

# VISUALISING PAUL'S APPEAL: A PERFORMANCE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have long noted the passionate rhetoric that Paul employs in his letter to Philemon. In appealing for mercy for the slave, Paul pulls all the stops as he attempts to change the mind of a wronged slave owner and secure Onesimus' safe return and reconciliation with Philemon. Previous studies have demonstrated the manner in which Paul's language would pull at the heart strings of Philemon, and through emotional appeal, attempt to move Philemon to a favourable decision. Yet, few if any of these studies have paid close attention to the occasion of the first reading of the letter—what actually took place when this letter was delivered to, not only Philemon, but the Christian community gathered in his house? How was it performed by the lector, whose task it was to animate Paul's request? What was the atmosphere like in the room where Philemon was now face to face with the slave seeking mercy and the rest of the community looking on at this response? This article will analyse the letter of Philemon through the lens of Performance Criticism. It will seek to recreate its first reading/hearing and highlight the rhetorical elements that can only be fully appreciated when one considers them in a performance setting.

**Keywords:** epistles; lector; performance criticism; Philemon

## INTRODUCTION

It is not clear how Onesimus met Paul. The most recent and convincing argument is that he was in some sort of domestic trouble with his master—perhaps he had broken something or caused some sort of material or financial loss. Whatever the case, he asked Paul to intervene as an *amicus domini* (“friend of the master”), so that the two could be



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reconciled (Bird 2009, 2; Dunn 1996, 304; Lampe 1998, 206–207). In this situation the slave was not a fugitive—moreover, Paul could legally accommodate him at his own expense (Lampe 1998, 206; Thurston and Ryan 2005, 171). His master Philemon and his household, including Onesimus, probably held Paul in high esteem, hence he went to Paul with his request (Dunn 1996, 305; Moo 2008, 367–368). However, it seems Onesimus had converted to Christianity while he was with Paul, and had become quite useful to him while the latter was in prison, so much in fact that Paul admits he was tempted to keep Onesimus for himself. Nevertheless, Onesimus could not stay. He had to go back and reconcile with his master (Philemon) or face being prosecuted as a fugitive (Lampe 1998, 206; Lohse 1977, 263). Paul therefore, sends Onesimus back to his master with an accompanying letter through which he intercedes for the slave (Barclay 1991, 165).

The letter, though addressed to Philemon personally, would have been read aloud to the church gathered in his house (Moo 2008, 383; Stuhlmacher 1975, 32; Thurston and Ryan 2005, 216). It serves as a defence of the slave and an appeal to Philemon who, in the context of its reading, becomes the judge before whom the appeal is being made. If the contents of the letter were to bring about reconciliation, then the letter would need to persuade Philemon not only in its *content*, but also in its *performance*. In this article I will consider the content of the letter in light of aspects of performance criticism. I will argue that the eventual outcome of the letter was reliant as much on the lector's performance as on its contents.

## THE SETTING, THE LECTOR AND THE AUDIENCE

Performance criticism seeks to recreate the performative event of the letter's reading. It focusses on the act of performing, the location, the performer, the audience, the cultural/historical circumstances, and the implied rhetorical impact on the audience (Rhoads 2009, 89). While the details of an original performance of a New Testament letter can never be recovered, what we know about the cultural ideal of oratory in the first century, and what it meant to speak effectively can be brought to bear on our interpretation (Shiner 2009, 51).

Paul communicated to his congregations through letters. The letter would have been delivered by a messenger and read aloud to them by an appointed lector (cf. Stirewalt 2003, 14). This would have been standard practice amongst the house churches. Each letter was to be read and re-read in order to teach, lead, and secure the compliant stance of the believers (Doty 1973, 26 – 26). These letters were never intended to be privately circulated or posted for reading, but were always directed to an assembled group. Thus, the process of reading aloud re-animated the words and evoked a sense of Paul's presence in the room (Stirewalt 2003, 16). To understand these letters properly we must explore their performative setting.

The performance space for the letter to Philemon is his own house (Lee and Scott 2009, 227). The early Christians gathered primarily over meals and letters were

performed as part of the gatherings (cf. 1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16).<sup>1</sup> These performances served to reframe the memories of those present. Letters linked the gathered members in a chain of virtuous lives as part of an emerging community (Shiell 2011, 39). They were also part of the curriculum of early Christian *paideia*.<sup>2</sup> Through the performance, the audience's attention was fixed on the person of Jesus as a parental figure, teaching them and disciplining them, and bonding them to one another in partnership (κοινωνία). The listeners in turn formed communities around this central figure (Shiell 2011, 39).

