

Pacifica Report

Paul, Philemon and Onesimus: Feeling one's way into a Bible story

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DURING THE MONTH OF AUGUST, 1998 my wife and I were able to make two visits, each lasting a week, to the islands of Taveuni and Rotuma, within the Republic of Fiji Islands. We visited Taveuni as participants in a field trip from Pacific Theological College, where I had been teaching New Testament. In the course of the visit, we were able to see something of church life at the grassroots, visiting several house churches.

At one of these visits I tried to introduce the group to the book of Job, but met with absolutely no response – not a single question or comment. The members of the group were probably a bit overawed by us overseas visitors, but it was only too obvious that I had been too ambitious in attempting to explain Job in one session.

The following evening, we were to visit another house church, also on the outskirts of Somosomo, and this time my wife and I decided to attempt something both more imaginative and more accessible, based on the letter of Paul to Philemon. Some ten days later, we repeated the programme three times on the island of Rotuma.

AN IMAGINARY CONVERSATION

To begin with, I said to the group, we want you to listen to an imaginary conversation. My wife and I are making this up, but something like this must have taken place nearly 2,000 years ago. Both of us are playing the part of men. As you listen, we ask you to keep three questions in mind:

- 1) Who are we?
- 2) Where are we?
- 3) What is happening?

The dialogue which followed went something this:

Onesimus: Greetings to you, brother Paul!

Paul: Greetings to you too, brother Onesimus! Did you have any difficulty in getting past the guards this morning?

Onesimus: No, they all seem to know me by now.

Paul: What have you brought me this morning, Onesimus?

Onesimus: A loaf of bread, and also some olives, figs and dates.

Paul: I don't know what I'd do without you, Onesimus. If it hadn't been for you, and my other friends here in this town, like Mark and Luke, I would have starved by now in this prison.

Onesimus: There's something else that I've brought you, Paul: pens, ink and paper.

Paul: Wonderful! You know how important it is to me to keep in touch with all the churches I have set up in different cities. Please sit down. There's something serious that I want to talk to you about. I've been thinking all night about you and about Philemon, your master. You've made yourself very useful to me here in prison, and I would hate to lose you, but I really think you ought to go back to Philemon.

Onesimus: Oh no, Paul! You can't mean that! You know what happens to slaves who run away. Philemon could have me flogged.

Paul: Yes, I know all that, but I also know Philemon. I have been able to bring you to the Lord Jesus, but, before I came here, I brought Philemon to the Lord, and I'm sure he will never forget that, I cannot believe he would treat you harshly, the way some masters treat runaway slaves.

Onesimus: But it isn't as simple as that, Paul. I wanted to get as far away from Colossae as I could, because I was afraid of being recognised and take back. So, week by week, I took money from his purse – not a lot, just a little, so that it wouldn't be missed. Then, after a few months, when I'd saved up enough money for the boat fare, I ran away. Philemon has every reason to be very angry with me. He trusted me with the household money, and I stole from him.

Paul: It was a very wrong thing to do, though I can understand why you did it, but I'm willing to pay back to Philemon the money you took from him. I'll write him a letter which you can take with you and tell him to charge anything that you owe him to my account. Whatever it comes to, I will repay it.

Onesimus: Well, Paul, it's not an easy thing that you're asking me to do, but, if you really believe that's what the Lord would want me to do, I'm willing to go back.

Paul: I'm so pleased to hear you say that. And, since you have brought me pens, ink and paper, I'll write the letter now.

Who? Where? What?

Having enacted the dialogue, we then solicited answers to the questions, Who? Where? What? Each time, it became clear that they had grasped the basic facts, namely,

- 1) that we were acting the parts of Paul and Onesimus;
- 2) that the location was a prison where Paul was a prisoner; and
- 3) that we were talking about a third person in another town, Philemon, the master to whom Onesimus belonged, as a slave, from whom he had run away and to whom Paul was now asking him to return.

