



## Mediation in Paul's Letter to Philemon

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### Abstract

Several aspects of Paul's letter to Philemon form a part of the scholarly debate. This article suggests that valuable insights for ecclesial conflict management can be gathered from Paul's approach in mediating a situation of conflict in the early church. The article argues from the social, cultural and inner texture of the letter to Philemon that Paul displays considerable mediation and rhetorical skill and intentionality in his attempt to appeal for a shift in attitude in Philemon from the perspective of his identity "into Christ" (v.6), "in Christ" (vv.8, 20), "in the Lord" (vv.16, 20) and "in Christ Jesus" (v.23) to "do even more than I ask" (v.21). Paul's appeal to Philemon is, in the final instance, an "appeal of love" (Wright 2004:204).

### Keywords

*Christ; mediation; Onesimus; Paul; Philemon*

## Introduction

Paul’s letter to Philemon can be described as “short, private and obscure” (Moo 2024:19 of 24).<sup>1</sup> Even if the main addressee of the letter is Philemon, Paul also has many others in mind in the letter (Witherington III 2007:54).<sup>2</sup> The letter is a mere 328 words (Bormann 2012:chapter 14). Traditionally, at least since the fourth-century commentary by Ambrosiaster (366–384 CE), Paul’s letter to Philemon has been interpreted as Paul’s attempt at mediating the reconciliation of Onesimus – a runaway slave – and Philemon – a wealthy slave owner and brother in Christ (Tolmie 2019:102–103).<sup>3</sup> Given the traditional interpretation of the intention of this letter, the

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1 The foundational Greek text used in this article is: Nestle, E., Nestle, E., Aland, B., Aland, K., Karavidopoulos, J., Martini, C. M., & Metzger, B. M. (1993). *The Greek New Testament* (27th ed., Phm 1–25). Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

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“With less than two pages in Nestle-Aland it is the shortest of the extant Pauline epistles. The papyri provide only an incomplete picture of the text (P 61, P 87). The more recent critical editions of the Greek New Testament base their reconstruction of the text of Philemon substantially on the majuscule manuscript Sinaiticus (or 01) but also consult Alexandrinus (A or 02) and the Codex Ephraemi rescriptus (C or 04). The letter to Philemon is missing in its entirety from Vaticanus (B or 03). The critical text of Philemon offers only a few variant readings. The quality of the text in the extant manuscripts is judged to be very good.” (Bormann 2012:chapter 14).

2 The scholarly discussion regarding the identity of two individuals whom Paul addresses in the opening of the letter, namely Apphia and Archippus (v.2), does not bring any final clarity on the matter. Apphia could be the wife or the sister of Philemon, but there are also many other possibilities as to her identity. The reader cannot determine her identity without doubt (Beale 2019:379). Archippus is known from Col 4:17: “Tell Archippus: ‘See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord.’” Suggestions that he might be the son of Philemon is purely conjecture. Many other possibilities exist in this regard (Young 2021:93). “... the church that meets in your home” (v.2) probably refers to the Jesus-followers in Colossae who meet in Philemon’s house (Beale 2019:379). “It bears stressing that Paul would have been passionately concerned for the vitality of the larger congregation of which Philemon and Onesimus were a part, and doubtlessly also for the good of Christians still further removed from those assumed by the letter—that is, of Christians known to have existed in the Lycus river valley (where Colossae was located), and probably of Christians who were located in Galatia still further east” (Nordling 2010:290–291).

3 “In keeping with the rest of the NT, Paul assumes an eschatological transformation of the OT cultic ministry, in which animal sacrifices are replaced by obedient Christians (cf. 12:1) and the praise they offer God (Heb. 13:15), the temple by the community of believers (e.g., John 2:21; 1 Cor. 6:19; 1 Pet. 2:5), and the priest by Christians (1 Pet. 2:5, 9) or Christian ministers. But one thing has not changed: to be ‘pleasing to God,’ sacrifices must still be ‘sanctified.’ And so, Paul acknowledges, it is ultimately God

reader might well assume that an exegetical study of the letter could prove to be very fruitful in providing guidelines for mediation in situations of ecclesial conflict.<sup>4</sup>

The traditional interpretation of Paul's letter to Philemon has been challenged in recent times.<sup>5</sup> Any attempt at reconstructing mediating principles or guidelines for conflict resolution from this text would first need to provide a brief overview of the many possible scenarios presented as background to Paul's writing of the letter, as well as the many possibilities regarding the status of Onesimus. Furthermore, any informed reading of the letter to Philemon will do well to at least highlight the many questions regarding the issue of slave ownership in the early church.