The setting of the house church functioned differently to the surrounding culture. In the Christian household, there was supposed to be freedom, brotherhood, and partnership for all (Jeal 2015, 2; cf. Gal. 3:28). However, the social orders and dependencies, as well as the power relationships were still present in this current situation, despite the aim to realise Christian values.<sup>3</sup> By locating the performance in a house where the Christian community is gathered, most likely over communion, Paul can ideally transcend these cultural norms with the values of the Christian community. This performance space was where all the participants, the performers and audience were physically present and spiritually attuned to the event (Oestreich 2016, 58). The performance itself was an event that involved several people: the lector presenting the text and the audience listening; all these present in the room were collectively involved in generating the meaning of the text that had reached them (Oestreich 2016, 4).

## THE LECTOR

We can never know for certain who the original lector was—however, we can make comments on how they functioned. If Colossians was written at the same time as Philemon, then both letters were sent simultaneously with Tychicus, whose role may have been to read the letters (Jeal 2015, 18; cf. Col. 4:7). Alternatively, the lector was a member of Philemon's household who had some form of education to enable him to read the letters to the assembled members of the house church. This might be a young slave that Philemon had educated for such a task (Oestreich 2016, 138). Pliny (*Ep.* 8.1) mentions such a slave amongst his own retinue. Again, there might have been someone in the Christian community that met in Philemon's house who was well educated to undertake the duties of the lector (Oestreich 2016, 138). Whatever the case, they would have been a person of standing in the community (cf. 1 Tim. 4:13; Cyprian, *Ep.* 33.4; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 1.1.5). The character of the speaker was central to their performance. Ancient orators believed that the manner in which a person communicated was a direct reflection of their character. Seneca (*Ep.* 114.2) for example, notes the

1 For discussion of the house church setting, see Stowers (1984, 59–82). Pliny mentions several of these kinds of gatherings, where works of literature were performed, e.g., *Ep.* 2.10.6; 4.27.1; 5.12; 7.17; 8.12.1, 21.3; 9.6.4, 34.1.

2 Numerous studies have demonstrated that the early Christian communities served an educational function. For overview and discussion, see especially White (2015).

3 From personal correspondence with Bernhard Oestreich.

popular saying, “A man’s speech is just like his life.” He sees the decline in the quality of speakers in his day as directly related to the declining moral character. Because of the importance placed on delivery of the message for the way the letters would be received, it would be assumed that the person chosen was recognised for their high standing and rhetorical ability (cf. Shiner 2003, 149).

The lector would be qualified for the task either by virtue of the fact that he was educated, or he was a church leader, or because of his close relationship with Paul.<sup>4</sup> He would be expected to reflect in himself the same emotions and attitudes that Paul wished to excite in his audience (cf. Cicero, *De Or.* 2.189–90). He would also be expected to embody the values, beliefs, and actions enjoined by the letter being performed, which were in turn embodied in the communal life of the audience (Rhoads 2009, 89–90). The task of the lector was to represent the voice and persona of the author; he was expected to re-enact and bring to life the original performance of the text through appropriate facial expressions, gesticulations, and vocal inflections (Brickle 2011, 17–18). It was his task to read the letter in the way Paul wanted it to be read (Botha 1993, 417). The text itself may have been memorised and delivered as an oration, or it may have been read out from the scroll (cf. Acts 15:31), with the scroll held in the left hand while gesturing with the right (cf. Aldrete 1999, 46–49; Oestreich 2016, 26). Whichever the case, it was presented in such a way as to move the audience to a desired course of action.

## THE AUDIENCE

As with all of Paul’s letters, the audience is identified in the opening greetings. The primary recipient is, of course Philemon (verse 1). He is made centre stage, both as the first named recipient and presumably the owner of the house in which the letter was read. During the performance, he would be seated in a place of prominence within the room, probably at the head of the table, with all eyes on him to determine his response to the letter (cf. Jeal 2015, 21; Oestreich 2016, 60–61). The opening greeting also names Apphia (verse 2a), who is traditionally seen as Philemon’s wife. It stands to reason that she is also being addressed as it is ultimately the slave of the family who is in focus; therefore, his fate rests on her decision as well (cf. Bruce 1984, 206; Dunn 1996, 312; Lohse 1977, 268). The letter also addresses Archippus, who is either the son of Philemon or a fellow house church leader.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these three, Paul also addresses the congregation gathered in Philemon’s house (verse 2b; cf. Oestreich 2016, 107). This was a typical scenario for one of these performances. Oestreich (2016, 104) notes that when Paul addresses a

4 See Oestreich (2016, 112) and Shiell (2011, 112) for discussion. The lector’s education would also qualify him in the community and give him the moral ethos and spiritual memories to influence the community.

