

## ST. PAUL IN ROME. 2. THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON<sup>1</sup>

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### I

**P**AUL'S Epistle to Philemon is short enough to be reproduced in full, in a fairly free translation.

PAUL, prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon, our dear friend and fellow-worker, with our sister Apphia and our fellow-soldier Archippus, and the church that meets in your house : grace and peace be yours from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I always thank God, my dear friend, when I remember you in my prayers, for I hear good news of the love and loyalty which you show to our Lord Jesus and all his holy people. So I pray that your Christian liberality, springing as it does from your faith, may lead you effectively into the experience and appreciation of every blessing which we have as fellow-members of Christ. Your love has brought me great joy and comfort, my dear brother ; you have refreshed the hearts of God's people.

That is why I am making this request of you ; I am making it for love's sake, although I could quite well exercise my authority in Christ's name and *command* you to do the proper thing. Yes, I could command you as Paul, ambassador<sup>2</sup> of Christ Jesus ; but I don't do that : I prefer to ask you a favour as Paul, *prisoner* of Christ Jesus.

The request I am making is for my son. My son? Yes, my son ; I have acquired one here, prisoner though I am. His name is Onesimus—profitable by name and profitable by nature. I know that in former days you found him quite unprofitable, but now, I assure you, he has learned to be true to his name—profitable to you, and profitable to me.

Well, I am sending him back to you, though it is like tearing out my very heart to do so. My own inclination is to keep him here with me, and then he could go on serving me while I am a prisoner for the gospel's sake—serving me as your representative. But I do not want to do anything without your consent ; I do not want the good turn you are doing me through his service to be done by you willy-nilly, but on your free initiative.

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 10th of February 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Taking *πρεσβύτης* in the sense of *πρεσβευτής*.

For aught I know, this was why you and he were separated for a short time, so that you might have him to yourself for ever, no longer as a slave, but something much better than a slave—a dear brother, very dear indeed to me, and surely dearer still to you, since he is now yours not only as a member of your household but as a fellow-believer in the Lord. You look on me as your partner, don't you? Well, Onesimus is my representative; give him the welcome you would give me. Has he done you any wrong? Does he owe you something? Never mind; put that down on my account. Here is my I.O.U., written with my own hand. "I will make it good. Signed: PAUL."

(I scarcely need to remind you, of course, of the debt that *you* owe *me*; it is to me that you owe your very life!)

Yes, my dear brother, let me have this *profit* from you as a fellow-Christian. Refresh my heart in the name of Christ, to whom we both belong.

I write like this because I have every confidence in your obedience; I know you will do more than I say. And, by the way, please get the guest-room ready for me; I hope I shall soon be restored to you, thanks to your prayers.

Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings; so do my fellow-workers Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, all of you.

It is admittedly question-begging to give a lecture on the Epistle to Philemon under the general heading "St. Paul in Rome". Two questions, in fact, are begged: Was this epistle written by Paul, and was it written in Rome?

## II

Was it written by Paul? Most critics have been content to leave the Pauline authorship intact. The epistle is too short for the most efficient computer to yield a significant analysis of its style and vocabulary.<sup>1</sup> If its authenticity is questioned, it is questioned mainly on account of the close association between this epistle and Colossians, which some find it difficult to accept as Pauline. For Colossians and Philemon were plainly written at the same time and place, sent to the same place, carried by the same messengers. Practically the same companions of Paul send their greetings in both; of the six who do so in Colossians, five do so in Philemon. Apart from these, Archippus is mentioned in both; and in both Onesimus arrives at the same time as the letters.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Q. Morton, *The Times*, 24 April 1963 ("there seems no reason to exclude it from the works of Paul").

Ernest Renan was so convinced of the genuineness of Philemon that for its sake he was willing to admit the genuineness of Colossians. "The Epistle to the Colossians", he wrote, "though full of eccentricities, does not embrace any of those impossibilities which are to be found in the Epistles to Titus and to Timothy. It furnishes even many of those details which reject the hypothesis [of its pseudonymity] as false. Assuredly of this number is its connection with the note to Philemon. If the epistle is apocryphal, the note is apocryphal also; yet few of the pages have so pronounced a tone of sincerity; Paul alone, as it appears to us, could write that little masterpiece."<sup>1</sup>

But Renan was a romantic, and would have been reluctant on that ground to abandon the authenticity of Philemon; a real biblical critic must be made of sterner stuff. And such was Ferdinand Christian Baur.