In this article, I present, firstly, some of the core characteristics of the process of mediation in conflict management as can be gathered from the works of leading researchers in the field of mediation ethics and mediation psychology.<sup>6</sup> A short overview of the seminal work of Christopher Moore, as well as references to other works by noted scholars such as Ellen Waldman, Margaret Herrman and Paul Randolph, will be presented in this regard. Secondly, I present a brief overview summary of the history of interpretation of Paul's letter to Philemon – with a specific focus on aspects in the text concerning the status of Onesimus and the possible background circumstances which led to the writing of the letter, the dynamics of slavery

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himself, by his Holy Spirit, who 'sanctifies' Gentiles, turning them from unclean and sinful creatures to 'holy' offerings fit for the service and praise of a holy God." (Moo 1996:890-891).

- 4 This article is the third in a series of four articles on ecclesial conflict management. The first article was published in the STJ in 2023 with the title: *Reformed Hermeneutics: A Hermeneutic that fits the Occasion?* The second article was published in the STJ in 2023 with the title *Ecclesial Conflict Management: Healthy Separation in Acts 15:36-41*.
- 5 A recent publication on the topic by Stephen Young (2021), *Our Brother Beloved: Purpose and Community in Paul's Letter to Philemon*, serves as an example of this trend in academic scholarship. I enter into dialogue with many of Young's perspectives in this article.
- 6 This section is of primary importance for the research, given that a comprehensive insight into negotiation of conflict demands an interdisciplinary approach (Herrman 2006:25). By no means does this overview of certain key aspects of the process of mediation aim to be complete. Rather, by highlighting certain key aspects of mediation, the reader is presented with a frame of reference from within which to interpret Paul's writing to Philemon from a position of heightened awareness towards and greater sensitivity for the dynamic nature of the process of mediation.

present in the text, as well as the reality of power relations and its function in the early church. Thirdly, I present a short reading of the text of Philemon based on the social, cultural, and repetitive textures of the text.<sup>7</sup> Finally, I present a description of mediation in situations of ecclesial conflict as can be gathered from the dynamics at play in Paul’s letter to Philemon.

## **Characteristics of the process of mediation in conflict management**

Conflict is both inevitable and necessary for thriving and innovative relational dynamics (Herrman 2006:23). What is the true function of any mediator in a situation of conflict? According to Randolph (2016:28), a mediator’s core function is to ensure “an attitude shift” in those involved in conflict, whilst Moore (2014:21) highlights the reconciliatory function of a mediator between the “competing needs and interests of involved parties.”<sup>8</sup> The process of creating a shift in people’s seemingly unalterable grasp of, viewpoint on, or insight into a situation of conflict – or of those

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7 Social and cultural texture refers to how texts encourage readers “to adopt certain social and cultural locations and orientations rather than others” (Robbins 1996b:72).

Inner texture refers to data that linguistic, literary, narratological, rhetorical, and aesthetic interpreters gather when they emphasise the relation of signs in a text to one another (Robbins 1996b:238). The result of this is six kinds of inner texture: repetitive; progressive; opening-middle-closing; narrational; argumentative; and sensory-aesthetic (1996b:238). Explorations of repetitive-progressive textures in biblical texts aim to answer certain very specific questions from the text itself. These questions include the following: What patterns emerge from the repetition of certain topics in the text? What topics replace other topics in the progression of the text? Is there continual repetition of the same word throughout the unit, or are there slight modifications at progressive stages? Does the progression bring certain kinds of words together but not others? Is there repetition that occurs in steps that create a context for a new word in the progression? (Robbins 1996b:50).

8 The mediation process consists of many stages. Two stages of mediation can broadly be presented as, first, preparatory stages, and second, mediation session stages. Specific tasks and aims characterise these two stages. During the preparation stage, relevant background information is collected and analysed, and an initial mediation plan is presented. The mediation session stages can be presented as consisting of the following aspects: the beginning of mediation; the presentation of the parties’ initial perspectives; development of an agenda; education is provided for issues, needs, and interests, and problems which need to be addressed are identified; identifying options and solving the problems; evaluating and refining of options to reach agreements; reaching agreements and closure; implementing and monitoring; anticipate future problems; developing mechanisms to counter this; reach agreements and closure (Moore 2014:13 of 37).

involved in the conflict – is a very difficult task. Success in mediation is very difficult. Approaching mediation by means of rational and logical forms of argumentation is not advisable. In fact, such an approach might be detrimental to the desired outcome (Randolph 2016:29). Instead, an approach which strives to highlight commonalities or sameness in the dispute might serve to revitalise and rehabilitate the situation (2016:34). In addition to this, mediators should consider both the internal and external factors involved in any situation of conflict (Herrman 2006:25).<sup>9</sup>

The communication skills of deep and truthful listening are considered a *sine qua non* of effective mediation. A mediator experienced as non-judgmental creates and sustains a relationship of trust, affinity, and safety within which those involved in the conflict can be gently guided to a shift in perception. The result of such a process is either conflict management or conflict resolution (Randolph 2016:35-36). Deep and truthful listening are counter-intuitive, but highly effective: “the concentrated listening skills of the mediator will defuse the anger” (2016:39).