5 For leader, see Bird (2009, 134) and Dunn (1996, 312). For son, see Moo (2008, 383) and Bruce (1984, 206).

certain individual his aims is to address the whole group, so that when one person was being addressed, there would always be others who felt spoken to. But in the case of the letter to Philemon the whole house church is not only hearing the letter performed through their presence in the room, they are in fact being brought into the decision by being directly addressed (cf. Jeal 2015, 20; Bird 2009, 135). They are, in other words, part of the decision makers. This would have increased the pressure on Philemon, as the decision was now given to the whole community and his reputation before the church was on the line (cf. Frilingos 2000, 99; Moo 2008, 383). During the performance Philemon would feel answerable not only to the distant Paul; but also to the rest of the church,<sup>6</sup> which meant that whatever his decision, it would undoubtedly affect his honour amongst those witnessing (Lampe 1998, 210; Oestreich 2016, 130). This forms the setting of the letter's performance, but what about the performance itself?

## THE PERFORMANCE

While we cannot recreate an original performance, creative imagination is possible. We could picture the speaker standing in a special position in the room, facing the audience, and thus taking centre stage, symbolising the apostolic position which Paul claimed for himself in the church (Oestreich 2016, 86). From this place in front of the audience, the lector could direct his attention towards whichever member was being addressed (cf. Shiner 2003, 28). He could look straight at them, using facial expressions to emphasise praise or criticism, or gestures to identify and focus attention on the addressees (Oestreich 2016, 105; Shiner 2003, 28).

In this setting Philemon takes the metaphorical place of a judge, and it is the lector's task to persuade him to act favourably on Onesimus (cf. Jeal 2015, 21). Quintilian (*Inst.* 5.12.11) says that the orator must think about the judge before whom he appears and look for such arguments as will most appeal to him. In our case, the lector would need to be sensitive to the climate of the room and the reactions of Philemon. Again, Quintilian (*Inst.* 6.4.19) notes that it takes a very sharp mind-minded person to see what remarks will impress the judge, and which he will reject. This response he says, is often discernible from his face and occasionally also from something he says or does.<sup>7</sup> In our situation, the lector would have to keep his focus throughout the performance on the reactions of Philemon. But he would also need to be conscious of the response of the audience, who took an active part in the formation of the performance, and whose reactions influenced not only the reader, but also each other, and ideally Philemon (Oestreich 2016, 98).

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6 Barclay (1991, 171). A second audience identified in the closing greetings, that of Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (verse 24). While they are not direct witnesses to Philemon's initial response, the fact that they are included as present when the letter was written makes them witnesses to the ultimate outcome (cf. Jeal 2015, 21).

7 Similarly, Cicero, *De Or.* 2.186.

The overall intent of the performance was to move Philemon's view on the matter through whatever means necessary. Quintilian (*Inst.* 11.1.43) says that when it comes to a defence on a capital charge, anxiety, concern, and all the mechanisms of amplification are appropriate in the speech. He states again that when the judge assigned is the people (or, in this context, the church in Philemon's house), and those who are to pronounce the verdict are unlearned and uneducated countrymen, the speaker must use every device that he thinks will help to secure his aims (*Inst.* 12.10.55). In other words, the content of the letter, as well as the performance of the lector need to pull all the stops. The letter needs to draw on all the rhetorical resources available and these need to be performed well to move Philemon to the audacious decision of welcoming Onesimus back.

## THE CHARACTER OF PHILEMON

If Onesimus was to be welcomed back by his master Philemon, then the latter would need to extend mercy and forgiveness to him. Therefore, Paul's chief aim from the start is to bring Philemon's loving and gracious character to the fore. This section therefore, forms the *captatio benevolentiae* (Lampe 1998, 214). Quintilian (*Inst.* 4.1.16) notes that the speaker ensures the judge's goodwill, not only by praising him, but by linking his praise to the needs of the cause, as well as invoking the judge's own dignity. At this point in the performance the lector would have faced Philemon, and would perhaps have physically drawn attention to him, with both arms stretched in his direction (Aldrete 1999, 13). All eyes in other words, are now fixed on Philemon.

