


ARAMAIC BIBLE COMPANION

INTRODUCTION TO PHILEMON -COMMENTARY NO.57

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A comic Greek Playwright of 330BC named Philemon wrote a play called “Partner” KOINOS. The concept of “partnership” is arguably the formula adopted by Paul for his delicate composition in favour of repatriating a runaway slave. Paul as a partner of Philemon can crave his genuine help and he does this most effectively in the letter which has all the hallmarks of a successful appeal.

Philemon is one of the shortest books of the bible but it is important in that it preserves testimony as to how Christians were already modifying the social concepts of their day and that Paul was in the vanguard of such transformation.

The letter whilst among the latest of the NT comes before 2Timothy and follows Philippians in which we are told Epaphras had but recently arrived at Rome. This letter was taken by Tychicus and Onesimus to the east in their 1000plus mile return journey east to Asia Minor.

Readers should note the esteem and authority that Paul commanded in the early church. I have added a note on extra-biblical source material concerning the current arrival in Rome of the British king and his entourage and the possibility that through contact with the converted members of that royal family Paul could arrange a western-most visit. Tradition has it that Pudens or Pudentia turned the former sizable palace that family obtained from the Senate into Rome’s first church and her brother became its leader after the death of Peter. In Titus 4.21 Paul makes special mention of Claudia (possibly the British Queen) and her children Linus and Pudens. It may be that members of Caesar’s house met with these converted Britons in Rome and so it is conscionable that with considerable ease and ready introductions Paul could arrange for travel west upon release from house arrest. It is also understandable that Luke would do no further formal historical writing in the climate of persecution that was fast developing. That climate would explain the dispersion of the fellow workers referred to in Philemon 24.

Philemon as I have observed is named “kiss” and its story of welcome home cannot be unlike that of Luke 15 where the prodigal is welcomed by his Father who runs and falls on his neck and “kisses” him. A blanket of silence hides from us the way in which Onesimus was received when he arrived at far-off Colossae and whether or not Paul managed his intended visit to Philippi and then his stay at Colossae. As a man of action I think Paul accomplished both objectives and during the busy interim before his second appearance before Caesar moved from utmost east of the new Gentile Church to utmost west. In the last analysis it does not matter to us today but it would have been a huge encouragement to the development of Christianity in the West in those times.

A commentary on this short bible book was first developed in August of 2001 and revised in October of 2011. I have included about a dozen the Greek words in the text because of their importance for its understanding. I commend the letter to the reader.

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THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

BACKGROUND – NOT JUST A KIND LETTER – BUT A LIFE-SAVING ACT

Luther makes this comment on the letter – “The epistle shows a right noble example of Christian love.... Christ lays Himself out for us...we are his Onesimus-es”. Colossae is the setting – a city about 8 kilometres from Laodicea. There can be little doubt but that the letter saved Onesimus from the fate of crucifixion at the worst or branding chains & the prison house at best. It was pretty much prison and chains for Paul himself at Rome for just two years before the writing of this letter Nero cited Augustus’ law that the “familiar” of a slave that committed murder be killed – at an earlier time 400 slaves of every age & both sexes were paraded through a line of soldiers to be slaughtered. Paul in his wisdom

no doubt in the light of current draconian law quietly advised Onesimus to get back home to Colossae and by returning him to Philemon's Christian auspice possibly saved his life.

GREETINGS

Paul, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, and Timothy the brother to Philemon the beloved and our fellow-worker; also to Apphia the dearly loved and Archippos our fellow soldier and to the church that is above his house...

Paul focuses on a like relationship of his with Christ – he is a **bonds slave** [δεδουλος]. He is coupled by bonds to Christ, anchored like a ship to his sure foundation. This expression is used 13/14 times in the NT

Paul wrote to Philemon – whose life was an expression of love (A KISS) whose name reminds us of the Father of the Prodigal son and that homecoming kiss. His wife Apphia is entitled “dear mamma” – the real signification of Apphia. Archippus is the chief of horse – an equestrian no doubt. The “church” (a) under Philemon was “distributed in all sections of his house” or (b) may have been “above” Archippus’ house much in the style of the upper room for Roman upper chambers were often very large – however it was disposed to meet it met under the auspice of a Christian family. As ever Paul refers to Numbers 6.25-26 and opens his correspondence characteristically with the Aaronic blessing – for Paul keeps before him and the church our glorious risen LORD and only Priest and Mediator.