Emotions play a central role in any situation of conflict. Emotion can be described in terms of three aspects, namely, cognitive, physiological, and behavioural. Emotions are about something which elicits specific changes in the body, which, in turn, lead to action tendencies. The emotion is either expressed or the individual acts in a certain way (Jones 2006:296-297). Discerning between reflective and unreflective emotions can be valuable in any mediation – especially considering the multi-layeredness of emotions (Randolph 2016:44-45).<sup>10</sup> Guilt, shame and jealousy might be seen as reflective emotions, whilst fear, anger, disgust, and passion can be seen as unreflective emotions. Differentiation between reflective and unreflective emotions is valuable to a mediator, since it provides the mediator with an awareness of which emotions can be engaged with to “mould a perception shift” (2016:45), and which emotions should “be accepted by the mediator in a non-judgmental manner” (2016:45). An understanding of the source

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9 Internal factors refer to logically based strategic factors, as well as psychological factors. External factors refer to organisational, structural and institutional factors (Herrman 2006:25).

10 This differentiation stands in contrast to Jean Paul Sartre’s view that all emotions are unreflective (Randolph 2016:45).

and the object of the emotions at work in any situation of conflict can reveal the essence of the disagreement (2016:47).

An awareness of the power relations between those involved in conflict is a further important part of the role of the mediator. The power balance can be divided into two categories, namely, symmetrical and asymmetrical forms of power. In symmetrical forms of power, those involved in the conflict are essentially on equal footing. In asymmetrical forms of power, however, there exists an unbalanced distribution of power. This dynamic creates two camps in the situation of conflict, namely, those with a stronger mode of influence and those with a weaker mode of influence (Moore 2014:26 of 37).

Waldman (2011:7 of 25), in her discussion of multiple models of mediation, distinguishes between problem-solving and relationship-building approaches to mediation. In following the work of Len Riskin, she subdivides problem-solving models into evaluative and facilitative approaches. The primary role of a facilitative approach is to ensure problem-solving. This role is likened to that of a symphony conductor who “brings the instruments together and works to help them play in harmony, but she does not add a bass or soprano voice herself” (2011:7 of 25). Evaluative mediation, in turn, tends to have a more wide-ranging role in mediation. The evaluative mediator feels comfortable in providing expert and experienced input and suggestions to enhance the probability of effective problem solving. The main difference between an evaluative and facilitative approach to problem-solving, therefore, has to do with their approach to the offering of opinions and evaluations in the process of mediation (2011:7 of 25).

Relationship-building and growth models of mediation, on the other hand, view “mediation as a way to help people gain a deeper understanding of themselves and those they interact with” (Waldman 2011:7 of 25). Problem-solving is, as a result, seen as subservient. In following the work of Bush & Folger and Monk & Winslade, Waldman distinguishes between transformative and narrative approaches to mediation. The transformative approach emphasises the opportunity for emotional and moral maturity as the desired outcome of conflict. In the same way as the facilitative model, the transformative approach aims to steer clear of providing an appraisal of the situation of conflict.

The narrative model has as its goal “a new story about ... interaction with one another ... the process has been successful if the parties have created a ‘sustainable forward-moving narrative’” (Waldman 2011:7 of 25). Sensitivity to the role of power in mediation and the destabilising of existing power relations are characteristic of this approach (2011:7 of 25).

From the above description of the dynamics involved in the process of mediation in conflict management, the reader is confronted with the complexity, sensitivity and diversity of the matter that lies before the mediator. Mediation is characterised by a preparatory stage, as well as a mediation stage. The central role of communication skills, namely, listening, an acute awareness of the role of emotions, power relations, and direct-dealing and indirect-dealing approaches to conflict management in all stages and in any situation of conflict cannot be overstated. Furthermore, the mediation process needs to differentiate between relationship-building and problem-solving approaches.

The current research continues with this broad framework for mediation in mind. A reading from a specific contextual reality of conflict in the life of the early church, namely, the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus, can fruitfully serve the reader in appropriating the many-sidedness of mediation. But, first, I will address the many interpretive issues involved in the reading of Paul’s letter to Philemon.

## Interpreting Philemon

Pauline authorship of the letter to Philemon has been attested since the early church (Dunn 2014:18 of 19).<sup>11</sup> Philemon was, most likely, written in the period between 52-55 AD by Paul to the very young church in Colossae during his imprisonment in Ephesus (Wright 2015:4).<sup>12</sup> Whilst Paul himself

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11 Only F.C. Baur has questioned the Pauline authorship of the letter to Philemon in recent times (Dunn 2014:18 of 19).

12 “Paul, then, has written a general letter to the church at Colossae along with this private note to Philemon at the same time, sending both with Tychicus, who is accompanied by Onesimus (Col 4:7–9). Where was Paul when he wrote these letters? I have considered this question in the introduction to Colossians, where I noted that, on the evidence of Philemon alone, an Ephesian provenance (and thus a date in the mid-50s) would make good sense.” (Moo 2024: I. AUTHOR, RECIPIENT, NATURE, AND PLACE OF WRITING section).

had not visited Colossae at the time of writing, Epaphras, one of Paul's co-workers and the one who taught the gospel to the congregation in Colossae, had provided Paul with insight into the life of the congregation (Col 1:7-8).

