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The Gospel in Philemon

John G. Nordling

Many appreciate the brevity and apparent simplicity of Philemon, but what is Paul's shortest letter *about*? Although the letter does not overtly revisit the history of Christ's ministry on earth or expound explicitly upon such cardinal doctrines of the faith as Christology or Soteriology, Philemon is *really about the gospel*.¹ Nevertheless, Christ is amply present in this letter,² and a sense of how the gospel permeates—and, indeed, gushes forth from—this shortest letter in the Pauline corpus shall prevent one from reading Philemon ethically or, at best, as a means of better understanding mere "background matters."³ Paul's specific repayment of Onesimus' debt (Phlm 18–19a) was founded upon and intentionally reflects the payment for all sin which the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished for the world (for example, Isa 53:11; Matt 1:21; Rom 3:25; 1 John 2:2). That the story of Jesus is at the heart of all Paul's theologizing has been recognized most forcefully by Ben Witherington III⁴; another way of

¹ By the term "gospel" in this paper I mean the gospel in its strict sense, for example, "[T]he Gospel, strictly speaking, is the kind of doctrine that teaches what a man who has not kept the law and is condemned by it should believe, namely, that Christ has satisfied and paid for all guilt and without man's merit has obtained and won for him forgiveness of sins, the 'righteousness that avails before God' [Rom. 1:17; 2 Cor. 5:21], and eternal life." FC Ep V, 5. References to the *Book of Concord* are from Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 478. For other definitions of the gospel in its strict sense, see Ap IV, 5; SA IV; FC SD V, 6.

² The title "Christ" occurs eight times in 25 verses: "Christ Jesus" (Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, 1, 9); "Lord Jesus Christ" (κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, 3, 25); "in Christ" (εἰς Χριστόν, 6); "in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ, 8, 20); and "in Christ Jesus" (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, 23).

³ With all due respect to my own commentary, where I assert that one of the main reasons for studying Philemon is "to understand better the type of background matters that surely attended each Pauline epistle in its original situation." John G. Nordling, *Philemon*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), xvi.

⁴ For example, "For Paul, Christ is the central and most crucial character in the human drama, and everything Paul says about all other aspects of the Story is colored and affected by this conviction. This becomes obvious even in unexpected ways and places. For instance, 1 Cor. 10:4 reveals not only that Paul reads the story of Israel in the light of his Christian faith but also that he believes Christ was already part of that story even during the Exodus-Sinai events. Indeed, Paul believes the one he calls Christ was

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putting the matter is to suggest that what is *contingent* about Paul's letter to Philemon—namely, the likely flight of Onesimus and the resulting debt which Paul promises to pay *carte blanche*—is intimately connected also to Paul's *coherent* understanding of the gospel, as prominent in Philemon as one finds anywhere else in Paul's writings.⁵

I. Paul's Promise to Make Amends

Not everyone accepts the interpretation that Onesimus stole from Philemon and ran away,⁶ but making that assumption leads readers to appreciate one of the most brilliant facets of the gospel in Philemon: the idea that Paul himself assumed Onesimus' damages and paid them off. Here is all that Paul himself reveals about the matter, although his brief words must speak volumes: "[and] if he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account" (Phlm 18 RSV; εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα). Notice, then, that Paul shifts Onesimus' infidelities to a conditional clause ("if . . ."), as though the main part of the sentence were reserved to mollify the master Philemon's pain and anger at what had been Onesimus' theft and flight. The word ἐλλόγα ("charge that!") constitutes the main verb in the sentence and so sets forth its main idea; what Paul intends to do in the imperative ἐλλόγα is direct Philemon's attention away from what must have been an all-engrossing attention to Onesimus' past crimes to the promise that Paul shall pay for everything, no matter what: "I, Paul, write with my own hand: 'I will repay'" (Phlm 19a; ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω). The implicit basis for such an assertion must rest with the atoning sacrifice of Christ, not simply with Paul's generosity. Elsewhere, indeed, Paul writes of Christ that he is

already present and active before the human story began, even active in the creation of the universe (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15-17). In Paul's view, one is always in danger of saying too little about Jesus Christ, not too much." *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 3.

