CHAPTER 2
THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

Introduction

The letter to Philemon is the shortest unit of the entire Pauline corpus, consisting of merely 335 words in the original Greek. It is more related to the ordinary private letters36 of the time (O’Brien 265). This fact, however, does not indicate that the letter is simply a piece of private correspondence. As in all Pauline letters, marks of the official stance are apparent. He uses a fitting sender identity, “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Philem. 1); Eduard Lohse sees a special significance in this appellation:

The words “a prisoner of Christ” already indicate that this writing should not be taken to be a mere private letter. It conveys a message that obligates its recipient to obey the apostolic word. The fact that an associate [Timothy] is mentioned also calls attention to the authoritative character of the letter (189).

Looking at the content of the letter, we can see that letter is a request of Paul in favour of Onesimus. Also that the social problem that is mentioned in it involves Christian community37, and not just one individual. Lohse says “in the body of Christ the personal problems are no more private” (187).

We can say that the letter to Philemon is a striking combination of personal/pastoral and recommendation/official styles.

The church in general has accepted the Pauline authorship of Philemon, but an exception to the church’s general acceptance of the letter occurred during the fourth century. Originally it was thought that the letter is about a single slave, returning to his master, and did not have much theological substance. One might fairly argue that the church of the fourth century assumed that Onesimus had run away from Philemon and Paul was responding to a common domestic problem. According to Lightfoot, in

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36 Philemon is called a private letter mainly because of the following facts: in the address, three proper names precede the mention of the house church; later, the second-person singular pronoun and its genitive, dative, and accusative forms are frequently used (Barth 112). It is first of all the ethical decision of one individual, Philemon, for which the apostle asks.

37 Apart from the personal character of the letter, it is also a “church letter”. Not only Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus, but also the congregation that is met in Philemon’s house is addressed in verses 1-2 and thereby encouraged and entitled to participate in the slave owner’s decision. The slave’s owner has to make up his mind in such manner that his decision and the congregation’s decision are harmonious. Already in the 4th century Chrysostom (ca. 345-397 CE) and Jerome contradicted the people those who disputed the canonical value of the letter with the argument that it was only a private letter leading with private affairs (Barth 113-4).
the fourth century there was a strong bias against Philemon, because “the Gospel has no concern for insignificant matters” (316). However, the Murathorian Canon plainly lists Philemon among its contents.

The traditional interpretation of the letter holds that Onesimus was a “runaway” slave from Philemon’s household and Paul later wrote the letter to intercede with Philemon on Onesimus’ behalf.

S. Winter, along with J. Knox puts forward serious doubts regarding the traditional interpretation of Philemon as the “return of a runaway slave”. According to Winter, Onesimus was “sent” by the community of Colossae to Paul to meet some of his material needs while he was under house arrest. Therefore, he says that the situation of Onesimus was not necessarily that of a “runaway slave” (Hawthome, Martin, Reid 626-32).

P. Lampe also disagreed with the traditional understanding of Onesimus as a “runaway slave”. His arguments were based on the proofs from the Roman legislation on slavery, according to which a slave could seek the help of an advocate or a mediator to plead on his behalf, if he had done something against the owner. In Onesimus’ case he is seeking the help of Paul to be a mediator (Hawthome, Martin, Reid 626-32).

Every aspect of letter has been debated, including its historical occasion, the actual substance of Paul’s request to Philemon, and his attitude towards the social system of slavery.

In the second half of the 19th century, the authorship and the theological import of this letter were challenged in the light of the American slave system. The slaves themselves brought a radical critique to the purported apostolic sanction of

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38 The date and provenance of Murathorian Canon are in debate. For long time the Muratorian Canon was taken to be a Roman product of the late 2nd or early 3rd century, but it would be unique at such an early time, and there are good reasons to consider it an Eastern list of 4th century (Ferguson 677-679). The document is fragmentary and badly translated into Latin, but lists the following books: four Gospels, Acts, 13 letters of Paul, Jude, 1-2 John, the Wisdom of Solomon, Revelation, and Apocalypse of Peter. The omission of most of the “Canonical Epistles” is notable, and so is the inclusion of the Wisdom of Solomon in a list of Christian Books (Freedman 856).

39 This view brings forth three tenets:
   a. Onesimus “wronged” Philemon, perhaps by robbing him, then ran away;
   b. After Onesimus was born as a Christian through Paul’s ministry, the Apostle sent Onesimus back to be forgiven and reconciled to Philemon and other members of his household and the Congregation that met at Philemon’s house;
   c. Since Onesimus was now “useful”, both to Philemon and to Paul, the Apostle allowed that he would like Onesimus to serve him in prison on Philemon’s behalf. Hence the letter may have contained at least a veiled request for the future services, if not the complete manumission, of Onesimus, the slave (Nordling 3-4).
slavery. Some apparently never believed the traditional interpretation of the letter, which may be summarized as follows:

“The letter to Philemon, a resident of Colossae in Phrygia is a model of Christian tactfulness in seeking to effect reconciliation between Onesimus, the runaway slave, and his master, who according to Roman law had absolute authority over the person and life of his slave” (Callahan 1).

The objective of this chapter is to analyze in detail the contents and the implications of Paul’s letter to Philemon. We use the method of Historical and Theological Criticism to understand in a better way the significance and the theology behind the letter to Philemon when Paul wrote it. This study will enable us to answer certain questions like: where was the letter written? Who wrote the letter and who was the recipient? And what was the scope of writing this letter? By answering these questions, we will try to clarify certain doubts and recent discussions on this letter. Finally we will use the Biblical hermeneutics technique to break open the letter Paul wrote to Philemon and to analyze the content and the structure of the letter, with special reference to the issue of slavery, in the later part of the chapter.

2.1. General Features of the Letter to Philemon

Before going into the structural analysis of the letter, it is important to analyze its authenticity, the date and place of composition, the recipient and the occasion of the letter.

2.1.1. The Authenticity of the Letter

Today nobody doubts the Pauline authorship of the letter. If its authenticity is questioned, it is mainly on account of its close association with the letter to Colossians. The letter to Colossians and Philemon were written at the same time and place, sent to the same place, and carried by the same messenger or messengers. The authenticity of Colossians has been questioned on the basis of language, thought, and style. For example, Colossians includes many long sentences and demonstrates a tendency to heap synonyms together. In comparison to the undisputed letters it contains a greater number of relative clauses and is notably heavily infused with liturgical influences. As is also true of the Ephesians, Colossians lacks the address “my brothers [and sisters]”, which appears frequently in Paul’s letters and underlines the personal relationship between the Apostle and his communities (e.g., Rom. 7:4; 1 Cor. 1:11; 2 Cor. 1:8; Gal. 1:11; Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 1:4). In addition, Colossians lacks the key Pauline concepts such as righteousness and justification. The cosmological significance assigned to the Christ event (1:15-20) exceeds what is found in the undisputed letters and Colossians concentrates almost exclusively on the present salvation of believers (MacDonald 6-8).
Yet this connection seems related more to a common destination in the Lycus Valley, somewhere near Colossae, rather than to any similarity of content. In fact, in terms of theological content and pastoral concern, Philemon has much more in common with the Philippians, another prison letter that could have been written during the same imprisonment (Thurston and Ryan 176-77). If this is true, then Philemon, with the expectation of an imminent release (Philem. 22), would have been written after the letter to Philippians, in which Paul still faces an uncertain and even life-threatening imprisonment.

The only major New Testament scholar to dispute the authenticity of the letter was F. C. Baur. The Tubingen school of Baur dismissed the letter as a Christian romance. In the first centuries of Christianity, the Pseudo-Clementine homilies, which represented the recognition and the reconciliation of the converted Christians were widespread. Therefore, Baur presupposes that the story narrated in the letter to Philemon is a vehicle to propagate the idea of Christian reconciliation. According to him, the apostolic authorship of the letter must not be taken for granted. Since the other “captivity letter” to which Philemon is so clearly related is not authentically Pauline, the authenticity of this letter too must be abandoned (82-4).

