EXPLORING PHILEMON

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EXPLORING PHILEMON

Freedom, Brotherhood, and Partnership in the New Society

Roy R. Jeal

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To my son, Dr. Nathan Jeal, with love

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Editorial Foreword

The Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity Series

The Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity (RRA) series uses insights from sociolinguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, ethnography, literary studies, social sciences, cognitive science, and ideological studies in programmatic ways that enact sociorhetorical interpretation (SRI) as an interpretive analytic. This means that SRI is a multidimensional approach to texts guided by a multidimensional hermeneutic. Rather than being a specific method for interpreting texts, an interpretive analytic evaluates and reorients its strategies as it engages in multifaceted dialogue with the texts and other phenomena that come within its purview. It invites methods and methodological results into the environment of its activities, but those methods and results are always under scrutiny. Using concepts and strategies of methods as an interactive interpretive analytic, sociorhetorical interpretation juxtaposes and interrelates phenomena from multiple disciplines and modes of interpretation by drawing and redrawing boundaries of analysis and interpretation.

The corpus of works for the Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity series is writings in the environment of the first four centuries of the emergence of Christianity. The primary corpus is the New Testament, but full-length studies and commentaries may be produced on writings with some significant relationship to study of the New Testament, such as Wisdom of Solomon, Sibylline Oracles, Didache, Epistle of Barnabas, Protevangelium of James, or Infancy Gospel of Thomas.

The Approach of SREC Commentaries

Sociorhetorical Exploration Commentaries (SREC) enact the interactive interpretive analytic of SRI by exploring, analyzing, and interpreting multiple textures of texts. Interpreters begin sociorhetorical commentary with a

description of the blending of rhetorical belief systems that occurs through the sequence of pictures the discourse evokes, which the authors call rhetography. This beginning point is motivated by insights both from conceptual blending theory and from rhetorical interpretation of early Christian discourse. Underlying this beginning point is a presupposition that spoken or written discourse begins its persuasive work by creating a sequence of pictures in the mind. As the commentators proceed, they interpret the rhetography in wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, miracle, and priestly belief systems in emergent Christian discourse to present an initial interpretation of the blending of belief systems that was occurring during the first Christian century.

After the beginning focus on the picturing of belief and action in texts being interpreted, commentators analyze the texts from the perspective of their inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural textures, ideological texture, and sacred texture. This section is called textural commentary. The strategies of analysis and interpretation are guided by a presupposition that humans create patterns of images and reasonings in the inner texture of their elaborations by recruiting great ranges of "background meaning" and building them into rich systems of belief and action through processes of "pattern completion" that create "emergent structures."

The final step in the commentary is the presentation of the rhetorical force of the text as emerging discourse in the Mediterranean world. An overall goal of the commentary, therefore, is to analyze and interpret how emerging Christian belief systems blended graphic imagery and reasoned argumentation into newly configured Mediterranean discourse. Emerging out of contexts within first century Mediterranean Judaism, early Christians lived in the Roman Empire in the context of Greek philosophy, a wide range of ritual practices, and multiple modes of social, cultural, and ideological perspectives. The sociorhetorical commentary in these volumes explores and exhibits the emergent modes of discourse in the highly diverse environment of religious belief and practice especially during the first-century-CE Mediterranean world.

What Stands in Common among SREC Volumes?

Every author of an SREC volume uses nomenclature present in *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (1996) and *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-rhetorical Interpretation*

(1996).[1] This means that each author includes a section titled "Textural Commentary" and within this section refers to basic textures of a text described in the two 1996 publications (inner texture, intertexture, social-cultural texture, ideological texture, sacred texture) and multiple subtextures within the basic textures, such as opening-middle-closing, repetitive, and progressive texture within inner texture.

In addition, each author works with six emergent Christian rhetorolects of the first century CE and with conceptual blending/integration among these rhetorolects. A rhetorolect is a mode of discourse "identifiable on the basis of a distinctive configuration of themes, topics, reasonings, and argumentations" that develops in cultures.[2] The six basic rhetorolects that have been identified since 1996 are wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, miracle, and priestly.[3] The initial publication that guided the RRA group in interpretation of conceptual blending/integration was *The Way We Think*, by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner.[4] Since then, a series

1. Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996); Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 7–39. See also David B. Gowler, L. Gregory Bloomquist, and Duane F. Watson, eds., *Fabrics of Discourse: Essays in Honor of Vernon K. Robbins* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

2. Vernon K. Robbins, "Socio-rhetorical Interpretation," in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 197.

3. Vernon K. Robbins, "The Dialectical Nature of Early Christian Discourse," *Scriptura* 59 (1996): 353–62; Robbins, "Argumentative Textures in Socio-rhetorical Interpretation," in *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts: Essays from the Lund 2000 Conference*, ed. Anders Eriksson, Thomas H. Olbricht, and Walter Übelacker, ESEC 8 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 27–65; Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse*, vol. 1, RRA 1 (Dorset, UK: Deo, 2009); Robbins, "Precreation Discourse and the Nicene Creed: Christianity Finds Its Voice in the Roman Empire," *R&T* 18 (2012): 1–17; David A. deSilva, "A Sociorhetorical Interpretation of Revelation 14:6–13: A Call to Act Justly toward the Just and Judging God," *BBR* 9 (1999): 65–117; deSilva, "The Invention and Argumentative Function of Priestly Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *BBR* 16 (2006): 295–323; Roy R. Jeal, "Starting Before the Beginning: Precreation Discourse in Colossians," *R&T* 18 (2011): 287–310; Duane F. Watson, ed., *Miracle Discourse in the New Testament* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012); Vernon K. Robbins and Jonathan M. Potter, eds., *Jesus and Mary Reimagined in Early Christianity*, WGRWSup 6 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).

4. Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

of additional publications by members of the RRA group has played an important role.[5]

Since authors understand SRI as an interpretive analytic rather than as a method, they have the freedom to select and foreground certain aspects of the texts more than, or even rather than, others. But every author has agreed to write an SREC volume within the following format: after an introductory chapter to the volume, which includes an explanation of the particular way the author will apply SRI as an interpretive analytic, each volume presents commentary on the text in a sequence of rhetography, English translation display, textural commentary, and rhetorical force as emergent discourse.[6]

The rhetography section presupposes knowledge of the essay titled "Rhetography: A New Way of Seeing the Familiar Text" and is regularly informed by other essays and books as well.[7] The rhetorical force section presupposes ongoing discussion and debate among New Testament scholars concerning the rhetorical role of a particular writing in emerging Christianity in the Mediterranean world. This means there are two "primary" foci in the rhetorical force section: (1) rhetorical force in emerging Christianity itself and (2) rhetorical force in emergent social, cultural, ide-

5. Vernon K. Robbins, "Conceptual Blending and Early Christian Imagination," in *Explaining Christian Origins and Early Judaism: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Science*, ed. Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro, BibInt 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 161–95; Robbins, *Invention of Christian Discourse*; Robert von Thaden Jr., *Sex, Christ, and Embodied Cognition: Paul's Wisdom for Corinth,* ESEC 16 (Dorset, UK: Deo, 2012); Thaden, "Pauline Rhetorical Invention: Seeing 1 Corinthians 6:12–7:7 through Conceptual Integration Theory. A Cognitive Turn," in *Cognitive Linguistic Explorations in Biblical Studies,* ed. Bonnie Howe and Joel B. Green (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 101–21.