⁵ For the understanding that so-called "coherence" and "contingency" dominate Paul's thinking, see Johan Christiaan Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought*, trans. Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). "By coherence I mean the unchanging components of Paul's gospel, which contain the fundamental convictions of his gospel . . . the term *contingency* denotes the changing, situational part of the gospel, that is, the diversity and particularity of sociological, economical, and psychological factors that confront Paul in his churches and in his missionary work and to which he had to respond." *The Triumph of God*, 15-16.

⁶ For the extremely influential views of the scholar John Knox who in so many ways challenged the traditional interpretation of Philemon, see Nordling, *Philemon*, 9-19.

the “sacrifice of atonement [ἱλαστήριον]” (Rom 3:25 NIV), a passage with many instructive parallels.⁷

How could Paul have made such a promise to Philemon if he was a “prisoner” (δέσμιος, Phlm 1, 9) and so presumably impecunious? Some suggest that Paul engages here in a kind of “comic ploy” that strove to compel Philemon to take Onesimus back without recompense.⁸ Most commentators, however, affirm that Paul pledged his own liability for damages Philemon sustained as a result of Onesimus’ theft and flight.⁹ In the admission that Onesimus had “wronged” (ἠδίκησεν, Phlm 18a) Philemon and “owed” him something (ὀφείλει, Phlm 18a), Paul alludes—albeit subtly—to Onesimus’ damages which could have been substantial. The two verbs—ἀδικέω (“I wrong,” cf. ἠδίκησεν in 18a) and ὀφείλω (“I owe,” cf. ὀφείλει in 18a)—occur in ancient documents that designate the illegal activities of people who refuse to pay debts and so incur criminal prosecution. In one papyrus, a certain Attalus complains, “I am *being wronged*” (ἀδικούμαι) by Ptolemaios in the matter of a failed debt.¹⁰ In another, a certain Demetrios takes legal action against several guarantors who *owe* (ὀφείλων) thousands of unpaid drachmas for olive oil and wine.¹¹

⁷ For example, ἱλαστήριον (“atoning sacrifice”): Exod 25:17, 20, 21; 31:7; 35:12; 38:5, 8; Lev 16:13, 14, 15; Amos 9:1; Ezek 43:14 (twice), 17; ἐξιλάσασθαι (“to make atonement”): Exod 30:15, 16; Lev 1:4; 6:23; 8:15, 34; 14:21; 16:10, 17, 27; 23:28; Num 8:12; 15:28; 28:22, 30; 29:5, 11; 31:50; Zech 7:2; Ezek 45:18; Dan 9:24; ἴλαση (“you will forgive”): Pss 24:11 (LXX); 64:4 (LXX).

⁸ So argued by John Koenig, *Philippians, Philemon*, in *Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 Thessalonians*, by Edgar Krentz, John Koenig, and Donald H. Juel, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 201.

⁹ See Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 204–205; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), 219–220; and N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 188.

¹⁰ Campbell Cowen Edgar et al., ed., [*Michigan Papyri*:] *Zenon Papyri in the University of Michigan Collection*, 19 vols., University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series 24 (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1931), 1:71,1; Philadelphia, 247–221 BC.

¹¹ J. G. Winter et al., ed., [*Michigan Papyri*:] *Papyri in the University of Michigan Collection: Miscellaneous Papyri*, 19 vols., University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series 40 (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1936), 3:173,7–8; third-century BC.

