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You More than Owe Me This Benefit: Onomastic Rhetoric in Philemon

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YOU MORE THAN OWE ME THIS BENEFIT: ONOMASTIC RHETORIC IN PHILEMON

Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: Wordplay and punning involving the names Philemon (Φιλήμων, “affectionate one”) and Onesimus (Ονήσιμος, “useful”) and their meanings, with concomitant paronomasia involving the name-title Χριστός (Christos) and various homonymic terms, constitutes a key element in Paul’s polite, diplomatic, and carefully-worded letter to Philemon, the Christian owner of a converted slave named Onesimus. Paul artfully uses Philemon’s own name to play on the latter’s affections and to remind him that despite whatever Onesimus may owe (ὀφείλει, opheilei) Philemon, Philemon more than owes (προσοφείλεις, prosopheileis) his very self — i.e., his life as a Christian and thus his eternal wellbeing — to Paul. Hence, Philemon “more than owes” Paul his request to have Onesimus — who was once “useless” or “unprofitable” and “without Christ,” but is now “profitable” and “well-in-Christ” — as a fellow worker in the Gospel. In a further (polyptotonic) play on Onesimus, Paul expresses his urgent desire to “have the benefit” (ὀναίμην, onaimēn) of Onesimus in the Lord out of Philemon’s own free will and with his blessing, since all three are now brothers in Christ, and thus slaves to Christ, their true “master.” In the context of Paul’s use of –χρηστός (–chrēstos) and ὀναίμην (onaimēn), Paul’s desire for Philemon’s voluntary “good deed” or “benefit” (τὸ ἀγαθὸν σου, to agathon sou) is to be understood as the granting of Onesimus and as the point and climax of this publicly-read letter.

As one of the shortest texts in the New Testament and the Bible as a whole, Paul’s letter to Philemon is something of an enigma that has troubled exegetes for almost two millennia due to its “deferential and circumspect” diction.¹ Paul wrote this brief letter to a Christian slaveholder, Philemon, who hosted a church congregation in his house (Philemon 1:2) at Colossae and who was himself an associate of Paul’s.²

1 See J. Albert Harrill, “Philemon, Letter to” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 497.

2 Ibid., 497-499. Paul and Philemon’s relationship is described as a *koinōnia*, a “partnership” (Philemon 1:6, 17) which has strong ecclesiastical and even

Paul wrote this letter concerning Philemon's possibly escaped³ slave Onesimus⁴ whom the apostle Paul had converted.

John Paul Heil argues⁵ on the basis of structure that verse 14 is the key to the whole letter: "But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly" (κην); or, "But I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed [benefit] might be voluntary and not something forced" (NRSV). Heil further states that Paul's motive is that he "wants Philemon to give his former slave Onesimus back to Paul as a beloved brother and fellow worker for the Gospel of Jesus Christ," because of Philemon's "faithful love" for the saints "as a beloved brother and fellow worker of Paul."⁶ In his attempt to persuade Philemon, Paul cleverly employs a nexus of onomastic puns involving the meanings and sounds of the names "Philemon" (Φιλήμων) "Onesimus" (Ονήσιμος) and "Christ" (Χριστός). The genius of the apostle's rhetorical approach is evident when each instance of wordplay is examined.

In this short study, I will examine each instance of onomastic wordplay (puns on names) in the Greek text of the letter. The artful, circumspect rhetoric of Paul's letter can be more fully appreciated when this onomastic wordplay is recognized in its variety and its implications are understood. Paul's message to Philemon is simple and more direct than is sometimes assumed: Philemon, "you more than owe me" the benefit that I am requesting of you.

Literacy, Orality, and the Memorability of Onomastic Puns

Concerning orality and literacy in the world and milieu of the New Testament, James F. McGrath observes that "while it was not at all a *purely* oral culture, the contexts of the New Testament authors were characterized by a high degree of residual orality" (emphasis in original).⁷

eucharistic overtones (see below).

3 Scholars are divided on whether Onesimus actually escaped, although this has been traditionally accepted. There is also disagreement as to whether and how Onesimus may have sinned against Philemon.

