

ONESIMUS AS A BROTHER:
IMPLICATIONS OF CHRISTIAN-ISLAM RELATIONS IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT: The arrival and spread of Christianity along with the Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. This has an impact on the notion that Christianity is a colonial religion for “pribumi” Muslims in Indonesia. This article aims to offers the topic of Onesimus as Philemon’s brother in Paul’s letter to Philemon as a solution to conflict the religiousness between Christianity and Islam. The approach of this article is a postcolonial perspective, where building change from society tends to be positioned on the “two poles” or binary into a society that integrates with each other and rubs off between communities that are local, communal, and global simultaneously.

KEYWORDS: Philemon, Onesimus, Muslim, Religiousness, Indonesia

Introduction

Some modern scholars follow this opinion, that Onesimus was a slave who fled from his master, eg Vincent, Kummel, G.H.P. Thompson, Guthrie, Lightfoot, O’Brien, Meeks, Melick, Nordling, Moule, M.M. Thompson, Wilson, Santoso, Sung Uk Lim, etc. (Vincent 1897:158; Kummel 1966:246; Thompson 1967:173; Guthrie 1970:635; Lightfoot 1970:312; O’Brien 1982:266; Meeks 1983:59; Melick 1991:338; Nordling 1991:97-119; Moule 1977:285; Thompson 2005:194; Wilson 2005:317; Santoso

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2011:13; Lim 2016:216). According to the experts included in this opinion, Onesimus, who was a slave in Philemon's household, fled from his owner after making several mistakes.

In 1993, Callahan offered a new interpretation of Onesimus' identity, namely as Philemon's brother. Callahan notes that Paul never explicitly mentions the words "fugitive" or "runaway" in his letter, which leads him to seek alternative historical explanations for what happened in Philemon's letters. In short, Paul expressed his desire that Philemon also accept Onesimus as his beloved brother. Paul tried to reconcile and unite the separate Christian families. In this context, Paul wrote that the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus was a Christian brother relationship, not a slave-owner relationship.

This article attempts to expose the texts of Paul's Letter to Philemon concerning Onesimus' identity as Philemon's brother with a postcolonial approach and then implied into the context of the religious relationship between Christianity and Islam, especially in Indonesia. What is important in this context is the need to build a religious relationship between Christianity and Islam as brotherhood in love, acceptance, and gentleness.

Commentary on Philemon 8-20

In verse 8, Paul begins his call to Philemon in his letter. Paul's work in the form of this letter is a work of diplomacy written using rhetorical techniques. In general, this crescendo implies that Onesimus has committed a serious offense against Philemon - and Paul is trying to help to alleviate the consequences of this serious offense. Paul begins by saying that he really has complete freedom to command Philemon to do what is right. He had the apostolic authority, but he chose not to run it. Paul sent this quick letter by refusing to call himself an apostle in that letter and this is a rhetorical strategy as described above. F.F. Bruce writes that "Paul could, of course, have exercised his authority as an apostle ... but that is not how one friend approaches another. Yet he cannot forbear to point out that, if he had been minded to exercise his authority, he had full liberty to do so" (Bruce 1984: 211). Dunn added the theological component as Paul's argument, that Paul was appealing to Philemon's duty ἐν Χριστῷ, responsibilities and obligations have been changed by becoming a Christian (Dunn 1996:325). If you imagine, at the beginning of Philemon reading this letter, then he will feel a real change when he read verse 8. Everything before was praise and introduction, and now Paul refers to the inherent right to him as an apostle to ask Philemon to do something.

In verse 8-9, Paul begins to compare with the word freedom (παρρησίαν) in the previous verse. The comparison is between the word "freedom to govern" and "begging in love" (παρακαλῶ). The subject of the word "freedom to govern" is on Paul's

side, while the subject of the word “begging in love” is on Philemon’s side. Both of these words fall into the realm of the legal language of human rights. For example, when there is someone who smokes in the public space. Then someone warned the person. But the person said that my right to smoke do not hinder me to smoke. The word right here is more to the word *parrotia*, because the right is measured by the person who smokes. Conversely, when there is someone who wants to smoke. But the person who wants to smoke does not smoke because there are some people who are nearby, and in his heart he says that if I smoke, then I will violate the right of others to not smoke, then the word right here is measured from others who have the right not to smoke. So as an apostle authority, Paul must have the right to command Philemon to carry out his orders. But Paul sees Philemon’s right, so Paul prefers to ask, that Philemon can do Paul’s hope sincerely.