Instead, Ernest Renan had an entirely different view on the authenticity of the letter. He was so sure of the genuineness of Philemon that, for its sake, he was willing to admit the genuineness of Colossians. The letter to Colossians, he wrote,

Though full of eccentricities, does not embrace any of those impossibilities which are to be found in the epistles to Titus and to Timothy. It furnishes even many of those details which reject the hypothesis [of its pseudonymity] as false. If the epistle is apocryphal [Colossians], the note [Philemon] is apocryphal also; yet few pages [of the Pauline corpus] have so pronounced a tone of sincerity; Paul alone, as it appears to us, could write that little masterpiece (Bruce 191-92).

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41 Philippians has been analyzed as a letter of friendship, as a letter of consolation, and as a family letter. Paul avoids the “patron-client” conventions in favour of those that suggest mutuality and reciprocity. Paul’s primary focus in Philippians is as that of securing concord in the church. He uses the positive and negative examples to exhort the Philippians to unity. Therefore the theme of Philippians is the partnership in the Gospel. Paul enumerates the results of Paul’s partnership with the Philippians and challenges the Philippians to remain united (Thurston, Ryan 34-7).

42 “Pseudo-Clementies” refers to a specific group of pseudonymous compositions that relate a fictitious tale of Clement’s conversion to Christianity, of his travel to Peter, and of his recovery of the long-lost and dispersed members of his family, originates in the 4th century CE. The main constituents of the Pseudo-Clementies are the Homilies and the Recognitions. The Pseudo-Clementies are significant for biblical studies in a number of ways, but mainly because the author of the basic writings was affected by the Syrian Jewish Christianity. He has preserved traditions that evidently extend back to apostolic times and that have survived elsewhere only fragmentarily (Freedman 1061-62).
Though Baur denied its authenticity, he admitted its noble Christian spirit. The Dutch radical W. C. Van Manen also took this line but, such an approach may rightly be consigned to the eccentricities of New Testament scholarship. The letter was already included in Marcion’s canon and, there are good reasons for assuming the authentic voice of Paul in the letter. “It breathes the great-hearted tenderness of the Apostle and the letter’s dealing with an intensely difficult situation points to an author of much experience in handling social problems” (Guthrie 250-51).

2.1.2. The Date and Place of Composition

The most difficult problem centers on the place where Paul composed the letter to Philemon. The letter itself testifies that Paul was a prisoner (Philem. 9) and in chains (Philem. 10; 15), when he wrote it, but which imprisonment did he mean when he wrote the letter? A careful comparison of the names in the letter with those of Colossians shows that the letter to Philemon was sent from the same place as the letter to Colossians. Tychicus, who was entrusted with the letter to Colossians, had Onesimus as his companion on the journey to the Lycus Valley, the same Onesimus mentioned in the letter to Philemon.

Scholars have discussed the precise location of Paul’s imprisonment at the time of writing the letter to Philemon, and there are three possibilities: Rome, Caesarea or Ephesus.

Caesarea, once suggested by a few scholars as the location where Paul composed Philemon, has fallen out of favour recently, because there is no clear support for this location in the companion letters: Colossians and Ephesians. Therefore, Ephesus and Rome emerge as the possible location for the composition of the letter (Barth, Blanke 122-23).

Many expositors favoured Rome as the possible provenience of the letter because the city was a place of refuge for runaway slaves. In the crowded city, they hoped to be safe from private and official hunters. Apart from the safety, here the

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43 Marcion was born in Sinope of Pontus in Asia Minor in the latter half of the 1st century CE. To Marcion the only legitimate apostle was Paul. His significance may be considered in four areas: The Christian Canon, New Testament Textual Criticism, New Testament Literary Criticism, and the Earliest Pauline Reform.

While not all scholars agree that Marcion forced the creation of the Christian Canon, we cannot deny that his was the first. His influence in this matter is manifest in the composition of the New Testament canon that was later to emerge. Marcion’s basic framework of gospel and apostle is seen in the Gospels and “Apostles” (i.e., Acts and Letters) in the Christian New Testament (Freedman 514-16).
slaves could find work and protectors. Obviously, social contact and conversation with free persons and fellow captives were possible in the city (Barth, Blanke 122-23). But the enormous geographical distance between Rome and Colossae does not support Rome as the provenience of the letter. Due to this distance it was difficult to imagine that Paul while in prison in Rome could expect in the foreseeable future to be a guest in Philemon’s house in Asia Minor (Philem. 22).

The lack of conclusive evidence either for Rome or Caesarea has made necessary the search for a third option. A respectable group of scholars (e.g. Duncan and Dodd) favour Ephesus as the place from where Paul wrote the letter. The major argument favouring Ephesus is the city’s proximity to Colossae. It is a hundred miles from Colossae to Ephesus and twelve hundred miles to Rome. Epaphra’s journey to Paul, the delivery of Colossians to Colossae, and Paul’s planned visit to Philemon’s house would be therefore, manageable without major obstacles and risks.

With regard to Onesimus’ choice for a place of refuge, according to Duncan, only in desperate circumstances, a fugitive slave would have gone over to an unknown place and would have travelled thousand miles by land, when comparatively near at hand there was a city with which was familiar to him and where he could get security (Bruce, The Epistle to Colossians 194).

Among the three places proposed as the location from where Paul wrote the letter to Philemon, the Ephesian imprisonment (ca. 54-56 CE) has gained the greatest support, especially in the shorter distance between Ephesus in western Asia Minor and the likely location of Philemon’s house in Lycus Valley. Ephesian hypothesis also provides the most likely scenario to explain Paul’s journey after his release from prison. After his release Paul travels through Macedonia for a promised visit to his close friends and partners at Philippi and finally reaches Corinth, where he wrote to the Romans his plans and asked their assistance in a westward campaign to Spain (Thurston, Ryan 180-81).

2.1.3. The Recipient of the Letter

The recipient of the letter is Philemon, who is described as Paul’s “beloved fellow worker” (Philem. 1)\(^{44}\). Philemon was a member of the church of Colossae\(^{45}\).

\(^{44}\) According to Knox, the master of Onesimus should be Archippus, not Philemon. Consequently, Archippus would be the recipient of the letter. He assumes that Philemon, whose name occurs at the beginning of the letter, is supposed to have been a distinguished member of the community at
(Col. 4:9) who owed his conversion to Paul (v. 19), and showed himself worthy of the consideration and regard which the Apostle evinces for him in the letter.

Paul apparently had not been to Colossae yet when he wrote the letter to Philemon, he wrote in the letter that Philemon should “prepare a guest room” for him (Philem. 22a). This conclusion suggests that although Acts records that Paul had passed through other regions of Asia Minor on previous occasions, there is no evidence to suggest that he had passed through Colossae itself before writing the letter to Philemon (Nordling 20). According to Acts 19:1 Paul did indeed reach Ephesus, yet he did so by way of “upper regions”, a phrase that probably refers to a route farther north than Colossae by about twenty five miles. Perhaps fatigue compelled Paul to traverse this northern route “over hills” and so avoid the more heavily congested road through Colossae farther south (Bruce, Acts 353).

Nevertheless, it is quite possible that Philemon had seen Paul “in the flesh” on some prior occasion or occasions, even if the Apostle had not yet passed through that part of Asia Minor where Philemon lived. He could have easily met Paul in Ephesus, the place where the Apostle lived and taught for more than two years (Acts 19:10). The Acts do not mention Philemon by name but does state that during Paul’s lengthy sojourn in Ephesus the residents of Asia heard the Word of God, both Jews and Greeks. So it seems only natural to suppose that Philemon, possibly while visiting Ephesus on business, might have heard Paul’s lectures at the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Nordling 21).