4 Onesimus is mentioned as being from Colossae in Colossians 4:9.

5 John Paul Heil, "The Chiastic Structure and Meaning of Paul's letter to Philemon," *Biblica* 82/2 (2001): 178.

6 Ibid.

7 James F. McGrath, "On Hearing (Rather Than Reading) Intertextual Echoes: Christology and Monotheistic Scriptures in an Oral Context," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43/2 (2013): 74.

Literacy rates during that time varied from place to place, as they do today, but there was perhaps a “wide[r] range of degrees of literacy in the time period.”⁸ For example, the literacy requirements of marketplace commerce differed from those of professional court scribes.

Regarding Paul’s letters in particular, McGrath further observes that, “we have good reason to believe that Paul’s letters, as well as other early Christian literature, would have been heard read aloud by most who were exposed to them, rather than actually read with their own eyes.”⁹ “What needs to be remembered,” he reiterates, “is that very few early Christians would have *read* Paul’s letters. Most who encountered the words Paul authored would have encountered them when they were read *aloud*” (emphasis in the original).¹⁰ Although Paul’s letter to Philemon is directed to a private individual, the implied audience of the letter also includes fellow-workers Apphia, Archippus as well as the church congregation that met at Philemon’s house (see Philemon 1:2).¹¹

Given “the limits of human memory,”¹² such communications needed to be memorable. Hence the importance and usefulness of onomastic wordplay. Beyond their rhetorical potency, onomastic puns are, by nature, memorable.¹³ They, like scriptural citations, can serve as hooks or pegs on which lengthier ideas and arguments can be hung. Paul’s letter to Philemon is, by virtue of these onomastic puns, both rhetorically potent and memorable.

“Useful” and “Well-in-Christ”

Addressing Philemon, Paul says of Onesimus (Ὀνήσιμος), whose name means “useful”¹⁴ or “profitable” in Greek: “Formerly, he was¹⁵ *useless*

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 75.

11 Heil, “Chiastic Structure,” 178.

12 McGrath, “On Hearing,” 79.

13 Hence, the use of onomastic puns today in the media (cf., e.g., the frequent use of onomastic puns in the headlines of newspaper and online articles). We certainly remember when our names have been made the object of puns, kind and unkind. Onomastic puns grab our attention.

14 Walter Bauer, Fredrick William Danker, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (rev. and ed. by Fredrick William Danker; 3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 711. Hereafter cited as *BDAG*.

15 The Greek masculine singular definite accusative particle *ton* here makes the description of Onesimus in Philemon 1:11 grammatically appositional to the

[ἄχρηστον, *achrēston*]¹⁶ to you, but now he is indeed *useful* [εὐχρηστον, *euchrēston*]¹⁷ both to you and to me”¹⁸ (Philemon 1:11, NRSV); or, “in times past he was to thee unprofitable to thee, but now profitable to thee and to me” (KJV). Paul here creates a play on the *meaning* of Onesimus’s name using an unrelated synonym and an antonym of “Onesimus.” Both of these forms of *chrēstos* (χρηστός) are rare, ἄχρηστον occurring only here and εὐχρηστον occurring here and twice in 2 Timothy.¹⁹

J. Albert Harrill believes that this wordplay is “technical language [pointing] to a particular kind of document, the ‘journeyman apprentice’ contract, such as those found among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri in Roman Egypt”²⁰ (de-emphasis mine). He further notes that “the aim” of such apprenticeships “was the personal transformation of a slave or a child from ‘useless’ to ‘useful.’”²¹ While it is possible, as Harrill notes, that Paul is petitioning “for Philemon to let Onesimus be apprenticed to Paul in the service of the Gospel,”²² it is also possible that Paul is petitioning Philemon to let him be fully apprenticed to Christ as Master, as I believe is further suggested by this wordplay.

But Paul also deliberately plays on the name-title “Christ.” The word *χρηστός* (*chrēstos*) in the Greek of Paul’s time also *sounded* almost exactly

accusative form of his name in 1:10: *Onēsimon, ton ... achrēston ... euchrēston*.