"What", asks Baur, "has criticism to do with this short, attractive, graceful and friendly letter, inspired as it is by the noblest Christian feeling, and which has never yet been touched by the breath of suspicion?"<sup>2</sup> Yet, he goes on, apostolic authorship cannot be taken for granted even here; and since the other "captivity epistles" to which Philemon is so clearly related are not Pauline, it follows that this epistle is not Pauline; it is, in fact (says Baur), a Christian romance in embryo, comparable in this respect to the *Clementine Homilies*. The *Clementine Homilies* show how "Christianity is the permanent reconciliation of those of who were formerly separated by one cause or another, but who by a special arrangement of affairs brought about by Divine Providence for that very purpose, are again brought together; through their conversion to Christianity they know each other again, the one sees in the other his own flesh and blood."<sup>3</sup> So the Epistle to Philemon suggests that perhaps Onesimus and his master were separated for a short time in order that the latter might thenceforth have Onesimus to himself for ever, no longer as a slave, but as a dear brother.

<sup>1</sup> E. Renan, *Saint Paul* (Eng. trans., London, 1889?), p. x.

<sup>2</sup> F. C. Baur, *Paul*, ii (Eng. trans., London, 1875), p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83.

W. C. van Manen, who rejected the authenticity of all thirteen Pauline epistles (including even the four *Hauptbriefe* which Baur admitted), added to Baur's arguments against the genuineness of Philemon some considerations of his own. For one thing, the ambiguity of the direction speaks against Pauline authorship, since the epistle is addressed by Paul and Timothy to three individuals and a household church, while the bulk of it is a personal letter from Paul to Philemon. "This double form . . . is not a style that is natural to any one who is writing freely and untrammelled, whether to one person or to many."<sup>1</sup> More probably the unknown author has modelled his composition on the letter of the younger Pliny to his friend Sabinianus, interceding on behalf of a freedman of the latter who has offended his patron and has sought Pliny's good offices to bring about a reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> The author of Philemon makes the freedman into a slave, and rewrites the letter so as to portray the ideal "relations which, in his judgment, that is according to the view of Pauline Christians, ought to subsist between Christian slaves and their masters, especially when the slaves have in some respect misconducted themselves, as for example by secretly quitting their master's service".<sup>3</sup>

Such a combination of hypercriticism and naïveté is easily recognized for what it is. There is no need to propound such far-fetched explanations of a document which, in the judgement of most critics as of most general readers, bears a much more probable explanation on its face—namely, that it is a genuine letter of Paul, concerning a slave called Onesimus, who somehow needs the apostle's help in restoring good personal relations between him and his master, and that Paul quite naturally takes the opportunity at the beginning and end of the letter to send greetings to other members of the household. Because of what they regard as the transparent genuineness of this epistle, several

<sup>1</sup> W. C. van Manen, art. "Philemon, Epistle to", *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, III (London, 1902), col. 3695.

<sup>2</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* ix. 21. For translations see J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London, 1879), pp. 318 f.; J. Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul*<sup>2</sup> (London, 1960), pp. 16 f.; E. M. Blaiklock, *From Prison in Rome* (London, 1964), pp. 71 f.

<sup>3</sup> *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, col. 3696.

scholars who are unable to accept the whole of Colossians as Pauline feel constrained nevertheless to salvage some of it for the apostle—enough, at least, to keep Philemon company.<sup>1</sup>

### III

But even if it was written by Paul, was it sent from Rome? Here, debate has fastened on two points: (a) the length of the journey that Onesimus must have made from his master's home to the place where Paul was in custody, and (b) Paul's request for the preparation of the guest-room in view of his expectation of an early release and a visit to the Lycus valley. Do these two points suggest that Paul was fairly near the Lycus valley at the time (say in Ephesus, about 100 miles away) or much farther distant (say in Rome, more than 1,000 miles away)?