THE FULL LETTER

Our next step was to have the entire letter read – in Fijian on Taveuni, in Rotuman on Rotuma. Since the letter runs to twenty-five verses, we looked for ways of shortening the reading, but could not find any verse which could be omitted without diminishing the letter's impact. It is a measure of Paul's tact and sensitivity that every word tells.

Feeling One's Way into the People Concerned

For the next phase of the study, we divided people into three groups and asked each group to focus on one of the three people involved in the story. Each group was asked a specific question, thus:

Group 1: Why was it hard for Paul to send Onesimus back Philemon?

Group 2: Why was it going to be hard for Onesimus to go back to Philemon?

Group 3: Why would it be hard to Philemon to take Onesimus back?

After about ten minutes, we came together again and heard reports from each group. How did they cope with these questions? Reasonably well with the first two, but not so well with the third. At this point, however, I had an opportunity to emphasise some features of Roman society which we had alluded to in the dialogue, namely, that prisons in the ancient world were inhospitable places, so that Paul was dependent on the goodwill of friends, if he was to survive in prison; that Roman society was severe on runaway slaves, and quite ruthless in suppressing slave revolts; and that Philemon would have been under considerable

social pressure from his friends in Colossae (or wherever it was that he was living) to make an example of Onesimus, when he returned. I shall now elaborate these three points.

LIFE IN PRISON

With reference to the first point, the writer to the Hebrews reminds his readers in 10:32-34 of earlier days when they had been publicly exposed to abuse and persecution for their faith. He commends them for the way in which they had shown their solidarity with those who had been directly attacked and had not shrunk from visiting those in prison. Commenting on these verses, F. F. Bruce remarks that

prisoners who had no means of their own were liable to starve, unless their friends brought them food and whatever other form of help they required; throughout the whole age of imperial persecution of the church, the visiting of their friends who were in prison was a regular though dangerous, duty of Christian charity.¹

THE TREATMENT OF RUNAWAYS AND REBELS

With reference to the second point, the treatment of runaway slaves in the Roman Empire, slaveowners who were Roman citizens were entitled by Roman law to inflict on runaways any punishment they chose – branding, flogging, even death.² M. P. Charlesworth mentions a runaway slave who stabbed himself to avoid recapture.³

As for slaves who engaged in armed rebellion, we know from ancient sources that, if captured, they were usually crucified. The most famous slave revolt in recent history was that led by Spartacus in Italy in 73-71 BCE. It took the Romans two years to crush this revolt, and of those who were captured, and those whose masters could not be found, six thousand in all, were crucified “on crosses set up like telegraph posts along the whole length of the Via Appia”.⁴

SOCIAL PRESSURE

As for my third observation, about the social pressure that would have been applied to Philemon to get him to make an example of Onesimus, this is a matter of inference, but it is legitimate to cite, as partial parallels, the hostile reactions against white liberals in the Deep

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1965) 270; Bruce refers to four ancient authors.

2. See John G. Nording, “Onesimus Fugitivus: A Defence of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon,” *JSNT* 41 (1991), 97-119; reprinted in Graig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *New Testament Backgrounds* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 263-83.

3. M. P. Charlesworth, *The Roman Empire* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951) 73.

4. M. Cary, *A History of Rome* (London: Macmillan, 1947) 365.

South of the USA before the dismantling of segregation, or against white liberals in South Africa before the dismantling of apartheid.

AND THEN?

Having asked people to try to feel their way into the situation of the three main participants in the story, I then raised the question, "What happened next?" I then said something like this.

We do not know exactly what happened, but one fact is undeniable: we do have Paul's letter to Philemon. So Onesimus cannot have torn it up and thrown it into the sea. On the contrary, it was preserved and, what is more, was included in the New Testament, the only letter we have that was written by Paul to an individual, as distinct from a church. I am assuming, with most scholars, that the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, were composed by followers of Paul. For my part, I cannot believe that Paul's letter would have been kept and treasured in this way, if it had been unsuccessful. For, in that case, it would have been a perpetual reminder to the church of a failure, of an appeal by Paul to a convert which went unheeded. So we can be reasonably confident that Philemon did do as Paul asked and welcomed Onesimus back, as he would have welcomed Paul himself (see v 17), whatever his rich friends in Colossae had to say about his actions.