In the opening section of the letter Paul draws upon memories of Philemon, making his past actions "sites of memory" for the community to emulate (cf. Shiell 2011, 58). In verses 4–5, Paul tells Philemon that he (Paul) constantly remembers him and makes mention of him in his prayers, specifically because he hears reports of Philemon's love (*ἀγάπη*) for the saints and faithfulness to Jesus Christ (verse 5). This sense of love will be appealed to momentarily (verse 9). By framing Philemon's decision in the context of his Christian character, Paul shifts the appeal from a legal to an ecclesiastical one that will be dealt with within the Christian community. Then in verse 6 Paul draws attention to Philemon's partnership (*κοινωνία*) in the faith and prays that it would become active through knowledge of everything good.<sup>8</sup> This *κοινωνία* will be drawn upon later in the letter (verse 17) as a further strategy to secure Philemon's favourable decision.

Paul then brings to remembrance some of Philemon's past deeds (verse 7). Praising a person for their deeds was standard practice in oratory as well as in the culture in general. Statues and inscriptions listing a person's achievements were ubiquitous in public. Even in the home, wax images of the family's ancestors (called *imagines maiorum*) were kept on display in the atrium.<sup>9</sup> The public display of these achievements

8 For the rendering of ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου as "your partnership in the faith", see Thurston and Ryan (2005, 223), Stuhlmacher (1975, 33), Bird (2009, 134), Lohse (1977, 271).

9 For discussion, see Dasen (2011, 109–147).

would serve to honour the person as well as inspire imitation in those observing (Judge 2008, 175–77; Winter 1988, 87–92). Paul tells Philemon that he has received great joy and comfort in the past from him, and continues to do so because he has, and continues to refresh the hearts (σπλάγχνα) of many—some of the audience at this point probably recalled being recipients of this care (Thurston and Ryan 2005, 225). This care will be called upon later when Paul requests Philemon to refresh his own σπλάγχνα in Christ (verses 12 and 20). Finally, Paul reminds Philemon of his Christian allegiance to the apostle—that is, Philemon is Paul's "brother" (vocative ἀδελφέ). By referring to Philemon in this way, the letter invents a new relationship that places the apostle and the household *paterfamilias* on an equal footing (Frilingos 2000, 100).

In the context of the performance Philemon is no longer seen as a wronged slave owner; but he is rather now publicly portrayed as Paul's brother and a partner in the faith. He is honoured as one who has a reputation for caring for the saints, as well as one who embodies the love and compassion of Jesus. In praising Philemon publicly for these elements of his character, and thereby establishing his *ethos*, Paul brings to the attention of those assembled in the room the very characteristics that he will shortly call on in dealing with the case (cf. Bird 2009, 133; Thurston and Ryan 2005, 193). It would be impossible at this point for the audience to see Philemon in any other light—moreover, the gathering would now be expecting him to act in a way that preserves this reputation (Jeal 2015, 41).

## PAUL THE OLD MAN AND PRISONER

Paul then says in verse 8 that he has great boldness in Christ to command Philemon to do what is right (πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν ἔχων ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνῆκον). In doing so, he reminds the audience of the apostolic status that he *could* bring to bear on the situation (Bruce 1984, 211; Jeal 2015, 43; Lohse 1977, 276). Although Philemon is the head of the household in which the letter is being performed, at this moment he is in an inferior position to the person standing in front of the gathering. However, Paul's strategy in moving Philemon's decision will not be through power; rather it will be through *pathos*.<sup>10</sup> In what follows (verses 9–13), Paul appeals to the emotions of his audience, and particularly Philemon, to secure a favourable verdict.

In verse 9 Paul appeals (παρακαλέω) to Philemon through love (ἀγάπη), the same love that he has already highlighted in verse 5.<sup>11</sup> The παρακαλέω at this point in the performance would have been accompanied by one of two gestures: either by (1) the lector moving his hand towards his mouth while converging the fingertips—a gesture

10 Cf. Thurston and Ryan (2005, 193). By setting aside his right to exercise his apostolic authority in the situation, Paul in fact models the same attitude he wants Philemon to show: he too should set aside his right as a slave master (cf. Lampe 1998, 216).

11 Oestreich (2016, 132) observes that "[i]f the church gets the impression that Paul is expecting too much of Philemon, then they should turn against the apostle. That might be the reason why Paul uses arguments, and pleads instead of commanding."

that denotes mild surprise, indignation, or entreaty (Aldrete 1999, 14), or alternatively, by (2) cupping the hand and lightly touching the chest with the fingertips, which also indicates exhortation, but was reserved for particularly emphatic situations (Aldrete 1999, 17; cf. Quin, *Inst.* 11.3.124). Either scenarios are possible and one of them is likely. But then the performance, and with it the audience's attention, is suddenly broken by an interjection.

