

D.F. Tolmie

Prof. D.F. Tolmie
Department Old and
New Testament Studies,
University of the
Free State, South Africa.
E-mail: tolmief@ufs.ac.za

ac.za
ORCID: [https://
orcid.org/
0000-0002-4804-3523](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4804-3523)

DOI: [http://dx.doi.
org/10.18820/23099089/
actat.Sup27.6](http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Sup27.6)

ISSN 1015-8758 (Print)
ISSN 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2019
Suppl 27:101-117

Date Published:
22 July 2019



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons
With Attribution (CC-BY)



HOW ONESIMUS WAS HEARD – EVENTUALLY. SOME INSIGHTS FROM THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF PAUL’S LETTER TO PHILEMON

ABSTRACT

Although Onesimus is the reason for Paul’s Letter to Philemon, he is only mentioned by name for the first time nearly halfway through the letter (v. 10). He also remains voiceless throughout the letter. This contribution focuses on the history of interpretation of the letter, and, in particular, the way in which the role of Onesimus has been interpreted through the centuries. Several examples of the way in which scholars interpreted the role of Onesimus are discussed, and it is argued that four broad trends may be discerned: Onesimus as a culprit who was saved by Paul; Onesimus as a pawn in the abolitionism debate; Onesimus’ status disputed, and Onesimus as a victim, with the letter being read in a resistant way.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although Onesimus is the reason for Paul’s Letter to Philemon, he is only mentioned by name for the first time nearly halfway through the letter (v. 10). He also remains voiceless throughout the letter. One reads a great deal about Paul’s and Philemon’s feelings, about what would be to their benefit, about the desired outcomes for them, but not once does one hear anything about Onesimus’ feelings, what would be to his

benefit and what the desired outcome would be from his perspective. In fact, one does not even hear whether Onesimus had any regrets over what happened in Philemon's house. No matter how good Paul's intentions in writing the letter might have been, Onesimus himself remains unheard – a situation that was typical for slaves in Paul's time.¹ For the greatest part of the history of interpretation, Onesimus remained unheard, primarily owing to the way in which interpreters filled in the many interpretative gaps in the letter. This has changed only fairly recently – as a matter of fact, only in the past decade or two. In this brief contribution, I wish to trace the way in which Onesimus, one of the many unheard people in the Bible, eventually got a voice, although it literally took centuries for this to happen. I will highlight some of the interesting – and sometimes even upsetting – ways in which scholars interpreted what is said about him in the letter. In order to map the broad movements in this regard, I will point out four trends in the history of research.

2. ONESIMUS AS A CULPRIT WHO WAS SAVED BY PAUL

Without any doubt, this is the dominant way in which Onesimus was perceived through the centuries. In fact, many interpreters still perceive him as a runaway slave who did something wrong, and who was ultimately “saved” by Paul in a twofold sense of the word: spiritually, in the sense that Paul converted him to Christianity, and physically, in the sense that Paul reconciled him to his master and thus saved him from a well-deserved punishment.² I have selected only a few of the numerous examples in this regard.

The oldest extant commentary on Philemon is the one by Ambrosiaster (composed between 366 and 384 CE³). The way in which Onesimus is depicted in this commentary most likely reflects the general view in Christianity at that stage. For Ambrosiaster, Philemon was a worthy layman (*in Philm. arg.*, 337.3⁴), a good man (*in Philm.* 8, 339.2), who had good reason

1 For an excellent discussion of the world in which Onesimus lived and the implications this has for understanding the Letter to Philemon, see Gerber (2016:75-106).

2 In this regard, see the discussion by Williams (2012:42-44).

3 For excellent discussions of Ambrosiaster, see Kannengiesser (2006:1081-1087) and Hunter (2009:1-26).

4 I have used the text in Vogels (1968), citing the verse number in the Letter to Philemon, followed by the page and line numbers according to Vogel's text. For an English translation of Ambrosiaster's commentary on the Letter to Philemon, see Bray (2009).

to be angry with Onesimus (*in Philm.* 18, 340.24). Onesimus, on the other hand, was a useless runaway slave (*in Philm.* 10-14, 339.21-24) who had offended his master (*in Philm.* 15-16, 340.5-7). According to Ambrosiaster, Paul returned Onesimus to his master as somebody whose sins have been forgiven and who has become useful (*in Philm.* 15-16, 340.5-9), asking Philemon not only to accept him back, but also to thank God for him (*in Philm. arg.*, 337.3-7). It is thus clear that the basic mould for the reception of Onesimus was already formed by the time of Ambrosiaster: Onesimus as a culprit – a runaway slave – who was saved by Paul in a twofold sense of the word. This notion would dominate the reception of Onesimus for approximately another one and a half millennia. Although many different nuances may be detected in the way in which individual scholars interpreted Onesimus in the centuries after Ambrosiaster, the basic pattern remained the same.