In a third, a certain Pyrrhos submits to an oath wherein he swears that he owes neither corn nor money: μὲ [μῆ] ὀφείλειν με σίτον (μ)ῆτε ἀρ(γύ)ρι(ο)ν.¹²

The point is that Paul promises to pay Onesimus' damages completely, even as he apparently paid other sums of money in the course of his apostolic career.¹³ Paul's usual habit consisted in his bearing the entire cost of the apostolic ministry himself by plying his tentmaking skills in whatever city his wide-ranging travels took him (for example, σκηνοποιοὶ in Corinth, Acts 18:3).¹⁴ At times he tapped other sources of income, too, as when Epaphroditus revived Paul by bringing to the apostle ample gifts from Christians at Philippi (Phil 4:18). Perhaps the written promise in Philemon could indicate Paul's expectation that "the Lord would provide," just as he always had.¹⁵ These parallel examples suggest, in any event, that Paul possibly had the means at his disposal to pay Onesimus' damages in full and so model for Philemon his famous self-sufficiency: "His pay was to receive no pay. His work was between him and God; he would not be paid for it."¹⁶

These standard explanations, however, still do not adequately account for what must constitute the *theological significance* of Paul's promise to assume Onesimus' damages. Paul would not have located himself so centrally in the repayment of Onesimus' debt were not his very person intended to serve Philemon and the congregation as a kind of blank check.¹⁷ Not only was his written obligation (Phlm 19a) significant,¹⁸ but so

¹² [Michigan Papyri:] Zenon Papyri 1:58,13–15; Philadelphia, 248 BC. For more evidence of the type provided here and in the preceding two footnotes, see Peter Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon*, Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 237–238.

¹³ For example, Christians in Jerusalem urged Paul to pay for the expenses of four men at the temple (Acts 21:23–24). Felix expected that Paul would pay him a substantial bribe (Acts 24:25–26). Paul lived in Rome in a rented house (Acts 28:30).

¹⁴ See Todd D. Still, "Did Paul Loathe Manual Labor? Revisiting the Work of Ronald F. Hock on the Apostle's Tentmaking and Social Class," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 781–795.

¹⁵ So Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 220.

¹⁶ P. W. Barnett, "Tentmaking," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 927.

¹⁷ The name (Παῦλος), the repeated and emphatic personal pronoun (ἐγὼ . . . ἐγὼ), and the first person singular verbs (ἔγραψα . . . ἀποτίσω) constitute a virtual incarnation of Paul himself in the text of the letter at this point. Elsewhere in Philemon Paul employs similar techniques, for example, Παῦλος δέσμιος, 1; τοιοῦτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης, 9. However, in no other place—as it seems—does Paul as strikingly inject his personality into a letter (although for still other examples of this kind see 2 Cor 10:1; Gal 5:2; and 1

too was Paul's expectation that he would receive hospitality soon upon his forthcoming visit to Philemon's house (Phlm 22a). Suppose, then, that the two verses were intended by Paul to be connected: the purpose of Paul's visit alluded to in verse 22a was for the apostle to deliver a generous monetary gift to Philemon and his household to fulfill the binding pledge announced in verse 19a.¹⁹ A temporary residence in Philemon's home could have impressed not only the recompense upon Philemon and the others, but also modeled for them—and, indeed, for all the world—how God works in Christian congregations according to the gospel. Luther, albeit in a non-related matter, provides the powerful insight that God's greatest gifts to sinners usually consist of a non-monetary type:

If I had gone . . . and seen and heard a poor pastor baptizing and preaching, and if I had been assured: "This is the place; here God is speaking through the voice of the preacher who brings God's Word" —I would have said: "Well, I have been duped! I see only a pastor." We should like to have God speak to us in his majesty. But I advise you not to run hither and yon for this. . . . Christ says: "You do not know the gift" [Jn. 4:10]. We recognize neither the Word nor the Person of Christ, but we take offense at his humble and weak humanity. When God wants to speak and deal with us, he does not avail himself of an angel but of parents, of the pastor, or of my neighbor.²⁰

Whenever Paul's residency occurred, then, the apostle would have presented himself to Philemon and the congregation as the type of "poor pastor" (to paraphrase Luther) who was content to proclaim nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2), an activity that models well the

Thess 2:18). Philemon 18–19a becomes, in effect, a promissory note wherein the dramatic elements of Paul's personality combine with the type of highly technical, legally binding language that would have obligated Paul to pay off Onesimus' debts in full. So Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 220.

¹⁸ "With this 'receipt,' Philemon could have required damages of Paul in the courts." Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 483.

