

DISRUPTING THE NORMAL REALITY OF SLAVERY:
A FEMINIST READING OF THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

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Like many other New Testament texts, Paul's letter to Philemon is connected with a long history of Christian guilt. As with the household codes, Philemon too has been misused in order to stabilize systems of domination that despise human beings, and to keep slaves enslaved. This letter was used in an especially terrible way in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a quarry for arguments against the struggle of African American slaves to attain liberation and human dignity.¹

This lends added urgency to the question of how we are to handle this text today. Four basic principles guide the feminist approach that is set out in this essay.

First, one may neither prolong nor suppress the history of guilt that is linked to the exposition of Philemon. We must abandon the perspective of the history written by Christian victors, making visible the history of injustice and offering a critical reflection on this history.

Second, one must make a distinction between this *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the analysis of the function of Philemon in the context of classical slavery, which in turn is to be seen within the patriarchal

1. Cf., e.g., Clarice J. Martin, 'The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: "Free Slaves" and "Subordinate Women"', in Cain Hope Felder (ed.), *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 206-31 (esp. 213-18); Lloyd A. Lewis, 'An African American Appraisal of the Philemon-Paul-Onesimus Triangle', in the same volume, pp. 232-46.

system of domination.² When we abandon the victors' perspective, it becomes possible to see the struggle for survival of those men, women and children within the dominant system of the Pax Romana. Here we must ask what visions are contained within the text.

Third, this change of perspective allows us to perceive the 'case' of the slave Onesimus, which is dealt with in the letter, as one of those 'extreme cases' in which, according to Walter Benjamin,³ reality is revealed and the truth becomes visible and known. For no matter what the precise facts of the affair of the slave Onesimus may be, it brings about a rupture in the normal reality of slavery. This disruption challenges an entire Christian house community to confront this question and redefine the liberating message of the gospel in the light of this question, in order to find a credible way of treating the Christian slave Onesimus, in the tension between that liberating message and the slavery that society accepted as the 'normal case'.

Fourth, a feminist analysis of Philemon finds it exceptionally significant that a woman, Apphia, is summoned as witness precisely in this 'test case' of liberating praxis; this is something unique in the Pauline corpus. Alongside the first addressee, Philemon himself, she is mentioned and addressed as the one who receives the letter, together with a man, Archippus, and an entire house community. This breaks open the exclusive antithesis of two men, Philemon and Paul, which is constructed in the body of the letter; for the letter is read aloud as it were in public, and it must meet Apphia's critical judgment. This can prove a fruitful hermeneutical key for a feminist reading.

In this essay, I shall develop these four aspects. They will be the starting point for a demonstration of the relevance of studying this letter.

2. On the basis of studies by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Christine Schaumberger, Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, I have set out a nuanced understanding of patriarchy in Sabine Bieberstein, *Verschwiegene Jüngerinnen—vergessene Zeuginnen: Gebrochene Konzepte im Lukasevangelium* (NTOA, 38; Freiburg/Switzerland: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), p. 22 and n. 82.

3. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in W. Benjamin, *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften*, I (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 251-61.

The 'Problem': Aspects of the History of Exegesis

The letter deals with a problem that is challenging the house community to act. The precise definition of this problem is closely linked with the history of guilt. Definition is, however, difficult, since neither the problem nor the initial question is ever clearly mentioned and described anywhere in the letter. Both the writer and the addressees know what is at issue, but our only hope of decoding the 'black box' is the indirect path of analysing the strategies that are proposed as solutions to the problem. This explains the variety of scholarly interpretations of the problem and intention of the letter.⁴

Traditionally, the indications in v. 14 about a separation and the intense pleas for the slave to be received back have led to the conclusion that Onesimus was a *fugitivus*, that is a runaway slave who had sought refuge with Paul, hoping that the apostle would plead with his master Philemon for him. The obligation that Paul imposes on himself in vv. 18-19 has led to the additional (or alternative)⁵ hypothesis that Onesimus had stolen money before his flight, or incurred some other kind of guilt, so that his master had incurred not only the loss of a worker, but the loss of his property by theft.⁶