Love is the basis of Paul’s argument. He has commented on Philemon’s matchless attitude to love, and Paul is now trying to build his argument on that attitude (which Philemon will defend). In this passage, Paul also identifies himself as a parent at the same time to show his appreciation and empathy (Fitzmyer 2000: 105). Bruce further writes: “If Paul did refer to himself as an old man, which his appeal would appear to be based on pity as well as love” (Bruce 1984:212). Paul “may be tugging at Philemon’s heartstrings ... or on the other hand, Paul may have mentioned his old age to engender the respect and privilege typically accorded to the elderly in antiquity” (Still 2011:112).

Whatever the case, it is clear that Paul named his age and his status as a prisoner designed to soften Philemon’s heart. It is a rhetorical language filled with invitations and charms. These identifications - old men and inmates - are very different from Paul’s sometimes overwhelming identification of himself as an apostle (1 Cor. 9:1; 2 Cor. 11:5, Gal. 1:1; 1 Tim. 2:7).

In verse 10, Paul names Onesimus for the first time (Artzt-Grabner 2010:120; Fitzmyer 2000:107). Philemon probably did not know that he would hear Onesimus’s name again. Paul has “strategically avoided Onesimus’ name up to this point in the letter ... suggesting that the mere mention of his name to Philemon might prove provocative” (Callahan 1997: 35). For this reason it is only in this verse that Onesimus’s name is mentioned.

Onesimus is not only mentioned by name. More than that, he is mentioned as Paul’s son. Paul uses the pronoun of the possessive ἐμοῦ, which would sound like, “I begged you about my son ...” Paul usually uses this word “son” when referring to the person he is converting (Cf. 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1; Titus 1:4. Bruce 1984:213). Seeing this, Onesimus did not appear to be a Christian until he met Paul. Philemon heard of his lost slave for the first time in this verse, and he heard

Onesimus described in terms that imply Paul's love and protection. Paul also refers to his imprisonment again by mentioning the word "prison", which functions rhetorically to derive sympathy from his readers, namely Philemon.

Edward Keazirian provides information about the role that Paul started playing now after he mentions Onesimus's name. He wrote that Paul "helped mediate between two parties as an uninvolved third party might have done. In addition, Paul was very supportive of Onesimus in how he served in two roles, namely as an advocate and mediator" (Edward M. Keazirian 2009:184).

In verse 11, Paul uses words to explain the existence of Onesimus. Onesimus used to be useless (ἄχρηστον) to Philemon. Although Paul has not used the word "slave", it implies that Onesimus worked for Philemon in some capacity in the past as a slave. Now, Onesimus is really useful to Paul (εὐχρηστον). The name Onesimus (Ὀνήσιμον) actually means useful, which is a synonym of one of the words Paul uses for his words (εὐχρηστον). Bruce sums up Paul's words, writing that Paul "plays on the meaning of the name, using a synonym and an antonym from another root" (Bruce 1984:213). This is a very clever way to show that Onesimus's value lies in its future potential, not in its use in the past. Paul returns using a firm pronoun (ἐμοῖ) to highlight how precious Onesimus is to him. On the creative use of εὐχρηστον and ἄχρηστον, Dunn discouraged commented that "if the experience of the troops is anything to go by, Onesimus must have been heartily sick of it by this time" (Dunn 1996:329).

In verse 12, Paul shows that he wants to send Onesimus back to Philemon. There is an interpretation which holds that Onesimus returned to Philemon with this letter. Surely if Onesimus's problem is with Philemon alone. But the question is, why Onesimus to jail? Of course there is a very heavy problem that befell Onesimus, the case of fugitive slave. So this letter must have been sent to Philemon by courier, and Onesimus is still in prison. This letter deals with Onesimus 'fate' who is in prison, for his freedom. Paul also reiterates how precious Onesimus is to him. He again uses the graphic term *σπλάγχνα* to show how deeply he loves Onesimus. Paul calls Onesimus as his *σπλάγχνα*, his love. This illustrates how important Onesimus is to him (Bruce 1984:214).