The history of interpretation of the reasons for Paul's writing of a letter to Philemon presents the reader with many possibilities and probabilities, but very few, if any, certainties. The challenge seems, at least initially, to be a daunting one. Many questions layer this quest, namely: What is the exact nature of the status of Onesimus? What exactly is it that Paul is asking of Philemon? Why is Paul vague, at least in an initial reading of the text, in addressing the issue at hand? What can be gathered from the letter to Philemon regarding Paul's view on slavery in the early church? In the following paragraphs, I present the many interpretive possibilities of these issues. I also suggest that, even though the interpreter struggles for clarity regarding many matters in Philemon, Paul's rhetorical thrust in the letter is engagingly clear. Paul's loving vision of the true gospel in his letter to Philemon moves the interpreter to a stunning clarity of thought and invites the interpreter to experience how this gospel transforms the interactions between Jesus-followers within the community of faith (Wright 2004:203).<sup>13</sup>

Moo (2024:19 of 24) helpfully provides the reader with a list which indicates the relevant interpretive issues, as well as a possible chronology for the events in Philemon:

1. Paul is a prisoner.
2. Paul appeals to Philemon about Onesimus (v.10).
3. Onesimus has converted to Christianity during his time with Paul in prison (v.10).
4. Onesimus is useful and very dear to Paul (vv. 10, 11, 12, 13, 16).
5. Paul is either sending Onesimus back to Philemon, or he is referring the case of Onesimus to Philemon (v. 12).
6. Paul prefers to keep Onesimus with him in prison (v. 13).

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13 I do not attempt to engage exegetically with these interpretive matters here. I simply aim to provide a detailed overview of the many interpretive puzzles involved in reading Paul's letter to Philemon.



7. Onesimus has been separated from Philemon (v. 15).
8. The purpose of this separation, Paul seems to suggest, is so that Philemon can have Onesimus back forever (v.15).
9. Paul suggests that Philemon can have Onesimus back as better than a slave (v.16).
10. Onesimus will now be dear to Philemon in the flesh and in the Lord (v.16).
11. Paul's one direct request to Philemon is to welcome Onesimus back (v.17).
12. Onesimus may have wronged Philemon in some way (v.18).
13. Paul is either directly or indirectly responsible for Philemon's faith (v.19b).
14. Paul asks Philemon for a benefit (v.20).
15. Paul is assured that Philemon will do even more than he asks (v.21).

In addressing the issue of the status of Onesimus more specifically, McKnight (2017:10 of 15) provides five options to explain the relation of Onesimus to both Paul and Philemon:

1. Onesimus (or the letter only) is officially sent to Paul as a messenger of the church.
2. Onesimus, as a runaway (fugitivus) is in prison with Paul, "whom he knows or does not know."
3. A partner of Paul comes across the runaway Onesimus and takes him to Paul in prison.
4. The runaway Onesimus develops many needs and approaches Paul to implore Philemon for clemency.
5. Onesimus, as an asylum seeker (erro), takes flight to Paul as a friend of the master (amicus domini) Philemon. Onesimus asks Paul to act as patron in asking Philemon for mercy, or in helping Onesimus find a better master.

Given the many possible scenarios provided as to why Paul wrote a letter to Philemon, the reader might ask: Why attempt to propose some guidelines from this letter as to the nature of mediation in the resolution of conflict? Moreover, if one decides to argue against the interpretation of the identification of Onesimus as either a runaway slave or an asylum-seeker, could the letter have any value whatsoever in arguing a case for mediation in situations of ecclesial conflict? Tolmie (2019:101-117), in confirming the diverse range of interpretive possibilities in the text of Philemon, suggests four categories by which he summarises the history of the interpretation of certain puzzling aspects recorded in Philemon:

1. Onesimus as a culprit saved by Paul: several examples from the commentaries of Ambrosiaster (366-384 CE), John Chrysostom (386-404 CE), Theodore of Mopsuestia (late in the first or early in the second decade of the fifth century CE), the *Glossa Ordinaria* (the “standard edition of the Bible” used from the twelfth to the beginning of the sixteenth century), Desiderius Erasmus (1519), and Bengel’s *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (1742) highlights the different ways in which this interpretive approach was followed (2019:102-105).
2. Onesimus as a pawn in the abolitionism debate: In 1807, the British Parliament abolished the slave trade. In the decades that preceded this decision, debates on slavery centred on theological issues. In these debates, the church oftentimes supported slavery based on a specific reading of Philemon. On the other hand, the abolitionists supported their stance by claiming that Onesimus was not a slave, that Paul wanted Philemon to set Onesimus free, or that, even if Paul never asked Philemon to set Onesimus free, this was Paul’s hope and intention with the letter.
3. The status of Onesimus disputed: during the twentieth century, many other possibilities were raised as to the status of Onesimus. The work of Knox (1935), Lampe (1985), Winter (1987), Schenk (1987), Callahan (1993), and Arzt-Grabner (2004) is highlighted by Tolmie.
4. Onesimus as a victim: Tolmie also emphasises the resistant ways in which Philemon has been read. The feminist reading of Bieberstein (2000), the “bodilessness” reading of Botha (2010), the postcolonial reading by Punt (2010), and a collection of essays edited by Johnsson

(2012) strongly argues for the need to hear the voice of Onesimus himself.