This interpretation acquires force from the legal understanding of the flight of slaves in the classical period as a crime that must be prevented, one that must also be punished as a deterrent to other slaves. It is well known that a whole series of public and private measures existed to effect the capture of runaway slaves, and no limits were set to the owners' punishment. The runaways might seek refuge in special places such as sanctuaries, and we have evidence of the successful intercession

4. On what follows, cf. Sabine Bieberstein, 'Der Brief an Philemon. Brieflektüre unter den kritischen Augen Aphias', in Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (eds.), *Kompendium feministische Bibelauslegung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), pp. 676-82 (esp. 678-79). Detailed bibliography in Wolfgang Schenk, 'Der Brief des Paulus an Philemon in der neueren Forschung', *ANRW*, II/25.4, pp. 3439-95.

5. Cf. Peter Lampe, 'Keine "Sklavenflucht" des Onesimus', *ZNW* 76 (1985), pp. 135-37.

6. For a discussion of variants in the traditional model of scholarly consensus, and of other explanatory models of the letter which have been proposed, see, e.g., Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an Philemon* (ÖTK, 12; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), pp. 227-35.

of a friend of a slave-owner on behalf of one such *fugitivus*.⁷

This interpretation of the letter as Paul's intercession for a *fugitivus* made it possible for past interpreters to use Philemon as 'proof' that slaves who ran away were behaving in an un-Christian manner—for after Onesimus had become a Christian, he recognized his 'responsibility' and returned voluntarily to his status as a slave. This interpretation had disastrous consequences, above all in societies like North America which kept slaves.⁸ It also prolonged the injustice done to slaves, since it completely adopted the perspective of the owners: Onesimus was declared a criminal, and thus written off.⁹

Sara C. Winter¹⁰ has taken up a thesis proposed by John Knox in 1935, and has argued vigorously as a feminist and liberation theologian against this interpretation, by pointing out that it is impossible on these terms to explain how a *fugitivus* could have stayed in prison with Paul; we are in fact nowhere told explicitly that Onesimus was a *fugitivus*. A major argument is the incompatibility between the traditional interpretation and the thanksgiving (vv. 4-7), which introduces the principal themes of the letter. Paul is not pleading on behalf of Onesimus; rather, he is asking for Onesimus, whom Archippus—the principal addressee of the letter, and Onesimus's master—has sent to Paul in prison on community business (like Epaphroditus in Phil. 2.25-30). Now Paul wants to keep him on a permanent basis, not as a personal servant (as v. 13 is usually understood to mean), but as a fellow-worker for the gospel.

Winter's interpretation does indeed prevent the kind of misuse of Philemon that I have presented, but it cannot explain why a *non-*

7. Cf. Pliny the Younger to Sabinianus (*Letters* 9.21), during the reign of Trajan (98–117 CE).

8. Cf. Sara C. Winter, 'Philemon', in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, II (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 302.

9. Examples of this line of interpretation are given by Clarice J. Martin, 'The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul's Letter to Philemon (Verse 18)', in Duane Watson (ed.), *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honour of George A. Kennedy* (JSNTSup, 50; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), pp. 321–37 (esp. 330–32); see also the studies cited in n. 1 above.

10. In the following three studies: 'Methodological Observations on a New Testament Interpretation of Paul's Letter to Philemon', *USQR* 39 (1984), pp. 203–12; 'Paul's Letter to Philemon', *NTS* 33 (1987), pp. 1–15; 'Philemon' (n. 8 above), pp. 301–12.

Christian slave should have been sent on community business, one moreover who is described as *useless* (v. 11). Besides this, classical parallels make it clear that the *sending back* of Onesimus (v. 12) must be read as the technical term for returning runaway slaves.¹¹

While we may admit that neither view is capable of explaining all the aspects of the letter, the hypothesis that Philemon is written against the background of the flight of a slave seems more probable. In either case, however, Paul is acting *within* the system of slavery, as we see both in his use of the terminology dealing with slaves which I have set out above, and from the fact that he does not infringe upon Philemon's authority to dispose of his slave.