6. See Robbins, "Socio-rhetorical Interpretation," 192–219, esp. 203–208; Robbins, "Socio-rhetorical Criticism," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 311–18.

7. Vernon K. Robbins, "Rhetography: A New Way of Seeing the Familiar Text," in *Words Well Spoken: George Kennedy's Rhetoric of the New Testament*, ed. C. Clifton Black and Duane F. Watson, SRR 8 (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 81–106; Robbins, *Invention of Christian Discourse*; David A. deSilva, "Seeing Things John's Way: Rhetography and Conceptual Blending in Revelation 14:6–13," *BBR* 18 (2008): 271–98; Roy R. Jeal, "Blending Two Arts: Rhetorical Words, Rhetorical Pictures and Social Formation in the Letter to Philemon," *Sino-Christian Studies* 5 (June 2008): 9–38.

ological, and religious discourse and conceptuality in the broader Mediterranean world at the time of the writing (and perhaps later).

What Are Some of the Variations among SREC Volumes?

Freedom for Each Author

Each author is given a range of freedom within the overall sequential framework of rhetography, English translation display, textural commentary, and rhetorical force as emergent discourse. Some authors think it works well to write textural commentary in the sequence in which the textures were presented in *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse* and *Exploring the Texture of Texts*: inner texture, intertexture, social-cultural texture, ideological texture, sacred texture. Other authors think it is too constraining to write textural commentary in a sequence like this. Therefore, authors are allowed to write textural commentary in whatever "order" of textures and subtextures they consider most workable for the text on which they are commenting. To indicate to the reader what texture the author is interpreting, bold letters introduce the major five textures (or combinations thereof), and italics introduce subtextures, like *repetitive texture* within **inner texture**.

This SREC Commentary on Philemon

Within the established sequence for writing SREC commentaries, Roy R. Jeal has chosen to interpret Philemon from the perspective of all the textures and subtextures in *Exploring the Texture of Texts*. Since Philemon is only 335 words long, he decided to divide the sequential commentary on the basis of the opening, middle, and closing of the letter. After the introduction, he presents the rhetography, English translation, and *repetitive texture* of the entire text. Then he presents textural commentary on the **inner textures**, **intertexture**, **social and cultural texture**, **sacred texture**, and rhetorical force as emergent discourse of the opening (vv. 1–7), middle (vv. 8–20), and closing (vv. 21–25). After this, he concludes the volume with a chapter on the **ideological texture** and rhetorical force as emergent discourse of the entire text of Philemon.

Jeal's decision to write this commentary on Paul's short Letter to Philemon using each SRI texture and subtexture makes it appropriate to publish it as the first Sociorhetorical Exploration Commentary in the Rhetoric

of Religious Antiquity series. Its comprehensive presentation of multiple textural analyses of Philemon allows the possibility for this commentary to function as a guide or manual for authors of other SREC commentaries as they select the modes they wish to foreground as they interpret units of text. The editors anticipate that subsequent SREC volumes regularly will present a selection of textural interpretive-analytic strategies, rather than always using all of them, because the length of their texts will not allow them the luxury of the comprehensive approach in this volume. Some commentators may desire to give only certain textural analytic-interpretive strategies prominence so they can introduce approaches they consider important for moving SRI into territory not yet in view.

Preface

> Yes, I think words were born to play with each other, they don't know how to do anything else, and contrary to what people may say, there are no such things as empty words.[1]

> But my people, inspired by what to them might seem an actual, renewed meeting with me—for the African has a capacity for disregarding distances of space and time—on leaving the solicitor's quarters laid their way round by the post office, looked up the Indian professional letter-writer in his stall there and had this learned man set down for them a second message to me. In such way the letter, first translated in the mind of the sender from his native Kikuyu tongue into the lingua franca of Swahili, had later passed through the dark Indian mind of the scribe, before it was finally set down, as I read it, in his unorthodox English. Yet in this shape it bore a truer likeness to its author than the official, conventional note, so that as I contemplated the slanting lines on the thin yellow paper, I for a moment was brought face to face with him.[2]

The letters of the New Testament were meant to be read, heard, and felt by their audiences. Their rhetorical energy was meant to affect people, to move them to believe, to strengthen their belief, and to live life out in ways appropriate to belief in Jesus Christ and the gospel. The letters describe and address life as it was encountered by Christ-believers in real social, cultural, and ecclesial situations. Paul the apostle's Letter to Philemon is made up of full, powerful, interactive words that bring us, even at this long distance and time from their composition, face-to-face with Paul, Philemon, Onesimus, and the situation that confronted them.

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1. José Saramago, *The Cave*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (Orlando: Harcourt, 2002), 173.

2. Isak Dinesen [Karen Blixen, pseud.], "Echoes From the Hills," in *Shadows on the Grass* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 119–20.

The words of the Letter to Philemon interact with each other on the field of play in multiple ways. They place images in the mind. They argue. They move ideas along. They have sounds, intonations, rhythms, movements, and indeed beauty about them. They indicate ideologies, and they evoke new ideologies. They introduce sacred ideas about faith in Christ Jesus and the implications of that faith. They call for a new ethic for an emerging society in the ancient Mediterranean world. The sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation in this commentary aims to look at these things, interpret them, and articulate them carefully. Words are our stock in trade as readers and interpreters, and our task is to learn and talk about them clearly, to explain how they are coherent and compelling. We examine the words to understand how they play and interweave together to bring us into contact with people, Christ-believers, who lived long ago, so that we may be better people today.

Because Philemon is short, I have had the luxury of engaging in a full-bodied sociorhetorical interpretation (SRI) that examines every line of the letter multiple times. Since SRI is an analytic rather than a method, each analytical procedure views the same text through a different lens, with the goal of coming, not to repetition, but to a comprehensive view of the features and the effect—the rhetorical force—of the letter as it emerged in its ancient setting. Structurally, therefore, the commentary moves through the analyses or "textures" of SRI as it has developed during recent decades. Following the introduction to Philemon, the commentary considers rhetography, textural commentary, and rhetorical force as emergent discourse. The textural commentary moves sequentially according to the *opening*, *middle*, and *closing textures* of the letter. The sections can be read individually or in varied sequences. I have aimed for as much depth as possible. I am aware that other commentaries in the SREC series will employ the analytic in other ways.

