PHILEMON - A TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:
What does this book/story say to us about God?
This question may be broken down further as follows:
a. Why did God do it/allow it?
b. Why did He record it for our study?

1. What does the book of Philemon add to your picture of God? Why do you think the early church fathers included this book in the Canon? Who was Philemon? Who was Onesimus? Where did Paul meet Onesimus? Is Onesimus mentioned elsewhere? (Colossians 4:9)

    Chronology of the Book of Philemon - See also Tentative Chronology of the Early Christian Church, e.g., at the beginning of the Teacher's Guide for Acts

    A.D. 60 (approximately) - Onesimus, a pagan slave from Colossae or Laodicea, ran away from his master, Philemon, and fled to Rome taking some of his master's money or possessions. (Philemon 10-19; *AA* 456)

    A.D. 60-62 - At Rome he met Paul and was converted. He then ministered to Paul in prison.

    A.D. 62 - He was sent back to Colossae, along with Tychicus, carrying letters to Ephesus, Colossae, and Philemon. (Colossians 4:7-9; Ephesians 6:21; Philemon 1)

    Here we see how St. Paul lays himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleads his cause with his master: and so sets himself as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus also St. Paul does for Onesimus with Philemon. ... We are all His Onesimi, to my thinking. [(Intro) Martin Luther, quoted by J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 317, 318.]

    Philemon as well as Ephesians and Colossians were clearly written from prison. (Philemon 1,9; Ephesians 6:20; Colossians 4:18) It appears these letters were written in the latter part of Paul's imprisonment since he seemed to think that he would be released soon. (Philemon 22) Very few scholars question the authorship of Paul for Philemon. Consider the following from Bible commentaries and *The Message*:

    Between the years 146 B.C. and A.D. 235 the proportion of slaves to freemen is said to have been three to one. Pliny says that in the time of Augustus a freedman by the name of Caecilius held 4,116 slaves (See *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1966 ed., vol. 20, pp. 776,777 art. "Slavery").

    With so large a part of the population under bondage the ruling class felt obliged to enact severe laws to prevent escape or revolt. Originally, in Roman law the master possessed absolute power of life and death over his slaves. The slave could own no property. Everything he had belonged to his master, though at times he was allowed to accumulate chance earnings. Slaves could not legally marry, but were nevertheless encouraged to do so because their offspring increased the master's wealth. The slave knew that he might be separated from his mate and children at the pleasure of his master. Slaves

could not appeal to civil magistrates for justice, and there was no place where a fugitive slave could find asylum. He could never serve as a witness, except under torture, and he could not accuse his master of any crimes except high treason, adultery, incest, or the violation of sacred things. If a master was accused of a crime, he could offer his slave to be interrogated by torture in his place. The punishment for running away was often death, sometimes by crucifixion or by being thrown to voracious lampreys in a fishpond.

Some slaveowners were more considerate than others, and some slaves showed great devotion to their masters. Certain tasks committed to slaves were relatively pleasant, and a number required a high degree of intelligence. Often teachers, physicians, and even philosophers became slaves as a result of military conquest. Many slaves ran shops or factories or managed estates for their masters. But the institution of slavery was a school for cowardice, flattery, dishonesty, graft, immorality, and other vices, for above all else a slave had to cater to his master's wishes, however evil. By about A.D. 200, conditions had improved greatly, and even more so after the spread of Christianity.

The Romans did not deny their slaves all hope of freedom. The law provided for their manumission, or liberation, in various ways. Most commonly, the master took his slave before an official, in whose presence he turned the slave around and pronounced the longed-for words *liber esto*, "Be free," and struck him with a rod. Manumission could also be performed by various other means, such as writing a letter, making the slave guardian of one's children, or placing on his head the *pileus*, or cap of liberty. But unless manumission was decreed by law rather than by a private owner, the slave was bound to remain a client to his master and to perform any obligations placed upon him at the time of manumission. In the Roman Empire it was possible for freedmen to rise steadily to positions of influence and even of civic authority, but their property, when they died without heirs, reverted to their former masters. One such instance was that of Felix, procurator of Judea (see Vol. V, p. 70). *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol.7, p. 376