The case has been debated one way and the other, by none more ably than by Principal G. S. Duncan<sup>2</sup> and Professor C. H. Dodd. Principal Duncan's argument for Ephesus, because it was so much nearer to Colossae than Rome was, has been answered by Professor Dodd, who thinks the remoter city the more probable. Principal Duncan has replied to Professor Dodd, but the question remains unresolved.

With regard to Onesimus's choice of a place of refuge, "only in the most desperate circumstances", says Principal Duncan, "such as the letter gives us no reason to assume, would a fugitive from justice have undertaken over unknown and dangerous roads a journey of a thousand miles by land, together with two sea voyages extending over some five days, especially when comparatively near at hand there was a city with which he was no doubt already familiar, and which was of sufficient size to afford him all the security that he was likely to require."<sup>3</sup>

With regard to the visit proposed by Paul in verse 22, Principal Duncan goes on to say: "How natural such a visit would be at a

<sup>1</sup> Cf. P. N. Harrison, "Onesimus and Philemon", *Anglican Theological Review* xxxii (1950), pp. 268 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Since this lecture was delivered, New Testament scholarship has suffered a sad loss by the death of Principal Duncan on 8th April 1965.

<sup>3</sup> G. S. Duncan, *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry* (London, 1929), pp. 72 f.; cf. P. N. Harrison, op. cit. p. 271.

time when his activities, temporarily interrupted by imprisonment, were directed towards the evangelisation of Asia: not far from him as he lay at Ephesus were those churches in the Lycus valley which in some indirect way no doubt owed their origin to his missionary-work in the province, but which he had never so far visited, and in at least one of which, Colossae, the conditions gave him grave cause for anxiety. On the other hand, how unlikely was he to contemplate such a visit, let alone give thought to the provision of a lodging there, when he lay a prisoner at Rome. . . . From Rome he meant, not to turn back to the Lycus valley, but to advance into Spain."<sup>1</sup>

To the argument that Onesimus was more likely to have fled to neighbouring Ephesus than to distant Rome, Professor Dodd says:

This seems plausible. But a moment's reflection may convince us that we are here talking of things about which we know nothing. We cannot know either what was in Onesimus's mind or what his opportunities for travel may have been. If we are to *surmise*, then it is as likely that the fugitive slave, his pockets lined at his master's expense, made for Rome *because* it was distant, as that he went to Ephesus because it was near. But this meeting of the runaway slave with the imprisoned apostle is in any case an enigma. Did he mean to go to Paul? Or was he taken to him? Or was it the long arm of coincidence that brought about such an improbable meeting? No secure argument can be based upon an incident which we cannot in any case explain.<sup>2</sup>

To the argument that Paul's request for a lodging at Colossae comes more naturally if he was at Ephesus at the time than if he was at Rome, he says:

This is a real point in favour of the Ephesian hypothesis. At the same time we do not know that Paul would have held to his intention in the greatly changed circumstances. Like all practical men, he was open to change his mind, as in fact we know both from Acts and from the Epistles he not infrequently did. On the Roman hypothesis, the emergence of the Colossian heresy may well have led Paul to plan a visit to Asia before setting out on further travels, whether or not the plan was ever fulfilled.<sup>3</sup>

These arguments of Professor Dodd, first publicly voiced in a lecture delivered in the Rylands Library, were taken up by Principal Duncan soon after they appeared in print in the

<sup>1</sup> *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry*, pp. 74 f.; cf. P. N. Harrison, *op. cit.* p. 281.