LOVE FAITH CARE ENERGY COMFORT AND COMPASSION 4-7

I thank my God, always inspired by remembering you rest on my prayers and vows, hearing of your love and the faith you have that is active toward the LORD Jesus and into the circle of all the saints so that your sharing and care belonging to your faith has been put to work in being fully acquainted with and able to teach every good thing in your circle with regard to Jesus Christ. For we have great joy and comfort resting on your love because, brother, the inner feelings and cares and anxieties [σπλαγγνα] of the saints have been laid to rest or “buried” through you.

Philemon rejoiced that Paul prayed for him and he was an energetic Christian marked by “koinoneia” or practical care of other believers. He was well instructed and could communicate to build others up but most of all he was a man of some position who calmed and stilled the fears of Christians at times when they might have cringed in fear of those in authority. There are three levels of support affirmed in this opening statement:

1. *The believers at Colossae enjoy the support of Philemon*
2. *Philemon enjoys the prayerful support of Paul. Paul assures Philemon “You stay in my prayers”^{v4}*
3. *Paul is utterly dependent on the support of his LORD in glory.*

ONESIMUS IS INDISPENSIBLE 8-11

On which account I hold the position to press on you or give you direction with great boldness openness and frank speaking on the crucial thing through grace I would rather implore you being suchlike an elder and reverent counsellor and ambassador as I Paul am. Though now a bond-slave of Jesus Christ I plead with you about my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds, the one formerly useless to you but now on the one hand he whom I have sent is of fine practical value to you and to me, on the other hand you win over me this time and take [προσλαμβανω] this man who is my own very bowels of compassion [σπλαγγνα]. Paul uses this phrase a second time to show how caring Onesimus was of the apostle and how genuinely he could hardly afford to spare that lovingkindness.

Paul uses the telling word EUCHRESTUS in v.11. It means “so useful – so indispensable” as opposed to “coming in handy”. When we remember that the Romans called Jesus “Chrestus” they thus displayed their appreciation of Him as “a good and useful person” – Onesimus has been saved – “born in bonds”^{v10} – “my youngest spiritual son” TEKNON. He was Christ-like in being ever ready for God's use.

THE NATURE OF PHILEMON'S FAITH-IN-ACTION 12

This chap is my own compassions – my bowels of mercy – kindness itself to me!

Onesimus was so dedicated to Paul as to offer him total sacrificial attention and care. He was working out his new-found faith in care for the aging Paul – in v7 Philemon himself is described as giving rest to the deepest feeling or anxieties of the saints. Philemon was putting Jesus' teaching in Matthew 11.28

into effect in Colossae and acting like his Lord by bringing rest to many who were heavy laden. Onesimus was doing exactly that in Rome. Paul is stressing that now in Christ both Lord and servant are in perfect concert and the re-meet promises a cordial and harmonious relationship of joint and mutual service.

PAUL LOOKS AT THE LORD'S PROVIDENCE IN IT ALL 13-16

Whom I proposed and deliberated [βουλομαι] to hold for myself that on your behalf he might attend me whilst in bonds on account of the gospel but without your decision or expressed wish [γνομυνης] I had no purpose or inclination to act that your goodness to me should not be of compulsion out of our relationship or faith but voluntary and out of what you really are.

Paul is sending Onesimus back as one who both showed Paul deep compassion and excited Paul's own compassion – and seeks the relief he knew Philemon was used to bringing other Christians. He was a real Partner. A comic Greek Playwright of 330BC named Philemon wrote a play called "Partner" KOINOS. Paul wished not to "twist Philemon's arm" to get help by requesting Onesimus stay to minister to him – he wanted Philemon freely to demonstrate his good work – i.e. that which is appointed of the LORD for the believer to complete.

For on this account probably [ταχα] he has been taken this great distance for an hour [a short time] that you might have him back for a lifetime or ever [αιωνιον] not as a slave but as more than a slave – a beloved brother – a brother especially or most to me but on the other hand more of a brother to you both in the flesh and in the LORD. Again the deftness of Paul's skilful appeal shows that Onesimus is better than a brother to him but that to Philemon he will be even more still – a brother by redemption of his body and by the redemption of Christ. So Paul has made the telling suggestion – inserted the vital "perhaps" which, doubtless, is his own strong view – that the LORD sent him to Rome to be converted and to meet Paul and help and encourage him at a vital point in his life. After all, the very coincidence of a slave turning up from a distance of close on 1200 miles away – and a slave at that whose master is a familiar of Paul was patently of divine design as far as Paul was concerned.