Several scholars suppose that Philemon himself established a congregation at his house, and brought Christianity home to Colossae. Some scholars even speculate that, “Philemon was a fine preacher” (Lohse 190; O’Brien, Colossian, Philemon 273; Barth, Blanke 138).

Laodicea. Paul would have sent the letter first to him, so that he might pass it on to Colossae and exert his authority on Archippus, urging him to fulfill the apostolic request (Lohse, Colossians 186). The beginning of Philemon lends no support to the thesis that Archippus, not Philemon, was the master of runaway slave Onesimus. Although Apphia, Archippus and the “house community” are mentioned along with Philemon as the addressee of the letter, there is no doubt that when Apostle later address the letter’s recipient in the singular (Philem. 2; 3), he has only Philemon in mind. The letter to Philemon itself offers no basis whatsoever for the position that Archippus, not Philemon, was the recipient of the letter.

4 A city in the eastern portion of the Lycus Valley in central Turkey, located on the southern bank of the Lycus River, about 100 miles east of Ephesus. Herodotus, in the fifth century BCE, called it “the large city of Colossae”, and Xenophon, about a century later, described it as large and prosperous”. The church in Colossae was probably founded not by Paul but by a convert named Epaphras (Col. 1:7), who was from Colossae (Col. 4:12) and who also evangelized Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 4:3). After the first century, Colossae disappeared from historical records (McRay 220-221).
In the light of the above mentioned situation, Nordling says that a person other than Philemon might have brought the Gospel to Philemon’s house, perhaps one of Paul’s missionary associates. Philemon might have permitted such a person to teach the Christian faith to the members of his household and conduct a ministry of Word and Sacrament. If that was the situation, then Epaphras becomes possible candidate for having actually brought the Gospel to Philemon’s household. Epaphras was a native of Colossae (Col. 4:12), and from him the Colossians had learned the “grace of God in truth” (Col. 1:7). Such details may indicate that Epaphras had been the original missionary to Colossae and possibly to the entire Lycus Valley.

The other names mentioned in the greeting of the letter are the sister Apphia, the fellow worker Archippus and the community assembled in Philemon’s house. Apphia, whose name was peculiarly Phrygian and is mentioned alongside Philemon, was probably his wife (Lohse 186). It is not clear how Archippus was related to Philemon. Some scholars attempted to specify the relationship between Archippus and Philemon and they thought that Archippus was son of Philemon and Apphia, but we have no certain means of knowing whether this is so or not (O’Brien. Colossians, Philemon 266). By comparing Colossians 4:17 it seems that he lived in the house of Philemon.

2.1.4. Occasion and Significance of the Letter

The occasion of the letter may be inferred from its contents though some of the details are obscure. A slave named Onesimus had wronged his owner Philemon, who was a Christian, living at Colossae, and had run off. Later, Onesimus had in some way come into contact with Paul, either as a fellow prisoner or because he had sought refuge in Paul’s company. He might have sought refuge in Paul’s company because he had heard his name mentioned in the house of his Christian master (O’Brien. Colossians, Philemon 266). In the latter event, it has been proposed that he

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46 The same opinion is shared by John Chrysostom, who says that she was the wife of Philemon, which seems probable from the juxtaposition of their names (Conybeare, Howson 689).

47 A slave who emancipated himself could take asylum in a sanctuary. He could also disappear in a large city and there make out an existence by begging and thievery. If he were captured, he had to be taken back to his master. Then the least he could expect was to be enslaved again. A far worse fate, however, might be in store for him. The master could punish him at his discretion. He could put him up for sale. If he wanted to, he could even kill him (Lohse 187).

48 He had certainly not been apprehended by the police and been thrown into prison. If that were the case, it would have been the duty of the authorities to take him back to his master (Lohse 187).
could have benefitted from the Athenian law by which a runaway slave could seek asylum in the home of a friend (Martin, Ephesians 135).

The precise nature of Onesimus’ offense is not certain. The traditional view, which presumes that Onesimus had run away from Philemon’s household, is still held by the majority of scholars, yet there are no verbs of flight found in the entire letter, nor any reason offered in the text for his flight. R. Lehmann comments, “It is difficult to know why Onesimus ran away. Was his master severe? It does not seem so. Philemon appears throughout the letter as a good and generous man” (Callahan 5). Taking into account verse 18 of the letter, it is assumed that Onesimus had stolen money and then absconded.

Growing in popularity, however, is the suggestion that the letter is a friendly appeal to a slave owner on behalf of a freedman or a slave from his master to whom the slave or the former slave has begged for help and mediation. Peter Lampe’s proposal that Onesimus would not, in this case, be considered a legal “fugitive” has sparked some new discussions on the issue. This received some support from the letter itself, which does not suggest that the Apostle was under any compulsion to send Onesimus back to Philemon (Lohse, Philemon 187) as Paul states his own decision to do so (v 12; Rapske 187).

At verse 10, the Apostle mentions his request to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, but the content of that request is not spelled out until seven verses later when Paul asks Philemon to welcome his runaway slave as he would receive himself (Philem. 17), that is as a “beloved brother” (Philem. 16). The Apostle does not want to collapse of the reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus because of any demand for compensation, and so Paul guarantees Philemon to compensate for any damages resulted from Onesimus’ flight, and asks to be charged on his own account. Here, Paul simply refers to a Roman law, which demanded that whoever gave hospitality to a runaway slave was liable to the slave’s master for the value of each day’s work lost (O’Brien. Colossians, Philemon 266-267). O’Brien describes this in the following words:

The bold request for Onesimus is carefully prepared by the writer as he uses gentle language (vv. 8; 9) with its tone of entreaty, then leads on to an appeal for Philemon’s willing cooperation and consent (v. 14), and finally with his promissory note indicates his willingness to accept any liability Onesimus may have incurred (Colossians, Philemon 267).
As a historical document, the letter throws unusual light on Christian conscience against the institution of slavery in the ancient world. Through this letter, Paul injects a moral tone and reminds his readers that the slaves are “to serve Christ”, that the owner has a “master in heaven”, that God deals with everyone impartially, and that both slaves and owners are servants of Christ.

According to Kummel, the purpose of the letter was to illustrate in a novelistic fashion how the Christian communities in the post-Pauline period handed the question of slavery (Lohse 188). For good reasons this view has found no acceptance, and today is no longer held by anyone. This letter is neither the disguise of a general idea nor the promulgation of a generally valid rule about the question of slavery. It is the intercession of the Apostle in a concrete situation in which “love” must be promoted by decision and need (Lohse 188). Paul refrained from giving Philemon any command and from urging a distinct demand: give Onesimus his freedom. Rather he puts the matter in Philemon’s hands. The decision is his. Paul’s sole injunction to Philemon is the commandment of love as the norm for his conduct.

2.1.5. Rhetorical Devices and the Epistle to Philemon

Rhetoric is an art of composition by which language is made descriptive, interpretive, or persuasive. For Hyde and Smith, “the showing of understanding by interpretation, such that the meaning is made known, is rhetoric in the purest sense” (354). The study of rhetoric is a classical discipline that goes back to Aristotle, and insights from the study of rhetoric have been applied to biblical texts. This methodological approach is called “rhetorical criticism” (Freedman 710).

Three species of rhetoric are described in the classical tradition: forensic, deliberative and epideictic (Hawthorne and Martin 822). Forensic speech defends or accuses someone regarding past actions; deliberative speech exhorts or dissuades the audience regarding future actions; epideictic discourse confirms communal values by praise or blame in order to affect the present evaluation (Hawthorne and Martin 822-23). These three rhetorical genres seek different kinds of response from the audience. Forensic: Is it just? Deliberative: Is it expedient? Epideictic: Is it praiseworthy?
The influence of Greco-Roman rhetoric on the writings in the New Testament is becoming more widely acknowledged today than in the past, particularly concerning the Pauline letters. Galatians, for example, has been analyzed by Betz as an “apologetic letter” which incorporates rhetorical devices familiar to forensic oratory: Paul functions as the defendant, the addressee or the “Galatians” play the role of the jury, and Paul’s opponents are the accusers (353-79). The structure of the letter incorporates the standard “parts of speech”: Introduction (Lat.: *exordium*), statement of facts (Lat.: *narratio*), main points to be made (Lat.: *proposition*), Proof (Lat.: *probation*), and conclusion (Lat.: *peroration*). The same pattern of the organization is also evident in 2 Corinthians verses 8 and 9.