<sup>2</sup> C. H. Dodd, "The Mind of Paul, II", *BULLETIN*, xviii (1934), 80, reprinted in *New Testament Studies* (Manchester, 1953), p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

**BULLETIN.** On the first score Principal Duncan added little to what he had said before (apart from a footnote reference to Pongrácz's suggestion that the Temple of Artemis would have afforded a place of refuge for Onesimus at Ephesus); on the second score he conceded that Paul might have changed his plans during his Roman imprisonment and decided to visit Colossae. "But long before he could have arrived at that remote and unimportant town in the Lycus valley, must we not allow for the eager news preceding him of his release, his journeyings eastwards, his subsequent arrival at Ephesus or some such centre in Asia? That one so situated should bespeak quarters at Colossae suggests the air-mindedness of the twentieth century rather than the rigorous conditions, which Paul himself knew so well (2 Co. 11: 25 ff.), of travel in the first."<sup>1</sup>

On this last point it may be said that long before the air-minded twentieth century most readers of the epistle, including some who experienced travel conditions not noticeably less rigorous than those which Paul had to endure in the first century, took it for granted that Paul did from Rome bespeak quarters at Colossae. More important: it was not only the Colossian heresy that caused Paul concern. The developing situation in the province of Asia, as Paul learned of it from Epaphras and other visitors, may well have seemed to him to call urgently for his presence there as soon as he regained his freedom (if indeed he did regain it). In other parts of the province than the Lycus valley Paul's opponents were exploiting his enforced absence to his detriment and (as he saw it) to the detriment of his converts and the cause of the gospel. Even if things had not yet come to the pass described in 2 Timothy i. 15, where "all who are in Asia" are said to have turned away from him, the beginnings of this trend could certainly be traced during Paul's custody in Rome, if not earlier.

One slight pointer to Rome as the place of origin might be the inclusion of Luke and Mark among Paul's companions at the time of writing. Luke was with Paul at Rome; we have no evidence that he was with him at Ephesus. Mark is traditionally

<sup>1</sup> G. S. Duncan, "The Epistles of the Imprisonment in Recent Discussion", *Expository Times*, xlvi (1934-5), 296.

associated with Rome, not with Ephesus.<sup>1</sup> But this pointer, if such it be, is far from conclusive.

Defenders of the view that the epistle and its companion epistles were composed during Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea could point out that Luke was very probably with Paul at that time; but (in spite of Lohmeyer's arguments)<sup>2</sup> Caesarea hardly comes into the picture. One could understand Onesimus making his way to Ephesus because it was near, or working his passage to Rome because it was distant; but why should he go to Caesarea?

The place from which the Epistle to Philemon was written cannot, in fact, be determined from a study of this epistle alone. It must be determined, if at all, by taking into account the evidence of the epistles with which this one is most closely associated—in the first instance, the Epistle to the Colossians. When we look at Philemon by itself, the arguments for Ephesus are weighty. But when we take Philemon and Colossians together, these arguments are outweighed by the arguments for Rome as the place from which Colossians was written. This question calls for treatment on a later occasion.

#### IV

The picture sometimes given of Paul's meeting Onesimus as a fellow-prisoner is rather misleading. Principal Duncan is quite right in emphasizing "how very radically Paul's condition of imprisonment in Rome must have changed for the worse if following on two years spent in his own hired house (Acts xxviii. 30), he was reduced to sharing the same prison-cell as a fugitive slave."<sup>3</sup> But there is no need to conjure up any such picture in our minds. The situation is more intelligible if we think of Paul as still living under house-arrest in his lodgings—albeit handcuffed to his military guard, and therefore technically a *δέσμιος* (verses 1, 9) or *ἐν δεσμοῖς* (verses 10, 13)—when Onesimus came to him.

<sup>1</sup> A visit by Mark to the province of Asia is implied in Col. iv. 10, but after the dispatch of Colossians.

<sup>2</sup> E. Lohmeyer, *Der Kolosser- und der Philemonbrief*<sup>11</sup> (Göttingen, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry*, p. 73.

In this case we might consider a suggestion made many years ago by Professor E. R. Goodenough.<sup>1</sup> He pointed out that Athenian law permitted a slave in danger of his life to seek sanctuary at an altar, and that that altar might be the hearth of a private family. The head of the family was then obliged to give the slave protection while he tried to persuade him to return to his master; he would no doubt use his good offices to try to mollify the master's wrath. If the slave refused to return, the householder's duty was to put the slave up for auction and hand over the price received for him to his former master. This provision survived in Egypt under the Ptolemies, and well into Roman imperial times, since it influenced Ulpian's legislation early in the third century A.D. Philo, who knew the Egyptian practice, modified the Deuteronomic law of the fugitive slave (Deut. xxiii. 15 f.) to conform with it.<sup>2</sup>

Goodenough explained the case of Onesimus in terms of this provision, but found it necessary then to suppose that Paul was free at the time, and that the reference to his being "in bonds" might be figurative.<sup>3</sup> But if the apostle was under house-arrest in his own lodgings, might not the place where he lived count as a "hearth" or "altar" within the meaning of the law—always supposing that Onesimus did avail himself of this legal provision?