¹⁹ It would have been analogous to the way Paul gathered a collection among the Gentile Christians in order to deliver an impressive gift "for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem" (Rom 15:26). So Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 110. For more on the Gentile offering, see Romans 15:25–28; 1 Corinthians 16:1–4; and 2 Corinthians 8:1–15.

²⁰ Martin Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1–4," in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 22:526–527. Hereafter cited as LW.

office of the holy ministry. Hock supposed that it would have been difficult to imagine Paul *not* bringing up the gospel as he engaged with fellow-workers, slaves, customers, and others who would have frequented the sort of leather-working shop with which Paul was familiar (see Acts 18:2-3).²¹ In an even greater way, Paul's residency with Philemon (Phlm 22a) would have impressed his hosts with the incalculable wealth of Christ and the gospel by the actual repayment of the money Onesimus had squandered, by the contribution to Philemon's wealth which Paul's tentmaking skills afforded, and (certainly not least) by Paul's preaching of the gospel while resident with Philemon and his workers.

The apostle's crushing poverty, therefore, would make many rich in Christ²² and more than cover all the debts incurred by Onesimus. This recompense from Paul would mimic—however imperfectly—the atoning sacrifice of Christ crucified, risen, and ascended, who in his death on the cross paid all debts to God.²³

II. Paul Embodies Christ in Philemon

From the first Paul presents himself as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, Phlm 1a). In verse 9 the same expression reappears, but in a greatly expanded form: “being such a one as *Paul*, an old man and now indeed also [νυνὶ δὲ καὶ] a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (τοιοῦτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης, νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, Phlm 9b; emphasis added). Elsewhere Paul employs the phrase νυνὶ δέ to introduce the idea of striking reversal, often in passages where the gospel dramatically trumps the law, sin, and death.²⁴ Here, with the addition of an intensifying καί,²⁵ Paul applies to himself an even stronger form of the same formula of striking reversal, as if to say, “An *old man*, true, but now

²¹ Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 41. Others propose that Paul was a weaver who made tentcloth from *cilicium* (that is, goats' hair), and still others that Paul worked in canvas or linen. For the representative opinions, see Still, “Manual Labor,” 781 nn. 2-4.

²² Paul describes the ministry of himself with his coworkers (2 Cor 6:1-12) as “poor men [πτωχοί], yet making many rich [πολλοὺς δὲ πλουτίζουτες]” (2 Cor 6:10).

²³ For the atoning sacrifice to which Paul's promise to make amends in Philemon corresponds, see, for example, Exod 25:17; Lev 16:10, 15-17; Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17; 9:28; 1 John 2:2; 4:10.

²⁴ “*But now* [νυνὶ δέ] the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law . . .” (Rom 3:21 RSV); “*but now* [νυνὶ δέ] that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God . . .” (Rom 6:22 RSV); “*but in fact* [νυνὶ δέ] Christ has been raised from the dead . . .” (1 Cor 15:20 RSV). Added emphases. For the formula, see also Rom 7:6; 11:30; 1 Cor 13:13; Eph 2:13; Col 3:8.

²⁵ Paul adds καὶ to νυνὶ δέ in 2 Cor 8:11, and possibly also in Phlm 11.

also [ὑπὲρ καί] a prisoner of Christ Jesus!" Hidden in Paul's abject wretchedness and misery as a prisoner was the apostle who—as a projection of Christ himself—applied to Philemon and the others the actual repayment of Onesimus' debt with all that this meant for the situation at hand: "the apostle, so to speak, plays Christ to them [Philemon and Onesimus], his ministry of reconciliation mirroring that of Christ at every point (2 Cor. 5:17–21)."²⁶

The designation "old man" (πρεσβύτες, Phlm 9) represents an additional part of the expansion and so justifies the understanding that—in this section of the letter, at least—Paul represents, or even embodies, Christ.²⁷ The term "old man" (πρεσβύτες) does not enable one to fix Paul's age with chronological exactitude and yet, since some of the ancient philosophers used πρεσβύτες to designate the sixth of a man's seven ages in life,²⁸ the word could suggest that Paul was in the neighborhood of forty-nine to fifty-six years old when he wrote the letter.²⁹ What seems especially significant about the word "old man" (πρεσβύτες) in Philemon is its marked similarity to the word "ambassador" (πρεσβευτής)³⁰; association with the latter word may have bestowed on Paul's "old man" a kind of dignity.³¹ The main point to see, then, is that the formal similarity between the two words results practically in the expansion, or even outright duality, of Paul's personality. Paul is more than just himself in Philemon; he also represents and shows forth Christ. The idea that in the Pauline persona

²⁶ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 179.