Struggles for Survival within the Dominating System of the Pax Romana

This last aspect reminds us of the socio-political circumstances under which the communities of believers in Christ lived. They were part of the Jewish minority, firmly inserted into the system of domination of the Pax Romana with its specific structures of power and of values, which included the division of society into free and unfree persons. Paul's struggles in 1 Cor. 7.7-14 or Rom. 12-13, and professions of faith such as 1 Cor. 12.13 or Gal. 3.26-28, show the extent of the challenge that the communities faced when the message of the gospel confronted this societal order.

Paul himself had come into conflict with the civil forces of order, and therefore sat in prison when he wrote to Philemon (vv. 1, 9-10, 13, 23).¹² This fact suffices to put an end to our perceiving Paul from the

11. Cf. the following three studies by Peter Arzt: 'Brauchbare Sklaven. Ausgewählte Papyrustexte zum Philemonbrief', *Protokolle zur Bibel* 1 (1992), pp. 44-58; ' "...einst unbrauchbar, jetzt aber gut brauchbar" (Phlm 11). Das Problem der Sklaverei bei Paulus', in Kuno Füssel and Franz Segbers (eds.), '...so lernen die Völker des Erdkreises Gerechtigkeit': Ein Arbeitsbuch zu Bibel und Ökonomie (Lucerne: Edition Exodus, 1995), pp. 132-38 (esp. 136); 'Das Salzburger Forschungsprojekt "Analyse der Paulusbrieve auf dem Hintergrund dokumentarischer Papyri"', in Michael Ernst et al. (eds.), *Die Wüste spricht: Papyri der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek. Katalog zur Ausstellung* (Salzburg: Verlag für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, 1996), pp. 30-34 (esp. 34).

12. On the significance of Paul's imprisonments for the interpretation of his letters and especially for a new evaluation of his theology of justification, see Elsa Tamez, *Gegen die Verurteilung zum Tod: Paulus oder die Rechtfertigung durch*

perspective of the western Christian victors' history; rather, he was on the side of the powerless, inextricably woven into the history of the Jewish losers in the Roman empire.¹³ He does not speak from a position of power: his work for the gospel belongs to the survival strategies of a small and oppressed minority within the Pax Romana. The letter to Philemon is generated by the struggle to achieve a new way of dealing with the slave Onesimus, and this struggle bears witness to those communities' search for areas of autonomous action within a dominating system that was supported *inter alia* by making human beings slaves.

Fissures in the Normality of Slavery

As I have indicated, the 'case' of Onesimus causes some fissures to appear precisely in this system of slavery. His flight—or, if we follow Sara Winter's interpretation, the simple fact of his membership in the Christian community—makes suddenly visible the dominant normality of slavery, which it brings to a boundary, so to speak, by exposing the glaring discrepancy between his situation as a slave and the common Christian terminology of 'brothers and sisters', which is based on the liberating message of the gospel.

Few questions had been asked until this point about the fact that this society owned slaves, but now a crack appears in the structures of plausibility, allowing the question of alternatives to be posed for the first time. A challenge is issued to Paul (and to an entire house community of believers in Christ) to seek within the dominant system of slavery for solutions that accord with the liberating message of the gospel, as this is expressed, for example, in such professions of faith as Gal. 3.26-28 or 1 Cor. 12.13. Thus the case of the slave Onesimus becomes a litmus test of liberating praxis based on the gospel, requiring the Christian communities to find a path along the boundaries between two worlds,

den Glauben aus der Perspektive der Unterdrückten und Ausgeschlossenen (Lucerne: Edition Exodus, 1998), pp. 67-71.