There is no way of deciding how in fact Onesimus made his way to Paul. Perhaps Epaphras of Colossae, the evangelist of the Lycus valley (Col. i. 7), who was on a visit to Paul at the time (Col. iv. 12) and who is indeed described as Paul's *συναϊχμάλωτος* in Philemon 23, brought him to Paul because he knew that Paul would help him in his predicament. We cannot be sure. We may be quite wrong in supposing that Onesimus was a runaway slave in the usual sense of the word. It could, I suppose, be argued that his master sent him to Paul to fulfil some commission, and that Onesimus overstayed his leave—*amore Pauli*, perhaps

<sup>1</sup> E. R. Goodenough, "Paul and Onesimus", *Harvard Theological Review*, xxii (1929), 181 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Philo, *De Virtutibus*, 124 (see F. H. Colson's notes in the Loeb edition of Philo, viii, pp. 238 f., 447 f.).

<sup>3</sup> He also cast doubt on the identity of the Onesimus of Philemon with Onesimus of Col. iv. 9 (op. cit. p. 182, n. 7).

(why not?)—and had to have a note of excuse from Paul begging pardon for his unduly long absence. Our ignorance of the details being what it is, the possibilities which might be canvassed are numerous.

The epistle throws little light on Paul's attitude to the institution of slavery. We get more formal teaching on this subject in the "household tables" of Colossians and Ephesians, and in remarks in other epistles.<sup>1</sup> What this epistle does is to bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution could only wilt and die. When Onesimus is sent to his master "no longer as a slave, but as a dear brother", formal emancipation would be but a matter of expediency, the technical confirmation of the new relationship that had already come into being. If the epistle were a document on slavery, one could illustrate it copiously by accounts of the conditions of slavery under the Roman Empire, including an advertisement of 156 B.C. quoted by Professor Moule in his commentary on Colossians and Philemon, in which information is requested about a runaway slave and a description is given not only of the slave himself but of the goods which he had on him when last seen.<sup>2</sup>

## V

If the epistle is not primarily a sociological document, what is it? We may gain a clearer idea of its nature and purpose if we ask three specific questions:

- (i) What is Paul asking for?
- (ii) Did he get it?
- (iii) Why was the epistle preserved?

Although formally these are three questions, materially they are parts of one comprehensive question, covering the character of the document and its place in the New Testament. It will help us, moreover, to find an answer to this comprehensive question.

<sup>1</sup> Col. iii. 22-iv. 1; Eph. vi. 5-9; 1 Cor. vii. 21-23; 1 Tim. vi. 1 f.; 1 Peter ii. 18-21.

<sup>2</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 34 ff.; cf. E. J. Goodspeed and E. C. Colwell, *Greek Papyrus Reader* (Chicago, 1935), No. 59.

and the more specific questions which make it up if we look at one of the most important and fascinating books ever written on this epistle—a book which deals not only with these major questions but also with a number of subsidiary ones.

In 1935 Professor John Knox, formerly of the University of Chicago and now (since 1943) of Union Theological Seminary, New York, published a little book entitled *Philemon among the Letters of Paul*. The edition was a small one, and the book did not receive the attention which it deserved. In 1959 it appeared in a new and slightly enlarged edition. Meanwhile Professor Knox's views on Philemon had received wider currency in his introduction and commentary on the epistle in *The Interpreter's Bible*.<sup>1</sup>

The milieu in which Professor Knox's work took shape was the Chicago New Testament school led by the late Edgar J. Goodspeed. Goodspeed himself pioneered the view that the *corpus Paulinum* of ten epistles (that is, lacking the three Pastorals) was edited and published at Ephesus about the end of the first century A.D., and that the document which we call the Epistle to the Ephesians was composed by the editor to serve as an introduction to the *corpus*—an introduction setting forth what the editor took to be "the quintessence of Paulinism".<sup>2</sup> Other members of the Chicago school undertook supporting studies with a bearing on the central thesis, and Professor Knox's book belongs to this category.