I offer two examples to illustrate some of the different nuances in the reception of Onesimus by the Church Fathers. First, John Chrysostom (the three homilies he preached on Philemon were composed between 386 and 404 CE⁵) placed more emphasis on Onesimus' wickedness than Ambrosiaster did. For Chrysostom, Onesimus was a thief, a robber and a runaway, characterised by extreme depravity and wickedness (*hom. in Philm. arg.*, 327.13-18;⁶ Chrysostom uses the word *κακία* for depravity). Chrysostom also believes that Onesimus' flight was caused by his arrogance and a corrupt mind (*hom. in Philm.* 16, 340.3-4). Bear in mind that the congregation to whom Chrysostom preached these homilies included slaves brought to church by their masters!⁷

Secondly, Theodore of Mopsuestia composed his commentaries on Paul's letters late in the first or early in the second decade of the fifth century CE (Fitzgerald 2010:342-345). Like Chrysostom, he also emphasises Onesimus' perversity: Onesimus' intentions were evil (*in Philm. arg.*, 773.4-5⁸), but Paul persuaded him to abandon his evilness of mind and return to Philemon of his own choice (*in Philm. arg.*, 773.5-9).

5 See, for example, the discussions by Quasten (1960:448-449) and Kelly (1995:132-133).

6 I have used the Greek text in Field (1849-1862), citing page and line numbers according to Field's text in brackets.

7 See De Wet (2015:9, especially note 21). De Wet also brought to my attention that Christians liked bringing their slaves to church, as this was a way of displaying their wealth.

8 I have used the text of Greer (2011), citing the verse number, followed by the page and line numbers according to Greer's text. Greer also provides an English translation.

Furthermore, Theodore emphasises another aspect, namely that Onesimus would be willing to obey Philemon in future. In fact, Theodore claims that Onesimus would be fit to obey orders, due to his diligence for his new-found religion (*in Philm. arg.*, 773.9-11). It thus comes as no surprise that one of the aspects that Theodore often emphasises in his commentary is that God wants people to stay in the “rank” (*ordo*) in which they were placed by him, since, according to Theodore, the diversity between people (for example, between slaves and their masters) was willed by God. Theodore even points out that, although it would have been easy for God to make everyone equal, he deliberately chose not to do so (*in Philm. arg.*, 778.17-780.5).

Let us proceed six or seven centuries ahead, to the *Glossa Ordinaria* – the “standard edition of the Bible”⁹ – that was used from the twelfth to the beginning of the sixteenth century. This edition contained the biblical text, with introductory notes at the beginning of each book, and glosses in the margins and notes in between the lines – a major progress at that time.¹⁰ The *Glossa Ordinaria* became hugely influential – it may even be described as “the most important exegetical tool of the Middle Ages and beyond” (Salomon 2012:12). The *Glossa Ordinaria* not only reflected the leading scholarship of the time, but it also had an immense formative influence on the interpretation of the Bible in the ensuing centuries.¹¹

There are no surprises in the way in which Onesimus is depicted in the *Glossa Ordinaria*. In fact, it is similar to the depiction in commentaries six or seven centuries earlier. See, for example, the marginal note on Philemon:

A Colossian, who was not endowed with an ecclesiastical office of service, but a laudable man among the people; the apostle sends an intimate letter on behalf of Onesimus, his slave, who had fled to his detriment, but after having heard the gospel from the apostle, he was baptised; and with whom the apostle pleads for forgiveness, writing from Rome, from prison. It is the intention of the apostle to beg for pardon for Onesimus from Philemon (*ad Philm. 1 marg. [Biblia Latina 4:421a]*)¹².

9 Froehlich (2010b:III, 1).

10 See, among others, Smalley (1984:55-57). The gloss on the entire Bible was completed c. 1130 (De Hamel 1987:4). Thereafter, it went through several stages until the first printed edition, produced by Adolph Rusch of Strasbourg in 1480/1481 (Smith 2009:141-186).

11 For example, for an excellent discussion of the important role that the *Glossa Ordinaria* played in medieval preaching, see Froehlich (2010a:1-21).