Immediately following the παρακαλέω Paul interjects to remind the audience who is making the request: "This is me, Paul."<sup>12</sup> The suddenness of this interjection would bring the audience's attention to the fact that it is not the lector making this appeal but the apostle. It would create an image in the mind of the audience that there was another voice behind the lector's presentation and that in fact, the lector is merely the vessel for the one who is making the request. However, what the audience is presented with is not Paul in his usual apostolic authority; but rather Paul an old man (πρεσβύτης).<sup>13</sup> Worse still, it is not just Paul the old man, it is also Paul who is now a prisoner (δέσμιος) for the sake of Jesus Christ! This stark reality would no doubt pull on the heartstrings of the audience (Bird 2009, 138), creating a picture in their minds of a helpless, aging prisoner pleading for mercy. On this portrayal, Dunn (1996, 327) argues:

We should hesitate to judge Paul harshly for lowering the tone of the appeal, as if it were emotional blackmail; on the contrary, appeal to the emotions was standard practice in Greek rhetoric. What he was about to ask of Philemon was a considerable favour, with all sorts of potential ramifications for Philemon's standing and reputation in the church and the wider community. Paul himself presumably judged it appropriate to screw the emotional pitch to this height.

This description of an aging prisoner would have been further emphasised through impersonation. It was common for a speaker to use visualisation or *ekphrasis*, to portray images to the audience. By so doing the speaker could arouse pity, indignation, or misery with vivid accounts (Oestreich 2016, 18–19; Shiell 2011, 17–18). Readers would impersonate people through speeches in character (*prosōpopoia*) or imitation of a figure in a story or speech (*ethopeia*). In this way, the audience could identify with the same emotions (Aldrete 1999, 35; Shiell 2011, 18–19). Quintilian (*Inst.* 6.1.26) notes:

When an advocate speaks for a client, the bare facts produce the effect; but when we pretend that the victims themselves are speaking, the emotional effect is drawn also from the persons. The judge no longer thinks that he is listening to a lament for somebody else's troubles, but that he is hearing the feelings and the voice of the afflicted, whose silent appearance alone moves him to tears; and, as their pleas would be more pitiful if only they could make them themselves, so to a certain extent the pleas become more effective by being as if they were put into their mouths, just as

12 The use of asyndeton immediately following the παρακαλέω (τοιούτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος) creates a divergent thought.

13 Some manuscripts have πρεσβευτής ("statesman/ambassador"). I follow the majority of translations that render πρεσβύτης as "old man."



the same voice and delivery of the stage actor produces a greater emotional impact because he speaks behind a mask.<sup>14</sup>

Quintilian (*Inst.* 11.3.89) notes several examples of how one might imitate certain characters such as impersonating a sick man by imitating a doctor feeling the pulse, or a lyre-player by shaping the hands as if striking the strings.

If we assume then that a lector's role was to bring the text to life, it would be safe to also assume that this would have been a vivid display. Oestreich (2016, 84) notes:

It is through the body that a performance becomes an experience, that is, an event in which physical mimesis generates meaning that goes beyond semantic understanding ... when listeners hear these passages, they become aware of the corporeality of the author. If, for example, the age of the presenter corresponds with what Paul says about himself in the Letter to Philemon—for example when an elderly church member presented the letter—then the reader would not only verbalise the apostle's thoughts, but he would also embody them visibly in front of the congregation. On the other hand, if the letter was read by a young person, then the contrast between the reader's condition and Paul's described condition experienced by the listener would stir up their imagination even more and heighten their awareness of Paul's condition.

At this moment in the performance we can imagine the lector, through some form of imitation portraying an aging prisoner about to appeal to the judge to have mercy. Yet paradoxically, the old man is at the same time a person of respect, who is not helpless, but armed with wisdom. To this effect, Oestreich asserts that:

Since society depended on oral transmission of knowledge more than on written sources, old individuals were respected because of their experience and knowledge. A prisoner for the sake of Christ is a person of honour because of the authenticity of his witnessing. It is this ambiguousness that gives strength to the appeal.<sup>15</sup>

In this posture the lector then repeats the *παρακαλέω* in verse 10, only now with the added weight of an old man making the appeal. At this point in the performance the emotional atmosphere has been raised, and it is in this context that the lector turns to the proverbial elephant in the room.