He accepts the general Goodspeed position and asks the pertinent question: Why was Philemon included among the letters of Paul? His answer, briefly, is that Philemon mattered supremely to a man who played a prominent part in the publication of the *corpus Paulinum*. Who was that man? It was Onesimus.

The argument runs thus. When Ignatius, bishop of Syrian Antioch, was on his way to Rome to be thrown to the wild beasts, about A.D. 110 or shortly after, the name of the bishop of Ephesus was Onesimus.<sup>3</sup> "What of that?" it might be asked. Onesimus

<sup>1</sup> xi (New York, 1955), 555 ff.

<sup>2</sup> E. J. Goodspeed, "The place of Ephesians in the First Pauline Collection", *Anglican Theological Review*, xii (1929-30), 189 ff.; *Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago, 1937), pp. 210 ff., 222 ff.; *The Meaning of Ephesians* (Chicago, 1933); *The Key to Ephesians* (Chicago, 1956).

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius, *Eph.* i. 3.



was a common enough name—especially a common enough slave-name. “Profitable” or “Useful” was a name bestowed on many slaves in accordance with a well-known principle of nomenclature, not because a slave was actually profitable or useful, but in the fond hope that the attachment of this name of good omen to him would make him so. Why, then, should one connect the Onesimus who was bishop of Ephesus about A.D. 110 with the Onesimus who figures in the Epistle to Philemon between fifty and sixty years earlier?

Because, says Professor Knox, Ignatius in his letter to the church of Ephesus shows himself familiar with the Epistle to Philemon; it is one of the rare places in patristic literature where the language of our epistle is clearly echoed. Not only so, but the part of Ignatius’s letter to Ephesus where the language of Philemon is echoed is the part in which Bishop Onesimus is mentioned—the first six chapters. In these six chapters the bishop is mentioned fourteen times;<sup>1</sup> in the remaining fifteen chapters he is not mentioned at all, apart from one general reference: “obey the bishop and the presbytery with an undisturbed mind.”<sup>2</sup>

This consideration is impressive, if not conclusive. But there is one point which I find particularly impressive. In verse 20 of our epistle Paul, playing on the meaning of Onesimus’s name, says, “Yes, my dear brother, let me have this *profit* from you (*ὀναίμην σου*) as a fellow-Christian”. And Ignatius seems to echo this expression with the intention of making the same play on words when he says to the Christians of Ephesus, “May I always have *profit* from you (*ὀναίμην ὑμῶν*), if I am worthy.”<sup>3</sup>

This indeed does not demand the identification of the two Onesimi; it could simply be that the name of the contemporary bishop of Ephesus reminded Ignatius of the Onesimus of Philemon; as the earlier Onesimus, formerly unprofitable, was henceforth going to be as profitable as his name promised, so the second Onesimus was eminently worthy of his “well-loved

<sup>1</sup> Including three times by name (i. 3, ii. 1, vi. 2).

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius, *Eph.* xx. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius, *Eph.* ii. 2.

name.”<sup>1</sup> But the identification is not impossible; it is (I should say) not improbable. Whether the Epistle to Philemon was written about A.D. 61, or some six years earlier (as those think who date it in the course of Paul’s Ephesian ministry), a lad in his later teens or early twenties when Paul wrote it would be in his seventies by the time of Ignatius’s martyrdom—not an incredible age for a bishop in those days.

Professor Knox is not so convincing, when he makes Paul say, “The request I am making is for my son,<sup>2</sup> whom I have begotten here in prison as Onesimus”—as though Onesimus were the new “Christian” name given him by his father in the faith.<sup>3</sup> This idea is too far-fetched; not only, as has been said, was Onesimus a common slave-name, but Paul would not designate the young man by a name which his master would not recognize.