Philemon is about teaching and learning wisdom. Paul is at work "on the ground," working through an emerging issue that affected him, Philemon, Onesimus, and many others. The letter is about how life should be lived faithfully, honestly, honorably, and productively in the new society, the *ekklēsia* of Christ-believers. There are important and dramatic implications for life in the household, the polis, and the cosmos. While it brings us face to face with a situation and with fascinating characters from the past, it also brings us face to face with ourselves in our own ecclesial, household, and sociocultural experiences. Surely this is a good thing.

This commentary does not do everything. It does not refer to all the secondary literature. It does not take an adversarial approach that tries to move ahead in tension with the work of other interpreters. The bibliography lists only the materials explicitly indicated in the commentary. There is more to do. The interpretation of biblical texts, including sociorhetorical interpretation, never ends. Each generation and each person must be taught by the texts. There is always more to learn.

Sincere thanks are due to many. I thank Vernon K. Robbins and Duane F. Watson, editors of the series, for their confidence in and support of my work. I am highly appreciative of the generous support of the Pierce Program in Religion of Oxford College of Emory University, which made possible the publication of this volume. I am grateful to my friends and colleagues of the Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity research group who, now for a long time, have engaged together in deep, revealing, and delightful sociorhetorical interpretation of fascinating texts. Vernon K. Robbins, the developer of SRI and man of ideas and energy who has brought it forward, has worked tirelessly to lead the RRA group to propose ever new ideas and approaches to interpretation. He has listened carefully to the thoughts of all, has pushed, persuaded, and been persuaded, with firmness but also with sensitivity and care. I am grateful for Vernon's personal friendship, which has involved many early-morning walks; discussions by email, Skype, and in person; much encouragement; and, for this volume on Philemon, support, criticism, editing, and love for these tasks. I thank many friends who have indicated their interest and support with questions, comments, criticism, and encouragement. I am deeply grateful for the support of my family, who ask questions about how things are going, engage in conversation, ask whether I am about to finish something, and encourage me to keep at it. Jackie, my wife, has always supported me in more ways than I can say.

Roy R. Jeal
February 2015

Abbreviations

Ancient Sources

Ann.	Tacitus, *Annales*
Ant.	Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*
De an.	Aristotle, *De anima*
Digest	a compendium of Roman law drawn together from laws long in force by the (Eastern) emperor Justinian in the sixth century
Ep.	Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*; Seneca, *Epistlae morales*
Eph.	Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*
Eth. nic.	Aristotle, *Ethica nicomachea*
Inst.	Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*
Leg.	Plato, *Leges*
Lucil.	Seneca, *Ad Lucilium*
Mart. Pol.	Martyrdom of Polycarp
Opif.	Philo, *De opificio mundi*
Pol.	Aristotle, *Politica*
Prob.	Philo, *Quod omnis probs liber sit*
Rhet.	Aristotle, *Rhetoric*
Rom.	Ignatius, *To the Romans*
T. Sim.	Testament of Simeon
T. Zeb.	Testament of Zebulun

Secondary Resources

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*

BDAG	Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000
BDF	F. Blass and A. Debrunner. *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Translated and revised by Robert W. Funk. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
ConC	Concordia Commentary
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
ESEC	Emory Studies in Early Christianity
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996
MM	J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan. *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*. 1914–1929. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995
NA^{28}	*Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland 28th rev. ed.). Edited by Barbara and Kurt Aland et al. Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 2012
NIB	*The New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTG	New Testament Guides
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
RBECS	*Reviews of Biblical and Early Christian Studies*
RRA	Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity
RSV	Revised Standard Version

R&T	Religion and Theology
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLGNT	*The Greek New Testament SBL Edition*. Edited by Michael W. Holmes. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010
SREC	Sociorhetorical Explorations Commentaries
SRI	Sociorhetorical Interpretation
SRR	Studies in Rhetoric and Religion
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976
UBS^4	*The Greek New Testament*. 4th rev. ed. Edited by Barbara Aland et al. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1994
WGRWSup	Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*

Glossary[1]

Argumentative texture. The reasoning that occurs inside a text. Rhetorical argument may be logical, asserting or prompting syllogistic reasoning, or qualitative, where the sequence of images, descriptions, and values encourages the reader to accept the portrayal as true and real. Argumentation moves people to thought, belief, understanding, and action.

Conceptual blending. The formation of new and emergent cognitive structures when topoi from particular and clear input frames (or mental spaces) are brought together and elicit understandings of new concepts and conditions not previously understood.

Frames. Cultural narrative and conceptual structures that prompt images and environments of thought. Frames provide reference patterns by which new experiences are assessed, choices are made, and values and behaviors are established. Input spaces within frames blend together in the human mind, inducing new, emergent cognitive structures, concepts, and conditions not previously understood.

Ideological texture. How people consciously or unconsciously see and understand the spatial and mental worlds in which they live. It involves beliefs, values, assumptions, philosophies, points of view, expectations, notions of right and wrong, behaviors, justifications of positions whether well-argued or not, doctrines, systems, politics, and power structures that affect people and things in the cultures in which they live. The particular alliances and conflicts nurtured and evoked by the language of a text, the language of interpretations of a text, and the way a text itself and inter-

1. See the comprehensive glossary in Vernon K. Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse* (Dorset, UK: Deo, 2009), 1:xxi–xxx.

preters of the text position themselves in relation to other individuals and groups.

Inner texture. The various ways a text employs language to communicate. This includes linguistic patterns, voices, movements, argumentations, and structural elements of a text; the specific ways it persuades its audiences; and the ways its language evokes feelings, emotions, or senses that are located in various parts of the body.

Intertexture. The representation of, reference to, and use of phenomena in the world outside the text being interpreted. This world includes other texts; other cultures; social roles, institutions, codes, and relationships; and historical events or places.

Narrational texture. The texture of the voices (often not identified with a specific character) through which words in texts speak. The narrator may begin and continue simply with an assertion that describes, asserts, or greets. Narration may present argumentation or introduce people who act, which creates storytelling or narrative.

Opening-middle-closing texture. The basic rhetorical structure of the beginning, the body, and the conclusion of a section of discourse. In a text, this texture indicates where the basic functional sections are located and how they operate rhetorically. These subtextures provide a sense of wholeness or completeness to a text.

Progressive texture. Progressions and sequences of grammar and ideas in a text. Progressions indicate how the rhetoric moves ahead linguistically, thematically, spatially, and topically.

Repetitive texture. Repetition of words, phrases, and topoi that help identify social, cultural, and ideological networks of meanings and meaning effects in the rhetoric in a text.

Rhetography. The progressive, sensory-aesthetic, and argumentative textures of a text that prompt graphic images or pictures in the minds of listeners and readers that imply certain truths and realities.

Rhetorical force as emergent discourse. The emerging discourse of a social, cultural, ideological, and/or religious movement like early Christianity as it moved audiences by eliciting belief, behavior, and community formation.

Rhetorolects. An elision of "rhetorical dialect" that refers to the emergent modes of discourse created by early Christ-believers, who shaped and reshaped language so that they could articulate their new faith understandings about Jesus Christ and the implications of that faith for life in their communities (the *ekklēsia*) and in Mediterranean societies. Modes of discourse are identifiable on the basis of distinctive configurations of themes, images, topics, reasonings, and argumentations. Six major rhetorolects are prominent in first Christian discourse: wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, priestly, and miracle discourse.