Now that Paul has explained how deeply he feels about Onesimus, he begins to describe Philemon (verse 12). Paul wanted to keep Onesimus to serve him. The verb imperfect βουλόμαι show an action that occurred in the past over a period of time. This is a very important word in this verse, for it shows that Onesimus had been with Paul for some time. It deals with verse 10, when he calls Onesimus his son in faith. This implies some time together before Onesimus's conversion. The imperfect verb ἐβούλομην in this verse further establishes the point of time. Paul had wanted

for a period of time to keep Onesimus with him, but finally decided to send him back to Philemon. With regard to this verb, Dunn wrote “The imperfect tense (I was wanting) implications of his onesimus’ existence was a considerable factor in his deliberation” (Dunn 1984:330; Comp. Sung Uk Lim 2016:216,229) and Blanke offers a long paraphrase of verse 13: “Although I knew that I would break existing laws, hurt Philemon’s property rights, and/or risk any moment the intervention of official and private slave hunters, yet for a long time I have fostered the idea, and even now I am trying and hoping to retain Onesimus at my side” (Barth & Blanke 2000:365).

The reason why Paul wants to keep Onesimus, so he can serve with him in the service on behalf of Philemon. That is the extent of Paul’s plea to Philemon if it succeeds. Paul’s plea has several options that Philemon can choose.

- At least Philemon can accept back as a slave. This is Paul’s most basic plea. This concerns the dangers that threaten Onesimus’s life. If Philemon refused to accept Onesimus back as his slave, the death sentence would be accepted by Onesimus.
- But Paul’s plea is more than just a basic petition, but more than that, accepting Onesimus as brother. For this subject will be discussed further in the interpretation of verse 16. So, Paul expects Onesimus as a permanently free man.
- Moreover, Paul expected that Philemon would allow the receptive Onesimus to be sent back to Paul to be able to serve God in the name of Philemon. It seems that this third hope of Paul succeeds, for Onesimus is recorded accompanying Paul’s ministry after that. This can be compared with Colossians 4:9.

For the sake of his personal friendship with Philemon and the wider unity of the Christian community, and as a rhetorical strategy for influencing Philemon and drawing his sympathies, Paul needed to send Onesimus back to Philemon (verse 14). Regardless of his wish, from time to time, to keep Onesimus by his side, Paul was compelled to write this letter, so that Philemon would accept Onesimus to be sent back to Philemon. Roman law required him to do so, otherwise Onesimus would be put to death. Fitzmyer writes, “Paul rhetorically hints at the authority that he could have used in Onesimus’ case” (Fitzmyer 2000:111). But despite his apostolic or apostolic authority to force, he rhetorically prefers to ask Filemon’s willingness to do one of his three petition options has been described in the interpretation of the previous verse.

In verse 15, Paul invites Philemon to reflect on why Onesimus was separated or should be separated from Philemon. He suggests that some kind of reconciliation may occur between Onesimus and Philemon, and perhaps the resolution is adequate with the separation that has taken place. Paul mentions the separation of Onesimus from Philemon for a while. It implies time to be ended - limited time of separation.

In contrast to the temporary separation, Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back, forever (Sung Uk Lim 2016:220,222). What does it mean to completely restore him? Paul will answer it in the next verse.

Bruce is interested in the use of the passive verb ἐχωρίσθη by Paul. The passive form allows Paul to refer to Philemon and Onesimus alike ...” (Bruce 1984:216). By using this passive verb, Paul wants to awaken Philemon, that there is a divine role in all the events that took place in the past. The important thing is in the future. Paul was convinced that Philemon was willing to accept Onesimus again, and that too was divine intervention. Chrysostom noted the subtlety of Paul’s rhetoric on this verse, “Paul wisely said ‘perhaps’, that the master may yield to his request ...” (Gorday & Oden 2000:315).

This is the first time Paul uses the word slave (δοῦλον) in this letter (verse 16). Paul did not want Philemon to accept Onesimus back as he had when he left Philemon’s home. Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus back as something much



higher than a slave, his beloved brother. Paul was aware of Philemon’s anger caused by Onesimus’s mistake and escape. So the phrase “*no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, moreover, ...*” implies that even if Philemon wanted to receive Onesimus back, it is okay to accept back as a slave, but his hope is more than that, Philemon accepts Onesimus again as a brother, since Paul himself has regarded Onesimus as his beloved brother. Paul constructs this verse symmetrically-chiastic:

If Paul’s request goes well, then for me Paul, Onesimus is “beloved brother in the Lord,” while for Philemon, Onesimus is “the beloved in the outward.” So it seems that Onesimus to Philemon was not just a slave, because apparently Paul was trying to awaken Philemon, which Onesimus was a brother of Philemon. This will be reconstructed later. So aside from being a slave to Philemon, Onesimus was actually his outer brother.