The shorter letter to Philemon, as analyzed by Church (17-33), is an example of deliberative rhetoric, which is divided into *exordium* (Lat.), *probation* (Lat.), and *peroration* (Lat.), and with specific appeals to *ethos* (Lat.) and *pathos* (Lat.). Deliberative rhetoric is appropriate to anyone who might need or seek advice. It is equally important to those who would “take part in the counsels of their friends” (Church 19). Thus, it is deliberative rhetoric, as the genre that is most conducive to Paul’s oratory purpose, especially in the letter to Philemon.

Deliberative rhetoric divides the structure of Philemon into five parts: Prescript (vv. 1-3), *exordium* or introduction (vv. 4-7), proof (vv. 8-16), *peroration* or concluding summary (vv. 17-11) and postscript (vv. 23-25).

The *exordium* is also thanksgiving in which Paul accomplished three things: He praises Philemon and establishes good mutual understanding between; he stresses the particular qualities of Philemon on which the outcome of the request depends; and he alludes to details that are woven into the main section and the *peroration* of the letter. In vv. 8-14, in the form of an elaborate request, Paul waives his authority (vv. 8-9a), relying on Philemon’s willing compliance with his request to receive Onesimus back as a brother. In the *peroration*, Paul restates his request (v. 17), amplifies his argument (vv. 18-19), puts the recipient in an emotional frame of mind, using *pathos* (v. 10) and secures the recipient’s favour (Aune, *The* 354-355).

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49 Among the Greeks, the expression *rhetorike techne* (Gk.) refers to the theory and practice of “speaking well”. The significance of speech was appreciated as early as Homer (9-8 BCE). By the beginning of the 1st century BCE, Rhetoric and Oratory was firmly established in Rome as the primary means by which to advance in public life. It was at this time that Cicero wrote his *De Inventione* (Lat.), the first of his seven books on the techniques of rhetoric (Freedman 710).
At least four oratory ingredients spice the language and style of Philemon: Drama, Contrasts, Hebrew elements and Humour.

Paul’s approach to Philemon is as dramatic as would be the rhetorical procedure of a contemporary orator (Barth, Blanke 115). Paul pleads in favour of Onesimus in a most dramatic way, just as he speaks up in the letters to Galatians, Romans, First and Second Corinthians. Through this letter a special drama, domestic and yet also of public interest, is unfolded before the eyes of the Christians in Colossae. Each of the main actors, Paul-Philemon-Onesimus in the drama invites the audience to identify themselves with the characters in the drama and their emotions.

The language, diction, and style of Philemon are Greek but include Jewish features as well (Couchout 129-46). Here, Semitic way of thought and speech is cast into Hellenistic rhetoric, with perfect mastery and case.

Several subdivisions and the letter as a whole use the “ring-composition”\textsuperscript{50} (Lat.: inclusion) pattern and deploy analogies. The word “grace” dominates the initial and the final benedictions (vv. 3 and 25). The house of Philemon is the meeting place of a congregation and shall soon have Paul as a guest (vv. 2 and 22). The word “Love” occurs in verses 1, 5, 7, and 9, before the reception of Onesimus as a “beloved” brother is explicitly asked for in verse 16. What Philemon is and does for Paul and the congregation, he shall also be and do for the returning slave. Grace and peace, love and faithfulness are gifts of God. Paul sends Onesimus back, pledges to pay for damages, and will be a guest in Philemon’s house (vv. 12, 18, 19, 22). Voluntarily Paul renounces his power to give orders; voluntarily he sends the slave back and spontaneous shall be the response and conduct of the earthly master (vv. 8, 9, 12, 14, 16, 18). The congregations’ prayer for Paul’s coming corresponds to the Apostle’s prayer for the host of the congregation (vv. 4-7 and 22). The idea of community is resumed in the appeal to partnership (vv. 6 and 17). “The good” Philemon does recall “every good (gift)” mentioned earlier (vv. 6 and 14). Three times the letter speaks of the heart, and twice of the rest being given to it (vv. 7, 12, 20; Thompson 116-117).

\textsuperscript{50} Ring-composition is a term for introductory and concluding or summarizing phrases or sentences at the beginning and end of sections of a narrative. It involves the framing of relatively short sections of text with noticeably similar phrases or sentences. Waters (65) defines ring-composition as "a return at the end of a section to the subject announced at the beginning, in a formulating phrase, and calls it "conspicuous epic mannerism". 
In contrast to the doctrinal style of Romans; to the irony and sarcasm found in Galatians; to the apologetic, wailing, and aggressive passages found in Second Corinthians; in Philemon the use of contrasts is a sign and means of good humour (Thompson 118).

The mighty Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ is a prisoner in Romans hands (vv. 1 and 9-10) and chooses the role of a beggar before Philemon (vv. 8-9). The child Onesimus was created by a father in chains (v. 10), who was, according to some versions of verse 9, an old man. A pun is made on the name Onesimus (useful) in verse 11. God’s purpose in permitting separation was to establish eternal union (v. 15). Paul and Philemon are business partners, and Onesimus can substitute Paul by being the third man in this association (v. 17). Philemon is much deeper in debt to Paul than the Apostle eventually is to the slave owner (vv. 18, 19). Paul is hopeful that he will benefit from Philemon, not only materially but by finding rest for his troubled heart (v. 20). Overflowing obedience is the sum of complete voluntariness (v. 21). A man whose chances for quick release from prison were less than certain invites himself to a private home for the near future (v. 22). All or at least a part of these elements could be considered, or are, humorous (Thompson 118-119).

2.2. The Structure of Philemon’s House Church

Paul referred to the congregation that convened in Philemon’s house as “the church throughout your house” (v. 2b). The house in which Philemon, his family and dependents, and other believers assembled for worship was unlike a modern church building in that it was a private domestic residence (Filson 106). Thus it would have served not one, but several diverse purposes in antiquity: as a workshop, storage centre, slave quarters, family quarters, kitchen, banquet hall, garden and so on, in addition to the place of the distinctive Christian assembly for worship (Nordling 28). The prescript in the letter to Philemon gives the reader the view of Philemon’s house

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51 Individuals, especially Philemon, are addressed, but also the house church (v. 2). Love and faith are mentioned and discussed separately, and yet they are held together as if by nature they formed hendiadys (vv. 5-7). Paul makes a humble request to which Philemon is expected to react with obedience, but this compliance has to be voluntary and spontaneous (vv. 8-9, 14, 21). In the letter “useless” Onesimus has proven “useful” and is trusted to prove even more so (vv. 11; 13; 15). The slave is not just a protégé of Paul, but rather the apostle’s own heart or alter ego (vv. 12; 17). Temporal separation will turn out to lead to eternal belonging in the master’s home (vv. 12; 15); now the slave will be a brother (v. 16). Paul, while being in prison pledges to make cash payments (vv. 18-19). The contract motifs are developed so far as to become paradoxes, and the paradoxes in turn may be understood at best as playful and humorous, at worst as subtle exhortations (Barth, Blanke 116).
church. Philemon, the head of the house is recognized as the leader of the house, where the Christian community gathered. He, however, is not to be thought of as an absolute monarch, because he is also accountable to the community (Fitzmayer 82).

The private dwelling at *Dura-Europos* provides the most compelling evidences yet for ancient Christian life and cults in antiquity: a small platform in the so-called “Assembly Hall” for the reading of Scripture and teaching, impressive wall paintings, an elaborately decorated door, a baptistery, and a possible refinements made to room in order to accommodate Christians who were about to receive the Eucharist (Blue, “Acts and the House Church”, 166-67).