Sacred texture. The manner in which a text communicates insights into the relationship between humanity, the cosmos, and the divine. It addresses redemption, commitment, worship, devotion, community, ethics, holy living, spirituality, and spiritual formation.

Sensory-aesthetic texture. The features in a text that indicate, reflect, or evoke things discerned through visual, oral, aural, olfactory, tactile, gustatory, textual, prosaic, poetic, intellectual, and other sensory and aesthetic human characteristics.

Social and cultural texture. The social and cultural nature and location of the language used and the social and cultural world evoked and created by a text.

SRI (sociorhetorical interpretation). A range of heuristic analytics that analyzes and interprets texts using features of rhetorical, social, and cognitive reasoning to help commentators learn how the texts under examination function to influence thinking and behavior. The *socio-* refers to the rich resources of modern social, cultural, and cognitive sciences. The *rhetorical* refers to the way language in a text is a means of communication among people. A major goal of SRI is to nurture an environment of full-bodied interpretation that encourages a genuine interest in people who live in contexts with values, norms, and goals different from our own.

Steps. In this commentary the term "step" is employed to indicate specific movement ahead in the progressive texture of the letter. Sociorhetorical analysis shows that sometimes there is variation in the steps both among the textures and between the textures and the rhetography. The steps sometimes do not correspond, because different functions may be in play as the interweaving of the rhetoric advances.

Texture. Emerging from a metaphor of figuration as weaving, the concept of texture in relation to a text derives from Latin *texere* (to weave) that produces an arrangement of threads in the warp and woof of a fabric. SRI extends the metaphor of texture to the metaphor of tapestry, approaching a text as a thick network of meanings and meaning effects that an interpreter can explore by moving through the text from different perspectives.

Topos, topoi (pl.). A place to which one may go mentally to find arguments. The topics by which argumentation is made. Thus topoi are landmarks in the mental geography of thought which themselves evoke networks of meanings in their social, cultural, or ideological use.

Wisdom rhetorolect. Discourse that interprets the visible world by blending human experiences of geophysical, social, cultural, and institutional human experiences with beliefs about God especially through parental and familial nurturing and caring modes of understanding. Wisdom is about doing good in the world and living faithfully, fruitfully, and ethically. Its special rhetorical effect is to conceptualize the function of spaces, places, and people through practices characteristic of households and other teaching-learning environments.

Editors' Note

The English translation of Philemon was made by the author, based on his exegetical insights. Other biblical texts are from the New Revised Standard Version, except where noted. Quotations from Latin and Greek authors follow the texts and translations of the Loeb Classical Library.

Introduction

This wonderful letter portrays Paul as a man of deep emotions who employs moving, subtle, manipulative, and simultaneously clear rhetoric. It presents Philemon as a caring person who has the good of his fellow Christ-believers in mind and works to meet their needs. Onesimus is presented as recently becoming a Christ-believer and like a child to Paul and, as one who has been Philemon's slave, one owned as property by another person. There is an implicit concern that, despite Philemon's love, faith, and good works for Christians (ἅγιοι, "holy ones"), he might not be inclined to treat Onesimus as generously. It is apparent that Paul thinks Philemon needs to be encouraged to treat Onesimus in the same way he, Philemon, "refreshes" others and with the same courtesy he treats Paul himself. While the lines of thought are clear—Paul wants Philemon to receive his slave Onesimus as a "beloved brother," as if Onesimus were Paul himself—the nuancing of ideas and language, the blending of words, the pictures the words convey, and the frames of cognitive understanding make the letter a very complex discourse for analysis.

This is a short letter as Pauline letters go, the shortest in the corpus, at 335 words. It is also the most directly personal letter in the collection. It was meant to affect Philemon intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally and to do so directly in the context of his faith as a Christ-believer, in the context of the *ekklēsia* (the assembly of holy ones) that met in his house, and in the context of his relationship with Paul. It is hard to imagine that it did not have its desired effect. Strangely, it seems, at least at first glance, Onesimus, the object of Paul's appeal to Philemon, is a slave who has become a Christ-believer through his contact with Paul during a separation from his owner. For Paul there is no doubt about what should happen next, because he thinks in well-developed and clear theological, practical, and Christian ways. The good Philemon does not yet have such a fully developed understanding. Many interpreters become occupied (and preoccupied) with historical questions: Was Onesimus a runaway

slave? Was he a messenger from Philemon to Paul? Did he seek Paul out? Was he a thief? Where was Paul located? And with more sociohistorical and ethical questions: Was Paul in favor of or against slavery? Why did Paul not explicitly call for the abolition of slavery? Did Paul mean for Philemon to manumit Onesimus? If so, why did he not say so explicitly? What was the nature of slavery in the Roman world, and how did it relate to the situation indicated in the letter? They become similarly occupied with certain theological questions: Does Philemon have any theological point? Why is it in the New Testament canon? These are all important—though generally not fully answerable—considerations, and they receive notice in this commentary; but the goal here is to identify, analyze, and interpret what the text and the arguments *do* and *how they go about doing it*. This is to ask, identify, and understand what is going on in the letter. So this commentary is less concerned with historical and sociohistorical conclusions and more concerned with the rhetorical force of the letter as a small but dramatically significant piece of the distinctly Christian discourse that was emerging in the Mediterranean world of the first century CE.

What the Letter to Philemon surely does show is that "in Christ"—in the critical space where Paul, Philemon, Onesimus, and the other named persons and all the holy ones are now located—things are different than they are in Mediterranean cultural, political, social, and religious practice. In this new space, a distinctly wisdom space, there is freedom, brotherhood, and partnership for all. There is a new society that is concerned for life as it should be in the community, much more than for how it operates in and is accepted by the larger culture. Philemon is expected to get the idea, specifically as regards himself and Onesimus, and to act accordingly.

Sociorhetorical Interpretation

Sociorhetorical interpretation is a heuristic analytic—or, perhaps better, a range of analytics—that, rather than being a "method" employing a series of scientific steps or formulae that are performed and produce predictable results according to a conceptual framework, is a kind of "multiple accounts evaluation" that analyzes (and reanalyzes) texts using features of rhetorical, social, and cognitive reasoning in order to help interpreters learn how the texts being examined function to influence thinking and behavior. It has been designed with the interpretation of biblical texts (and

other religious texts of the ancient Mediterranean)[1] in mind, focusing on the New Testament and closely connected documents. Analysis aims to discover phenomena in the texts as they emerge in their social, anthropological, and rhetorical contexts and as they bring about religious and theological cognition. It is not an adversarial approach that aims to move interpretation and understanding ahead by comparison and contrast with other interpretations. Rather, it employs the analytic for continuing discovery of the rhetoric of topoi, pictures, textures, and emergent structures that the texts set in recipients' minds and by which the audiences are meant to be socially and religiously formed and reformed. Sociorhetorical interpretation aims to show *how* texts such as the Letter to Philemon *function* rhetorically and socially.

