

## PHILEMON

### Authenticity:

Virtually no one (conservative or liberal) doubts the Pauline authorship of Philemon. The notable exception is Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860), founder of the so-called ‘Tübingen School’ (university in Germany), whose application of the idealistic philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) caused him to re-write the history of the entire New Testament and early Christian church as the story of dialectical tension (thesis [Peter and Jewish Christianity] + antithesis [Paul and Gentile Christianity] = synthesis [John and ‘early catholicism’]) reaching its developmental or evolutionary climax at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D (gospel of John written at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century).

### Canonicity:

The 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian heretic, Marcion († ca. 154 A.D.), listed Philemon in his reduced NT canon (Marcion rejected the entire OT and accepted only parts of the NT based on his radical disjunction between the law and the gospel). Here is the remark from the great patristic anti-Marcionite, Tertullian (ca. 160-225 A.D.) of Carthage: “To this epistle alone did its brevity avail to protect it against the falsifying hands of Marcion. I wonder, however, when he received . . . this letter which was written but to one man, that he rejected the two epistles to Timothy and the one to Titus . . .” (*Against Marcion*, 5.21 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:473).

The famous Muratorian Fragment (ca. 170 A.D.) lists Philemon among the authentic and universally accepted epistles of Paul: “Even though he [Paul] writes the seven churches, he speaks to all. But he wrote out of affection and love, one to Philemon, one to Titus, two to Timothy and these are held sacred in the honorable esteem of the church catholic.”

### Tools:

The paradigm shift in the study of Philemon occurred in Norman Petersen’s, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul’s Narrative World* (1985). Peterson explored the narrative of the epistle in order to unlock the related socio-theology. While reducing Paul to a 20<sup>th</sup> century social activist (in part), Petersen nonetheless placed the focus on the story inherent in the letter.

Best popular commentary for the lay-reader: none that I am able to recommend at this point.

Best conservative commentary for the pastor: John Nordling, *Philemon* (2004). Conservative Lutheran (Concordia Series) so beware of the sacramental impositions on the text; otherwise, very helpful. Cf. more at “Preaching Resources” at [nwts.edu](http://nwts.edu)—click “List of Bible Commentaries”.

Latest critical study of the letter: D. Francois Tolmie, ed. *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (2010). Some superb articles by Jeffrey Weima and Ernst Wendland as well as other valuable reflections. Marred by several trendy, social activist, eisegetical studies (reading Paul through modern politically correct lenses). Very expensive—get a copy via inter-library loan. But do not neglect it—it is essential reading!

A. Assessing what we know about this epistle

1. Where was Paul when he wrote it?
  - a. How do you know?
  - b. What other letters are thought to have been written by Paul in these circumstances?
2. To whom was it written?
3. About whom was it written?
4. What seems to be the subject of Paul's letter?

B. Assessing the form or structure of this letter

1. Notice vv. 1-3. What part of a letter would you call this?  
Compare this with Col. 1:1-2; Phil. 1:1-2; Eph. 1:1-2
2. Notice how v. 4 begins. What would you call this section?  
Compare this with Col. 1:3; Phil. 1:3; Eph. 1:16
3. The bulk of Paul's remarks are found in vv. 8-20. What would you call this section of the letter?
4. Paul ends in v. 25. What would you call this section?  
Compare Col. 4:18; Phil. 4:23; Eph. 6:24

C. Consider the structure of the letter in another way.

1. List the personal names of humans in vv. 1-2.
2. How many are there?
3. What do they have in common?
4. List the personal names of humans in vv. 23-24.

5. How many are there?
6. What do they have in common?
7. List the words in v. 3 which also appear in v. 25.

Now fill in the following outline:

vv. 1-3

\_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_

(NAMES) (PHRASE)

vv. 23-25

\_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_

(NAMES) (PHRASE)

The pattern of beginning and ending a work in the same way is called an \_\_\_\_\_.

Why does Paul bracket or envelop his epistle in this manner?

D. Examine the distribution of the names of Christ in the epistle

v. 1 \_\_\_\_\_

v. 3 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

v. 23 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

v. 25 \_\_\_\_\_

This pattern is called a \_\_\_\_\_.

What/Who is the point of or focus of the chiasm?

Why is the Lordship of Christ pivotal to this epistle?

E. Notice the distribution of Christological titles/names elsewhere in the epistle.

v. 5 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

v. 6 \_\_\_\_\_

v. 8 \_\_\_\_\_

v. 9 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

v. 16 \_\_\_\_\_

In the body of the letter, the focus is on \_\_\_\_\_.

Paul uses two of his favorite Christological phrases in this epistle.

v. 8 \_\_\_\_\_ (see ἐν Χριστῷ [*en Christō*], vv. 20 and 23)

v. 16 \_\_\_\_\_ (see ἐν κυρίῳ, [*en kyriō*], v. 20)

What is the sense of “in” in these two phrases?

Thus, the focus of the letter is centered \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_.