12 The above translation is based on the facsimile edition of the 1480 edition, published by Brepols in 1992: *Biblia Latina cum glossa ordinaria: Facs. Reprint of the ed. princeps Adolph Rusch of Strassburg 1480/1481. 4. Evangelia,*

In this instance, one finds exactly the same elements as pointed out earlier: Onesimus is depicted as the culprit who caused damage to his master, but who is ultimately saved by Paul in a twofold sense of the word – by baptism and by Paul begging on his behalf for pardon from Philemon. This picture is reinforced elsewhere in the *Glossa Ordinaria*. For example, the comment added to “useless” (v. 11) explains that Onesimus stole from Philemon (*ad Philm.* 11 *int.* [*Biblia Latina* 4:421b]), and the comment added to “especially to me” (v. 16) indicates that, by fleeing, Onesimus offended Philemon. However, once his sins were obliterated, he could return to Philemon as a useful individual (*ad Philm.* 16 *marg.* [*Biblia Latina* 4:422a]).

I conclude this section with two final examples of the way in which Onesimus was interpreted later on. First, in his *paraphrasis* on the Letter to Philemon, composed towards the end of 1519 (Bateman [ed.] 1993:380), the great Humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus furnishes his readers with more or less the same information on Onesimus: He stole from his master – Erasmus also deems it necessary to point out that this was a typical behaviour of slaves – and fled to Rome, where he heard Paul preaching, accepted the gospel and then served him in prison. Paul sent him back to Philemon, since he knew that Philemon would be upset because he had fled. Erasmus also points out that Paul reconciled the runaway and former thief with his master by means of this letter (LB VII 1075 *arg.*¹³).

Secondly, in his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (published in 1742 and republished several times; Thompson 2011:844-845; Fritsch 1951:208), Bengel offers a similar view: Onesimus was a runaway slave (*ad Philm.* 9, 888-889¹⁴) who fled to Paul after having committed the crime (*ad Philm.* 11, 889) that had caused Philemon injury (*ad Philm.* 11, 888); he confessed to Paul what he had done (*ad Philm.* 18, 890); Paul realised that mentioning his name to Philemon would be offensive. He, therefore, found it necessary to first introduce a positive description of Onesimus before asking Philemon to take him back (*ad Philm.* 10, 888).

Epistulae Pauli, Ad Hebraeos, Acta Apostolorum, Epistulae Catholicae, Apocalypsis Johannis (Froehlich & Gibson 1992). I refer to the page number and the line number(s). I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Alfred Friedl of the University of Vienna who helped me with the translation of the Latin text.

13 References are to the *Editio Lugdunensis* (1703-1706), facsimile edition (Erasmus 1961-1962). For an English translation, see Bateman (1993:70-74).

14 I have used the first edition (Bengel 1742). References are to verse number, followed by page number in this edition.

3. ONESIMUS AS A PAWN IN THE ABOLITIONISM DEBATE

In 1807, the British Parliament abolished the slave trade in Britain, although slavery was still legal; in 1833, the *Abolition Act* was passed, but slaves in the British colonies had to wait until 1838 before they were set free (Avalos 2013:237). In the decades before these decisions were taken, the debates on this matter often centred on theological arguments, but, sadly, theology and the church did not act as agents of change,¹⁵ as they were mostly found on the side of people supporting slavery. In this debate, the Letter to Philemon was often used, and, in a theological world dominated by a literal approach to the Bible, “the pro-slavery arguments often had the better case” (Barclay 2007:13). In fact, the argument was deceptively simple: that Paul sent a runaway slave back to his master proves that slavery was an institution willed by God.¹⁶ This notion was usually presented as an either/or choice that turned it into a powerful argument: One could either take the Word of God seriously or opt for one’s own notions of morality and thus choose against God’s will. How difficult it was for God-fearing theologians not to be persuaded by such arguments is evident from the following quote from the writings of John Henry Hopkins:

If it were a matter to be determined by my personal sympathies, tastes, or feelings, I should be as ready as any man to condemn the institution of slavery; for all my prejudices of education, habit, and social position stand entirely opposed to it. But as a Christian ... I am compelled to submit my weak and erring intellect to the authority of the Almighty. For then only can I be safe in my conclusions, when I know that they are in accordance with the will of Him, before whose tribunal I must render a strict account in the last great day (Atkins 2010:216).¹⁷

Onesimus thus became a pawn in the heated debates between the pro-slavery and the abolitionist groups. On the abolitionist side, various arguments were developed in order to overturn the argument based on Onesimus’ fate. I mention only a few of these.