16 BDAG, 160. It is noted here that in Greco-Roman society *achrēston* pertains “to a lack of responsibility within the larger social structure.”

17 Ibid., 417. *Euchrēstos* is used “in description of service that has special social value” (versus *achrēstos*).

18 The phrase in Greek places the pronouns representing Philemon [*soi*] and Paul [*emoi*] between *achrēston* and *euchrēston*, painting the desired picture of a potentially closer relationship between Philemon and Paul ([*kai*] *soi kai emoi*) on account of the Onesimus matter.

19 In addition to Philemon 1:11, see 2 Timothy 2:21: “If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto **honour** [τιμήν, *timēn*], sanctified, and **meet** [εὐχρηστον, *euchrēston*] for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work.” The adjective εὐχρηστον occurs alongside wordplay on the name “Timothy” (“one honoring God” or “God-honored,” from τιμάω [*timaō*], “to honor” and θεός [*theos*] “god”). See also 2 Timothy 4:11, “Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is **profitable** [εὐχρηστος, *euchrēstos*] to me for the ministry.” In all three instances, εὐχρηστος/ον, conveys the idea of being “useful,” “beneficial,” or “profitable” with respect to service in the gospel.

20 Harrill, “Philemon,” 498.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

the same as Χριστός (*Christos*, “Christ”).²³ Thus Paul is also referencing Onesimus’s conversion *to Christ*: “in times past he was ‘without Christ’ [i.e., ἀχρηστον ~ *achris[t]on*]²⁴ to you, but now he is indeed ‘Well-in-Christ’ [εὐχρηστον ~ *euchris[t]on*] both to you and to me” — a clever pun on -χρηστός (*-chrēstos*).²⁵ This homophonic wordplay adds additional nuance to Paul’s play on “Onesimus.” F.F. Bruce notes that “in Gentile ears Christ was simply an alternative name for Jesus ... *Christos* sounded exactly like a fairly common slave-name, *Chrēstos* (Latin *Chrestus*) and among Greeks and Romans there was considerable confusion between the two spellings, as also between *christianoī* and *chrestianoī*.”²⁶ The Latin suffix *-ianus*, attached to the name Christ, denoted “adherent of.” Thus, a “Christian” was an adherent of Christ, but an ordinary Greek or Roman might have heard “Chrēstianos” and understood it to mean an “adherent of (a slave) Chrestos.”²⁷

As a Christian of the Roman Mediterranean world, Philemon would have been sensitive to the pejorative overtones of this terminology. Christ, had in fact, died the ignominious death of a slave, of whom Philemon professed to be an adherent, like Paul and now Onesimus. By calling Onesimus (Ὀνήσιμος, “useful”) -χρηστόν (*-chrēston*, “useful”), Paul is placing Onesimus on the same level as himself and Philemon within the sphere of their “shared” relationship to Christ (Χριστός/χρηστός, *Christos/chrēstos*).

23 The eta (ē) in - χρηστός (*chrēstos*) was pronounced -EE (as in fee) in the Koine of that time, just as it is today in Modern Greek. Thus the pronunciation of *-chrēstos* was hardly distinguishable from Χριστός (*Christos*).

24 Cf. Ephesians 2:12: “At that time ye were **without Christ** [χωρὶς Χριστοῦ, *choris Christou*], being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God [ἄθεοι, *atheoi*] in the world.”

25 Paul uses unmodified forms of the adjective χρηστός, -όν in Romans 2:4 (used here substantively; 1 Corinthians 15:33 and Ephesians 4:32, where it has the sense of “kind” or “good” (substantively, “kindness” or “goodness”).

26 F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 132.

27 Ibid. Bruce cites the manuscript confusion between the two spellings in Acts 11:26 (“And the disciples were called Christians [*christianous/chrēstianous*] first in Antioch”: “A few Greek witnesses to the text (including the first hand in Codex Sinaiticus) exhibit the spelling *chrēstianous* (accusative plural) instead of *christianous*. The latter is certainly what Luke wrote, but the former may well represent what some of the Antiochenes thought they were saying.”