Estimates suggest that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, men and women who were treated like pieces of merchandise to buy and sell. A familiar proverb was "So many slaves, just so many enemies!" The average slave sold for 500 denarii (one denarius was a day's wage for a common laborer), while the educated and skilled slaves were priced as high as 50,000 denarii. A master could free a slave, or a slave could buy his freedom if he could raise the money (Acts 22:28). (*The Bible Exposition Commentary* - article on Philemon)

Philemon

Every movement we make in response to God has a ripple effect, touching family, neighbors, friends, community. Belief in God alters our language. Love of God affects daily relationships. Hope in God enters into our work. Also their opposites—unbelief, indifference, and despair. None of these movements and responses, beliefs and prayers, gestures and searches, can be confined to the soul. They spill out and make history. If they don't, they are under

suspicion of being fantasies at best, hypocrisies at worst.

Christians have always insisted on the historicity of Jesus—an actual birth, a datable death, a witnessed resurrection, locatable towns. There is a parallel historicity in the followers of Jesus. As they take in everything Jesus said and did—all of it a personal revelation of God in time and place—it all gets worked into local history, eventually into world history.

Philemon and Onesimus, the slave owner and slave who figure prominently in this letter from Paul, had no idea that believing in Jesus would involve them in radical social change. But as the two of them were brought together by this letter, it did. And it still does. (Introduction to Philemon - *The Message*)

2. In light of the fact that Onesimus was a runaway slave, did Paul really have anything to do with sending him back to Philemon? (Philemon 12) Would Onesimus have been sent back to Philemon by the authorities to be punished or killed? In the times of Paul, there were an estimated 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. In fact, there were considerably more "slaves" than there were "free men." Thus, it was considered essential that the slaves be severely punished if they tried to run away or rebel in any way. Archaeologists have even found "Wanted: Dead or Alive" notices for runaway slaves. Slavery was not a lifelong condition based on "race" but often a way of paying back debts. A slave could buy his way out of slavery if he had the money, or he would be released when his obligation was complete.

    Considering Roman law about slavery, it was very unlikely that the authorities in Rome realized Onesimus was a runaway slave. If they had known this, he would have been arrested and returned to his master almost immediately for punishment or death. Thus, it seems likely that Onesimus sought out the Christians in Rome or the apostle Paul himself for some reason. Perhaps, Onesimus identified himself as a Christian and hoped for some fellowship or even some assistance. After being converted, apparently Onesimus revealed his true story to Paul. Instead of turning Onesimus over to the authorities, Paul decided to do what he could to correct the problem by writing this letter to Philemon. See the notes above regarding slavery.

3. Why did Paul not take this opportunity to say that slavery was a terrible sin and that no Christian should be involved in it? (Compare Ephesians 6:5-9; 1 Timothy 6:1,2; Titus 2:9,10) Would slavery continue if all slaves had done what Paul told Onesimus to do and if Philemon had done what Paul suggested he should do? (See also Colossians 3:11)

    Considering the number of slaves being held during the days of Paul, for a small group such as the Christian church to attempt to change this common practice in society would have resulted in the church being immediately banned. The major task of the church to spread the gospel would have been overshadowed by such an attempt to eliminate slavery. So, Paul took another approach. He realized that if he could get people to really act like Christians, slavery would disappear. Furthermore, if Christ should return soon, as Paul fervently hoped, slavery would be eliminated forever! No doubt, Paul believed that this was the best way to deal with the problem of slavery.

