

I received an interesting question this week about Paul's letter to Philemon. And hey, how often do you get a question about Philemon?!? This is the shortest of Paul's letter (it's a one-pager) where he is writing to his convert Philemon, a rich slave owner, asking him to receive back into his good graces his run-away slave Onesimus.

So what was *that* all about? Here is the question and my response.

QUESTION:

A question on an atheist discussion group, "Why did Paul send Onesimus back?" got me thinking.

From your writing about Greco Roman notions of dominance as status, it seems that the simple manumission of a slave was not a de facto improvement in status, because a man with no wealth, power, or influence was about as low on the ladder as one can be, save for a similarly situated woman. A trusted slave of a wealthy, powerful individual would have more status than a "free" Onesimus.

Would it be unreasonable to suggest that Paul was hoping for an improved station in life for Onesimus as the favored slave of Philemon, who was probably not enormously wealthy and powerful by Roman standards, but pretty high up in the Colossian Christian community? He may have really hit the jackpot and become Philemon's adopted son, which would be far better than a simple manumitted slave.

This also puts a different spin on the implications of Paul's self-identity as a slave of Jesus Christ. "Your master is a centurion or a senator? My master is the King of the Universe and sits at the right hand of God Almighty!" Am I reading it right?

RESPONSE

The question assumes the very common view that what Paul is doing is asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back and set him free from slavery ("manumit" him). Most people read the book of Philemon that way. And I don't think it's at all right. In my view there is not a hint in the letter that Paul wants Philemon to set Onesimus free. Then what is he writing about? Here is how I explain the entire letter in my book [The New Testament: A Historical Introduction](#)

The letter to Philemon is a little gem

The rest of this post is for blog members only. If you don't belong yet, now's a good time to join. Tomorrow today will be yesterday and before long it will all be yesterdays, and where will you be without joining the blog? Lost in your yesterdays. OK, you will be anyway, but think about joining. All membership fees go to charity, so at least your yesterdays will be filled with good deeds.

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