13. See Brigitte Kahl, 'Der Brief an die Gemeinden in Galatien. Vom Unbehagen der Geschlechter und anderen Problemen des Andersseins', in Schottroff and Wacker (eds.), *Kompendium* (n. 4 above), pp. 603-604; Claudia Janssen, 'Paulus. Grenzgänge zwischen Traditionen und Zeiten', in Claudia Janssen, Ute Ochtendung and Beate Wehn (eds.), *GrenzgängerInnen: Unterwegs zu einer anderen biblischen Theologie. Ein feministisch-theologisches Lesebuch* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1999), pp. 54-56.

the world of the socially accepted 'normal case' of slavery, and the world of the gospel praxis of resistance.

Reading Philemon in Public

The Pauline corpus constructs a situation of communication 'from man to man' which is broken open in the address and conclusion of Philemon, by means of the communities that these passages evoke. This tells us something fundamental about the manner in which Paul attempts to develop his own solution. Already v. 1 makes it plain that this letter is not written by Paul alone; just as Paul names co-authors in all his letters (apart from Romans), so here Timothy is presented as co-author. The circle of those involved in the letter is enlarged in a similar way at its close, when five senders of greetings are mentioned (vv. 23-24). The letter is not addressed to one person alone: alongside Philemon, who is named first, Paul addresses a woman named Apphia¹⁴ and a man named Archippus, as well as an entire house community (v. 2) to which Paul refers again at the close of the letter when he formulates his blessing in the plural (v. 25). Paul does not relate Apphia or Archippus to Philemon by means of any terms designating family or dependence;¹⁵ he employs autonomous descriptions for them, 'sister' and 'fellow soldier'. Thus we have the picture of one addressee, Philemon, with two independent witnesses given their places beside him; these in turn are picked out from the larger circle of addressees (viz., the house community) which is mentioned next.

This involvement of the communities establishes a public. All of them are affected by the problem of receiving Onesimus, which is discussed in the letter, and this public dimension removes the problem from the private sphere of an 'issue' to be settled between Paul and Philemon. This public functions as a counterweight to the 'you' (singular) to whom the letter is addressed from v. 4 onwards; it is most probable that this 'you' is the Philemon whose name is the first to be mentioned.¹⁶ Thus, the letter is read before the public from the start,

14. For a thorough treatment of the figure of Apphia, see Martin Leutzsch, 'Apphia, Schwester!', in Dorothee Sölle (ed.), *Für Gerechtigkeit streiten: Theologie im Alltag einer bedrohten Welt* (Festschrift for Luise Schottroff; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), pp. 76-82; Bieberstein, 'Philemon', pp. 677-78.

15. On this, cf. Winter, 'Paul's Letter', p. 1.

16. A different view is taken by Winter, 'Paul's Letter', p. 3. She identifies Archippus, mentioned third, as the addressee.

and it must stand up to the critical judgment of this public.

At the same time, this public can be understood as the already-realized model of a new kind of mutual relationship, which the letter invokes at its beginning and its conclusion. This is indicated by the terms '*fellow worker*', '*fellow prisoner*' and '*fellow soldier*', but especially by the use of '*brother*' and '*sister*' to address Timothy and Apphia at the beginning, and Philemon in the body of the letter (vv. 7, 20). This self-designation of the members of the communities of Jesus Christ as siblings points at least to a programme formulating egalitarian structures of relationship independent of rank, status and gender (cf. Gal. 3.26-29). These are not a matter of course; it is necessary to work hard to achieve what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has called this 'community of equal followers'. This becomes obvious in the letter to Philemon, not with reference to women, but with reference to the slave Onesimus, who has become a Christian and wishes to be accepted as a 'beloved brother' (v. 16), something that obviously is not taken for granted. This description consciously juxtaposes two elements that have already been used to describe Philemon himself (vv. 1, 7), so that the new relationship between the two men, which Paul demands, is already indicated in this passage.

The Community as Public: A Counterweight to the State as Public

This public dimension of the community functions as a counterweight not only to the private sphere between Paul and Philemon, but also vis-à-vis the public dimension of state and society, which not merely accepted slavery as the normal state of affairs, but in fact required for its own maintenance a system that divided the population into free and unfree persons. In this way, the network of the fellowship of those who believe in Christ becomes a 'counter-culture'. While the state sanctions the public pursuit of runaway or criminal slaves, this fellowship offers a space in which it is possible to cultivate other kinds of behaviour.