Paul is trading on the “culturally charged moral values in Paul’s fundamentally hierarchical ancient Mediterranean world.”²⁸ Paul refrains in his letter from calling Philemon κύριος (*kyrios*, “lord, master”), reserving that title for Christ alone (Philemon 1:5). The implication for Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus is that they are all three δούλοι (*douloi*, “slaves”) of Christ, who died as a slave on their behalf. This is also the force of Paul’s addressing Philemon as ἀδελφέ (*adelphē*, “brother,” Philemon 1:7) and urging him to accept Onesimus “no longer as a slave [δούλον, *doulon*], but more than a slave, a **brother beloved** [ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, *adelphon agapēton*]” (Philemon 1:16 NRSV); or, “as a servant, but above a servant, a **brother beloved**” (ΚΙΥ). They are to be equal “in the Lord” (Philemon 1:16), i.e., in relationship to their common master (κύριος, *kyrios*). Outside of the fellowship of Christ they are all ultimately “useless” or “unprofitable.”²⁹

Grace and Partnership

Paul’s pun on the meaning of Onesimus (“useful”) and χρηστόν/ἄχρηστον/εὐχρηστον (*chrēston/achrēston/euchrēston*) has an additional dimension. Paul’s description of Onesimus as εὐχρηστος (*euchrēstos*) has soteriological and Eucharistic overtones. In Paul’s language one can hear the echo of χάρις (*charis*) “grace” (English “grace” from Latin *gratia*, by way of Old French, is cognate with Greek χάρις; so too apparently Latin *caritas*, “charity” which the Vulgate uses to render Greek *agape*, the early Christian term for the pure “love” of Christ). Onesimus is not “without grace,” (cf. Greek ἄχαρις, *acharis* = “without grace” or “graceless”; ἀχάριστος, *acharistos* = “unthankful,” “ungrateful”)³⁰ and “useless” or “unprofitable” (ἄχρηστος, *achrēstos*) because he remains “in the Lord”

28 Harrill, “Philemon,” 498.

29 Cf. the “unprofitable” or “useless servant” language of Matthew 25:30: “As for this worthless slave [τὸν ἀχρεῖον δούλον, *ton achreion doulon*], throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Cf. also Luke 17:10: “So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves [Δοῦλοι ἀχρεῖοι ἐσμεν, *Douloi achreioi esmen*]; we have done only what we ought to have done!’” In the language of King Benjamin, “I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another — I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21).

30 The adjective ἀχάριστος, ον is attested in Luke 6:35 and 2 Timothy 3:2.

(Philemon 1:16, 20) — i.e., “in Christ” (cf. Philemon 1:6, 8, 23) — and is a partaker or partner of Christ’s love (cf. Philemon 1:17).

Moreover, Paul’s use of the word εὐχρηστος (*euchrēstos*), not only evokes the idea of “useful” and “well-in-Christ,” but echoes the verb εὐχαριστέω (to “give thanks”) as used previously in Philemon 1:4 (“When I remember you in my prayers, I always **thank** [εὐχαριστῶ, *eucharistō*] my God” [NRSV]; or, “I thank my God, making mention of the always in my prayers” [KJV]). Beyond his use of *eucharistō* as part of his greeting formula (see, e.g., Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Philippians 1:3; and Thessalonians 1:2), this verb is used by Paul in reference to what came to the communal Christian meal:

And **when he had given thanks** [εὐχαριστήσας, *eucharistēsas*], he broke it and said, This is my body, which is [broken] for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:24-25, NRSV)

And **when he had given thanks**, he brake it and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me (1 Corinthians 11:24-25; see also 1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

On the basis of this passage and others,³¹ the nominal form of εὐχαριστέω (*eucharisteō*), εὐχαριστία (*eucharistia*), of course, becomes the basis of the Eucharist as a technical term.