-
- 15 For a thorough discussion of this matter, see Avalos (2013) and, in particular, pages 269-284, where he identifies the primary reasons why the arguments of the abolitionists ultimately carried the day. As he explains, biblical ethics did not play a major role in this regard.
- 16 This argument, used by Harris (see Chapman 2007:546) in 1788, is found in various forms in the arguments used by the pro-slavery side. For other examples in this regard, see Harrill (2000:149-186), Barclay (2007:3-14) and Kreitzer (2008:77-106).
- 17 Atkins also provides more detail and the broader context.

One of the strategies used was to deny that Onesimus had been a slave. For example, Barnes (1846:318-331) argues as follows: There is no clear evidence in the letter that Onesimus was a slave; there is no indication in the letter that Paul forced Onesimus to go back to Philemon or even advised him to do so; there is no evidence in the letter that Paul wanted Onesimus to return as a slave or that Onesimus should be treated as a slave; there is clear evidence in the letter that Paul did *not* want Onesimus to be treated as a slave, and the principles found in the Letter to Philemon would ultimately lead to the abolition of slavery.

Another strategy was not only to concede that Onesimus was a runaway slave whom Paul returned to his master, but also to argue that Paul wanted Philemon to set Onesimus free on his return. The work of McKeen may be cited as an example in this regard. McKeen (1848:28-29) argues as follows: It is indeed the case that Onesimus, a slave or a servant of Philemon, had fled to Paul who was imprisoned in Rome. Paul converted him to Christianity, and, due to Onesimus' piety and the friendship that developed between him and Paul, Paul advised him to return to Philemon, which Onesimus willingly did. However, Paul did not want him to go back to a state of slavery, but he expected Philemon to set him free. McKeen then applies this perspective as follows to his own situation: "What good man, what good abolitionist, now, would not rejoice to effect similar reconciliations, as to witness again such manifestations of the power of true religion?" (McKeen 1848:28).

A third strategy was to claim that, although Paul did not actually ask Philemon to set Onesimus free, this was what he hoped for and what he was hinting at. For example, Parry (1834:28) argues as follows: Paul shows the greatest respect for Philemon's feelings, and thus undertakes to compensate him for any losses. At the same time, it is also clear that Paul desired Onesimus to be set free, and that he hinted as much. The same should be true of Christianity: The freedom of slaves should not be commanded, but rather be something that is desired. Thus, the true spirit of Christianity should be one of philanthropy.

The above clearly shows how a particular view about Onesimus was used as part of an argumentative strategy, depending on the particular objective ("proving" that the Bible supported or opposed slavery) that the proponent had in mind. With the benefit of hindsight approximately two centuries later, we can clearly discern what was going on. The abolitionist debate highlighted the problematic results that could emerge from a literal reading of the Bible. The (often not so successful) strategies developed to argue that Paul did, in fact, want Philemon to set Onesimus free were manifestations of an uneasiness with a literal reading of Scripture, and the

first indications that scholars were trying to find a better way of reading the Bible. Barclay (2007:14) puts it so eloquently:

This is not quite a bypassing of explicit texts, in order to appeal to the more abstract “principles” of the Bible. This is rather a refusal to let slaves remain locked within the texts that speak about slaves, and to let them roam, as agents and as objects, across the whole biblical canon, under the labels “brother”/“sister” and “man”/“woman”, not under the label “slave”. It is this act of hermeneutical liberation (born of both religious and philosophical change) that turned out to be most significant for social reform – liberation from the very category “slave”.

4. ONESIMUS’ STATUS DISPUTED

For many centuries, there was, to some degree, consensus on Onesimus’ status. According to this “traditional view”,¹⁸ Onesimus was the slave of Philemon who had wronged him in some way or another and who then decided to flee. He met Paul in prison in Rome, where Paul converted him to Christianity and then sent him back to his owner. As noted in the previous section, some of the elements of this view were challenged during the abolitionist debate. During the twentieth century, several other possibilities were raised, not necessarily in order to advance a particular view on the ethical impact that the letter should have on Christianity, but rather to show that the tiny amount of information in the letter about Onesimus may very well fit other scenarios. I refer briefly to some of the views that have been proposed in this regard.

Knox (1935) rejects the view that Onesimus was Philemon’s slave. According to Knox, Onesimus was the slave of Archippus, and Philemon was the overseer of churches in the Lycus Valley. On their way back to Colossae, Tychikus and Onesimus would stay over with Philemon, and the letter was meant to persuade Philemon to exert pressure on Archippus to send Onesimus back to Paul to support him in his missionary endeavours. According to Knox, the letter achieved its purpose and Onesimus later became the bishop of Ephesus.