However, the specific praxis of this fellowship is never explicitly stated. As has been argued above, the extensive use of family language (brother/sister, father/child, begetting...) can be read as evidence that a new model of mutual relationships had already been realized in this fellowship; at the same time, the manner in which this terminology is employed makes it clear that language always serves as an instrument,

either to maintain social realities or to create new ones.¹⁷ This requires an explanation.

Language as an Instrument for the Creation of Social Realities

The intensity and vigour of the argumentation increases throughout the letter, from the initial exhortation (vv. 4-6) via the argument (vv. 8-16) to the epilogue (vv. 17-22).¹⁸ Thus, Paul draws an extremely positive picture of Philemon in the initial exhortation, but the individual traits are shaped in such a manner that they can serve the further development of his argument, in the sense that Philemon is now required to live up to this positive picture. The themes of 'prayer' (v. 4), 'love' (vv. 5, 7), 'fellowship' (v. 6), 'the good' (v. 6) and 'refreshing the heart' (v. 7), which are introduced in the thanksgiving section, are all taken up again later on in the letter, developed and made the object of concrete demands.

Paul begins to present his main concern from v. 8 onwards, but he does so in such a way that—as with the problem that led to the composition of the letter—one can infer it only indirectly. Although Paul says that he is entitled to issue commands (v. 8), and refers to his age (v. 9) and his imprisonment on behalf of Christ (vv. 9-10, 13) in such a way that it is surely difficult to resist his authority, he chooses instead to make a request (v. 9) with reference to the slave Onesimus; this, however, is not formulated in precise terms. Nevertheless, when this section closes with the affirmation that Philemon is to receive Onesimus back, no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother, both in the 'flesh' and in the 'Lord' (v. 16), this must be interpreted as a demand for a relationship as equals between the (former) slave and the (former) master. When Paul argues in support of his aim, he not only increases the emotional pressure, but also undergirds his plea by means of terminology drawn from the family: he compares his relationship to Onesimus with that between father and son (vv. 10-13), and calls the new relationship that is to be achieved between Philemon and Onesimus a relationship between brothers (v. 16), presenting himself as a model in his own brotherly attitude to Onesimus. The background to this family terminology must be seen in the de facto unity between 'brothers and sisters' in the Christian communities; its consistent application here means that Onesimus is fully integrated into this fellowship,

17. Cf. Lewis, 'African American Appraisal', pp. 234-35.

18. This is analysed in detail by Bieberstein, 'Philemon', pp. 679-81.

so that it is no longer possible to look on him as a slave.

In the demand he makes in v. 17, introducing the epilogue (vv. 17-22), Paul makes a further link between Onesimus and his own person, and the continuation of the text shows that this has a very concrete basis: Paul is willing to pay for any damage that Onesimus may have caused to Philemon. At the same time, he emphasizes that Philemon in turn 'owes' himself to Paul, that is, he draws Philemon into the creditor-debtor relationship with himself. The economic terminology used in this section—the relationship between Paul and Philemon is described as one between 'business partners', involving debts and their payment—forbids us to spiritualize Paul's expectations of Philemon, pointing instead to the economic aspect of the situation. The manumission of a male or female slave makes sense only when their material livelihood is assured. This too may be envisaged, when Paul demands that Philemon take on Onesimus as 'business partner': Philemon must show a greater degree of responsibility than that implied in the 'mere' manumission of his slave.¹⁹ Verses 20-21 intensify the appeal. Verse 20 speaks once again of the 'heart', addressing the emotional level, while v. 21 already counts openly on Philemon's obedience. According to v. 22, Paul is even willing to inspect personally what Philemon has done in this matter.

We may sum up as follows: it is above all the consistent integration of Onesimus into family terminology and the close link between what happens to him and the person of Paul that prescribe social regulations that serve as a boundary from which the recipients of the letter cannot retreat. Once again, we see that language is an instrument, not only for depicting social realities, but also for maintaining these or creating new realities.