PAUL WOULD PAY FOR BENEFITS GAINED BUT URGES THIS BE CONSIDERED ALONGSIDE BENEFITS HE BROUGHT TO PHILEMON 17-20

If therefore you hold me to be a partner take him as if you were having me back. But if he has wronged or injured you or defrauded you put that to my account. I, Paul, have signed in my handwriting; I will pay the penalty [αποτισω] lest I say to you that you also owe what you are to me. Yes, brother, I would have your delightful benefit [a middle optative from ονινεμι "grateful support" or "enjoyment of help"] in the LORD. Cause my deep cares to be at rest in the circle of the LORD. Paul goes back to the comment he made about Philemon relieving the cares or anxieties of the saints (v.7) and now appeals for his own concern to be relieved in similar fashion.

PAUL AND HIS PEN

Having been confident that you would listen and comply, I wrote to you, knowing that you will do more than I say. Together with this prepare a guest room for me also for I hope that on account of your (plural) prayerful vows I shall have been indulged or shown favour by you (plural).

Paul put his name to the account of Onesimus. He explains that he writes with some confidence because Philemon respects the apostolic authority of his friend. So this is a confident letter and one which expresses the hope that in following it up he shall himself arrive, when circumstances allow, at Colossae to see the church in action and further to delight in the company of Philemon, Apphia Archippus and Onesimus.

INSTEAD

1 Instead of serving me he should serve you v13

2 Instead of being a slave he should be reinstated as a brother v16

3 Instead of what I say – you will do more – praying for me – also "Prepare me a guest's lodging"

Paul still hopes to be released without payment – however, Romans loved to receive cash for criminal releases. There is circumstantial evidence and many traditional early writings to suggest Paul re-visited Philippi in the east and did reach Spain if not the coast of ancient Britain in the interim between his house-arrest and final imprisonment. Due to the dispersal of friends he may have been left without Luke whose narrative in Acts covers nothing beyond his voyage to Rome and early stay there. Demas

also departed. He may well have travelled back with Epaphroditus and Mark to the East before himself journeying to the utmost west

Augusta Cook refers to Chapter 3 (Libra3) of the Demonstration Evangelica of **Eusebius** (325 AD) of which I have a copy and says "The Apostle (Paul) passed beyond the reaches to the isles called the Britannic isles." This is not necessarily correct; however "some" may well have included Paul. The text of Eusebius shows that the largely uneducated apostles travelled "to Rome, to Persia, to Armenia, to Parthia, to Scythia and some have reached the "ends of the world" – the land of the Indians and some have crossed the Ocean and reached the Isles of Britain." **Tertullian** (200AD) in Apologia 37 states "The haunts of the Britons, inaccessible to the Romans, is subjugated to Christ". *The connection would have been enabled by the fact that the British king Cataraclacus whom the Romans captured was given a palace in Rome and his daughter Pudens is mentioned by Paul in 2Timothy4.21 and her husband Rufus in Romans 16.13. Paul may have been in correspondence with this Christian princess & her mother Claudia and arranged a westernmost visit but this much is speculative.*

COMPANIONS OF HONOUR (cf Colossians 4 12-14)

Epaphras (cf Philippians 4.18 & 2 Timothy 4.11—some 1-2 years later) **my fellow prisoner taken at spear point** [αἰχμαλωτός] **Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke my fellow workers embrace you** [literally "cling fondly to you" ἀσπάζω] **in the circle of Jesus Christ.**

Epaphras was sharing prison with Paul [In Philippians 2 25-27 he had arrived with support from Philippi but Paul's circumstance had deteriorated as had Epaphras' health and this most Christ like believer from Colossae had continued in Rome for some considerable time possibly determining to brave it out alongside the imprisoned Paul or even being made prisoner and compelled to be holed up with him as a sympathiser. This letter was written before that development and Mark from Lystra was there. Demas had not departed for Thessalonica, and Luke, who remained steadfast throughout, was there too.

GRACE IS THE LAST WORD AND THE FINAL SILENT APPEAL

The Grace of our LORD Jesus Christ be with your (plural) spirit.

The spirit of the whole church was to be encouraged by the "undeserved favour" of the LORD. The whole church continues at its best as it is aware of its life and spirit being sustained by **GRACE**.

FINIS

Bob Coffey Aramaic & Greek Bible Companion
L'shuvkha Marva (To the glory of the Lord)