Lampe (1985:135-137) challenges the reason normally provided for Onesimus’ flight, namely that he simply wanted to get away from Philemon, as he was afraid of being punished. Lampe proposes that Onesimus deliberately fled to Paul because he did want to return to Philemon’s

18 For a more detailed overview of what follows, see Tolmie (2010:2-6).

household.¹⁹ Like other slaves of his time who had done something wrong, he thus went to a third party whom he thought would be able to intercede successfully on his behalf.

Winter (1987:1-15) challenges several elements of the traditional view. According to her, the letter was not directed to an individual, but was meant for the whole congregation. Furthermore, Onesimus did not run away, but was most likely sent to Paul by Archippus. The reason for Paul's letter was thus not to send Onesimus back home, but rather to request that he be released from his duties in Colossae so that he could assist Paul in his missionary work. Winter also believes that Paul wanted Onesimus to be manumitted.

Schenk (1987:3439-3495) also accepts that Onesimus did not flee from Philemon, but that he was sent to Paul by Philemon. Furthermore, he constructs a different view of the prehistory of the congregation to which Philemon belonged. At the time when Apphia, Archippus and others were converted to Christianity (according to Schenk, this probably happened in Pergamum), Philemon was still an enemy of the church and really made life difficult for them; this was true of Archippus. However, when Philemon was converted, his house came to be used as meeting place. At a later stage, Philemon sent Onesimus to Paul with news of a specific good deed.

Callahan (1993:357-376) challenges the notion that Philemon was a slave (like some of the abolitionists did). According to him, Onesimus was Philemon's physical brother, and verse 16a ("no longer as a slave, but more than a slave") does not refer to an actual, but to a virtual state of affairs, namely to Philemon's attitude towards his brother.

Like Lampe, Arzt-Grabner (2004:131-143) also challenges the notion that Onesimus was a *fugitivus*, but he does so in a different way. According to Arzt-Grabner, Onesimus did not flee on purpose, and it would be better to describe him as an *erro* (absconder), as somebody who liked leaving his master and wander about. This would imply that Onesimus had left his master's house at least once before.

Although not all of the suggestions are equally convincing, the net effect of such alternatives was that the scholarly community came to realise that there were many more uncertainties about these matters than had previously been realised. The gaps in the letter may indeed be filled

19 This is called the *amicus domini* hypothesis. For a slightly different view, see the work of Lokkesmoe (2015) who proposes the *amicus domini ex post facto* theory: Onesimus originally ran away from his master, and only at a much later stage decided to seek out Paul to intervene on his behalf.

in different ways! For the understanding of Onesimus, in particular, this meant that the totally negative picture that had, to some extent, attained canonical status in the history of interpretation had started to crumble. But had his voice been heard yet? Not really. It would take some time before this happened.

5. ONESIMUS AS A VICTIM: THE LETTER READ IN A RESISTANT WAY

In spite of the many differences that have been noted in the interpretations of the Letter to Philemon discussed above, they all share a similar attitude, namely their positive approach to the letter. One could say that the letter was read in a compliant way, in the sense that the interpretation of the letter develops, in a positive way, what was regarded as the core message of the letter. Occasionally some people reacted negatively to the letter. One such occasion is the response that Reverend Charles Colcock (a missionary) received in the 1840s from a group of slaves in Georgia when he preached to them on the letter:

I was preaching to a large congregation on the Epistle to Philemon; and when I insisted upon fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants, and, upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away, one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked anything but satisfied, either with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismissal, there was no small stir among them: some solemnly declared “that there was no such epistle in the Bible”; others, “that it was not the gospel”; others, “that I preached to please masters”; others, “that they did not care if they ever heard me preach again” (see Kreitzer 2008:81).

However, resistant reading of the text in the real sense of the word and supported by a sound theoretical basis only became possible much later, when postmodern approaches challenged the traditional modernist approach to the Bible that characterised biblical scholarship.²⁰ The newer approaches challenged the notion of objectivity that played a major role in biblical criticism, and emphasised new “lenses” whereby to view texts, for example by taking seriously the experience of people or groups that have traditionally been excluded from the academic interpretation of texts (Johnson *et al.* 2012:5). It was only because of this switch in perspective that Onesimus was really taken seriously for the first time, or – as it were

20 For an excellent overview of what all of this entailed, see Johnson *et al.* (2012:1-5).

– that his voice was truly heard for the first time. I illustrate this by briefly referring to four studies.

Bieberstein (2000:105) interprets the letter from a *feminist perspective*. As she points out, this implies that one should deliberately abandon interpreting the letter from the perspective of the victors and instead read it from the perspective of the victim, in this case, Onesimus. Among other things, Bieberstein (2000:115) argues that Paul never abandons the “logic of slavery” in the letter, but that a feminist reading of the letter can break open the notion of social normality created by the letter. One can thus creatively reconstruct the situation presupposed in it by reading the letter through the critical eyes of Apphia and deliberately seek “liberating alternatives” (Bieberstein 2000:116).