Of course, it is anyone’s guess as to how far the above mentioned structured resembled Philemon’s original house church. The letter reveals no more than that Philemon’s house apparently doubled as a Church and that Philemon had space enough at home to honour Paul’s request for a guest-room or at least to offer Paul suitable hospitality.

### 2.3. The Structure and Analysis of the Letter to Philemon

In this letter the Apostle employs the same basic structure he uses elsewhere in his writings. The introductory part of the letter starts with the greeting (vv. 1-3), followed by the thanksgiving prayers (vv. 4-7), which prepares the ground for the request of Paul to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. The body of the letter (vv. 8-20), in which the intercession for Onesimus is made, is carefully structured so that the reader is gradually led to the actual request. In the body of the letter, before going into the actual request, Paul gives a brief description of his situation (vv. 8-12), indicating the basis of his appeal and stressing how dear Onesimus has become to him. He then looks back (vv. 13-14) to the time when the slave came to him seeking refuge, and tells why he did not keep Onesimus with him (vv. 15-16). Only at the conclusion of the main section does he state the content of his request for the first time: “welcome him as me”.

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52 *Dura-Europos*: a garrison town in Syria of the third century CE.
2.3.1. Formal Epistolary Opening and Greeting (vv. 1-3)

In the introductory part of this letter Paul calls himself “a prisoner of Christ” (v. 1). This letter stands out from all other Pauline letters, for Paul’s designation of himself as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus”. To be sure, Paul does refer in this manner in other letters as well (Eph. 3:1; 4:1; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 1:8), but not in the initial greetings as he does in Philemon. Although he avoids any display of his apostolic authority, the words “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” already indicate that this writing should not be taken to be a mere private letter (Lohse 189).

According to Lohse, the term “prisoner” (Gk.: desmios) is best understood as a literal imprisonment, from which Paul hopes soon to be released, rather than a metaphorical bondage or a religious imprisonment (189). Undoubtedly, here Paul mentions his own situation in the hope of winning a compassionate hearing for Onesimus (Reicke 73). Paul thus not only conveys the facts about his situation in the prison but appeals to Philemon’s sympathies as a Christian brother (Thompson 206). Nowhere in this letter does Paul refer to himself as an ‘Apostle’, nor does he arrogate to himself apostolic prerogatives. The authoritative title of ‘Apostle’ is dropped, because he desires to entreat Philemon, and substitutes the term “Apostle” with a “designation which would touch his friend’s heart” (O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon 272). Therefore, Paul appeals to Philemon as a Christian brother. Reconciliation between Christian friends should not be achieved through coercion.

Paul associates Timothy, who was in his company for much of his Ephesian ministry, in the greeting. When the Apostle names others along with himself in the address it is usually because of their relationship with the church to which the letter is sent. Co-sender could also mean co-writer. That would be unlikely in this instance, as Paul addresses Philemon in the first persons singular throughout most of the letter (Thurston, Ryan 210). The associate, however, plays no role in the formulation of the letter, and in no way is a joint author of the letter (Lohse 189). It may be that Timothy served as the amanuensis, the scribe who manually wrote the letter. The statement in v. 19 says that Paul is writing “with his own hand” refers only to the greeting rather than to the whole letter (Thompson 207). Even so, the rest of the letter uses the first

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53 Paul is asking to Philemon a favour, therefore he is careful not to assert his apostolic status, as he does in most of his prescripts (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1. Nor does he uses “slave of Christ” (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1), probably because the term might have been too delicate in this letter in view of the topic it addresses (Bruce 205).

54 Timothy is mentioned as co-sender in four of the seven letters (2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon).
person singular “I” rather than “we”, indicating the personal character of Paul’s
appeal to Philemon. His singular reference to “your house” also provides the hint that
what follows will be a unique one-to-one address to Philemon (Thurston, Ryan 182).

Philemon, whose name appears first, is the real recipient of the letter (Lohse
189). His name appears only in this letter within the entire Pauline corpus and only in
the first verse in the entire letter, and his name does not appear anywhere in early
Christian literature as well (Callahan 24). He is called “beloved” (Gk.: agapetos), a
term which Paul employs elsewhere to address his own converts (Rom. 16:5), friends
(Rom. 16:8-9), co-workers (Rom. 16:12), and entire communities. Although Paul uses
this word in other situations to characterize addressees (Rom. 1:7) or to address the
community, here it bears a special significance. Philemon is reminded at the very
beginning of the letter that he belongs to a community of mutual love (Lohse 189). As
a Christian he lives in “love” and manifests it in his deeds. Thus, he cannot deny that
love to a slave whom the Apostle calls “beloved brother”.

In the greeting part Philemon is considered as a “co-worker”55. Paul uses this
term for himself and for others who have a share with him in the proclamation of the
Gospel. Since co-worker implies as active preaching ministry, perhaps Philemon, like
other co-workers might have retried home to establish the community56 (Thurston,
Ryan 211). Only in this letter, however, does Paul ascribe this title to an addressee in
the greeting part of the letter. He does this to establish at the outset Philemon’s
relation to all those who share in the work of the Lord. The term “co-worker” is used
here not only descriptively, recognizing Philemon’s status as co-worker, but
prescriptively as well, suggesting the responsibilities incumbent upon Philemon as the
bearer of this designation (Callahan 25). In doing so, Paul rhetorically prepares the
way for pressing claims on Philemon as co-worker to receive the emissary sent to
him.

Apphia, Archippus, and the entire “house church” are named along with
Philemon as recipients of the letter. Their names are mentioned because the matter
that the Apostle is dealing with is not just a personal affair that concerns Philemon

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55 Apostle’s co-workers included a host of women and men who laboured side by side with him in
proclaiming and teaching Gospel, especially in cities and along major trade routes where they could
encounter as many people as possible (Thurston, Ryan 211). Use of Philemon as a co-worker also gives
the impression that, unlike other Christians in the Lycus Valley, Philemon was personally known to
Paul (Bruce, Philemon 206).

56 Whether or not this Philemon is the same person later mentioned in the tradition as the Bishop of
Colossae (Thurston, Ryan 211).
alone. Rather the decision that must be arrived at is a concern of the entire community (Lohse 190).

In the letter the term “our sister” is attached to the name of Apphia, who is traditionally understood as the wife of Philemon, because her name is attached to Philemon’s name (Lohse 190). Even if Apphia had been Philemon’s wife and involved with him in the household, the use of the term “sister” (Gk.: adelphe) could serve to focus attention on Apphia’s role within the local church that is to welcome Onesimus back home (Thurston, Ryan 212). Apphia is thought to be among Paul’s co-workers (Rom. 16:15; 1 Cor. 7:15), and the terms “brother” and “sister” are the forms of expression Paul normally employs to describe both his own co-workers and Christians in general (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 3:1).

John Chrysostom⁵⁷, one of the early fathers of the Church, assumes that Archippus, whom Paul calls “fellow soldier” in this letter and the one mentioned in the letter to Colossians, is one and the same, perhaps a friend of Philemon (Callahan 26). The use of the term “fellow soldier” in this context is expressive of dedicated service to the gospel (Thurston, Ryan 212), and Paul reserved this title exclusively for himself and for his co-workers. This term is designated to persons like Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), who had played an important role in assisting Paul in his missionary labours, and had faithfully stood by his side through sufferings and trials, perhaps even through persecutions (O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon 273). The use of this term does not necessarily mean that Archippus is the leader of the Christian community in Colossae⁵⁸. Nor does it indicate that Archippus, not Philemon, is Onesimus’ master who should now welcome him as his Christian brother⁵⁹ (Lohse 190).

