SUPPLYING THE MISSING BODY OF ONESIMUS:
READINGS OF PAUL’S LETTER TO PHILEMON

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Introduction

The Apostle Paul’s letter to Philemon is just that—a letter. It is a personal letter to a “dear friend” about a particular situation that involves Paul, Philemon and a certain man named Onesimus. Overall, it seems to be a quite private letter as well, except for the fact that Paul addresses others in the opening, including the Christian community that meets in Philemon’s house. Reading this bit of ancient mail reveals a delightful side of Paul. His letter, though quite brief, is filled with word plays, irony, and wit. For example, Paul plays on the Greek name Onesimus which means “useful” when he writes “I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me” (v. 10).\(^1\) When Paul offers Philemon the equivalent of an “I owe you,” promising to repay anything that this Onesimus might owe Philemon, he dryly adds, “I say nothing about your owing me even your own self” (v. 19). Paul speaks to Philemon as a parent might appeal to the best instincts of her teenager, “Confident of your obedience, I’m writing to you, knowing you will do even more than I say” (v. 21). In case Philemon was preparing to do less, Paul adds one more thing, telling Philemon to prepare a guest room for him since he will likely be coming to visit him (or check up on him) soon (v. 22).

All this is clear enough and the reader can enjoy Paul’s wit and aplomb in dealing with Philemon. But who is this Onesimus? What is his relationship to Philemon and what exactly does Paul expect from Philemon? That is not at all clear from the letter.

To be sure, there is a traditional interpretation of the occasion of the letter. Beginning at least since the 4th century CE, Onesimus was understood to be a slave who had run away from Philemon, perhaps

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\(^1\) All biblical translations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
stealing something from him as well. He has come into service to Paul during Paul’s imprisonment, but Paul is legally obliged to send the runaway Onesimus back to his owner, Philemon. In this view, the letter is understood as an appeal for clemency on Philemon’s part. More recently, this traditional reading has been challenged by several different scholars who suggest that Onesimus was not a fugitive at all, but perhaps a servant sent by Philemon to assist Paul or maybe an estranged brother of Philemon.2

The point of this essay is not to offer an argument for one particular reading over another. It is not to discover what Paul really meant, or who Onesimus really was. Instead, the focus will be on the nature of this text as a both a personal letter about a particular experience in the life of Paul and an authoritative canonical text. The discussion will be guided by ideas raised by the literary perspective known as the New Historicism. While a full scale explanation of this perspective is not possible here, I will highlight some ideas that are of special interest in exploring Paul’s letter to Philemon.3

In Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher’s, Practicing New Historicism, the authors speak of their attraction to the historical anecdote. They have in mind a type of story that is not located in a recognized authoritative text, that is, in “literature,” in the formal sense, but one discovered perhaps in a captain’s ship log, or someone’s personal diary. This interest in the anecdote is a sign of the New Historicist’s commitment to particularity. As Greenblatt and Gallagher explain their use of the anecdote, “We wanted to show in compressed form the ways in which elements of lived experience enter into literature, the ways in which everyday institutions and bodies get recorded.”4 Conversely, they are interested in showing how the language of the literary plays out not only in public, but also in private, intimate moments. In short, New Historicists introduce the anecdote into their literary analysis to produce a “touch of the real.” They want to find real bodies and living

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