In contrast to the traditional interpretation of Onesimus as a runaway slave (*fugitivus*), in this article, I aim to show that the slave Onesimus, intentionally takes flight to Paul as a friend of Philemon, the slave owner.<sup>14</sup> Both Paul and Philemon are Jesus-followers and Paul, it seems, played a role in the conversion of Philemon. Onesimus, who also converted to Christianity whilst visiting Paul in prison, might have wronged Philemon in some way. Onesimus might also have been wronged by Philemon in some way.<sup>15</sup> Paul seemingly has very little interest, if any, in either knowing or sharing the exact details regarding the background of how Onesimus came to be with him in prison.<sup>16</sup> Onesimus seeks Paul's help in reconciling and resolving this relational tension, as well as this possible legal tension. Paul, in turn, appeals to Philemon to welcome Onesimus as better than a slave, as a brother in the Lord, as he would welcome Paul himself – confident that Philemon will do even more than he asks.<sup>17</sup>

The suggestion by Douglas Campbell (2020:119-134) on Philemon provides a helpful framework from which to engage the background and interpretive issues in the letter. Campbell's reading of Philemon is done by means of

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14 This conclusion is based on the work of Peter Lampe (Tolmie 2010:3).

15 The absence in the letter of the admittance of any guilt on the part of Onesimus seems to be of importance in any attempt to reconstruct the possible background circumstances which led to Onesimus approaching Paul regarding his relationship with Philemon. Based on this, I tend to gravitate towards the possibility that Onesimus might have been unhappy about the treatment he was receiving from Philemon and was seeking Paul's mediation in this regard. Such an interpretation, of course, stands in contrast to the traditional interpretation of Onesimus as the guilty party in this situation of conflict.

16 To be sure, Paul gives the reader a hint that Onesimus might have done something improper towards Philemon. But, as if to confirm his focus on the future of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, remarkably, Paul indicates in vv 18-19 that he takes up the responsibility to repay any debts which Onesimus might have incurred within his relationship with Philemon: "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self."

17 Paul is confident, I suggest, of at least two things: firstly, that Philemon will set Onesimus free from slavery, namely, manumit him. And, secondly, that Philemon will send him back to Paul as a fellow worker in the service of the gospel of Christ. I make these decisions fully aware of the many other possibilities in this regard (see Tolmie 2010:25). See also Wessels (2010:143-168) for confirmation of the manumission of Onesimus by Philemon.

a comparative reading with Philippians. Campbell (2020:119) strikingly states that both Philemon and Philippians are “documents of crises”, which indicates “how certain key theological commitments are practically enacted when they encounter situational differences.” Irrespective of the exact nature of the relational dysfunction in Philemon, what does seem to be clear is the relational tension which is created between Philemon and Onesimus by the conversion of Onesimus: “... the letter imagines a countercultural way ... to enact the social in relation to the slave Onesimus, who has now become a brother, and charts the way for his reception by the Christian community so that he is claimed and embraced as one who belongs, as one who is family” (Young 2021:4).

In the following paragraphs, I present an analysis of the social, cultural and inner texture of Paul’s letter to Philemon to highlight this tension which was created by the conversion of Onesimus (v.10). I suggest that such an approach provides the modern reader the opportunity to listen to Paul on his own terms in a hermeneutically responsible manner. Even if hermeneutical approaches to the biblical text, such as a postcolonial or a feminist reading of the text, form a part of a thorough exegetical process, a hermeneutics of suspicion<sup>18</sup> can only be constructive within the wider parameters of a hermeneutics of trust.<sup>19</sup> My hermeneutical approach of choice is, therefore, a hermeneutics of trust.

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18 “‘Hermeneutics of suspicion’ is a phrase used to describe the interpreter’s acknowledgement of ideological and perspectival distortions present, both consciously and unconsciously, in any text. In the field of history, for example, this suspicion takes the form of a recognition that all history is written from the perspective of its ‘winners’ and cannot therefore but distort the loser’s legitimate claims” (Bowe 2003:Kindle locations 535-538).

19 “The text comes alive in the present. The present situation, as experienced by the reader, affects the meaning of a text and a text alters the reader’s understanding of the present” (emphasis in original) (Sheldrake 1991:172). At the same time, however, “our interpretation of a text is, to a degree, constrained by the authority retained by the author” (1991:174). Gadamer refers to this as ‘hermeneutics of consent’ (1991:174).