The list of addressees⁶⁰ by the Apostle concludes with the mention of the community assembled in Philemon’s house. The term “household” is read here not only as the structure in which the assembly met, i.e., “house”, but those who lived together in the house as an extended family (Callahan 27). Though it is a personal

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⁵⁷ John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407 CE): He was the Bishop of Constantinople and a greatest preacher in the early Church, hence the name Chrysostomos (golden-mouthed). He lived during the golden age of early Christian literature. Others who were part of the blossoming of Christian cultural and spiritual life are Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus (Wilken 495-497).

⁵⁸ This is the opinion of Lohmeyer, who without basis in the text holds that Archippus had replaced Epaphras as leader of the community in Colossae (Lohse 190).

⁵⁹ On the hypothesis of Knox that Archippus was the real recipient of the letter.

⁶⁰ Later tradition makes the persons named in Philemon bishops of various communities: Archippus, Bishop of Laodicea in Phrygia; Philemon, Bishop of Colossae; Onesimus, Bishop of Beroea in Macedonia (Lohse 190).
letter, the community mentioned here becomes the witness to what the Apostle has to say to Philemon.

Paul concludes the introductory part with the greetings of peace and joy, which is found in every undisputed Pauline letters. This Pauline greeting is a combination of the conventional greetings of Semitic letters (Heb.: shalom, “peace”) and Greek letters (Gk.: chairein, “grace”). The word “Grace” is a biblical term which is rich in theological meaning, and it expresses God’s favour and His steadfast and covenantal love for humanity (Thurston, Ryan 213). Here Paul specifies that “Grace” and “Peace” are both coming from “God our Father” and “the Lord Jesus Christ”. The greeting is extended not only to Philemon, but also to the entire community that should take the message of the Apostle to heart (Bruce, The Epistle to Colossians 207).

2.3.2. Thanksgiving Prayer and Theological Basis for the Appeal (4-7)

The epistolary opening and greeting is followed by the customary Pauline expression of thanksgiving, interwoven with an intercessory prayer. Both the thanksgiving and the intercessory prayers are closely related to the purpose of the letter. In this section, Paul gives thanks to God for Philemon’s faith and love, and the reason for thanksgiving is the news that Paul received about the Christian virtues of Philemon (Lohse 192).

In verse 6 we can find the general content of the prayer, which is evidently the key to the subsequent appeal. Here Paul expresses his confidence that his friend whose faith and love are assured will respond to his call (Fitzmeyer 94). So Philemon will give proof of his Christian status by acting in a way that will show specifically the acceptance of the salve, and in this way the “faith of Philemon is made operative by love” (Martin, Colossians 162).

61 Like the petitioners in the Old Testament psalms Paul prays “my God”. Thanks is given to God, not to human being, that Philemon has conducted himself as a genuine Christian (Lohse 192).
62 It was probably Epaphras who had given Paul the news about Philemon, which caused in the apostle so great joy. Onesimus also could have given Paul news about Philemon and his household, but Epaphras’ news would have been objective, since he gave to the apostle the news about the Colossian church in general (Bruce. Epistle to Colossians 208). The love and loyalty, which Philemon showed, according to the news, were the practical outcome of his Christian faith (Gal. 5:6). While the details concerning what Paul has heard remain unspecified, the general description of Philemon’s love and faith will provide the theological basis for both the appeal of the epistle (v. 9) and the course of the action taken. Both here and throughout the epistle “love” (Lat.: agape, “Christian love”) is placed first and in emphatic position as it prepares for the apostle’s appeal (Thurston, Ryan 223).
Verse 7 is a smooth and effective transition from the thanksgiving section to the main purpose of the letter (Bruce 210). This verse has the dual function of expressing the cause for thanksgiving and of providing the explanation as to why Paul will appeal to love rather than simply exhort his friend to do what he should. Paul uses the word “joy” (Gk.: chara), which follows “love” (Gk.: agape) as a fruit of the Spirit, followed by the word “encouragement” (Gk.: paraklesin) to let Philemon know the personal significance his goodness holds for the Apostle (O’Brien. Colossians, Philemon 281-2). According to some commentators here Paul calls to mind the general distinguishing marks of Philemon’s behaviour as the presupposition for making his request. Others, however, think that he has in mind some particular instance of the kindness for which Philemon was distinguished. According to Lohse, Paul indicates that he has learned of one particular deed by which Philemon has helped the community (195). Also Philemon’s deeds of love have been a rich source of “joy” and “comfort” to the Apostle. Here the Apostle does not detail Philemon’s deeds of love, but simply spells out the effects: “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed”. By using the expression “hearts” Paul indicates that the “saints” have been refreshed in their innermost feelings. By the gift of his love Philemon has strengthened the community of brothers. Since Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the Christians in the previous occasions, the Apostle is confident that he will not refuse his request in connection with Onesimus.

2.3.3. Paul’s Plea for Onesimus (8-20)

In verse 8 Paul commences the body of his letter to Philemon that is the intercession for Onesimus. At the beginning of this section Paul does the groundwork for the actual appeal to Philemon that he will make towards the end of this section. He bases his appeal on the bonds of love and interdependence, which unite believers in the Lord. Hence the mutuality and interdependence which exists among believers “in the Lord” provide the foundation for Paul’s appeal and request to Philemon.

In verse 8, Paul, makes it clear that he does not have any intention of using his authority as an apostle of Christ to plead on behalf of Onesimus. In this verse he respected the freedom of Philemon in granting his request, and appeals to faith and

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63 Koster, correctly observes that the frequent occurrence of the term “the hearts” in this brief epistle reveals the personal interest of Paul in this matter (Lohse 195).
love that were affirmed in the previous section (4-7). The infinitive “order” or “command” (in Greek: epitassein) suggests that the Apostle has come clear-cut expectations from Philemon (Thurston, Ryan 232).

In verse 9, Paul introduces the basis and motivation for both the appeal and the act of sending Onesimus back to Philemon. In saying “yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love”, Paul wants to convey both friendship and encouragement. The Greek word mallon is best translated as “prefer” instead of its more literal translation as “rather” (Thurston, Ryan 233). The use of the word “prefer” brings out the contrast with the preceding epitassein (Gk.:), often translated as “order” or “command”. In this verse Paul presents himself as “ambassador of Christ”. Here the apostle takes care to make his request on behalf of Christ, whose ambassador he is and whom he represents. This makes it clear that Paul is not drawing upon his apostolic authority; rather it is as Christ’s envoy that he makes this appeal in favour of Onesimus. Just as in the political arena that still exists today and like any ambassador, Paul seeks to advance a mutual bond of cooperation but carries no special authority except that of persuasion and entreaty (Thurston, Ryan 233). He uses the term “ambassador” in connection with the divinely commissioned ministry of reconciliation as “ambassadors of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20). In this verse the combination of “ambassador of Christ” and “prisoner” would seem almost paradoxical if it were not qualifying “Christ Jesus”. This fact shows that Paul is a person who proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ and takes part in his sufferings as well.

In verse 10 Paul finally states the appeal on behalf of Onesimus. The reference to Onesimus as Paul’s own “child” (Gk.: teknou) is a clear indication that Onesimus had been brought to faith in Jesus Christ by the Apostle (Lohse 198). Paul was accustomed to speak of his converts as his “children” (1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Tit. 1:4; Gal. 4:1), and this reflects the personal intimacy with them. Occasionally Jewish and Greco-Roman teachers would refer to disciples or pupils as “sons”, but the personal relationship that unites Paul with his converts in Christ goes far beyond this.

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64 Paul intercedes for a runaway slave. He, however, does not say that the master should exercise the Stoic virtue of clemency and shows himself to be mild-mannered. Rather, Paul speaks to him in terms of Christian love and faith (Lohse 197).

65 The Greek term presbytēs, could be translated either “ambassador” or “old man”.

66 The image of father and child is sometimes employed in Rabbinic Judaism to describe the relationship that obtains between a teacher and the student whom he has instructed in the Torah. In the mystery religions the mystagogue is considered the father of the initiative who remains bound to him. Paul uses a similar mode of expression (Lohse 200).
normal secular usage (Bruce, *The Epistle to Colossians* 212). At this early point of the letter Paul simply provides the information about the conversion of Onesimus, their close relationship, and the beneficial service that he now provides. Only after the Apostle has affirmed the close ties that join him to Onesimus, does he mention Onesimus’ name.