²⁷ See Wright, who describes the "paradoxical offices" of the apostle. *Colossians and Philemon*, 180–181.

²⁸ Pseudo-Hippocrates supposed that a "man" exists from twenty-eight until forty-nine years old, then is an "old man" (πρεσβύτες) until fifty-six years old. Cited in Philo *On the Creation of the World* 105–106.

²⁹ So Günther Bornkamm, "πρεσβύτες," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 6:683; Barth and Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*, 321; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, Anchor Bible 34C (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 105.

³⁰ "Before and after Paul's time the original difference between *presbytes* and *presbeutes* had begun to vanish or became neglected." Barth and Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*, 323. Indeed, some of the manuscripts admit of either πρεσβύτες or πρεσβευτής in Philemon 9b (see the critical apparatus in NA²⁷). Only an internal epsilon (ε) distinguishes the two words formally; so almost certainly πρεσβύτες and πρεσβευτής sounded the same, or were even indistinguishable, to native speakers of the Greek language.

³¹ While the noun "ambassador" (πρεσβευτής) does not appear in the New Testament, Paul twice applies to himself the cognate verb πρεσβεύω ("to be an ambassador"): "so we are ambassadors [πρεσβεύομεν] for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Cor 5:20 RSV); "... for which I am an ambassador [πρεσβεύω] in chains" (Eph 6:20 RSV).

really two characters come together—both Paul and Christ—occurs elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, for example, “I have been crucified with Christ [Χριστῷ συνεσταύρωμαι]; nevertheless, I live [ζῶ δέ]; yet not I [οὐκέτι ἐγώ], but Christ lives in me [ζῆ δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός]” (Gal 2:19–20).³² Luther attempts to plumb the mystery that “in Christ” every Christian leads a kind of double life.

Paul had said above: “I have died, etc.” Here a malicious person could easily cavil and say: “What are you saying, Paul? Are you dead? Then how is it that you are speaking and writing?” A weak person might also be easily offended and say: “Who are you anyway? Do I not see you alive and doing things?” He replies: “I do indeed live; and yet not I live, but Christ lives in me. There is a double life: my own, which is natural or animate [*naturalis vel animalis*]; and an alien life [*aliena*], that of Christ in me. So far as my animate life is concerned, I am dead and am now living an alien life. I am not living as Paul now, for Paul is dead.” “Who, then, is living?” “The Christian.” Paul, living in himself, is utterly dead through the Law but living in Christ, or rather with Christ living in him, he lives an alien life. Christ is speaking, acting and performing all actions in him; these belong not to the Paul-life, but to the Christ-life.³³

In dealing with the situation for which he wrote the letter to Philemon, Paul presents himself in two guises: the first, according to Paul’s “human nature” (bound prisoner, old man, and so forth), so to speak, but the second as the very embodiment and projection of Christ who, in ways hinted at in the text, would pay off Onesimus’ debt, provide the means by which the two principle protagonists would forgive each other, and bring a lasting solution for whatever problems Onesimus’ theft and flight had caused Philemon’s struggling congregation.

III. Triangularity in Philemon

The insight into the doubled nature of the Pauline persona enables one now to understand also the sort of relationship that Paul hoped could begin to exist henceforth between Philemon and Onesimus. As Paul composed this letter, he knew Onesimus would soon look his aggrieved master full in the face. To alleviate that potentially disastrous moment,

³² Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4,” in *LW* 26:165, 167.