A leading characteristic of sociorhetorical interpretation is the way it identifies and examines the multiform and multivalent geometry of the texts of the New Testament and of Mediterranean antiquity. Texts are imagined to be analogous to a tapestry,[2] a woven textile that presents pictures, stories, argumentation, sensory, and aesthetic details. This means that they draw on features (or threads) from other texts, material culture, social, and cultural agency and many other realms. They employ and create ideologies, and they relate to the sacred and the spiritual realm. In doing all this, they present a multidimensional fabric and picture that fills spaces of various kinds and that both conveys and elicits meaning. The interweaving of threads forms textures that are not flat, two-dimensional broadcloth fabrics, but are both coarsely and finely textured images that have depth and shapes of all possible kinds. This geometry[3] brings the shapes together yet recognizes that they interweave in multiple ways and in multiple directions and that they turn and can be turned, and every turning reveals something not noticed before.

Sociorhetorical interpretation does a very important thing for understanding and for writing about biblical texts: rather than trying to judge them from, as it were, the outside—whether to show that what they say is correct, true, historically accurate, inspired, inspiring, authoritative, or

1. Hence the general title of the series, the "Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity."

2. See the programmatic work of Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996).

3. For me the concept of "geometry" is informed by Margaret Visser, *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery, and Meaning in an Ordinary Church* (Toronto: HarperPerennial, 2000), and by many life experiences.

the word of God, on the one hand, or wrong, false, historically fabricated, misleading, misguided, simply mistaken, on the other—it lets them stand in judgment over their interpreters. It avoids being bound by the static sources, situations, and structures of discourse, being concerned more with the *interplay* of them in the production and evocation of ideas, thoughts, and behaviors. The point here is that sociorhetorical interpretation attends to what the texts actually say and do, observing the rhetography or images cast on the imagination, the **inner textures** and **intertextures**, the **ideologies**, indeed to the **sacredness** of the texts apart from external methodological or moral constraints. Sociorhetorical interpretation is not aiming to make a point for its own or for some third party's sake. It is aiming to learn, to understand.[4] The text should be heard in its own self-presentation. Because it is a heuristic analytic, it can be performed multiple times. There is no final, definitive analysis or interpretation. Discovery is always a continuing process. It encourages one to do all one can, but allows for and encourages more to be done heuristically by others. Sociorhetorical interpretation aims to show (in visuality, visual exegesis, rhetography), to describe (textural analysis), and to explain the power (rhetorical force) of biblical and religious discourse as it emerged and was employed in the ancient Mediterranean.

While sociorhetorical interpretation takes the classical rhetorical tradition indicated in the famous handbooks seriously, it recognizes that ancient Mediterranean, early Christian, and biblical rhetorics are broader than the handbooks indicate. The three species of classical rhetoric (judicial, deliberative, epideictic), for example, do not adequately address the range of situations and kinds of discourse indicated in the New Testament.[5] Rather than addressing the law courts, political assemblies, or civil ceremonies, early Christian and New Testament discourse addresses situations centered in "households, political kingdoms, imperial armies, imperial households, temples, and individual bodies of people."[6] Early Christians did what groups and communities of all kinds and in all places do:

4. On this, see especially Christopher Bryan's "A Digression: 'Great Literature'?" in *Listening to the Bible: The Art of Faithful Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 56–65.

5. See the discussion in Roy R. Jeal, *Integrating Theology and Ethics in Ephesians: The Ethos of Communication* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2000), 35–43.

6. See Vernon K. Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse* (Dorset, UK: Deo, 2009), 1:1–3. This point is noted by others in regard to New Testament texts, e.g., Neil

they shaped and reshaped language in ways that expressed their beliefs, their worldview, and what had been revealed to them. This reshaped language was meant to be delivered to Christ-believing audiences who could recognize the discourse in light of their belief. New Testament documents like the Letter to Philemon are, therefore, living things whose features require interpreters to be imaginative, looking for these features of reshaping and the development of ideas, getting as close as we can by explanation of their meanings in our own words while recognizing that analysis and interpretation must be done again by every generation of interpreters.[7] Sociorhetorical interpretation helps overcome a negative hermeneutic of suspicion with a hermeneutic of openness and hope. It aims to examine the letter in a living, vital, breathing world where there are human, ethical, and eternal concerns, not only (or merely) concerns for facts and factual, reconstructed situations.

Rhetorolects: Distinctive Rhetorical Dialects or Modes of Discourse

One of the important developments employed by sociorhetorical interpretation is the recognition that early Christians, in their shaping and reshaping of language, were creating their own emergent discourse so that they could articulate their understanding of faith in Jesus Christ and its implications for life in their community and in societies. This discourse became identifiable by its distinctive rhetorical dialects or modes of speaking and writing.[8] Sociorhetorical interpretation calls these modes of discourse rhetorolects (*rhetórolect*; an elision of "rhetorical dialect"). Each rhetorolect is a mode of discourse "identifiable on the basis of a distinctive configuration of themes, topics, reasonings, and argumentations" that develops in cultures.[9] Early Christians employed at least six major

Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 20.

7. See Richard B. Hays, "Crucified with Christ: A Synthesis of the Theology of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, Philippians, and Galatians" in *Pauline Theology*, ed. Jouette M. Bassler (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1994), 1:227–46, here 228.

8. See especially Vernon Robbins, "The Dialectical Nature of Early Christian Discourse," *Scriptura* 59 (1996): 353–62; Robbins, "Socio-rhetorical Interpretation," in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 192–219. Robbins, *Invention of Christian Discourse*, 1:7–9, and *Invention of Christian Discourse*, vol. 2, forthcoming.

9. Robbins, "Socio-rhetorical Interpretation," 197.

rhetorolects: wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, miracle, and priestly.[10] An analogy that provides a helpful illustration is the ancient Greek concept of modes of music. Thomas Cahill points out,

> In our Western music we still know the modes "major" and "minor." The Greeks had five modes, known to us by their names—Ionian, Aeolian, Lydian, Dorian, and Phrygian—which referred also to ethnic groupings within Greece. Each of these modes, each of which had submodes, was easily recognized by listeners, and each created a characteristic mood, just as we might say, "That sounded like a Scottish ballad. This sounds like a Spanish dance." Each Greek mode was constructed from an invariable sequence of relationships between the notes that no other mode possessed, more distinct than E flat major is from C minor, perhaps at times more akin to Asian music with its larger intervals and quarter tones. The Dorian was martial, the Phrygian engendered contentment, the Mixolydian (one of the submodes) was plaintive, the Ionian softly alluring, apparently making seduction easier. In all, Greek music probably sounded something like the late medieval music of Europe with its emphases on catchy, easily singable melodies, exaggerated rhythms, and humble instrumental accompaniment—Gregorian chant gone wild in the streets.[11]

The rhetorolects in early Christian discourse, similarly, both describe and create particular and often specialized understandings.[12] They correspond to the "spaces" in which actions of God and humans occur.[13] While this commentary points to the use of prophetic, priestly, and apocalyptic rhetorolects and spaces in Philemon, the letter is a rhetorical discourse strongly focused on wisdom because it is concerned with how Christ-believers should behave toward other Christ-believers in *ekklēsia* and household locations and in all sociocultural situations.