Onesimus has become a “partner” with Paul and with his master Philemon in what Paul calls a κοινωνία (*koinōnia*) — a “fellowship” (“the sharing [fellowship] of your [Philemon’s] faith” [Philemon 1:6, NRSV] = “the communication of thy faith” [KJV]; “If thou count me therefore a partner [κοινωνόν (*koinōnon*), a sharer, a member of the fellowship], receive him as myself,” Philemon 1:17, KJV) — i.e., the “fellowship of [Christ’s] sufferings” (Philippians 3:10). *Koinōnia* is a term Paul uses

31 See, e.g., John 6:11, 23; Matthew 15:36; 26:27 [26-29]; Mark 14:23 [22-24]; Luke 22:17-20; cf. Matthew 14:19; Luke 9:16.

elsewhere with additional, explicit eucharistic overtones (see especially 1 Corinthians 10:16-17).³²

All of this is framed by the “grace” (χάρις, *charis*, Philemon 1:3) that Paul the “prisoner of Christ [Χριστός, *Christos*] Jesus” wishes to all of his partners or fellows in the fellowship of their master Christ, the thanks (εὐχαριστῶ, *eucharistō*) Paul gives “always” for them (Philemon 1:4), the great “joy” (χαρὰν, *charan*, Philemon 1:7; cf. English *cheer*) that Paul feels on account of Philemon’s charity or love, as well as the “grace [χάρις, *charis*] of the Lord Jesus Christ [Χριστοῦ, *Christou*]” that Paul wishes to be with Philemon and his fellow congregants. In other words, the χαρά (*chara*, cheer/joy) of Christ is their shared χάρις (*charis*, “grace”) and – χρηστός (–*chrēstos*, “profit,” “usefulness,” Philemon 1:11), of which the erstwhile slave Onesimus now also partakes.

Philemon the “Affectionate”

From the beginning of the letter, Paul has been playing on both the affections of Philemon and the meaning of his name, “affectionate one,”³³ by addressing him as “dearly beloved” (Φιλήμονι, τῷ ἀγαπητῷ, *Philēmoni tō agapētō*, 1:1). He has noted his “love [ἀγάπην, *agapēn*] for all the saints and ... faith toward the Lord Jesus” (Philemon 1:5, NRSV); or, “love ... which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all his saints” (ΚJV). Paul has further noted that they — Paul and the saints — had “received much joy and encouragement from [Philemon’s] love [ἀγάπην, *agapēn*]” (NRSV) or “had great joy and consolation in [Philemon’s] love” (ΚJV), this “because the bowels of the saints [were] refreshed” in him (Philemon 1:7). He has besought him “for [the] love’s sake [διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην, *dia tēn agapēn*]” (Philemon 1:9) that he would treat Onesimus, whom Paul calls his “own bowels” (1:12), as a “brother beloved” [ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, *adelphon agapēton*] (Philemon 1:16), and again urged him, “Refresh my bowels in the Lord [or, in Christ].”³⁴ The noun φιλία (*philia*), from which the name “Philemon” (Φιλήμων) derives, and the noun ἀγάπη (*agapē*) both denote kinds of “love” or “affection” in Greek. The bowels or viscera were often considered the seat of “love” or “affection” (see further below).

32 1 Corinthians 10:16-17: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

33 BDAG, 1057.

34 “In Christ,” in some of the other manuscripts, has become the preferred reading.

By invoking the term ἀγάπη (*agapē*) and φιλία (*philia*, the latter present in the name Philemon) as a paronomasia (pun) on Philemon, Paul gently but firmly applies a pressure on Philemon as “the affectionate” one to live up the Christian ideals embodied in his name. A public failure or refusal to live up to these ideals by complying with Paul’s wishes, greatly risks lessening his standing in his church community.

“Your Good Deed” (“Thy Benefit”)

While perhaps opaque at a glance, the “good deed” or “benefit” (τὸ ἀγαθόν, *to agathon*) to which Paul refers in Philemon 1:14 is clear when viewed as an extension of the punning on “Onesimus” and *–chrēstos* in 1:10-11. According to Heil, verse 14 sits at the chiasmic center of the structure of the letter.³⁵ Both ballast and a confirmation that the “good deed” or “benefit” is Philemon’s possibly permanent granting of Onesimus to Paul as a fellow-worker and ministrant are achieved with Paul’s subsequent use of the verb ὀναίμην (*onaimēn*, “let me have the benefit [of/from]”) in v. 20 (see below).