Indeed, we can probably go further. In his letter to the Colossians Paul as is his wont, concludes the letter with greetings to the church from various people around him and with news of various co-workers. Tychicus, who is evidently the bearer of the letter, will tell them all the news about Paul himself. Then Paul goes on: "He is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here" (Col 4:9). Is this the same Onesimus? We cannot be certain, but it seems quite likely. If so, what has happened? Philemon has not only welcomed Onesimus as a brother but has released him to go back to Paul, to assist him in his imprisonment, as before, and now Onesimus is returning to Colossae again.

The likelihood of this scenario becomes greater, when one looks carefully at Paul's words to Philemon, particularly vv 13 and 14. Surely we have here a clear indication that Paul is hoping that Philemon will not only welcome Onesimus but also send him back, with his blessing, and probably also set him free.

THE FAITH THEY HAD IN COMMON

As a final comment, I spoke briefly about Paul's repeated references, in the space of a short letter, to the Lord Jesus Christ. It would have

been quite a useful exercise to ask people to count up these references themselves. In the space of twenty-five verses, I find no fewer than eleven references. This is what binds all three people – Paul, Philemon and Onesimus – together: their common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is their common experience of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that gives Paul the boldness to ask both Onesimus and Philemon to take a risk and make a sacrifice in the same way as he himself is prepared to sacrifice his own comfort and convenience.

I am reminded, at this point, of a passage in 1 Corinthians, 1 Cor 9: 15-18, in which Paul speaks of the overwhelming constraint that he feels is laid upon him to preach the gospel. "Woe is unto me," Paul exclaims, "If I preach not the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16 [AV]). And yet, as I remark in my commentary on 1 Corinthians,

this sense of constraint is not one which oppresses and crushes Paul. It is rather an overwhelming longing on his part to serve the proclamation of the gospel with every fibre of his being, in gratitude to God for the overwhelming bounty of his grace.⁵

HOW WAS THE STUDY RECEIVED?

I said at the beginning that, after the failure of my study on Job, my wife and I decided to attempt something both more imaginative and more accessible. How well did we succeed?

After our first attempt, we felt it had gone reasonably well, no more, but, the following afternoon, the leader of the group which we had visited that night called on us in order to tell us that the study had had a bigger impact than we had dared to hope for. When the group had met again that morning for their regular service, they had talked about our study at length. They had not been familiar with the story of Philemon and had found our use of a dialogue method unusual and interesting. Furthermore, they had gone on talking about the difficulty of the choices that all three men in the story had faced, Onesimus, in particular. What is more, one young man in the group had, overnight, applied the story to himself in a deeply personal way. In the figure of Onesimus he had seen himself, a young man who had wandered away from God and who was now being called to come back to God and to a life of Christian discipleship.

The response to the study, when we used it on Rotuma, was not as dramatic as that, but was still encouraging.

5. Nigel Watson, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth, 1992) 94.

LESSONS TO DRAW

If this is a fair assessment of people's responses, both on Taveuni and on Rotuma, what was it that we had done right? First, we had used a variety of methods: dialogue, focused discussion in small groups, plenary discussion. Secondly, we had tried to bridge the historical gap both by using an imaginary dialogue and by setting questions designed to help people to feel their way into the situation of the main actors in the story – why was it going to be hard for Paul to send Onesimus back? And so on. Thirdly, we had allowed people to hear the whole letter in their own language. Fourthly, we had introduced people to some of the types of historical judgement that all historians have to make in assessing historical evidence. For example, the dialogue between Paul and Onesimus was something which we made up, but something like that dialogue must have taken place, before Paul wrote the letter. Again, we do not know exactly what the result of Paul's letter was, but the mere fact that it was preserved and included in the New Testament makes it very probable that it was successful. Fifthly, we had drawn attention to both similarities and dissimilarities between first century Graeco-Roman society and the modern world. Slavery is not practised any longer, but the kind of social pressure to which Philemon must have been subjected is by no means strange to the modern world.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