³³ *LW* 26:169–170; Latin from Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [*Schriften*], 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), 40.1:287. In Galatians 4:14 (RSV), Paul, speaking in the first-person, writes: “you did not scorn or despise me, but received me [ἐδέξασθέ με] as an angel of God [ὡς ἄγγελον θεοῦ], as Christ Jesus [ὡς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν].”

Paul wrote of Onesimus that he was “sending him back” to Philemon (ἀνέπεμψά σοι, Phlm 12a). The apostle used the verb ἀνέπεμψα—an epistolary aorist—to insinuate himself into the same time as Philemon who doubtless would be reading the epistle in Onesimus’ presence:³⁴ “We should imagine that the first thing Onesimus did after returning to his angry master was to hand him Paul’s little letter.”³⁵

Hence Paul presents himself as manifesting *Christ in engagement with* the governing dispositions and animus which would have led Philemon and Onesimus to react to the other at that point in time, each knowing full well the other’s “old Adam.” Philemon is the one to whom Paul addresses himself in particular (“you,” σοι in Phlm 8, 11–12; σε in Phlm 10), and yet—if the appeal is at all symmetrical—points put to Philemon must already have been put to Onesimus in an earlier conversation, before Paul composed the letter. Because Paul reminds Philemon that he has “much boldness [πολλήν . . . παρρησίαν] in Christ to command you [ἐπιτάσσειν σοι, Phlm 8],” how much bolder, and how much more insistent, might Paul have been toward Onesimus in bringing that runaway slave to a repentant acknowledgement of his “uselessness” (ἄχρηστον, Phlm 11a)? Then Paul plays father to Onesimus by “begetting” him amid the imprisonment (ὄν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Phlm 10) and thereby instills in Onesimus a desire to be “useful” (εὐχρηστον, Phlm 11b) to his master once again. This reconstruction assumes that Onesimus could have been indispensable to Philemon well before a falling out or perhaps greed caused Onesimus to steal from his master and abscond: “[I]f there is any truth to the emerging picture, Onesimus [c]ould have been *the most important slave in Philemon’s employ*—perhaps, let us say, the slave whom Philemon had elevated to give the other domestics ‘their food at the proper time’ [Mt. 24:45], or the very one set ‘over all [Philemon’s] possessions’ [Mt. 24:47].”³⁶

³⁴ Paul sometimes chose the aorist tense to describe an action which, for him (as he wrote), was *present*, even though it would have been *past* from the perspective of the letter recipients. For the epistolary aorist in Greek, see Herbert W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1920; 1956), “1942. Epistolary Tenses”; and Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), “334. The epistolary aorist.” Other verbs in Philemon which commentators often suggest are epistolary aorists are ἔσχον (7); ἠθέλησα (14); and ἔγραψα (19, 21).

³⁵ John G. Nordling, “Onesimus Fugitivus: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41 (1991): 108–109.

³⁶ Nordling, *Philemon*, 145–146; original emphasis. For evidence in the papyri that even highly trusted, well-provisioned, and apparently unassailable slaves could, on occasion, betray trusting masters, see Nordling, *Philemon*, 147.

Such speculation should be recognized for what it is, of course, yet a clear pattern emerges in verse 8 where Paul launches his appeal for Onesimus “in Christ” (ἐν Χριστῷ, 8a). Behind the changed Onesimus stands Paul, and behind Paul stands Christ—each personality lending stature to the one who stands before. Hence the relationship envisioned by Paul vis-à-vis Philemon and Onesimus is essentially triangular, with Paul himself playing Christ’s part at the apex of the triangle.³⁷ Paul urges the sanctified response of love wherein the two former combatants were to be for each other “in Christ,” even as Paul—Onesimus’ spiritual “father” (10b) and the one to whom Philemon is beholden (19b)—has already stood as Christ for each of the other two in separate contexts.³⁸ Just as Christ had shown God’s grace to Paul on prior occasions,³⁹ and as Christ even now intercedes on behalf of sinners before God the Father, so Paul presents himself in the letter as the one through whom the forgiveness of sins shall be conveyed to Philemon and Onesimus. The triangularity of the relationship is reiterated in one of Luther’s enduring insights into Paul’s shortest letter:

What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights [Phil. 2:7] and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and rights, and receive us into favor for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly advocates our cause and so heartily takes our part. For we are all his Onesimus[es] if we believe.⁴⁰

IV. Restored Relationships in Philemon

As Paul looked beyond the near-term rapprochement between Philemon and Onesimus, he saw not only a restoration and patching-up of whatever

³⁷ See figure 8 in Nordling, *Philemon*, 232.