## ONESIMUS REDESCRIBED

It must be noted that throughout this entire performance Onesimus would be standing in the room (Moo 2008, 407). It is almost impossible to imagine that at this point the lector did not draw the audience's attention to him through clear gestures (cf. Jeal 2015, 45). In fact, it was standard practice for performers to call others out of the crowd or point at them to evoke a response (Shiell 2011, 71–72). The gesture of pointing would correspond to statements in the text that addressed a person who was present. This

14 Similarly, see Cicero, *De Or.* 3.216–17.

15 From personal correspondence with Oestreich.

would be accompanied by his glance, the combined effect would direct the eyes of the listeners accordingly (Aldrete 1999, 17–18; Oestreich 2016, 85; Shiner 2003, 28). The audience's gaze would now be squarely fixed on the young man, dressed in his common garments, and wearing his metal collar. He is the guilty party in the dock and Philemon is the judge. The audience, like all ancient audiences in a trial, would assume the role of a jury, and it was up to the lector to win his pardon. Paul (through the lector) needs Philemon to show mercy and therefore, needs to appeal to his emotion.

Emotional impact was considered essential, if not central to verbal performance. The success of a speech was judged by the way it effected the emotions of the listeners; therefore, orators focussed on the emotions in order to achieve their ends (Shiner 2003, 57). According to Cicero (*De or.* 2.178):

Nothing in oratory, Catulus, is more important than to win for the orator the favour of his hearer, and to have the latter so affected as to be swayed by something resembling a mental impulse or emotion, rather than by judgement or deliberation. For men decide far more problems by hate, or love, or lust, or rage, or sorrow, or joy, or hope, or fear, or illusion, or some other inward emotion, than by reality, or authority, or any legal standard, or judicial precedent, or statute.<sup>16</sup>

Quintilian (*Inst.* 4.1.16–18) says that when appealing for a humbler client, the orator must appeal to the judge's sense of justice, and when appealing for the unfortunate, his mercifulness. In our case, Paul has already highlighted the love, grace, generosity, and care that Philemon is renowned for. All of these will now need to be activated if he is to get Philemon to forgive Onesimus. In the context of our performance the judge and audience's attention is now focussed on Onesimus. It would be easy to imagine that the memories of what he had done, and the associated feelings of anger are now brought to the fore. It therefore, becomes the task of the lector to reframe how the audience sees Onesimus.

In verse 10 Paul gives the first clue to the content of his request. The verse literally reads: "I appeal to you for my son, who I gave birth to in prison, Onesimus." For the audience who had been waiting until now to find out what Paul wants, this would have come as quite the shock: "Paul gave birth in prison?!" Paul first describes the man standing in front of them, not as a slave, but as his son, born to him in prison.<sup>17</sup> But in a clever rhetorical move, he leaves his name to the end. The effect is twofold—first, everyone in the room knew who he was and what he had done. He was the slave with whom his master was angry. But now he is presented differently. He is first presented

16 This was a common tactic of orators. See, for example, Cicero, *De or.* 2.182, 185, 188; Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 1.4; Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.5.2–3; 4.5.6; 5.12.9, 12; 6.2.4–7; 8.3.61–62. Cf. Shiell (2011, 72).

17 By using this language, Paul has effectively presented him in a new status: no longer a slave, but a son of Paul and, by implication, a brother to Philemon. Paul's appeal thus has the double effect of presenting Onesimus in terms of a new status (son and brother instead of slave), but also of creating a rhetorical household within the actual household of Philemon. In this new setting, Paul replaces Philemon as the *paterfamilias*, effectively pushing Philemon's authority outside the epistle's margins (Frilingos 2000, 101).

in a new, familial light; as Paul's son. Only then is he re-introduced as Onesimus (Dunn 1996, 328). Philemon would no doubt still be harbouring feelings of anger towards Onesimus for whatever it was that he had done, but how could he possibly do anything to punish Paul's son? (cf. Lohse 1977, 278)

The second effect of leaving his name to the end is found in verse 11. In a slightly different move Paul sets out to *change* the memory that Philemon has of Onesimus. Onesimus' action of running away would have certainly left a bitter taste in Philemon's mouth. But now his memories of Onesimus' overall service may have also been tarnished through the lens of this incident. Paul acknowledges this in verse 11, stating that Onesimus was indeed *useless* (ἄχρηστον) to Philemon previously, but all that has now changed. Paul has stated the name Onesimus at the end of verse 10, but now he cleverly plays on the name, which means "useful"; saying that this young man standing in front of them has now become his namesake: *useful* (εὐχρηστον) to both Philemon and Paul.<sup>18</sup> His playing on the name would not be lost on an attentive audience—in fact, it may have raised some approving chuckles. Paul illustrates Onesimus' newfound usefulness by pointing out that he is now *so* useful that Paul would have preferred to keep him for himself! (v 13a).