It is right to think that it is through the letter, which is written by Paul that Philemon, for the first time heard any things concerning his absentee slave. Naturally, Philemon was not aware either of his conversion by Paul or of the exemplary service mentioned in the letter. Thus to lighten any tension in this situation, Paul uses two key words “useful” and “useless”. Earlier Onesimus might have been a useless slave to his master. Now he has become quite a different person, and now he is really useful to the Apostle and also will be to Philemon (Lohse 200). The temporal terms that compares his pre and post Christian status, “once” and “but now”, function to accentuate Onesimus’ transformation in Christ. The past has now been cancelled out. Only the present matters, which is determined by the fact that Onesimus belongs to Christ. And the curious benefit to Philemon that is included in “both to you and to me” prepares for the implied appeal in verse 13, “so that he might serve on your behalf”. The word play in this verse indicates that Onesimus may now be able to perform many services in a Christian household, which he could not do have prior to his baptism (Thurston, Ryan 235).

Verse 12 is the heart of this letter, where Paul makes his request to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Here he expresses the depth of his personal bond with Onesimus and identifies it as his “own heart”. Paul also mentions about the personal sacrifice he is making in sending back Onesimus, his own child. Paul is sending Onesimus to Philemon with the express assurance that his slave means much to him (Lohse 201). This strong emotive and personal identification with his new convert will resurface at the apex of the appeal, when Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus as if he were the Apostle himself.

Though Paul stated his decision to send Onesimus back home in the previous verse, in verse 13 he mentions his desire to have Onesimus with him, because Onesimus was his valued companion and co-worker. For Onesimus has rendered
faithful service\textsuperscript{67} to him and could even continue to give it in place of Philemon. Paul, as an Apostle, could have the right to claim this service, and is in great need of it, especially in the imprisonment which he must suffer for the sake of the Gospel (Lohse 202). It is here that Philemon is given the actual reason for Paul’s imprisonment, which is undoubtedly his public proclamation of the gospel and his mission (Thurston, Ryan 236-7). Nevertheless, he does not want, under any circumstances, to encroach upon the decision which only Philemon, as the slave’s rightful master, can make.

In verse 14 Paul makes it clear that he does not want to do anything without the consent and response of Philemon (Lohse 202). This decision of Paul may also presume his understanding of partnership with Philemon. Here the implication is clear that the Apostle would like Philemon to grant his request spontaneously, under the prompting of Christian grace (Bruce, \textit{The epistle to Colossians} 215).

Paul, for the first time, in verse 15 mentions Onesimus’ absence from Philemon’s household. According to Bruce, “the separation of Onesimus from Philemon’s household was Onesimus’ making and Philemon’s part in the matter was wholly involuntary and passive” (\textit{The epistle to Colossians} 216). But Paul considers the separation as an act of God, because through this separation, all Philemon, Onesimus and Paul could benefit. It was due to this separation that Onesimus could become a member of Christ, as Philemon already was, and a new and deeper relationship was thus established between Onesimus-Philemon-Paul, which would never come to an end.

The above mentioned relationship made Paul to commend Onesimus to Philemon “no longer as a slave” but as a “beloved brother”. In verse 16 Paul indicates that Onesimus who was Philemon’s slave now has a new identity in Christ as a “brother”. The Apostle writes with the assurance that Philemon will take legal steps to change the master-slave relationship between Onesimus and him. In this situation Paul could exercise his apostolic authority and direct Philemon to free Onesimus, but he did not compel him to do so, because he believed that the responsibility and the initiative should come spontaneously from Philemon as an expression of the grace of God working in his heart, and this action could give the Apostle real joy.

\textsuperscript{67} Since Philemon was previously introduced as the apostle’s co-worker, this service must be related to the Gospel mission, perhaps even preaching.
Whether or not Onesimus retained his position as Philemon’s slave, it is clear from Paul’s statement that Philemon is no longer to regard him as a slave but, by virtue of his baptism a “beloved brother” to all within the church. This fraternal relationship draws Onesimus into the circle of personal intimacy that Paul already shares with Philemon (Thurston, Ryan 246). Paul further explains the bond between Onesimus and Philemon by saying “in the flesh” and “in the Lord”. Although Onesimus “in the flesh” is, as a slave, the property of his master, this earthly relationship is now surpassed by the union “in the Lord” (Lohse 203). For a Christian the only thing that matters is to have accepted God’s call and to follow him. The master of a slave also must be obedient to this call, because he is also subject to the call of Christ. In this way, Paul establishes a tremendous change the relationship of master and slave once and for all. This actually is a blow to the backbone of slavery. In Christ Jesus, they are united in a deep bond of love and grace.

In verse 17 Paul refreshes his close relationship with Philemon by calling him “partner” (Gk.: koinonos), and expressed his hope that Philemon will receive Onesimus with the same welcome that he himself would be given: “accept him as you would me”. This intimate identification of the writer with the recommended party is typical of letters of recommendation (Callahan 55). It is not only the characteristic of Paul’s envoys, but “rooted in first century conventions for social and diplomatic relationships” (Mitchell 641-2). Here Paul does not merely enjoin a warm welcome for an imminent visitor, but urges his addressees to accept one another. The verb used here is “to welcome” (Gk.: proslambano), the same term that is used in his discussion of the “weak” and “strong” members of the Roman assembly and their relation to one another (Rom. 14:1; 15:7). In this context Paul reminds his listeners that they are members of the same community and he is exhorting them to accept one another whether they are “weak” or “strong”. In the same way Paul wants Philemon to accept Onesimus, just as Philemon has accepted him, and to forgive Onesimus’ mistakes.

In verse 18 Paul speaks of Onesimus’ wrong doing in a conditional clause: “If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything”. Clarice Martin has argued that the debt of Onesimus mentioned in this clause is not a fact but a possibility. According to her the language used in this verse is part of Paul’s rhetorical appeal to

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68 The Greek word koinonos means partners who share common interests or who as comrades are engaged in the same endeavours. When Paul calls himself a “partner”, he is referring neither to business transactions not simply to the ties of friendship. Their “fellowship” is grounded in their belonging to one Lord (Lohse 203).
Philemon and in no way establishes Onesimus’ indebtedness. She points out that “if” (Gk.: *ei*) in verse 18 introduces a simple condition and thus states a proposition, not a reality (321-37). Therefore, Paul leaves to Philemon to determine whether or not Onesimus has done some injustice to him.

The above mentioned clause is followed by a call for concrete reparations: “I will repay it” (v. 19). Here Paul shows that real wrongdoings need concrete reparations, and the reconciliation between persons does not come cheaply; it can be realized only when those wish to reconcile make good their commitment by paying what is owed. In this context the Apostle is not interested in forgiveness, and thus the language of forgiveness is completely absent.

At the end of this section of the letter Paul strengthens his request on behalf of Onesimus. In verse 20 he once again addresses Philemon as a Christian brother and expresses his wish: “Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ”. Here the particle “yes” denotes affirmation, agreement or emphasis, which strengthens Paul’s appeal. Once again the affectionate term of address, “brother” is used. Lightfoot aptly remarks: “It is the entreaty of a brother to a brother on behalf of a brother” (342). Though the apostle’s concern is the future of Onesimus, he is closely and personally identified with him, so that he also can benefit from Philemon’s action.

At the conclusion of his introductory thanksgiving paragraph Paul had referred to Philemon’s acts of love by which “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed” (v. 7). In the same way now in the concluding part of the body of the letter he clothes his request to Philemon with similar words, with the hope that this dear brother once again will act in love and “refresh the heart”, this time the heart of the Apostle.