³⁸ Philemon could have met Paul in the place where that apostle lived and taught for more than two years (Acts 19:10; see 19:8), namely, in Ephesus, the great metropolis of Roman Asia. Perhaps Onesimus met Paul there for the first time (he possibly traveled to Ephesus with his master on business), though the conversion of Onesimus occurred wherever Paul had been “in bonds” (ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Philm 10b, 13b) when he wrote the letter—in Rome, suppose many (see the attestations in Nordling, *Philemon*, 7 n. 33), though an Ephesian imprisonment also has received much support (see Nordling, *Philemon*, 6 n. 20).

³⁹ For example, Paul uses the highly autobiographical phrase “through the grace that was given to me” (διὰ τῆς χάριτος τῆς δοθείσης μοι, Rom 12:3). Slight variations on the formula occur at Rom 15:15; 1 Cor 3:10; Gal 2:9; Eph 3:2, 7.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to Philemon, 1546 (1522),” in *LW* 35:390.

had been the troubled past relationship between this particular master and his slave, but also a clear demonstration of what the gospel and the forgiveness of sins can do among ordinary sinner-saints in a Christian congregation. The matter seems apparent by the way the leading *dramatis personae* were intended to interact with each other henceforth in this still-unfolding drama of salvation. By now the character substitutions had come full circle: first, *Christ* had faced *Philemon* in the aged and suffering persona of *Paul* the old man and prisoner of Christ Jesus (Phlm 8–9). Second, *Paul* relates to *Onesimus* as though the latter were virtually a piece of his inner self (τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα, Phlm 12b; see μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ, Phlm 20b). Third, *Paul* urges *Philemon* to receive *Onesimus* as though he were *Paul* himself (προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ, Phlm 17b). Fourth, a hint of *Onesimus*' future usefulness is presaged by *Paul*'s statement that he would like to keep *Onesimus* back for himself in order that *Philemon* may serve *Paul* through *Onesimus* (ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ, Phlm 13b).⁴¹ Fifth and finally, *Paul* exclaims to *Philemon*, "may I benefit [ὀναίμην] from you in the Lord!" (ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ, Phlm 20a). In the latter statement the verb ὀναίμην⁴² almost certainly effects a play on *Onesimus*' name,⁴³ as if *Paul* were to say, "May I derive an *Onesimus* from you in the Lord!"⁴⁴ *Paul* saw *Onesimus* as key, then, to whatever future relationship the apostle would cultivate between himself, *Philemon*, and the congregation.

Such triangularity and taking-each-other's-part in Christ, climaxed by a former runaway slave becoming reconciled to his master, were signs of

⁴¹ "[Philemon] would delight in rendering [Paul], through the slave, the service which he could not personally perform." Marvin R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and Philemon*, International Critical Commentary 37 (New York: Scribner, 1897), 186.

⁴² The first person singular, aorist optative middle of ὀνίμημι, which in the present context means: "may I have joy or profit or benefit, may I enjoy w[ith] gen[itive] of the pers[on] or thing that is the source of joy." Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 570. Only here in the NT does the verb ὀνίμημι occur, though see ὀναίμην τοῦ παρόντος (Euripides *Hecuba* 997), and οὕτως ὀναίμην τῶν τέκνων (Aristophanes *Thesmophoriazusae* 469).

⁴³ "Onesimus, lit[erally] 'useful' [s[ee] the play on words in Phlm. 11), a name frequently found . . . , esp[ecially] for slaves," Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 570.