10. For a full description and discussion see Robbins, *Invention of Christian Discourse*, 1:7–9, 90–120. There may be more rhetorolects that interpreters will identify.

11. Thomas Cahill, *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 87.

12. What Robbins calls "the invention of Christian discourse."

13. See especially the chart in Robbins, *Invention*, 1:109, for a clear description of rhetorolects and their respective spaces.

Wisdom

Sociorhetorical interpretation understands Philemon as a wisdom text. It employs overall a wisdom rhetorolect, has a wisdom goal, and has a view toward wisdom space. Wisdom in the context of New Testament discourse has to do with the lives early Christians were called to live in their ancient Mediterranean social, cultural, and religious world. Christ-believers lived in locations, in social spaces, where they interacted with people and behaviors of diverse kinds. They lived in and under the authority of the Roman Empire and of the emperor. They faced pressures to conform to social, political, religious, and legal ideologies, norms, and expectations. Major questions for them in their Mediterranean setting would naturally have been "How should we live our new lives of faith?" and "What should we do?" These questions arise because believers like Paul recognized that things are different "in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ, Phlm 8, 20, 23) because Jesus is recognized as Lord (vv. 3, 5, 25) and eternity is in view (v. 15). These ideological perspectives call for clear thought and understanding in the Mediterranean context. Much of the New Testament was produced to address these issues. Wisdom discourse was the natural response to the situation.

> Wisdom rhetorolect interprets the visible world.… [It] blends human experiences of the household, one's intersubjective body, and the geophysical world (firstspace) with the cultural space of God's cosmos (secondspace). In the lived space of blending (thirdspace), people establish identities in relation to God who functions as heavenly father over God's children in the world. People perceive their bodies as able to produce goodness and righteousness in the world through the medium of God's goodness, which is understood as God's light in the world. In this context, wisdom belief emphasizes "fruitfulness" (productivity and reproductivity) in the realm of God's created world.[14]

Wisdom is, therefore, about doing good in the world and about living faithfully, fruitfully, and ethically. The discourse developed out of a variety of language and rhetorical modes and ideologies, particularly the Old Testament and other Jewish discourses, and also drew on moral and behavioral notions from the broader Mediterranean realm of thought.[15]

14. Ibid., 1:xxix–xxx; see also 1:121–74.
15. Ibid., 1:121–74.

Its motivation, however, relies on the conviction that God is the Father of all, that Jesus is Lord and Christ, that he is alive in the present time even though he had been dead, and that humans are responsible to Christ's authority and that they can in fact do good things. The normal location of wisdom is in physical bodies in the household, the space where people live out much of their lives.

Philemon was invented, spoken, written, and delivered with such wisdom in mind. While the man Philemon was a notably loving and faithful person who had other Christ-believers in mind (Phlm 5), there is more wisdom for him as someone who is a believer living in Mediterranean culture. Philemon is physically located in a household, which, adding to the complexity of households, is the location of the church, the *ekklēsia* (καὶ τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ, v. 2). He has membership in and commitment to the *ekklēsia*. He has a commitment to the new relational situation among believers. He is also a slave owner. The rhetoric of the letter is aimed directly at the social formation of Philemon as he stands in this household situation. It is specifically designed and presented to persuade him to receive his slave Onesimus, over whom he has power, as a "beloved brother" (οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλὰ ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, 16). It aims to craft a wisdom space where Philemon receives Onesimus, who himself has become a Christ-believer (vv. 10–13).

This wisdom discourse moves to the development of an *ecclesial* space. The letter must be seen as a pastoral and deeply theological text. It envisions a kind of "ecclesiastical discipline"[16] where all believers, even if they are or have been slaves in the ancient Roman Mediterranean, are, in their physical bodies, family members and participants in the assembly of believers, the ecclesial space. Philemon's social formation in this way is Paul's goal and is effectively the same thing as Philemon's sacred or spiritual formation.[17]

Rhetography

Sociorhetorical Explorations Commentaries privilege "rhetography" as the starting point for analysis and commentary.[18] This is because what is

16. Marianne Meye Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, Two Horizons Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 201.

17. See the sections on **sacred texture**.

18. For this reason rhetography is placed first in the commentary, followed by a translation of the text of Philemon.

"seen" or otherwise sensed is first and fundamental to understanding. The word *rhetography* is an elision of "rhetoric" and "graphic,"[19] indicating the interrelationship and function of the visual and the persuasive features of texts. Visible, written texts are composed of recognizable letters of alphabets that are shaped into words and grammaticalized into phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. The sounds that correspond to these constructions are understood by people when they are read silently, read aloud, and heard. What we see in texts with our eyes or hear with our ears draws most (if not all) of us quite naturally into the visuality or visual art of the words. We "see" scenes and visualize persons, places, and things; we "hear" sounds and notice colors and other sensory phenomena; we visualize and hear and feel the emotions that the rhetoric of the words conveys. The written art (words) and the visual art (pictures evoked by the words) intersect or blend in the mind in the visual imagination and contribute dramatically to interpretation and understanding. Texts are themselves visual things[20] that, when they are most effective, evoke or cause the mind to recall the visual. The rhetography is a way of telling the story that texts aim to get across to people. Interpretation of the imagery is visual exegesis.[21]

Aristotle, in the *Rhetoric* (*Ars Rhetorica*), speaks of employing metaphors that "set things before the eyes" (*Rhet.* 3.11.1 [Freese, LCL]), in order to create a sense of reality in the minds of audience members. He had in mind the notion that rhetoricized combinations of words have a visual aspect and a visual function that elicit mental images that human minds

19. See Vernon K. Robbins, "Rhetography: A New Way of Seeing the Familiar Text," in *Words Well Spoken: George Kennedy's Rhetoric of the New Testament*, ed. C. Clifton Black and Duane F. Watson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 81–106.

20. Particularly for modern people who generally read texts individually and silently. The first recipients (or most of them) of New Testament texts heard them read aloud.

21. For a full theoretical account including modern theories of rhetography/visuality, see my article, "Visual Interpretation: Blending Rhetorical Arts in Colossians 2:6–3:4" in *Biblical Rhetography through Visual Exegesis of Text and Image*, ed. Vernon K. Robbins, Walter S. Melion, and Roy R. Jeal, ESEC (Atlanta: SBL Press, forthcoming). See also Jeal, "Blending Two Arts: Rhetorical Words, Rhetorical Pictures and Social Formation in the Letter to Philemon," *Sino-Christian Studies* 5 (2008): 9–38; Jeal, "Clothes Make the (Wo)Man," *Scriptura* 90 (2005): 685–99; and Jeal, "Melody, Imagery, and Memory in the Moral Persuasion of Paul," in *Rhetoric, Ethic and Moral Persuasion in Biblical Discourse*, ed. Thomas H. Olbricht and Anders Eriksson (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 160–78.

employ for understanding: "I mean that things are set before the eyes by words that signify *actuality*" (ἐνέργεια, *Rhet*. 3.11.2 [Freese, LCL]).