4. Why do some translations have Paul calling himself an "ambassador" while others have "an old man"? (Philemon 1:9)

    In all known Greek manuscripts of this verse, we find the Greek word *presbutes* - "an old man." But many Bible scholars believe that this expression is not like Paul. Dr. Richard

Bentley, an English theologian of the 17th century who spent a lot of time working on the book of Philemon, suggested that the word should have been *presbeutes* - "an ambassador." As one can recognize without even knowing Greek, the pronunciation of these two words is almost exactly the same. By the time he was twenty-four, Dr. Bentley had a Hexapla of the Old Testament with every word in the Hebrew Bible collated with Chaldee, Syriac, Latin, and Greek (two different versions). He was such a recognized scholar that he worked with Sir Isaac Newton, and jointly they delivered the first Robert Boyle Lectures.

Dr. Bentley believed that Paul would never appeal to the pity of Philemon by referring to himself as "an old man" but rather would appeal by claiming that he was "an ambassador" of Jesus Christ. (Compare Ephesians 6:20; 2 Corinthians 5:20)

Such a "scholarly guess change" is known in the science of "textual" or "lower" criticism as a "conjectural emendation." Many modern translations have accepted Dr. Bentley's conjectural emendation even though there is no manuscript evidence for it at all.

Philemon 9:

"...the aged..." (*Tyndale, Geneva, KJV, NKJV, ASV, NASB* [footnote: or "an ambassador"], *Weymouth, Concordant Literal*)

Weymouth (1929): footnote: (Aged) Greek *presbutes*; another word *presbeutes* (ambassador) differs only by a single letter, and there is evidence that ambassador was sometimes written *presbutes*. Paul, at this time, was hardly aged in length of years, though, perhaps, prematurely so by the kind of life he had lived: cf. 2 Cor. 11:23-29. "Ambassador and now also a prisoner" (cf. R.V. margin) yields a tempting correspondence with the expression in the contemporary Epistle to the Ephesians 6:20 (cf. 2 Cor. 5:20)

"...an old man..." (*RV, ARV, NIV, TLB, NLT, Stevens, Greber, Kleist and Lilly, Montgomery, Noyes, Douay-Confraternity, NRSV*, [footnote: "an ambassador"], *NAB, Moffatt, Beck, Phillips, Jerusalem, William E. Paul, Clear Word, Schonfield, Lamsa, Spencer, Moore, Noli, Norlie*)

NAB footnote: *Old man:* some editors conjecture that Paul here used a similar Greek word meaning "ambassador" (cf. Ephesians 6:20). This conjecture heightens the contrast with "prisoner" but is totally without manuscript support.

"...an aged man..." (*New World, Kingdom Interlinear*)

"...an elder..." (*Scarlett*)

"...an ambassador..." (*RSV, Translator's, Twentieth Century, GNB* [footnote: "or an old man"], *NEB, Message*)

"...an ambassador *and* an old man..." (*Amplified*)

"...an envoy..." (*Goodspeed, Williams*)

"...a messenger..." (*CEV* [footnote: Or "an old man"])

There are at least 63 such conjectural emendations that have been considered significant enough to be included in one or more English version of the Bible. It is interesting to note in this context that even the *King James Version* adopts at least one reading for which there is no manuscript support.

5. Do we have any idea what the outcome was of Paul's writing of this letter? What happened

to Onesimus? It is interesting that in about A.D. 110, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to the Bishop of Ephesus who was a man named Onesimus. Onesimus was a fairly common name, especially for slaves, and it meant "useful." Notice Paul's play on the name in Philemon 11. Do you think this could have been the same Onesimus? (See E. J. Goodspeed's *Introduction to the New Testament* p. 121 and following.) Is it possible that Onesimus helped to collect all Paul's letters together to form the New Testament? Many scholars believe that this may have taken place in Ephesus.

It is fascinating to consider the possibility that this same slave, Onesimus, may one day have been the "bishop" or "elder" of Ephesus. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that Ephesus apparently became the "publication center" for the early Christian church. Thus, it is possible that this former slave may have had considerable influence in putting together our New Testament! Paul's diplomatic letter may have had a great influence on the Christian church for all time to come! If this is the same Onesimus, this book may be included in the New Testament to explain the history of this prominent man in early Christian church history. This may be similar to the reason that the book of Ruth is included in the Old Testament–partially to explain some of the history of David's ancestors.

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