

6. Paul's Letter to Philemon

I. Introduction

The shortest letter in the Pauline corpus

A letter by our standards, a note by Paul's standards

The next shortest in the Pauline corpus is Titus, with three chapters. The next shortest among the undisputed letters is the four-chapter letter to the Philippians.

The only shorter texts in the New Testament are 2 John (13 verses) and 3 John (15 verses).

A captivity letter

The opening of the letter (v. 1)

The third person greeting: Epaphras, Paul's fellow prisoner, Mark, Aristarchus, and Luke say hello (v. 23).

I need a room when I get out (v. 22).

A note on imprisonment in Greco-Roman society: Imprisonment is not a punishment.

Slavery in the Greco-Roman world

The Greco-Roman world was one of the five slave cultures in the history of humankind.

Ways in which a person became a slave:

Born into slavery

Sold into slavery

Captured in war

Opted for slavery

Differences between slavery in the Greco-Roman world and in the eighteenth and nineteenth century U.S.:

Economic possibilities

Social and political possibilities

An option to leave slavery

The amicus domini

5) The prevalence of slavery, a major factor in Greco-Roman society D) Paul's use of kinship language, adelphos (1,7, 16, 20), and adelphi
Paul's use of adelphos language in 1,7, 16, 20 has an important function in the rhetorical strategy of Paul's letter to Philemon.

Other kinship terms used by Paul: father, mother, son, children

3) The social setting of Paul's use of kinship language

II. The Opening of the Letter

The sender(s): Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother

"Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house"

The rhetorical impact of the epithets

The house church

C) The greeting: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"

III. The Argument

The thanksgiving, a captatio benevolentiae (vv. 4-7)

The plea

Paul's child

A pun, the play on the name of Onesimus

Your brother C) The economic argument

D) A plea or a command?

Review Questions

How was slavery in Paul's Greco-Roman society different from the slavery in the history of the United States?

Who was Onesimus?

3. What is so striking about Paul's use of kinship language in the Letter to Philemon?