Then Paul brings his emotional appeal to a climax (v 12). He describes Onesimus as the one "whom I sent back to you, him, that is, my heart (σπλάγγνα)." The effect of this language is literally, "I am tearing out my own σπλάγγνα and sending it to you!" (cf. Bruce 1984, 214). Paul is effectively sending himself back to Philemon (Lohse 1977, 280). Dunn (1996, 330) notes again that we would be wrong to accuse Paul of emotional blackmail at this point, for "Paul was a man of deep emotional strength and it would be natural that it would well up when Onesimus' future is on the line." Paul has already described Philemon as one who refreshes the σπλάγγνα of the saints (verse 7). How much more now should he care for Paul's very σπλάγγνα?

While this descriptive language depicting Paul and Onesimus is highly emotive, if the performance was to have its full effect, it would have been the lector's prerogative to fully embody its emotional impact (cf. Cicero, *De Or.* 2.188–190; 3.216–17). Quintilian (*Inst.* 6.2.26–28) says:

The heart of the matter as regards arousing emotions, so far as I can see, lies in being moved by them oneself. The mere imitation of grief or anger or indignation may in fact sometimes be ridiculous, if we fail to adapt our feelings to the emotion as well as our words and our face. Why else should mourners, at least when their grief is fresh, seem sometimes to show great eloquence in their cries? Why should anger sometimes make even the uneducated eloquent, if not because they have vigour of mind and genuine personality? Consequently, where we wish to give an impression of reality, let us assimilate ourselves to the emotions of those who really suffer; let our speech spring from the very attitude that we want to produce in the judge. Will the hearer feel

18 Scholars also note a second possible wordplay on ἄχρηστον and εὐχρηστον, possibly implying a-christos ("without Christ") and eu-christos ("good Christian"). Cf. Moo (2008, 409), Dunn (1996, 329), Lohse (1977, 279).

sorrow, when I, whose object in speaking is to make him feel it, feel none? Will he be angry, if the person who is trying to excite his anger suffers nothing resembling the emotions he is calling for? Will he weep when the speaker's eyes are dry? Impossible!

If this is the case with our performance, then we can picture the lector visually and emotionally portraying an imprisoned old man—one who is incarcerated for simply representing his own community. Yet in the midst of this adversity came a ray of light, a son by the name of Onesimus, who has become Paul's very heart. This Onesimus has now been radically transformed and is a whole new person. He *was* at one point useless, but has now become *essential* to the work of the Ministry of Christ. More than that, he is no longer just a slave, he is a family member. How could Philemon still judge him harshly in the face of this metamorphosis? How could he possibly punish the very heart of Paul? Surely Philemon would see it Paul's way, but in case he didn't, there was another ace in Paul's sleeve.

## PHILEMON'S FAILED OBLIGATION

In verse 13, Paul adds to the intense emotional mix a sense of shame, further heightening the *pathos* of his appeal. Paul reframes his encounter with Onesimus by noting that his service to Paul stood in the place of the service that Philemon could not, or perhaps did not have the opportunity to provide (verse 13b). Onesimus filled the gap where Philemon had failed. The comment, simple as it seems, may have brought with it a sting of rebuke. Philemon, after all, was Paul's partner in the gospel (συνεργῶ, verse 1; ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου, verse 6; εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, verse 17a). Scholars have argued that the *κοινωνία* language in these verses (particularly verse 17) is technical language that stems from the Graeco-Roman business world, thus implying that Onesimus and Paul shared a partnership of some kind (Lampe 1998, 223; Stuhlmacher 1975, 49). It would be safe to assume that Philemon had contributed to Paul's Ministry at some stage in the past (Bird 2009, 134). But was there more to the language?

In treating the *κοινωνία* language in Philippians 1:5 and 7, Ogereau (2014, 376) argues that Paul and the Philippians would have been partners in a *societas* (a business partnership with the goal towards a particular [profitable or non-profitable] objective or course of action). These sorts of arrangements were contractual in nature and relied on the mutual agreement and contribution of both parties. In this case, whereas Paul's obligation to the partnership involved his own effort, time, energy, skills, and missionary experience in promoting the gospel, the Philippians provided the financial and/or material resources (Ogereau 2014, 377). The goal of the *societas* was the advancement of the gospel. Could a similar arrangement have been in place between the apostle and the wealthy church leader? The frequency of the language combined with the clear affection the men had for one another makes it plausible. If this was in fact the case, then perhaps verse 17 comes as a slight rebuke of Philemon, who had failed to meet his obligations in the time of Paul's greatest need. The sense of public shame would be profound.