Botha (2010:252-272) reads the letter from the perspective of *bodilessness*, by exploring the “*materiality* of respect, love, care, responsibility, freedom” (Botha 2010:251; Botha’s emphasis). What Botha highlights in the case of the Letter to Philemon is the *absence* of such respect, although words used in the letter seem to indicate the contrary. This only becomes clear if one critically probes the principles and power relations underlying the letter. The basic problem that Botha identifies in the letter is the way in which the principles of hierarchy and obedience function:

Paul and Philemon belonged to a higher class than Onesimus; they belonged to a class “located above that of slaves and freedmen”. It was this principle of hierarchy which made possible the *givenness* of the language used in Phlm. To heed the message, to be persuaded by its language, would imply the affirmation of hierarchy, as well as acknowledgement of the practice of ownership and the principle of usefulness (Botha 2010:259; Botha’s emphasis) ... Underlying all of this is the hierarchical value system with a discourse of “more valuable” and “less valuable” bodies (Botha 2010:266).

Punt (2010:223-250) opts for a *postcolonial reading* strategy. Such an approach begins by acknowledging that the letter was written from the perspective of slaveholders; it concerns Onesimus, but his perspective is nowhere to be found in the letter (Punt 2010:225). Punt also draws attention to the way in which power functions in the letter in that Paul establishes himself as the “ultimate patron” of both Philemon and Onesimus (Punt 2010:237). Although Paul becomes Onesimus’ voice in the letter, this is not solely for Onesimus’ benefit as Paul also has his own interests in mind (Punt 2010:242); the letter increased his own patronage (Punt 2010:246):

While Paul's challenge was aimed at Philemon's authority and his position as the owner of Onesimus, Onesimus' voice remains silent throughout Phlm, although he took the initiative that led to the writing of the letter. Notwithstanding his physical location, and in addressing his own non-elite, freeborn "status anxiety", the only person who really emerged in a stronger social position than before was Paul! (Punt 2010:246).

The final example to which I wish to draw attention comes from a collection of essays significantly titled *Onesimus our brother. Reading religion, race and culture in Philemon*. The title of Matthew V. Johnson's essay (Johnson 2012:91-100) aptly summarises what he has in mind: "Onesimus speaks. Diagnosing the hys/terror of the text". He begins by noting that Christianity often has noble ideas, but that these should be tested by what happens in practice. For example, in the American context, the European Christians' sense of superiority was merely fostered and reinforced. Something similar happened in the interpretation of the Letter to Philemon. Onesimus was never taken as the starting point for interpreting the letter; only Paul's voice was heard. If one takes Onesimus' silence as point of departure, the letter is understood in a totally different way. For example, Onesimus' reason for leaving Philemon's house is then viewed as justified, as nobody has the right to enslave another human being. Even Paul's seemingly kind gestures in the letter are unmasked by the distinction he makes between spiritual slavery and physical slavery; his plea to Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother is nullified by the mere fact that he sends him back to his boss (Johnson 2012:91-96). As Johnson (2012:96, 97) puts it:

Unless and until Onesimus has an equal voice in the conversation, so to speak, he will not have even potential to be a brother ... Onesimus's voice must be silenced because of the nature of the threat it poses. The slave can be seen, used, discussed, tolerated but never heard.

6. CONCLUSION

We have now come to the end of our journey of almost two millennia. We have noted how, for the greatest part of this era, Onesimus was perceived as a culprit and that it was only very recently that this perception has been challenged. In the academia, Onesimus' voice only started being heard approximately twenty or thirty years ago. The reason why this took so long has also become clear: For too long interpreters of the Bible have been unaware of the extent to which their own social location has

influenced their reading of texts and often made it impossible for them to listen to the unheard voices in the Bible. What would Onesimus' message be nowadays if he could speak to us? Perhaps "Christianity saved my soul, but it could not liberate my body"? If so, the question that should torment us is: "How many other unheard voices in the church and society are still being silenced by and in Christianity today?"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ARZT-GRABNER, P.

2004. Onesimus *erro*: Zur Vorgeschichte des Philemonbriefes. *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95(1-2):131-143. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zntw.2004.003>

ATKINS, R.

2010. Contextual interpretation of the Letter to Philemon in the United States. In: D.F. Tolmie & A. Friedl (eds.), *Philemon in perspective. Interpreting a Pauline letter* (Berlin: De Gruyter, BZNV 169), pp. 205-222.