*Breaking Open the Continuum of History:
Relating the History of the Forgotten Ones*

Studying Philemon today also means 'breaking open the continuum of history',²⁰ changing one's perspective so that history is no longer related as the story of the rulers, but is told anew as the story of the victims. For

19. Cf. Arzt, "'...einst unbrauchbar'", pp. 137-38.

20. Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff', p. 259.

one must attempt in every epoch anew to wrest the tradition from the grip of the conformity that threatens to overwhelm it... Only the historian who is pervaded by the conviction that even the dead will not be safe from the grasp of the enemy, if he is victorious—and he has not ceased to be victorious!—has the inner gift of kindling in what is past the spark of hope.²¹

Philemon is a suitable example of this change of perspective because its centre is the story of one of these victims, so that it makes visible one of the forgotten ones. It is indeed true that the 'case' of Onesimus is still dealt with as an individual matter, and to a certain extent the letter does not abandon the logic of slavery. Paul does not question the calculations of profitability; he does not condemn slavery as such; and he always negotiates *about* Onesimus, without letting him appear as an autonomous person (perhaps with the exception of v. 16). But, as Walter Benjamin has said, it is precisely an individual case that can let us see reality as a whole. This means that the contribution of a feminist liberation-theological reading of the letter would be to use this individual case to uncover systems that hold human beings in contempt, and to recall the victims; to tell the history of those who have remained without a voice and a memorial, instead of continuing to write the victors' history.

Precisely here, where social normality is broken open, the letter to Philemon summons a woman, Apphia, as witness. She brings before our eyes the relational structure of the early communities of believers in Christ, where a new relationship to the slave Onesimus is now being sought. Paul has so much confidence in this relational network within a house community that he makes use of it in order to achieve his goal and to evoke the model of a different reality. This allows us to perceive that he too is integrated into these relational networks—a corrective to the image of Paul (often still dominant) as the great solitary figure of early Christianity.²²

21. Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff', p. 253.

22. Cf. Luise Schottroff, 'Auf dem Weg zu einer feministischen Rekonstruktion der Geschichte des frühen Christentums', in Luise Schottroff, Silvia Schroer, and Marie-Theres Wacker (eds.), *Feministische Exegese: Forschungserträge zur Bibel aus der Perspektive von Frauen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), pp. 206-209 (ET, *Feminist Interpretation: The Bible in Women's Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998]); Janssen, 'Paulus', pp. 52-54.

If we take one step further in the direction of a creative reconstruction of women's history, we can see Apphia, named at the beginning of the letter, as active in this relational network, speaking out vigorously against the structures of slavery which know only contempt for human beings and create strait-jackets from which it is almost impossible for individuals to escape. Apphia sees to it that the uncomfortable topics of justice and liberation are not overlooked, nor those without voices forgotten. If we 'read the letter with Apphia's critical eyes',²³ it is possible to break open false constraints and look for liberating alternatives. This can help us, not only to alter our androcentric patterns of perceiving the 'Pauline communities' and to see the variety of women and men with their stories and their struggles, but also to take the Christian communities down to the present day more seriously as networks and responsible fellowships. Their task, in an existential reality which is as complicated today as it was in the past, is to take decisions, to raise their voices in society and to remind people even of uncomfortable topics. Thus they will prevent the concerns of minorities and the weak from being forgotten under pressure from the constraints of daily living.

ABSTRACT

The letter to Philemon shows the struggle of communities of believers in Christ to find areas in which they could act within the dominating system of the Pax Romana. The enslavement of human beings was one of the supports of this system, and the 'case' of the slave Onesimus brings about a rupture in the normality of slavery, making clear the discrepancy between slavery and the liberating message of the gospel. The letter creates a critical public which becomes the guarantee of a new mutual relationship between slaves and free persons. Our concern today must be to use such individual cases to unmask systems that show contempt for human beings, and to tell the story of the victims.

23. Cf. Bieberstein, 'Philemon', pp. 676-82.

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