Words can convey both actuality and metaphor according to Aristotle (*Rhet*. 3.11.2). The idea is that words are able to portray the inanimate in an animated way (*Rhet*. 3.11.3) that "gives movement and life to all, and *actuality is movement*" (κινούμενα γὰρ καὶ ζῶντα ποιεῖ πάντα, ἡ δ' ἐνέργεια κίνησις, *Rhet*. 3.11.4 [Freese, LCL]). This means that things are *seen* in the imagination to be energized, working, functioning, active.[22] When he begins his discussion of style (λέξις), Aristotle states that it is necessary to give attention to it in order to make things clear and visible by presenting φαντασία, that is, a show, an impression, an appearance in the imagination (*Rhet*. 3.1.6). This is to say that, in Aristotle's view, rhetoric, words, and literature elicit visual images in the mind that are linked, indeed necessary, to understanding (belief) and action (behavior). Quintilian addressed how eloquent speech functions and the importance of awakening the emotions of the audience so that it is drawn into symbolic worlds where ideas are understood (Quintilian, *Inst*. 6.2.24–36).

> The prime essential for stirring the emotions of others is, in my opinion, first to feel those emotions oneself. (*Inst*. 6.2.26 [Butler, LCL])

> Consequently, if we wish to give our words the appearance of sincerity, we must assimilate ourselves to the emotions of those who are genuinely so affected, and our eloquence must spring from the same feeling that we desire to produce in the mind of the judge. (*Inst*. 6.2.27 [Butler, LCL])

How can these emotions be produced in the speaker and grasped by listeners?

> There are certain experiences which the Greeks call φαντασίᾳ, and the Romans visions [*visiones*], whereby things absent are presented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes. (*Inst*. 6.2.29 [Butler, LCL]).

> From such impressions arises that ἐνέργεια which Cicero calls illumination and actuality, which makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively

22. Ἐνέργεια appears as "actuality" in the LCL version translated by J. H. Freese quoted here. The word means "energy," "working," "function," "action."

> stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence. (*Inst.* 6.2.32 [Butler, LCL])

Ned O'Gorman demonstrates, by reading Aristotle's *Rhetoric* together with *De anima* (*On the Soul*), that there is a visual aspect to Aristotle's rhetorical theory.[23] According to *De anima*, sight is the most developed sense (3.3). *Phantasia* (φαντασία), brought on (primarily)[24] by visual perception, conveys understanding to the mind and, indeed, to the soul (ψυχή).[25] *Phantasia* brings what is not seen in visual reality to the human mind in the visual imagination.[26] By it things are interpreted to be meaningful, to be right or wrong, and it is critical to perception, deliberation, and understanding (*De an.* 3.3.5–3.7.8).[27]

According to Aristotle, style (λέξις) evokes *phantasia* for the purpose of clarity of idea and understanding ("but all this [i.e., style] is appearance/imagery for the listener/audience"; ἀλλ' ἅπαντα φαντασία ταῦτ' ἐστι καὶ πρὸς τὸν ἀκροατήν, *Rhet.* 3.1.6).[28] Style is what brings things before the eyes. The mind visualizes and blends scenes, persons, actions, and material things that appear to be, but are not, material realia. Such mental imagery and blending has a rhetorical function. It has emotional, pathos effects that lead to the development of opinion. It is an integral part of persuasion and the development of correct judgments and correct behaviors. The texts communicate things beyond themselves *in what they picture*. The language is not only the language of words but also the language of the visual imagination.

23. Ned O'Gorman, "Aristotle's *Phantasia* in the *Rhetoric*: *Lexis*, Appearance, and the Epideictic Function of Discourse," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 38 (2005): 16–40.

24. But also by the senses of sound, smell, taste, touch. The sensibilities affected are visual, oral, aural, olfactory, tactile, gustatory, textual, prosaic, poetic, and intellectual. See ibid., 19. Sound is particularly important for ancient Mediterranean documents since they were first spoken, then transcribed, then read aloud to their audiences. Sound evokes the visual.

25. Ibid., 17.

26. Ibid., 20.

27. Ibid., 20–21.

28. See ibid., 22–27. The LCL translation by J. H. Freese mistakenly renders the line as "But all these things are mere outward show for pleasing the hearer."

Textures

Following consideration of the rhetography of a text and an English translation, Sociorhetorical Exploration Commentaries provide an analysis of "textures."[29] This analytical rather than methodological approach[30] examines various textures first to discover what they are and then to interpret how their function has rhetorical power, that is, to *explore* how they *do* things to people. The approach is exploratory, not final, aiming to see ever more broadly and deeply into the artistry and power of the rhetoric. As with the rhetoric of any tapestry, any artistic work, and any verbal or written discourse, there are many textures that may be considered. In the commentary, I have looked at the series of textures according to the taxonomy set out by Vernon Robbins in *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse* and *Exploring the Texture of Texts*. Descriptions of the textures are provided in the sections of the commentary as they go along. Here, however, are brief statements about what each texture considers.

Inner textures are concerned with the language, the medium of communication, of the texts under consideration. Analysis involves identifying and examining words, patterning, voices, movement, argumentation, and the structural and sensory artistry of the language.

Opening-middle-closing texture is the basic rhetorical structure of the letter. All texts (and generally coherent units of texts) have these parts or variations of them. The terms correspond to "beginning" (or "introduction"), "body," and "ending" (or "conclusion"). *Opening-middle-closing texture* provides a sense of wholeness or completeness to a text.

Repetitive texture refers to repetitions of words, grammaticalizations, and topoi, which produce patterns that help identify major themes in the rhetoric and social relations in a text.

Progressive textures are the sequences of grammar and ideas in a text. They indicate where the rhetoric moves ahead linguistically, thematically, spatially, and/or topically.

Narrational texture is observed in the storytelling or narrative presented by the (implied) narrator or speaker. It listens to the voice(s) that

29. Here see especially Robbins, *Tapestry*; and Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

30. See above on sociorhetorical interpretation.

conveys the ideas of the discourse. The narration is the story as it is being told in a text.

Argumentative texturing is about the reasoning that occurs inside a text. The rhetorical argument may be logical or qualitative. This texturing is meant to move people to thought, understanding, belief, and action.

Sensory-aesthetic texture is revealed in the features that indicate, reflect, or evoke things discerned through visual, oral, aural, olfactory, tactile, gustatory, textual, prosaic, poetic, and intellectual sensibilities. This texturing produces a recognizable "feel" in a text.