In a carefully structured paragraph (vv. 8-20) Paul uses his words carefully, and makes his plea for Onesimus, the runaway slave. He bases his appeal on the ground of love, because he is aware of Philemon’s kindness and generosity in the past, and he looks forward of Philemon’s love being shown once again, this time with reference to Onesimus. In this request the Apostle awaits a free and spontaneous response from Philemon to act on Christian charity, and to welcome back Onesimus as a member of his household, since he is born again “in the Lord” through Baptism.
2.3.4. Final Remarks and Greetings (21-25)

In this section Paul glances back at the matter previously mentioned and assures Philemon, as he writes to him, of his confidence in his obedience. The term “obedience” seems rather unusual here; because Paul has expressly rejected the use of his apostolic right to command Philemon and instead bases his appeal on love. Perhaps here the term “obedience” is signifies obedience to God (O’Brien 305).

As Philemon is obedient to the will of God, Paul is sure that he “will do even more than I say” (v. 21). The Apostle has said expressly that he wants Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would himself, but what is “more”, that he does not spell out. As we read between the lines we can interpret the “more” as a desire of the Apostle to have Onesimus back to him for the service of the Gospel, a desire which Paul has already mentioned earlier (v. 13).

Paul then indicates that he hopes to come in person to visit Philemon and his household; therefore he requests the latter to prepare a “guest room” for him. No doubt by making this announcement he lends a certain emphasis to his intercession for Onesimus since he will obviously be able to see for himself how things have gone (Lohse 206-207). When Paul wrote the epistle there must have been a realistic prospect of his being released from prison, a development for which he asks the prayers of Philemon and his community. His arrival at the home of Philemon would be an appropriate occasion for Philemon to refresh his heart by granting him Onesimus. In his request for prayer Paul uses “your” in the plural, indicating not only that he is asking for the prayers of the community but also that this personal letter to Philemon is intended to be read to the entire community (Keegan 75).

Greetings are another common feature of Pauline letters, appearing just before the final blessing (vv. 23-25). The greetings from Paul’s fellow prisoner, Epaphras, and four fellow workers are addressed to “you” in singular, that is, to Philemon alone, possibly because they were personally known to Philemon (Keegan 75). The final blessing, however, is addressed to the entire community, using the blessing formula similar to those found in Paul’s other letters, especially in the letter to Philippians (Phil. 4:23), another letter from prison.

2.5. The theological Significance of the Letter to Philemon

The literary, historical and interpretative problems which remain should not detract from the beauty and meaning of this letter. Basically, it contains no explicit
theological or ethical doctrines, nor does it attack any heresies in the church. Nevertheless, it presents a number of important truths that should not go unnoticed.

2.4.1. Demolition of Social Barriers

The letter provides a small commentary on slavery in the ancient world. When we read it together with Colossians 3:22-4:1, we begin to appreciate how conversion to the Christian faith broke down all social, racial and economic barriers. Although Paul does not speak directly for the abolition of slavery, this letter exemplifies the truth that all are one in Christ Jesus. The same idea is found in the epistle to Galatians as well: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). A new relationship and partnership has been formed in this situation where master, slave and apostle are all part of one family in Christ (Philem. 16). The Church as a whole should be characterized by such virtues as love, forgiveness, equality and fellowship.

2.4.2. Christian Brotherhood

The emphasis on love in this letter to Philemon leads to Paul’s teaching about brotherhood. The main plea of the letter is that Philemon welcomes Onesimus back as more than a slave, as a beloved brother. The mutual relationship of love and brotherhood that already exists between Paul and Philemon must now be widened consciously and extended even to the slave Onesimus. This indirectly tells us how Paul conceived the social relations among members of the Christian church. They are expected to behave as Christians, above all other human considerations.

2.4.3. Promotion of Equality

The letter to Philemon serves, to recognize and promote genuinely equal and loving relations among members of a Christian community. Paul seeks to promote equality among diverse members of the community regardless of their status in the world. A radical change in of the master slave relationship, based on their common faith in Christ Jesus is envisaged by Paul. The mutual affection that is mentioned in the letter engenders also an equality where it did not exist earlier (Vacek 280-318).

Unlike the patron-client or master-slave relations that maintains and solidifies existing inequalities (Malina 90-116), relations among Christians are to foster
equality, as they help to bring the community together in a mutually beneficial reciprocity.

2.4.4. Christian Reconciliation

Reconciliation means a change in attitude from enmity to friendship. It results in peace and friendship. Reconciliation can also be seen as the result of peace negotiations as Paul proposes to Philemon. There should be people to work as heralds to intercede on behalf of the “weak, downtrodden, and poor”. In this letter Paul acts as an ambassador of Christ, one who promotes peaceful reconciliation between brothers. The reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus is based on the principles of Christian love and forgiveness and not on Roman law or on apostolic authority. The release of Onesimus for Paul’s ministry must be a voluntary action leading to the highest good for all parties concerned. Paul is confident that he will succeed in motivating Philemon “to do even more” than he has requested (Philem. 21).

Conclusion

Without doubt the most pressing issue raised by the letter to Philemon for modern readers, is that of the relationship of Gospel to slavery. Exactly what Paul wishes to say concerning slavery or what implications may legitimately be drawn from what he does not say. Paul issues no ultimatum to Philemon or elsewhere in his letters, regarding the evils of the institution of slavery (Thompson 198). In fact, although Paul writes in Col. 3:11 “that there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, salve and free; but Christ is all in all”, he goes on to say, a few lines later, that slaves are to obey their earthly master in all things (3:22). Hence, it is not surprising that Paul’s approach is viewed as cautious and even reactionary: the status quo that Paul takes away with one hand and apparently gives back with the other. Thus his admonition to slaves to obey their masters fits squarely with his counsel to slaves to “remain as they are”, since “whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed persons belonging to the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:21-24). It means to be united in Christ; it apparently does not change the basic social situation of master and slave. When constructed this way, at least part of the purpose of the epistle to Philemon is to ensure the maintenance of the social order, cementing the superior position of masters and the obedience of slaves.
But this reading of Philemon assumes that Paul’s primary purposes are to return Onesimus to Philemon and in such a way that preserves the status quo. Whatever Onesimus’ has done wrong, Paul will make it good so that Onesimus can go back to his master. On this reading, Paul thus validates and sustains the hierarchical order. But Paul’s purpose in writing this short epistle was not to ensure that a slave could go back to his master but that a Christian in a vulnerable position would be treated as a brother in Christ by a fellow Christian. Such treatment follows not Roman law or social convention but the demands of Christian conduct. In other words, Paul writes primarily to effect reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus, not as a master and slave but as brothers in the Lord (Thompson 198-9). Indeed, Paul never speaks of Philemon as a “master” of Onesimus, using the term only for the risen Christ who is “Lord of all”, of Paul, of Philemon, of Onesimus, and of all the others mentioned by name in the letter. Paul did not seek to restore the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus to its previous footing but to redefine their relationship on an entirely new footing based on the Gospel. He does not therefore, send Onesimus, the slave back to Philemon, the master; he sends one brother in Christ to another so that they can acknowledge as brothers in Christ.

Some interpreters view this letter as a private communication seeking to urge Philemon to a particular course of conduct with respect to Onesimus, whereas some other interpreters have suggested that Paul’s message is for the wider Christian community as well (Barclay John 161-186). That is, Paul is concerned not merely with the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus but also with the health of this particular Christian congregation. Wall, suggests that Paul may hope to use his superior position to help Onesimus’ standing in the congregation that meets in Philemon’s house. Winter, argues that although the letter is formally addressed to Philemon as the overseer of the Congregation in Colossae, it is in fact intended for the entire church. All these studies rightly stress that for Paul, Christian conduct is not a private and individual matter, but is lived in relationship to others, in social networks, and in conscious awareness that one belonging to Christ the Lord consequently and necessarily belongs to fellow believers in the Lord (Thompson 200).