However, it is between his mention of the “good deed”/“benefit” (τὸ ἀγαθόν, *to agathon*) and “hav[ing] benefit” (ὀναίμην, *onaimēn*), that Paul employs one of his strongest rhetorical punches. Instead of returning immediately to playing on Philemon’s affections, he invokes commercial terminology punctuated by his use of verbs that sound like Philemon’s own name.

“You More than Owe Me One[simus]”

As if to further suggest their equality before the Lord in the Gospel, Paul declares that if Onesimus “owes” (ὀφείλει, *opheilei*)³⁶ Philemon anything

35 Heil, “Chiastic Structure,” 178.

36 Paul uses the verb ὀφείλει (*opheilei*) in Romans 13:8 (“Owe no man any thing, but to love one another”); 15:1 (“We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak”), 15:27 (“their duty is [literally, they ought] also to minister unto them in carnal things”); 1 Corinthians 5:10 (“for then must ye needs [or, you would need to] go out of the world”); 7:36 (“if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require [i.e., if it must be thus]...let them marry”); 9:10 (“he that ploweth should [or, ought to] plow in hope”); 11:7 (“For a man indeed ought not to cover his head”); 11:10 (“for this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels”); 2 Corinthians 12:11 (“I ought to have been commended of you”), 12:14 (“for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children”); Ephesians 5:28 (“So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies”); 2 Thessalonians 1:3 (“We are bound [or, we ought] to thank God always for you”);

that it should be charged to his (Paul's) account, but then immediately reminds Philemon that he "more than owes" (προσοφείλεις, *prosopheileis*) Paul his very self (Philemon 1:19). This constitutes a paronomasia — that is, a play on the similar sounds in Philemon, ὀφείλει, and προσοφείλεις.

The wordplay suggests a triangular relationship between Philemon, Onesimus (the one who "owes" Philemon) and Paul (the one covering Onesimus's debt, and the one to whom Philemon "owes" more than everything) under Christ, the one to whom they all owe themselves. Here too the rhetorical effect is to place Onesimus on a more even footing with Paul and Philemon. Their interrelationship is to be horizontal, rather than hierarchical or vertical.

There may be a further dimension to Paul's wordplay on ὀφείλω (*opheileō*), προσοφείλω (*prosopheileō*) and Philemon here. The homonymous Greek verb ὠφελέω (*ōpheleō*), the pronunciation of which would have differed from the former primarily in vowel quantity, means to "assist," "benefit," "be advantageous," "profit." In other words, ὠφελέω was at once a homonym of ὀφείλω/προσοφείλω (*opheileō/prosopheileō*) and a synonym of χρηστός (*chrēstos*), Onesimus, and ὀναίμην (*onaimēn*, see immediately below). Thus Paul's wordplay on Philemon, ὀφείλω/προσοφείλω and implicitly ὠφελέω identifies Philemon's name more closely with that of Onesimus, his slave.

"Let Me Have Benefit [or Joy] in the Lord"

The final two onomastic wordplays occur when Paul pleads with Philemon, "let me have joy [*onaimēn*, literally, let me have profit or benefit] in the Lord, *refresh my bowels* in the Lord" (Philemon 1:20). The use of ὀνίνημι (*oninēmi*) represents a careful and climactic word-choice by Paul,³⁷ forming a polyptoton³⁸ — this time on the name "Onesimus," which is cognate with this verb. Here Paul makes Onesimus a symbol

2:13 ("but we are bound [or, we ought] to give thanks alway to God for you"); and Philemon 1:18 (here). Paul uses the verb predominantly — almost exclusively apart from Romans 13:8 and Philemon 1:18 — as an auxiliary verb that roughly translates "ought." Paul's use of ὀφείλω as commercial/spiritual term makes its use here in Philemon 1:18 and in Romans 13:8 noteworthy.