The hermeneutical process can be described as an awareness of, as well as an appreciation of, the three worlds of the biblical text, namely, the world in front of the text, the world of the text, and the world behind the text. The world in front of the text generally refers to issues of historical context and includes exegetical aspects such as social and cultural context, composition, sources, etc. The world of the text generally refers to the literary aspects such as semantics, structure, grammar, discourse, and rhetoric. The world in front of the text generally refers to aspects such as the history of interpretation and the current reception of the text. As a matter of hermeneutical urgency, I work from

## Power relations and patronage in Philemon

According to Witherington III (2007:51) “the major purpose of this discourse is to get Philemon to do what Paul judges to be the right thing ...” Given that mediation between Onesimus and Philemon was only possible because of the presence of some form of hierarchy and the acknowledgement of or submission to this hierarchy, an awareness of the power relations in the letter is beneficial to the current study. Identity plays a fundamental role in conflict (Jones 2006:298). In this section, I aim to indicate how matters concerning power relations and patronage in Philemon are transformed by the perspective of an identity in Jesus as Lord and Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Paul’s rhetorical focus in his letter to Philemon becomes clearer when read from the perspective of the repetitive texture of the text. As indicated earlier, the text of Philemon is a mere 328 words. In these 328 words, Paul refers to God and Jesus and the Spirit no fewer than 13 times. Paul’s numerous references to Jesus are particularly relevant for this study: with eleven of the thirteen references to the deity mentioning Jesus specifically, Paul clearly directs his appeal to Philemon from the perspective of Jesus as the Lord and Christ. I refer to each of these instances below.

In verse 1, Paul refers to Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, “Christ Jesus” in the genitive. In verse 3, Paul refers - again in the genitive - to θεοῦ πατρός ἡμῶν, “God our Father”, as well as to κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, “(the) Lord Jesus Christ”. In verse 4, Paul uses the personal τῷ θεῷ μου, “my God” in the dative, whilst he refers to τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν, “the Lord Jesus” in the accusative in verse 5. In verse 6, the accusative Χριστόν, “Christ” features, and in verse 8, the dative Χριστῷ, “Christ” is used. In verse 9, Paul uses the genitive Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, “Christ Jesus” once more. In verses 16 and 20, Paul uses the dative κυρίῳ, “Lord”, and in verse 20, Paul also uses the dative Χριστῷ, “Christ”. In verse 23 Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, “Christ Jesus”, appears in the dative

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the premise that the world of the text is the only responsible starting point in the hermeneutical process. Inasmuch as there is a dynamic and reciprocal “flow” between the three worlds of the text, then the world in front of the text and the world behind the text stand in service of the world of the text. In other words, the world of the text has a “rite of passage” in the interpretive process in a hermeneutic of trust.

20 I do not attempt to interpret slavery metaphorically or claim that slavery was more “acceptable” in New Testament times (Botha 2010:252).

for the first time, and, finally, in verse 25 Paul uses the genitive τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, “the Lord Jesus Christ”.

Not only is the repetitive texture of Paul’s reference to Jesus as Lord and Christ enlightening in terms of the foundation of Paul’s argument in the letter to Philemon, but also Paul’s frequent use of the preposition ἐν in reference to Jesus as Lord and Christ. No fewer than five times does Paul refer to “in Christ” (vv 8, 20), “in the Lord” (vv 16, 20), or “in Christ Jesus” (v.23). What exactly does Paul mean by this phrase? Gorman (2019:8 of 27) emphatically states: “Participation is not merely one aspect of Pauline theology and spirituality ... rather, it is at the very heart of Paul’s thinking and living. Pauline soteriology (theology of salvation) is inherently participatory and transformative.” What is, therefore, of particular interest for the current research, is the familial and relational implications of Paul’s repetitive reference to Jesus as Christ and Lord. Paul’s “language of participation ... was ‘not dogmatical but poetical’ language” (Gorman 2019:8 of 27). A wide array of terminology is used to describe Paul’s use, namely, union with Christ, mysticism, theosis, deification, divinization, Christosis, and Christification. Irrespective of which term is preferred, transformation as the consequence of participation in Christ is centrally important in understanding Paul’s use of the term.<sup>21</sup>

Campbell (2020:130) states that Paul triangulates Philemon’s relationship with Onesimus by inserting himself directly into the dysfunctional relationship. I suggest that Paul not only triangulates the relationship, but that he intentionally creates a relational pentagon in the letter to Philemon. Paul’s point of reference for the request in the letter is Jesus as Lord and Christ. Moreover, Paul’s referencing of several fellow believers in the letter creates a fifth relational reality in the contentious matter between Philemon and Onesimus. Paul mentions the following people by name: Timothy & Philemon (v.1), Apphia & Archippus (v.2),<sup>22</sup> Onesimus (v.10), Epaphras

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21 See Gorman (2019:8 of 27) for a useful layout of different authors’ approaches to the topic.