It is true that for a while Philemon lost a slave (which was a very expensive commodity at the time), but for eternity he gained something far more valuable in return, the rediscovery of an outer brother and brother in Christ. This is a relationship worth more than money. Behind the above chiastic structure, Paul also wants, that Philemon accepts his brother back in the flesh (outwardly), as well as his brother in God (spiritually; cf. Chia 2023: 1-10; Chia 2023:490-496).

As an apostle and as (albeit indirectly) the man who made Philemon a Christian, Paul was certainly honored by Philemon (verse 17). As fellow Christians, certainly

between each other to be “brothers in God”. As a rhetoric expert, Paul is very skilful in delaying a command, until this verse, an instruction has been uttered, to accept Onesimus as “brother in the Lord,” as Philemon accepts Paul also as “brother in the Lord.” Even more so than that, accepting it as “brother in the flesh”, because basically so, that they are brothers of one father. The first imperative verb is used in this letter (προσλαβοῦ). Paul’s ability as a rhetorician is evident in this verse: he impressively avoids mentioning the word “slave” until verse 16, and has avoided the use of imperatives until verse 17. Chrysostom commented on this fact: “We see that Paul only introduces the heart of the matter after praising Philemon and with much preparation” (Gorday & Oden 2000:316).

Paul combines the above imperative verbs with a firm pronoun (ἐμέ). Thus Paul emphasizes that Philemon should not only accept Onesimus again, but accept him as if Paul himself walked through the door of his house. Fitzmyer said, “Onesimus is to be welcomed as the virtual presence of Paul himself” (Fitzmyer 2000:116).

The inclusion of all the churches that met at Philemon’s home as a recipient of the letter had created a system of accountability for Paul in connection with this request. They all heard that Philemon was asked to receive Onesimus back as if he were an apostle, and they would all be there to observe and be witnesses of how Philemon received Onesimus.

With verse 18, Paul tried to remove any practical obstacle to Philemon that he hoped to say “yes”. Although this is a sensitive issue, namely the debt problems caused by Onesimus’s flight, Paul expresses it very gently. This verse begins with the rhetorical construction that Paul has mentioned the financial injury resulting from the departure of Onesimus, and this certainly results in Philemon hating Onesimus. But Paul begs Philemon, that the financial injury is counted on him. In the language of economic law at the time, Paul himself would pay for it. Verses 17-19 show several types of technical financial and juridical terms from the ancient commercial language. Some of the technical terms shown are *opheilein* (for “owing” something to someone), *adikein* (for someone’s “wrong”), and *ellogein* (for charging someone’s account) (Barth & Blanke 2000:485). The aorist form of ἡδίκησέν implies, that there was a violation in the past, which has resulted in debt which until the time of writing the letter has not been paid. Paul is trying to settle a financial injury through a second warrant, ἐλλόγα. He ordered Philemon to collect the debt to him. Paul uses a strong personal pronoun to emphasize that he will pay for it. This whole verse serves to shift the focus of Philemon from Onesimus, and to place it right on Paul.

Paul affirms that he seriously wants to pay Onesimus’ debt to Philemon (verse 19). He gave this affirmation by signature. The signature of the ancient letters is that “I,

Paul, I write with my own hands” (Cf. Gal. 6:11). Bruce correctly noted that “Onesimus was in no position to make, or even to guarantee, restitution” (Bruce 1984:220).

With proper rhetorical techniques, Paul then makes a recapitulation to Philemon. Paul reminds us that Philemon owes himself (Paradox tactic) (Powell 2009:422), that Philemon can know Christ through Paul’s influence, albeit indirectly. Paul is trying to make Philemon aware. So through that consciousness, Paul expected Philemon to grant his wish.

By referring to Philemon as “brother”, Paul brings his personal friendship with Philemon again (verse 20) (Barth & Blanke 2000:485). Paul also adds a bit of humour using another word on Onesimus’s name (optative *ὄναίμην*). Can be seen game word between onaimen with name Onesimus. So this is a humor built through word games:

Yes Brother, I want *ὄναίμην* for you in God.

Yes Brother, I want to be **useful** to you in God.

Yes Brother, I want to be **Onesimus** to you in God.

Paul’s presence is the presence of Onesimus. So if Philemon accepts Paul as a brother, then Philemon also accepts Onesimus’s presence as a brother. Even Paul wants to be Onesimus to Philemon.