Apart from this, what has the possible identification of Paul’s Onesimus with the bishop of Ephesus whom Ignatius knew to do with the preservation of the Epistle to Philemon among the letters of Paul? This, says Professor Knox: if (as the Goodspeed school believes) Ephesus was the place where the *corpus Paulinum* was edited about the end of the first century, then the Onesimus of Ignatius’s letter was probably already bishop of Ephesus and in a position of responsibility in relation to the editing of the *corpus*. Why should he not have been the editor himself? In that case we need look no farther for the reason for the careful preservation of the Epistle to Philemon. But if Onesimus was editor of the *corpus Paulinum*, then (according to the Goodspeed school) he would have been the author of the Epistle to the Ephesians. If

<sup>1</sup> Knox argues (op. cit. pp. 89 ff.) that Ignatius’s reference (i. 1) to the Ephesian church’s “well-loved name” (*τὸ πολυαγαπητόν σου ὄνομα*) is to be understood as an allusion to the name of its bishop, in whom the church was embodied: “I received in the name of God your whole community in Onesimus” (i. 3).

<sup>2</sup> “I appeal to you for my child” (op. cit. p. 14). “Is Paul appealing on behalf of Onesimus? Or is he simply asking for Onesimus? . . . Paul, with all possible delicacy, is asserting a claim upon Onesimus” (op. cit. pp. 19 f.), i.e. he is asking that Onesimus be given (back) to him.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. p. 21; he alludes (p. 90) to Ignatius’s mention of “thy (*σου*) well-loved name, which ye have acquired by your righteous nature (*ὃ κέκτησθε φύσει δικαία*), according to faith and love in Christ Jesus” (*Eph.* i. 1).

that were so, Paul certainly did a wonderful piece of work the day he won Onesimus for Christ!

Professor Knox raises another interesting question. To whom is the Epistle to Philemon addressed? To Philemon, of course, is the natural answer. Yes, but not so fast. It is addressed not to Philemon alone; it is addressed to "our dear fellow-worker Philemon, our sister Apphia and our comrade Archippus, and the church in your house"—"your" in the singular. This is a place where it is useful to follow the Authorized and Revised Versions and retain the distinction between the singular and plural pronouns of the second person: "the church in thy house" (τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ). In whose house? The house of the person who is addressed in the second person singular from verse 4 to verse 24 of the epistle—Onesimus's owner. And who was he? Philemon, again, is the natural answer—the person first mentioned among the addressees in verse 1 (just as the real author of the epistle is the person first mentioned among the senders in verse 1).

But Professor Knox does not think so. Onesimus's owner, according to him, was not Philemon but Archippus, the third addressee.<sup>1</sup> Why should Philemon have been Onesimus's owner any more than Archippus? Confirmation that Archippus was Onesimus's owner is sought in the cryptic reference to Archippus in Col. iv. 17, where Paul bids the Colossian church tell Archippus to see to it that he fulfils the ministry he has received "in the Lord". What Paul is doing there is enlisting the support of the Colossian church in persuading Onesimus's master to do what Paul wants him to do.

Who then was Philemon? He was overseer of the churches of the Lycus valley, who lived at Laodicea. Paul arranged that the epistle should be delivered to Philemon first because he could use his influence with Archippus; this was the "epistle from Laodicea" which Paul asked the church of Colossae to procure and read (Col. iv. 16).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. pp. 49 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Goodspeed held this view of the letter from Laodicea, but he made Archippus and Onesimus, as well as Philemon, live at Laodicea (*Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 109 ff.).

What can be said of this reconstruction? It is quite probable that the cryptic reference to Archippus's ministry had something to do with the "letter from Laodicea", since it comes immediately after the injunction to procure and read that letter. But one thing is certain: after the extraordinary delicacy with which Paul makes his plea for Onesimus in the Epistle to Philemon, it would be an incredibly flat-footed action to put pressure on Onesimus's owner by name in another letter which was to be read aloud at a church meeting where the owner would presumably be present.<sup>1</sup> The reference to Onesimus in Col. iv. 9, on the other hand, is unobtrusive: "Along with Tychicus I am sending Onesimus, my trusty and well-loved brother, who is one of yourselves." No one could take exception to that, although doubtless it would add just a little more weight to Paul's plea in the Epistle to Philemon. But there was no need to put on the spot a man to whom Paul was writing separately and saying, "I know you will do more than I say"; any attempt to put him on the spot before the church of Colossae would go far to neutralize the effect of Paul's diplomacy in the Epistle to Philemon.