22 Interpreters have suggested different possibilities as to the identity of Apphia and Archippus, namely, that they were either the wife and son of Philemon, or that they were prominent members of the church in Colossae (Moo 2024: I. THE LETTER OPENING (vv. 1–3) section). On this interpretive challenge, (Moo 2024: I. THE LETTER OPENING (vv. 1–3) section) states: “We finally do not have enough data to

(v.23), Mark, Aristarchus, Demas & Luke (v.24). The importance of a social identity is emphasized through an appreciation of the phenomenon of patronage, which is closely associated with power dynamics in the first-century Mediterranean world. Patronage is widely prevalent in the ancient world, and its presence cannot be neglected (Rice 2013:29).

Scholars have argued that Paul's strategy in his letter to Philemon can be termed "gentle compulsion" (Punt 2010:241-242).<sup>23</sup> Punt (2010:236) engages the dynamics of power relations at work in Paul's letter to Philemon: "Paul claimed power in his letter to Philemon in a subtle and rhetorically strategic way, availing himself mainly of household terminology and family imagery, which he employed skilfully to exert his authority" (2010:245). According to Wessels (2010:143), Paul's use of a "variety of rhetorical strategies ... in his attempt to persuade Philemon to comply with his wishes regarding Onesimus" is a powerful subtext at work in his letter to Philemon. From this perspective, it seems that Paul takes (undue?) advantage of his role as Philemon's patron in the faith (v.19) to pressurise Philemon to do what he asks, and even more.

Even if Paul emphasises and confirms his patronage in the lives of both Philemon and Onesimus, I propose a different conclusion than mere coercion from Paul's side.<sup>24</sup> A different dynamic seems to be at work in Paul's rhetorical approach of mediation in this letter. I believe Paul is redefining any existing horizontal power relations from the perspective of both the socially and culturally destabilising and transformative effect of an identity in Christ. Paul clearly states: "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you based on love ... But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary." (vv 8-9, 14). Paul refuses, therefore, to be an arbitrator (Hecht & O'Brien 2018:8 of 15). Paul is sensitive to the role and possible

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decide one way or the other. But, with considerable hesitation, I think it more likely that Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus his son." I concur with Moo on this point.

- 23 Castelli (1991:21) has indicated that mimesis, with its "hierarchy of benefaction", can function as an oppressive category, which she terms "sameness". Within this "sameness" any type of deviation is seen as a threat.
- 24 Paul "desires a structured hierarchy" (Nebreda 2011:223) within his first-century groups of Jesus-followers, namely, a "hierarchy of benefaction" (2011:224).

effects of power in this mediation effort, taking great care in his rhetorical approach to narrate solely from the perspective of a shared story and identity in Christ.<sup>25</sup> Young (2021:100) indicates that believers have no rights before God, except for those divinely granted. Instead, believers have many obligations which stems from their “relationship to God and Christ, many of which are worked out in their relationships to other humans” (2021:100). This type of power is salvation-oriented (not political power), ablative (not to the principle of sovereignty), individualising (not to legal power), coexistent and continuous with life, and it is linked with a production of truth. Paul is strongly urging Philemon to “display a salient social identity rather than centre on ... personal identity” (Nebreda 2011:226).<sup>26</sup>

In his strikingly fresh reading of grace in Paul’s theology, John Barclay presents the Christ-event as the focus and fulfilment of divine patronage in the form of gift-giving. Barclay (2015:30 of 36) calls attention to two aspects of gift-giving in the ancient world which are relevant to the current discussion.

First, Greco-Roman and Jewish practices of gift-giving were intended to stimulate mutuality and reciprocity by creating or maintaining social bonds. A gift can, therefore, be “unconditioned (free of prior conditions regarding the recipient) without also being unconditional (free of expectations that the recipient will offer some ‘return’)” (emphasis in original) (Barclay 2015:30 of 36). For Paul, the discordance of grace as well as the expectation that “those who are ‘under’ grace ... will be reoriented in the ‘obedience of faith’” (2015:30 of 36) is intelligible. Second, benefits, because they “expected a return” (2015:30 of 36), were regularly given in a biased manner, namely, to those who were considered worthy of the gift.

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25 See the reference to *kyridoularchy* by Talbott (2010).

26 Dunn (2014:18 of 19) describes the letter to Philemon as a “masterly blend”: “The masterly blend of appeal and demand which is such a striking feature of the letter would be astonishingly artful if not by Paul himself.” In this article, I argue, however, that Paul – even if he blends masterfully in other letters (i.e. Philippians and Corinthians) – steers clear from making any demands based on his own apostolic authority in the letter to Philemon. Instead, Paul makes an appeal of love to Philemon: “Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you based on love.” (vv 8-9). Paul displays an acute awareness of the tension, sensitivity and complexity involved in the dynamics between both a master and a slave who are “in Christ”. In this sense, I suggest, Paul displays masterful mediating and pastoral leadership.