AVALOS, H.

2013. *Slavery, abolitionism, biblical scholarship*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press. The Bible in the Modern World 38.

BARCLAY, J.M.G.

2007. "Am I not a man and a brother?" The Bible and the British anti-slavery campaign. *Expository Times* 199(1):3-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524607082907>

BARNES, A.

1846. *An inquiry into the scriptural views of slavery*. Philadelphia, PA: Perkins & Purves.

BATEMAN, J.J. (Tr.)

1993. *Paraphrases on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, the Epistles of Peter and Jude, the Epistle of James, the Epistle of John, the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Collected Works of Erasmus 44.

BENDEL, J.A.

1742. *Gnomon Novi Testamenti in quo ex nativa verborum vi simplicitas, profunditas, concinnitas, salubritas sensuum coelestium indicatur opera Io. Alberti Bengelii*. Tübingen: Schramm.

BIEBERSTEIN, S.

2000. Disrupting the normal reality of slavery: A feminist reading of the Letter to Philemon. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 79:105-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X0102307909>

BOTHA, P.J.J.

2010. Hierarchy and obedience: The legacy of the Letter to Philemon. In: D.F. Tolmie & A. Friedl (eds.), *Philemon in perspective. Interpreting a Pauline letter* (Berlin: De Gruyter, BZNW 169), pp. 251-272.

BRAY, G.L. (Ed. & Tr.)

2009. *Commentaries on Galatians – Philemon: Ambrosiaster*. Downers Grove, ILL: IVP Academic. Ancient Christian Texts.

CALLAHAN, A.D.

1993. Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an alternative argumentum. *Harvard Theological Review* 86(4):357-376. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000030625>

CHAPMAN, M.D.

2007. The shortest book in the Bible. *Expository Times* 118(1):546-548. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524607081078>

DE HAMEL, C.

1987. *Glossed books of the Bible and the origins of the Paris booktrade*. Woodbridge/Wolfeboro, NH: D.S. Brewer.

DE WET, C.L.

2015. *Preaching bondage: John Chrysostom and the discourse of slavery in Early Christianity*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520286214.001.0001>

ERASMUS, D.

1961-1962. *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia emendatiora et auctiora, ad optimas editiones praecipue quas ipse Erasmus postremo curavit summa fide exacta, doctorumque uirorum notis illustrata: in decem tomos distincta, quorum primo, in hac editione, praefixa sunt elogia & epitaphia Erasmi, a uiris doctis conscripta, nec coniunctim unquam antea sic edita: cum indicibus totius operis copiosissimis*. Hildesheim: Olms.

FIELD, F. (Ed.)

1849-1862. *Sancti patris nostri Joannis Chrysostomi archiepiscopo Constantino-politani interpretatio omnium epistularum Paulinarum homilias facta* (7 vols). Oxford: J.H. Parker.

FITZGERALD, J.T.

2010. Theodore of Mopsuestia on Paul's Letter to Philemon. In: D.F. Tolmie & A. Friedl (eds.), *Philemon in perspective. Interpreting a Pauline letter* (Berlin: De Gruyter, BZNW 169), pp. 332-363.

FRITSCH, C.T.

1951. The interpreter at work. V. Bengel, the student of Scriptures. *Interpretation* 5(2):203-215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096435100500206>

FROELICH, K.

2010a. The *Glossa Ordinaria* and medieval preaching. In: K. Froehlich (ed.), *Biblical interpretation from the Church Fathers to the Reformation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, VCS), pp. 1-21.

2010b. Makers and takers: The shaping of the Biblical *Glossa Ordinaria*. In: K. Froehlich (ed.), *Biblical interpretation from the Church Fathers to the Reformation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, VCS), pp. III, 1-19.

FROELICH, K. & GIBSON, M.T. (EDS.)

1992. *Biblia Latina cum glossa ordinaria: Facs. reprint of the ed. princeps Adolph Rusch of Strassburg 1480/81. 4. Evangelia, Epistulae Pauli, Ad Hebraeos, Acta Apostolorum, Epistulae Catholicae, Apocalypsis Johannis*. Turnhout: Brepols.

GERBER, C.

2016. Onesimus, der Nützliche. Sklaverei in der Welt des Paulus. In: D. Marguerat (ed.), *La lettre à Philémon et l'ecclésiologie paulinienne/Philemon and Pauline ecclesiology* (Leuven: Peeters, Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum 22.), pp. 75-106.

GREER, R.A. (TR.)

2011. *Theodore of Mopsuestia: The commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul. Translated with an introduction*. Leiden: Brill. SBL Writings from the Greco-Roman World 26.