Then Paul adds the third imperative of this letter (*ἀνάπαισόν*). Dunn summarizes it like this, “Paul seems to be conscious of just how much he used to be. So he makes a deliberate effort to ‘lighten up’ with his final plea” (Dunn, 1996, 337). The translation of the last phrase verse 20 follows Santoso. The translations usually translate: that Paul begs Philemon to “comfort” him. But agreeing with Santoso, the researcher translated, that Paul begged, that Philemon “comfort” my heart (*σπλάγχνα*). So instead of consoling Paul, but comforting Paul’s heart, Onesimus, because in verse 12 Paul introduces Onesimus as my heart (*σπλάγχνα*). Behind the verbs of the command (*ἀνάπαισόν*) there is something urgent to do immediately. This is due to the threat of death of Onesimus, who certainly awaits Philemon’s answer immediately.

Structure of Philemon 8-20

Based on the above interpretation, the development of the above rhetorical arguments can be illustrated in the following structure chart:

Vv. 8-15 Rhetorical style of “humble” to gain sympathy

↓
V. 16 Command to “receive Onesimus back”

Vv. 17-19 The rhetorical style of “recapitulation” with a humorous style

↓
V. 20 Command to “comfort Onesimus”

By looking at the chart above, it is known that the construction of the rhetorical argument in verses 8-20 is directed to two orders with the same goal, that Philemon should reclaim Onesimus, at least as a slave who would prevent Onesimus from the death penalty, but more than that, as brothers in the flesh and in the Lord, because basically they are both brothers and sisters and now you are in faith in Christ. The receptivity of Onesimus in the Philemon family is an act of “comforting”, that is, the life of the outer brother and the brother in faith is saved from the death penalty.

Implications of the Narrative of Philemon to building between Christian-Islam Relationship

Since Onesimus was a slave of Philemon, and Paul was familiar with Philemon, Paul wrote this letter to Philemon, which contained pleas for Onesimus. Paul begged that at least Philemon accept Onesimus back as a slave. When Philemon accepted him back as a slave, the threat of capital punishment could be avoided. But Paul's plea is more than that, that Paul wants Onesimus to be accepted by Philemon as his brother. Paul wanted to awaken Philemon, that as fellow Christians they were both brothers of faith (brothers in the Lord). Even Paul also realized that Onesimus was the brother in the flesh, the half-brother. For that Paul wants a reconciliation of brothers and sisters. To be sure, love must be the main foundation in the Philemon family. If this petition is accepted, Paul begs a subsequent petition that is less important than the two options of the petition, that is, if Onesimus may be sent to Paul to assist him in mission service. Apparently this continued plea came true, for Onesimus was recorded alongside Paul's next missionary journey, and then he was sent by Paul to return to Colossae. It seems that after being sent back to Colossae, Onesimus pastored the church at Colossae. This can be seen in Colossians 4:9 “He [Tychicus] I co-ordered with Onesimus, one of your own. They will tell you everything that happens here.”

The religious relationship between Christianity and Muslims has fluctuated. Sometimes Muslims were active while Christians reacted to these developments. At other times, active Christians and Muslims responded. In general, this is what happened in the Middle Ages and the modern era in aspects of belief, politics, economy, social and culture. These two relationship models make the tug-of-war between the two prolonged and always reveal a fluctuating “face”; sometimes collaborating and sometimes conflict (Jumhana 2018:112-115; Waryono 2011:98).

The two religions are essentially ‘one family’, namely from the Abrahamic religion family and historically-institutionally present in different histories and places, even though they are still in one area. This also happened like Onesimus and Philemon, where they came from one father with different mothers (Waryono 2011:98).

The interesting thing, like what Paul said in his letter to Philemon as a solution to religiousness relations in Indonesia, including christianity and muslims, is a relation-

ship to be able to accept each other forever, no longer as servants with his master, but more than servants with his master, namely as beloved brothers, both in the man and in God (Phil. 1: 15-16) (Hidayati & van Doorn Harder 2020; DeVan 2014).

Conclusion

So this Philemon letter has a happy ending, that Philemon accepts Onesimus back as a brothers and sister in faith. So in this way, even though the religiousness relationship between christianity and muslims is a tug of war, getting far and closer in Indonesia, both parties must embrace mutual empathy as brother and sister in the man and in God to optimize growth towards humanism, freedom, tolerance, integrity struggling with differences, cooperation, theological sharpening, openness that is dynamic of ideas, and love.

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