⁴⁴ So Nordling, *Philemon*, 277. About the play on *Onesimus*' name in verse 11, David E. Garland observes, helpfully: "Paul comes from a pun-loving background." *Colossians and Philemon*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 339.

what could, by God's grace, henceforth be achieved through the gospel—a transformation begun during this life, to be sure, but one that will be brought to completion in the new heavens and new earth (for example, Isa 65:17-25; Rev 21-22). Isaiah's famous vision conveys the essential reality more powerfully:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them. (Isa 11:6 RSV)

Luther's comments on the latter passage seem relevant also to the prospect of a restored relationship in Christ between Philemon and Onesimus:

[T]he tyrants who formerly preened themselves with their power, wisdom, and wealth will shed their feathers and tufts and with bowed neck confess themselves to be sinners, and they will be harmless. And he says, the wolf will associate with the lamb. Not the lamb with the wolf. The tyrant will become a martyr, and the wolf a teacher. The wolves are false teachers according to Matt. 7:15. Paul was a wolf before his conversion. The lambs are the Christians. . . . This is what the Word of God does; it casts down the proud and lifts up the lowly. The calves are the faithful. The lions are the rich. Lion cubs are said to act more fiercely than the adults. That is, those who formerly yielded to no one now obey the Gospel preached to them by the least of the brethren, and they gladly hear the Word. . . . Human beings differing extremely among themselves—savage, wild, irascible, hateful, murderous, ungovernable, and the people of the gentle Christ—come to agreement through the preaching of the Gospel. The church will convert the nations not by force but by the goodness of the Word.⁴⁵

V. Conclusion

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that Philemon represents much more than an isolated fragment of Paul's writing, plucked somehow from out of the flotsam "of a large and varied correspondence."⁴⁶ The letter, though brief and practical, plainly represents Paul at his theological best. Such facets of the gospel as the substitutionary atonement of Christ and the forgiveness of sins are more than hinted at in Philemon, and so,

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, "Lectures on Isaiah, Chapters 1-39," in *LW* 16:122-123.

⁴⁶ So J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1879), 303.

while considerably briefer than his other letters, tiny Philemon must rest upon the same theological substructure that Paul builds upon everywhere else in his corpus. Surrounding congregations, which the New Testament indicates were no less filled with peevish masters and chafing slaves,⁴⁷ must quickly have taken note of how repentance, forgiveness, and restoration genuinely prevailed in Philemon's house congregation as a result of the proper use of Paul's brief letter, not force, retaliation, or even the so-called "justice" that today merely masquerades as the gospel.⁴⁸ In fact, the restored Onesimus could himself have played a role in the eventual preservation of the letter Paul wrote to Philemon.⁴⁹ Thus the presence of the letter in the emerging canon of Scripture⁵⁰ suggests that, in the end, the gospel saved the day for Paul, Philemon, Onesimus, and every other Christian who worshipped in Philemon's house church (Phlm 2b).⁵¹

⁴⁷ For example, Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10.

⁴⁸ See the decidedly activist stance of Allen D. Callahan who, for the sake of so-called justice, argues that white America should pay reparations to the descendants of African slaves: "When a debt of injustice is incurred, justice calls for the retirement of that debt. The check must be paid." *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 61-62.

⁴⁹ John Knox supposed that Onesimus, Philemon's slave, eventually came to have a role in the publication of a corpus of Paul's letters in ca. AD 90: "What better explanation would we need of both the presence of Philemon in the collection and the predominant influence of Colossians upon the maker of Ephesians?" *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul: A New View of Its Place and Importance*, rev. ed. (New York: Abingdon, 1959), 107.

⁵⁰ "The Muratorian Canon of ca. AD 175 plainly lists Philemon among its contents, indicating that in the earliest period of the church—to all intents and purposes—there never was any serious doubt about the authenticity of Philemon." Nordling, *Philemon*, 3.

⁵¹ I would like to thank Drs. Peter Arzt-Grabner, John Thorburn, Brent Froberg, and Charles Gieschen, as well as my wife, Sara Nordling, for reading earlier drafts of this article.