HARRILL, J.A.

2000. The use of the New Testament in the American slave controversy: A case history in the hermeneutical tension between Biblical criticism and Christian moral debate. *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 10(2):149-186. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rac.2000.10.2.03a00020>

HUNTER, D.G.

2009. 2008 NAPS presidential address: The significance of Ambrosiaster. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17(1):1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.0.0244>

JOHNSON, M.V.

2012. Onesimus speaks. Diagnosing the hys/terror of the text. In: M.V. Johnson, J.A. Noel & D.K. Williams (eds.), *Onesimus our brother. Reading religion, race, and culture in Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), pp. 91-100. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22nm7fd.8>

JOHNSON, M.V., NOEL, J.A. & WILLIAMS, D.K.

2012. Introduction. In: M.V. Johnson, J.A. Noel & D.K. Williams (eds.), *Onesimus our brother. Reading religion, race, and culture in Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), pp. 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22nm7fd>

KANNENGIESSER, C.

2006. *Handbook of Patristic exegesis: The Bible in ancient Christianity. With special contributions by various scholars*. Leiden/: Brill.

KELLY, J.N.D.

1995. *Golden mouth: The story of John Chrysostom – ascetic, preacher, bishop.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

KNOX, J.

1935. *Philemon among the letters of Paul: A new view of its place and importance.* Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press.

KREITZER, L.J.

2008. *Philemon.* Sheffield: Phoenix Press. Readings: A New Biblical Commentary.

LAMPE, P.

1985. Keine "Sklavenflucht" des Onesimus. *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76(1-2):135-137.

LOKKESMOE, R.

2015. Finding Onesimus. Recovering the story of a first-century fugitive slave. Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology, University of Denver.

McKEEN, S.

1848. *A scriptural argument in favor of withdrawing fellowship from churches and ecclesiastical bodies tolerating slaveholding among them.* New York: William Harned.

PARRY, T.

1834. *Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus, or, Christian brotherhood; being a practical exposition of St. Paul's Epistle to Philemon, applicable to the present crisis of West Indian affairs: In a discourse preached in St. John's Church, Antigua, on Sunday, December 29, 1833. With an appendix containing remarks on I. Education of the poor. II. Relief of the destitute.* London: J.G. & F. Rivington.

PUNT, J.

2010. Paul, power and Philemon. "Knowing your place": A postcolonial reading. In: D.F. Tolmie & A. Friedl (eds.), *Philemon in perspective. Interpreting a Pauline letter* (Berlin: De Gruyter, BZBW 169), pp. 223-250.

QUASTEN, J.

1960. *Patrology.* Vol. III. Utrecht/Westminster, MD: Spectrum/Newman.

SALOMON, D.A.

2012. *An introduction to the Glossa Ordinaria as medieval hypertext.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

SCHENK, W.

1987. Der Brief des Paulus an Philemon in der neueren Forschung (1945-1987). *ANRW* II.25.4:3439-3495. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110851373-016>

SMALLEY, B.

1984. *The study of the Bible in the Middle Ages.* Oxford: Blackwell.

SMITH, L.

2009. *The Glossa Ordinaria: The making of a Medieval Bible commentary*. Brill Academic Publishers. Commentaria 3. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004177857.i-270>

THOMPSON, A.J.

2011. *Bengel, Johann Albrecht*. *EBR* 3:844-845.

TOLMIE, D.F.

2010. Tendencies in the research on the Letter to Philemon since 1980. In: D.F. Tolmie & A. Friedl (eds.), *Philemon in perspective. Interpreting a Pauline letter* (Berlin: De Gruyter, BZNW 169), pp. 1-27. BZNW 169. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110221749.1>

VOGELS, H.J. (ED.)

1968. *Ambrosiastri qvi dicitvr commentarivs in epistvlas Pavlinas III: In epistvlas ad Galatas, ad Efesios, ad Filippenses, ad Colosenses, ad Thesalonicenses, ad Timothevm, ad Titvm, ad Filemonem*. Wien: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky. CSEL 81/3.

WILLIAMS, D.K.

2012. "No longer a slave": Reading the interpretation history of Paul's Epistle to Philemon. In: J.A. Noel & M.V. Johnson (eds.), *Onesimus our brother. Reading religion, race, and culture in Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), pp. 11-46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22nm7fd.5>

WINTER, S.C.

1987. Paul's Letter to Philemon. *New Testament Studies* 33:1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500016027>

Keywords

Onesimus

Philemon

Interpretation

Trefwoorde

Onesimus

Filemon

Interpretasie