And it would if anything be still more disastrous for Paul to direct that the Epistle to Philemon should be read aloud to the assembled church at Colossae. True, in the Epistle to Philemon Paul sends greetings to "the church that meets in your house" as well as to Philemon, Apphia and Archippus—but that does not mean that the private contents of verses 4-22 were to be divulged even to the household church with which these three were associated, not to speak of the city church of Colossae.

What Archippus's ministry was, which had to be publicly enjoined on him in Col. iv. 17, must be a matter of speculation; but there is no good reason to suppose that it is relevant to our understanding of the Epistle to Philemon. Nor was Archippus Onesimus's owner. It is unlikely that this idea would have occurred to any one but for a desire to link the burden of the Epistle to Philemon with the ministry laid on Archippus in Col. iv. 17.

<sup>1</sup> According to Goodspeed, he would not be present: "If he were in Colossae, why should the Colossians have to 'tell' him? He would be present at the meeting of the church and would hear the message without being told" (*Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 112).



The first person addressed in the Epistle to Philemon would naturally be the head of the house;<sup>1</sup> Apphia and Archippus would naturally be members of his family—his wife and his son perhaps.<sup>2</sup> It was, then, in Philemon's house that the household church of verse 1 met, and when Paul goes on to say, "I am making this request of you" (verse 9), it is to Philemon that the request is addressed. It is Philemon who is Onesimus's master; the traditional title of the epistle is no misnomer.

## VI

We return to our three specific questions.

(i) *What is Paul asking for?*

He is asking Philemon of Colossae, one of his own converts, not only to pardon his slave Onesimus and give him a Christian welcome, but to send him back so that he can go on helping Paul as he had already begun to do. Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus with him, but would not do so without Philemon's express and willing consent—not only because it would have been illegal to do so, but also, and especially, because it would have involved a breach of Christian fellowship between himself and Philemon.

(ii) *Did he get it?*

Yes; otherwise the letter never would have survived. That it survived at all is a matter calling for comment, but if Philemon had hardened his heart and refused to pardon and welcome Onesimus he would certainly have suppressed the letter.

<sup>1</sup> "It is evident that Philemon's house is meant" (E. J. Goodspeed, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 111). C. F. D. Moule regards the fact that Philemon's name comes first, together with the phrase *κατ' οἶκόν σου*, as "fatal to the theory that Archippus is primarily the one addressed" (op. cit. pp. 16 f.).

<sup>2</sup> For an imaginative reconstruction of the situation and its sequel (quite different from that outlined above) see Naomi Mitchison, "The Triumph of Faith", in *When the Bough Breaks* (London, 1927), pp. 91-158.

<sup>3</sup> If Philemon of Colossae was Paul's convert, how is it that Paul apparently knew the Colossian church only by hearsay (Col. i. 4 ff., ii. 1)? It has been suggested to me by Mr. E. W. Goodrick that the "upper country" through which Paul passed on his way to Ephesus (Acts xix. 1) included the Lycus valley. If so, he might have met Philemon on that occasion and won him for Christ, although the actual evangelization of Colossae and neighbouring cities was carried out, a little later, by Paul's colleague Epaphras.

(iii) *Why was the epistle preserved?*

Not only because it accomplished its purpose so far as Philemon was concerned, but also because Onesimus treasured it as his charter of liberty. And there is much to be said for the view that Onesimus did not remain a private Christian, but became in due course one of the most important figures in the life of the province of Asia—bishop of Ephesus, no less. It was in his lifetime that the corpus of Pauline letters was first collected and published, and wherever and by whomsoever this work was carried out, Onesimus (if he was bishop of Ephesus) could scarcely fail to get to know about it, and he would make sure that his Pauline letter found a place in the collection.