37 In the New Testament, ὀνίνημι (*oninēmi*) only occurs here in Philemon 1:20.

38 According to Richard A. Lanham (*A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. 2nd ed. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991], 117) polyptoton constitutes a wordplay involving a "repetition of words from the same root but with different endings" (vis-a-vis paronomasia, "punning [or] playing on the sounds and meanings of words," i.e., from unrelated roots [see p. 110]).

of the “profit” or “benefit[s]” that he has gained in the Lord through preaching the gospel and of his hopes to further acquire through Philemon’s “benefit” or “good” (Philemon 1:14).

If not clear previously, it is now evident that Onesimus (“useful”, “beneficial”) is the “benefit” or “good thing” (τὸ ἀγαθόν, *to agathon*) that Paul wishes from Philemon, so that he (Paul) might “have benefit” (ὀναίμην, *onaimēn*) in the (true) Master (ἐν κυρίῳ, *en kyriō*), the Lord Jesus Christ. The polyptotonic wordplay on “Onesimus” and ὀναίμην (*onaimēn*) is unavoidable to the hearer. The pressure to do the “good thing” or “right thing” is now practically irresistible. If Philemon still has any further reticence about granting Paul’s request, the latter now makes one more appeal to Philemon’s “affections.”

An “Affectionate” Reprise

On top of all of this, Paul makes a final allusion to “Philemon” as “affectionate one” when he says: “refresh my heart [literally, bowels] in Christ” (Philemon 1:20) or, some of the other manuscripts have it, “in the Lord [Master].” Again, the bowels or viscera were often considered the seat of affections anciently.³⁹

Paul’s reprise of this phrase, used previously in Philemon 1:7 in reference to Philemon as the “affectionate” one by whose “love” or “affection” (Philemon 1:2, 5, 7) “the hearts [bowels] of the saints have been refreshed” (Philemon 1:7; cf. 1:12, 20). This constitutes a final play on, or allusion to, the meaning of Philemon as the “affectionate one” as a part of Paul’s final appeal to Philemon to grant Onesimus and to “do even more than I say.” As McGrath has noted, “material closer to the end [of a Pauline letter] could have had a potentially overpowering influence on the understanding of the letter that hearers took away with them.” The onomastic puns in Philemon 1:17-20 on Onesimus and Philemon’s names should be read with this in mind.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, Philemon hosted a congregation of the nascent Christian community — a “house-church” at his own house (Philemon 1:2). The letter that bears his name would have been read in a meeting of the local church community, presumably by one of the local church

39. See, e.g., Isaiah 16:11; 63:15; Jeremiah 4:19; 31:20; Lamentations 1:20; 2:11; Philippians 2:1; Colossians 3:12; 1 John 3:7; Mosiah 15:9; Alma 7:12; 26:37; 34:15; 3 Nephi 17:16-17.

officials. Philemon, no doubt, would have been present, and all eyes would have been on him (as it were) as it was given a public reading.⁴⁰ The social pressure for him to “do the right thing,” “the good thing” (τὸ ἀγαθόν, *to agathon*, Philemon 1:14) would have been practically impossible to resist.

Paul’s letter to Philemon and its rhetoric, including the interwoven plays and puns on “Onesimus,” “Philemon,” and “Christ,” constitute a miniature masterpiece and a fine example of how thematically central and richly textured onomastic wordplay in ancient texts and literature can be. In a world without telephone, text-message, Twitter, television, radio or internet, communications had to be composed for maximum effect on first hearing or reading, with virtually every syllable contributing to the rhetorical and mnemonic impact of the whole. Paul’s letter to Philemon constitutes just such a communication.

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40 Heil (“Chiastic Structure,” 191) notes that the “implied audience” of this letter is not only “composed ... of ... Philemon, the primary addressee (v. 1), but also two other fellow workers, Apphia and Archippus, as well as the assembly of Christians gathered at the house of Philemon for the public reading of the letter (v. 2). Thus, the letter is a communal rather than a private communication between partners with a mutual concern and responsibility for advancing the gospel.”

