Neukirchenvlun: Neukirchener, 1991-2001; 4 vols), vol. 2, p. 139.



(ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ δύνασαι ἐλευθερὸς γενέσθαι, μᾶλλον χρῆσαι).<sup>71</sup> This introduces three difficulties which means the thought remains disputed: a) the purpose of the introduction (ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ); b) the meaning here of μᾶλλον; and c) the meaning of the elliptical final clause (μᾶλλον χρῆσαι). We shall take these in reverse order.<sup>72</sup>

The final clause – μᾶλλον χρῆσαι – refers to making use of something that is not here specified.<sup>73</sup> The first inclination, on the principle that elliptical expressions should be filled out with the closest possible antecedent, would be to take the unspecified thing which someone in this situation should make use of as the freedom that has just been mentioned as a possibility in the previous clause.<sup>74</sup> Hence the translation ‘make good use of that freedom’ (broadly in line with RSV, NIV, NASB, REB).<sup>75</sup> In turn this view takes μᾶλλον as continuous and emphasizing.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> For various exceptions to the main line of the argument cf. 7.9 (introduced with εἰ δὲ), 7.11 (introduced with ἐὰν δὲ καὶ), 7.15 (introduced with εἰ δὲ), 7.28 (introduced with ἐὰν δὲ καὶ); cf. Barchy, *ΜΑΛΛΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ*, p. 171 on the frequent use of ‘exceptions’ throughout the chapter.

<sup>72</sup> On the scholarly options see, in increasing detail, J.A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB 32; New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2008), pp. 309-10; Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, pp. 553-8; Barchy, *ΜΑΛΛΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ*, pp. 1-25; Harrill, *Manumission of Slaves*, pp. 74-108; for older views A. Steinmann, ‘Zur Geschichte der Auslegung von 1 Kor 7,21’ *TRev* 16 (1917), pp. 340-348 [*non vidi*].

<sup>73</sup> χρᾶσθαι means ‘make use of’ rather than ‘put up with’ and normally takes the dative of the thing made use of; here either τῇ δουλείᾳ (with e.g. Peshitta, Chrysostom, Theodoret, NRSV) or τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ (with e.g. Origen, Jerome, Erasmus, Calvin, Lightfoot, Zahn etc.), see BDAG, p. 1087; H. Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (ET J.W. Leitch; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 127 (supporting the former); Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 553-6 for a discussion of the history of scholarship (with references).

<sup>74</sup> For this view cf. H.L. Goudge, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians. With Introduction and Notes* (Westminster Commentaries; London: Methuen, 1911, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), p. 59; G.D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 317; R.E. Ciampa and B.S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans & Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), p. 320; Thiselton, *Corinthians*, p. 558; Harrill, *Manumission*, p. 127. On the syntactical argument (cf. Barchy’s complaint in *ΜΑΛΛΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ*, p. 23) we note S.R. Llewelyn, ‘“If you can gain your freedom”: Manumission and 1 Cor. 7.21’ *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* 6 (1992), pp. 63-70, at p. 68 (‘An analysis of ellipsis in conditional sentences in the NT shows that what is omitted should be inferred from the immediately preceding clause.’ with 21 examples); D.E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 309 (cf. note 14 for a list of examples which differs only slightly from Llewelyn’s list). J.B. Tucker ends up at apparently the same point by a different argument, *Remain in Your Calling: Paul and the Continuation of Social Identities in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), pp. 83-4.

<sup>75</sup> A further consideration is that of Barchy, who argued that there would be no historical grounds for the idea that a slave who was offered manumission (and thus freedom), had any choice in regards to refusing this and preferring to remain in slavery, *ΜΑΛΛΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ*, pp. 96-114; ‘neither Greek, Roman nor Jewish law made it possible for a person in slavery to refuse or forego manumission’, p. 110. Harrill (citing also Barrett, ‘Review of *ΜΑΛΛΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ*’) disputes this conclusion: ‘the ancient sources show that in some cases, especially in times of personal need or political upheaval, slaves did not always accept offers of freedom, notably when a nondomestic party proposed to put up the cost’, *Manumission of Slaves*, p. 100 (unfortunately lacking any citations or references to these ‘ancient sources’).

<sup>76</sup> Harrill discusses seventeen examples of the use of μᾶλλον with χρᾶσθαι in Greek literature, *Manumission of Slaves*, pp. 108-21. He argues that μᾶλλον here is adversative to the earlier instruction: ‘do not worry about it’, and

Thirdly, the introductory phrase may be taken as introducing a major contrast with the preceding passage (ἀλλὰ), with the καί functioning emphatically (as in 7.11, 28): ‘but if indeed’.<sup>77</sup> Although the interpretation of this verse remains disputed, the balance of exegetical probability is clearly on the side of those who see Paul here as allowing for, and thus to encourage, Christian slaves to take advantage of an opportunity to gain their freedom, and to use this freedom in service of the Lord (cf. also v. 23).<sup>78</sup>

In view of these factors it seems plausible to think that Onesimus would have personally desired his freedom, that his benefactor Paul allowed for believing slaves to gain their freedom, and that in his discussion with Philemon, facilitated by the letter itself, he would have had opportunity to put his own perspective on the letter and the broader situation to his master, Philemon.

## 5. Concluding Summary

In this article we have argued that Onesimus was the one who carried the letter to Philemon to Philemon. We have further argued that in re-introducing Onesimus as a believing brother to Philemon, Paul uses some of the language and features of the letter of recommendation (a feature that is common in the ways in which Paul introduces his named letter carriers). Both of these positions have been well represented in scholarship on Philemon. In view of the anticipated role of

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thus that Paul ‘tells the slave facing a different situation (specifically, an offer of manumission) to “use freedom instead.”’ (p. 121).

<sup>77</sup> Thrall shows that Paul uses εἰ καί in different ways; sometimes in combination with a concessive meaning, ‘although’ or ‘even if’ (e.g. 2 Cor 4.16; 7.8a & c; 12.11; Col 2.5); this would suit the view that Paul intended slaves to remain in slavery: ‘even if it is possible to become free ...’; and sometimes where καί is emphatic, and separated grammatically from εἰ (e.g. 1 Cor 4.7; 7.10-11, 27-28; 2 Cor 4.2-3; 7.8b-9; 11.5-6). The presence of two other occurrences in the same chapter is decisive (alongside other considerations) for Thrall, 1 Cor 7 ‘contains no examples of εἰ καί meaning “although” or “even if,” but has two instances of an emphatic καί in a conditional protasis (1 Cor. vii 11, 28), one before an one after the verse under consideration’ M.E. Thrall, *Greek Particles in the New Testament: Linguistic and Exegetical Studies* (NTTS III; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962), pp. 78-82, quotation from p. 81; cf. also Trummer, ‘Die Chance der Freiheit’, pp. 355-6; and moving the discussion forward, Harrill, *Manumission of Slaves*, pp. 119-20.

<sup>78</sup> For additional arguments in support of this general view see W. Deming, ‘A Diatribe Pattern in 1 Cor. 7:21-22: A New Perspective on Paul’s Directions to Slaves’ *NovT* 37 (1995), pp. 130-7; D.G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), pp. 162-6.

named letter carriers, building on the socio-epistolary assumptions behind the use of the letter of recommendation, and the emphasis such a letter places on the carrier's input in interpreting customarily ambiguous instructions, we have argued that Onesimus would likely have desired his own manumission and freedom and would have been expected to take the opportunity to present such a viewpoint to Philemon. Taking full account of the role of the letter carrier thus brings a new confidence to the view that the aim of the letter is to secure Onesimus' release in order that he can return to serve Paul.