The concept of “unmerited” grace (as expressed by Paul and other Jewish voices) was, therefore, not normal in the ancient world (even though it was possible). In fact, “an unmerited gift from God was theologically problematic, and could threaten the justice and the rationality of the universe” (2015:30 of 36).

The patronage between believers always, therefore, submits to and is defined by God’s patronage in Christ, which is unconditioned, unmerited and anticipates the obedience of faith. Paul, in a sense, does not look back but, instead, is focused on the nature and the potential of the current and future characteristics of the relationship between Philemon, Onesimus, Paul, Timothy, Appiah, Archippus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, and the church in Colossae (vv. 1,2,23,24).<sup>27</sup> This interest is expressed in affective and relational language, which, in turn, is born from their identity “in Christ”.

Paul communicates in emotional language in his letter to Philemon: “Emotion is powerful and risky” (Jones 2006:317). Notice Paul’s use of affective familial and partnership language in Philemon: ὁ ἀδελφός, “our brother” (v.1), τῷ ἀγαπητῷ, “dear friend” (v.1), τῇ ἀδελφῇ, “our sister” (v.2), τὴν ἀγάπην, “love” (v.5), ἡ κοινωνία, “the partnership” (v.6), χαρὰν ... καὶ παράκλησιν, “joy and encouragement” (v.7), τῇ ἀγάπῃ, “love” (v.7), τὰ σπλάγχνα, “hearts” (v.7), ἀδελφέ, “brother” (v.7), τὴν ἀγάπην, “love” (v.9), τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, “my son” (v.10), τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα, “my very heart” (v.12), ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, “a dear brother” (v.16), κοινωνόν, “partner” (v.17), ἀδελφέ, “brother” (v.20), τὰ σπλάγχνα, “heart, (v.20). Paul’s use of words in his plea in this letter is characterised by familial and partnership language – both of which are infused with affective language which gives us deep insight into Paul’s relational focus in this letter.

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27 Insight into the dynamics of honour and shame, voluntary associations, as well as the dynamics of friendship in the first-century Roman world, provide the reader with valuable insights into the social and cultural texture of Paul’s letter to Philemon. From the social and cultural aspects of honour and shame (Malina 1993 and Hellerman 2009), voluntary associations (Ascough 2003), as well as linkage groups (Fitzgerald 2007), it is important to highlight that the Spirit, and not the flesh, is what brings Jesus-followers together in God’s family. This is a family characterised not by competition for honour, but by friendship.

## Guiding principles from Philemon for the process of mediation

Amanda Hecht and Shawn O'Brien (2018:8 of 15) present the reader with clear principles for mediation from the letter to Philemon. The authors suggest that modern mediators should, in taking Paul's masterful lead, put themselves in the shoes of all sides of the conflict. Modern mediators should, furthermore, also understand their context and work in creative ways within the boundaries and opportunities presented by that world. Paul does all of this whilst maintaining a larger vision at work in the lives of these early Jesus-followers, namely, the church functioning in unity. Paul does not allow this situation to be a private matter only between individuals.

I have argued that Paul highlights a relational pentagon in his letter to Philemon. These relationships and partnerships are described by Paul in affective terms. These terms, which Paul uses repetitively throughout the letter, serve to indicate Paul's authentic and substantial estimation and appreciation of Philemon's love and faith. It does not merely function as an effort at manipulation and intimidation on Paul's part (Dunn 2014:317). Moreover, Paul's affective language serves to remind and encourage Philemon that his relationship with the newly converted Onesimus should be characterised in the same way. Paul inserts himself into the (currently) dysfunctional relationship between Onesimus and Philemon as mediator. Paul, in the reading offered here, seems to be encouraging both Onesimus and Philemon to work towards the flourishing of their relationship. Paul is, therefore, less interested in solving a problem, and more interested in building a relationship. The characteristics and dynamics of this relationship is, of course, a central part of Paul's rhetoric in the letter to Philemon. For Paul, both Philemon and Onesimus have a new identity because of their shared faith in Christ. This reality functions as the centre of Paul's plea in the letter. It emphasises both Paul's awareness of the power relations at play between a master and a slave, as well as the way in which these power relations are redefined in Christ. They are brothers in Christ and of all believers – specifically also those believers whom Paul mentions by name in the letter.

In v.6 Paul says: ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου ἐνεργῆς γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν. Douglas Moo (2024:395)

translates this verse as follows: Philemon, I am praying that the mutual participation that arises from your faith in Christ might become effective in leading you to understand and put into practice all the good that God wills for us and that is found in our community; and do all this for the sake of Christ.”<sup>28</sup> Paul’s prayer for Philemon serves as a summary for the attitude which all should have in mediating situations of ecclesial conflict.

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28 “This verse is universally recognised as the most difficult in Philemon” (Moo 2024:389). Moo (2024:390-394) discusses 4 approaches to this verse.

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