Up to this point Paul has done everything he can to present Onesimus in the best possible light, but—as the reading drew to a close—a decision needed to be made. While Paul could have claimed his apostolic authority and kept Onesimus (verse 14), he did not want to do anything without Philemon's knowledge. Paul did not want Philemon's eventual good action (τὸ ἀγαθὸν σου) to come through compulsion (κατὰ ἀνάγκην), but rather through his own volition (κατὰ ἐκούσιον). There is a touch of audacious confidence in Paul's statement in that he assumes Philemon's favourable decision is a foregone conclusion. Philemon would be acutely aware by now of the eyes watching him, waiting for his response (Jeal 2015, 48). Nevertheless, the decision still had to be made, bringing the performance to its climax. In this final section (if it wasn't already), the lector's gaze would once again be fixed on Philemon as he launches his appeal.

## THE APPEAL

In verse 15 Paul moves in one way or another, to the request. He begins by framing the circumstances of Onesimus' eventual return. He suggests that perhaps Onesimus was moment-arily taken away from Philemon (διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη), perhaps through divine means. Philemon is invited to look back on the event that has caused him so much anger and reassess it in a new frame (Jeal 2015, 48). In this re-envisioned scenario Onesimus has not fled at all; in fact he was taken by another power so that Philemon could have him back forever, no longer as a slave but rather, as a beloved brother (ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, verse 16).<sup>19</sup> Then in verse 17 Paul takes the request one step further, bringing back into frame the daring apostle only glimpsed in verse 8. Here he bypasses Philemon's position as a slave owner and instead makes his appeal to Philemon the fellow evangelist—"if you consider me your partner (κοινωνός) receive him (προσλαβοῦ αὐτόν) as you would me!"<sup>20</sup> The use of the vocative with the lector's piercing gaze would effectively bring Philemon face to face with both his partner and apostle, Paul. In this confrontation, Paul presents a gentle ultimatum: "If you don't receive him, then you don't really have fellowship with me" (Bird 2009, 142).

In verse 18 Paul finally addresses the hitherto unmentioned issue of Onesimus' offence. Onesimus' unspecified action has cost Philemon, probably monetarily, but certainly his reputation as a manager of his household. This recent memory would still be burning in Philemon's mind, more so now that Onesimus is standing there in front of him. Paul is however, quick to assure Philemon that he will repay whatever damages that have been done or any loss suffered through his absence. Paul's rhetorical skills are here fully displayed. Once again, the audience is reminded that it is Paul behind the lector: "I, Paul, I write this with my own hand, I will repay it (ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῆ

19 The use of ἀλλά in the point/counterpoint set introduces a correction of the expectation created by the first conjunction, an incorrect expectation is cancelled and the proper expectation is put in its place.

20 de Vos (2001, 103). Paul wants Philemon to treat him as an honoured guest. Such treatment would place Onesimus as someone even more important than a brother, a spouse, or a child.

ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω)!” Paul pulls out all the stops at the appeal’s climax, adding the full weight of his personal standing behind the request (Dunn 1996, 339). But then in a seemingly manipulative twist, he draws upon one last memory. He reminds Philemon that *he* in fact owes the greater debt to Paul; that is, the debt of his very salvation. Paul thus delays any mention of debt to the end, but then saves his best argument to immediately counter it (Thurston and Ryan 2005, 253). The result is that in a matter of two verses, Philemon has been changed from the creditor to the debtor (Bird 2009, 142). It is from this place of authority, that Paul can make his final request.

In verse 20 Paul says that he wants to be the recipient of Philemon’s benefit. Here we find another play on words in that ἀναίμην sounds like Onesimus (Bird 2009, 142; Lohse 1977 285). Paul is explicit about what he wants: “Refresh my σπλάγχνα in Christ!” The effect of the command is made more potent now that Philemon has his reputation on the line as one who is renowned for this very noble act. While it is still unclear as to what Paul exactly wants as the final outcome (beyond reconciliation), he is nevertheless confident of it happening—in fact, he is assured that Philemon will do even more than whatever it is that he wants from him (verse 21)!

## CONCLUSION

Did the performance of the letter yield the desired effect? It is hard to imagine that it did not. Philemon was left pressured by his honour before his friends to receive Onesimus as his brother. The need for him to avoid social shame pressed heavily on him (Jeal 2015, 54). The fact that the letter was preserved is a good indication that Paul did succeed in reconciling Philemon and Onesimus (Moo 2008, 373). Bird (2009, 10) argues that Philemon not only accepted Onesimus back, but returned him back to Paul to serve him in prison. The mention of the bishop named Onesimus by Ignatius (*Eph.* 1.3; 2.1; 6.2) may refer to the same person, but one cannot say this with the utmost certainty. Like the majority of scholars, I conclude that Paul’s letter achieved its desired outcome—that of reconciling Philemon and Onesimus. This was due certainly to its content, but we also assume that it was to a large extent, due to its dynamic performance.

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