My own interest in the letter to Philemon dates back to a sermon which I heard preached in Holy Trinity church, Cambridge, by one of my teachers, the late Professor H. H. Farmer, in October, 1952. He it was who introduced me to the idea of considering the difficulty of the decisions facing the three main participants. I still remember the occasion vividly. I sometimes hear people say that sermons are forgotten almost as soon as they are delivered. Whenever I hear that said, I beg to differ. Good sermons are remembered. And so are good Bible studies.

A note on an historical problem raised by Philemon in the foregoing. I have presupposed the traditional interpretation of Philemon, according to which Onesimus had run away from his master, Philemon, after having robbed him. This view is accepted by the great majority of commentators but it has been called into question by John Knox⁶ and, more recently, by Sara Winter.⁷ The main argument advanced by Knox and Winter is that the text of Philemon nowhere states directly that Onesimus had run away. They argue, further, that Paul nowhere refers

6. John Knox, *Philemon among the letters of Paul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935); see also Knox's article on Philemon in *IB* (New York: Abingdon, 1995) 555.

7. Sara Winter, "Methodological Observations on a New Interpretation of Paul's Letter to Philemon," *USQR* 39 (1984) 203-12; and "Paul's Letter to Philemon", *NTS* 33 (1987) 1-15.

to the penitence of Onesimus, nor does he ask his master explicitly to forgive him. Instead Knox argues that the letter is essentially a public appeal to the Colossian congregation for the full-time services of Onesimus. Winter believes that Paul is not literally sending Onesimus back but rather referring his case to the proper higher authority.

Their views are discussed thoroughly by Nording,⁸ who argues convincingly that the traditional interpretation represents a more natural reading of the text. The passive form, *echoristhe*, in v 15 can be translated "went away"; at the same time it conveys a hint of providential overruling.

We must also give due weight to Paul's conciliatory purpose in this letter. He is asking a great deal of Philemon, and the delicacy of the situation elicits the highest degree of tact of which Paul is capable. It is entirely understandable that he should allude to Onesimus's wrongdoings in an oblique and euphemistic manner.

I say "wrongdoings" because "wronged" in v 18 is naturally taken as a discreet reference to a robbery committed by Onesimus just before he ran away. There is ample evidence that robbery and flight commonly occurred together, runaway slaves typically loading themselves with as many of their master's goods as possible, and then making their way to a slave-catcher (*fugitivarius*), who would try to strike a deal with the owner.⁹

As for the absence of any reference to the penitence of Onesimus, his willingness to return to his master is sufficient evidence that he had repented of any wrongs he had committed.

As for the argument that Paul makes no explicit plea to Philemon to forgive Onesimus, that is surely contradicted by Paul's request in v 17b to "welcome him as you would welcome me". The reference to doing your duty in v 8 is naturally taken as a discreet nod in the same direction.

Finally we must provide a satisfactory account for the inclusion of the letter in the New Testament. The traditional view of Onesimus as a runaway makes the inclusion of the letter more intelligible than Knox's view does, or Winter's either. Nording is hardly exaggerating, when he argues that Knox's reconstruction turns the letter into "a rather dispassionate, non-theological, financial transaction between Paul and Onesimus's owner".¹⁰

For these reasons I consider that the traditional reconstruction of the historical setting should be accepted.

8. Nording, "Onesimus Fugitivus", 263-83.

9. See Nording, "Onesimus Fugitivus", 270, 274.

10 Nording, "Onesimus Fugitivus", 282.