Intertextures are the connections and interactions between a text being studied and phenomena outside it. This involves "intertextuality," connections with other texts, but also relationships with any observable external phenomena.

Social and cultural texture refers to the "social and cultural nature and location" of the language used and the "social and cultural world" evoked and created by a text.[31] It employs social topoi and categories that denote social and cultural situations addressed and created in the rhetorical discourse.

Ideological texture has to do with how people see and understand the spatial and mental worlds in which they live. It involves the beliefs, values, assumptions, philosophies, points of view, expectations, notions of right and wrong, behaviors, justifications of positions whether well-argued or not, doctrines, systems, politics, and power structures that affect people and things in the cultures in which they live.

Sacred texture is the texture of the relationships among humans, the created order, and God, between and among humanity, the cosmos, and the divine. This is the texturing that addresses redemption, commitment, worship, devotion, community, ethics, holy living, spirituality, and spiritual formation.

Rhetorical Force as Emergent Discourse

Sociorhetorical Exploration Commentaries conclude with analysis of the rhetorical force of the text as emergent discourse in the ancient Mediterranean world. This analysis recognizes that Philemon, like all New Testament and early Christian discourse, is "emergent," because it presents the

31. Robbins, *Exploring*, 71–94.

developing thinking, theology, and faith of some early Christ-believers set down in writing, transmitted, and preserved as they came to it and went along in their lives. Paul and other New Testament authors did not arrive fully formed, speaking and writing with fully developed beliefs and doctrines. They understood and interpreted Jesus Christ, the new faith and the new society, and their implications as they came to understand more about them and as they encountered circumstances—such as those of Philemon and Onesimus—that called for thoughtful interpretation and the application of interpretation to the actual conditions of the new reality. This *emerging* discourse was shaped with powerful and dramatic *rhetorical force* in order to move audiences—real people in real locations and circumstances—employing the dynamics of the visual and the textural, that is, the sociorhetorical, to elicit belief, behavior, and formation among the people individually and collectively as the *ekklēsia*. This rhetorical force evoked, encouraged, and strengthened faith and indicated, reminded of, and sometimes corrected behavior appropriate to the faith. In other words, the rhetorical force of the emergent discourse was meant to shape the lives of people. In this process new modes of discourse were created that, while drawing on other existing modes, are new and strategic communications that affect audiences. The rhetorical force of the Letter to Philemon powerfully influenced, I presume, Philemon, Onesimus, the *ekklēsia*, and other early Christ-believers. It influences us as readers and listeners to it now.

Reading a Sociorhetorical Exploration Commentary

The layout of the commentary makes clear that it is not structured in a verse-by-verse or even paragraph-by-paragraph fashion as is frequently done. It does work through Philemon in a careful, structured way as it employs the analytic indicated above, but it flows differently than is usual in Bible commentaries. It can be read usefully in several ways. Some readers might like to read the entire book from beginning to end, but many will find it most helpful to work through the first section on rhetography, perhaps followed by the English translation of Philemon, and then go immediately to the final section on rhetorical force as emergent discourse. This approach in itself provides a complete sociorhetorical interpretation of Philemon and creates the possibility for readers to select sections of the textural commentary they wish to read according to interest. The sections of the textural commentary offer a complete analysis of the entire letter. The analyses of **inner textures** are the most complex, as they interpret

features of the letter in multiple ways. Reading the textural analyses will flesh out and enhance understanding.

Contextualizing reading, of course, will be very important. The commentary does not lend itself easily to looking up a particular verse, phrase, or word in order to get an interpretation regarding a particular issue or concern, although that can be done with a little work. Every line of Philemon is covered multiple times as the commentary goes along. Rather than reading specific sections of the commentary to try to find an answer to a particular question or to a concern about a word, phrase, or idea, it is important to read larger portions in order to come to a fuller understanding of what may be at stake for the author, the audiences, and for readers then and now.

The Text

The Greek text of Philemon is a clean, strongly attested document of 335 words in the NA[28], UBS[4], and SBLGNT editions of the Greek New Testament (334 words without the disputed [καί] in verse 11).[32] The letter occurs in many manuscripts and had early—though not universal—reception. The relatively small number of variants indicated in the apparatuses date from about the fifth century CE and later. There are no troubling alternate readings. Variants occur with respect to the addition of a few words, alternate ordering of words, and some differences in pronouns. None demand dramatic alterations to meaning or rhetorical force. It seems likely that the variants are to be attributed to efforts at correcting the letter's language in order to clarify or to make wording look and sound like Paul's usage elsewhere. Examples include the following:

- Some manuscripts add the word ἀγαπητῇ ("beloved") to καὶ Ἀπφίᾳ τῇ ἀδελφῇ in verse 1, probably to agree with the sentiment regarding Philemon.
- Some manuscripts have the reading "faith and love" rather than "love and faith" in verse 5, apparently to agree with Paul's more usual word order.

32. For a more detailed discussion, see Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 104–8.

- Some manuscripts add the imperative form προσλαβοῦ ("receive") to verse 12 to read ὃν ἀναπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα προσλαβοῦ ("whom I send back to you, receive him, this one [who] is my own viscera"). This variant is likely intended to agree with the usage in verse 17.

A number of commentators have preferred to interpret πρεσβύτης ("old man") in verse 9 as if it were its homonym πρεσβεύτης ("ambassador"; see Eph 6:20). There is no textual evidence for this reading, though the RSV uses "ambassador."[33] In the end it is clear that the preferences of the editors of the Greek editions are to be respected and followed.

The Author

Paul is the undoubted author of the letter.[34] It is important to be aware, however, of what it means to have been the author of a document during the Greco-Roman era and how Hellenistic and New Testament letters were produced. Our modern notion of an individual person sitting at a desk or table preparing and sending a letter must not be projected back directly and imposed on how letters in the first-century CE Mediterranean were prepared.[35] Several people would normally be involved in the writing process. Already from the beginning it is clear that Timothy is named as cosender of the letter (Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφός, v. 1). At the end of the letter Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke are named as coworkers with Paul who send greetings to Philemon (Ασπάζεταί σε Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, Μᾶρκος, Ἀρίσταρχος, Δημᾶς, Λουκᾶς, οἱ συνεργοί μου, vv. 23–24). While the narrational voice of the letter is certainly Paul's, Timothy must be nearby and is imagined as a participant in the message. It seems likely that the others are not far away, and since they send greetings they can be imagined to be listening in. Paul

33. See Barth and Blanke, *Letter to Philemon*, 107, 321–22; and Allen Dwight Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 31–32, who discuss both meanings for πρεσβύτης.

34. The few disputes about authenticity have never been convincing; see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 34C (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 8–9.

35. On this see Margaret Ellen Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament* (Salem OR: Polebridge, 2009), 11–57.

speaks the letter aloud, dictating it to a scribe, perhaps, but not necessarily, dictating to Timothy.

We cannot know the precise conditions of the composition of Philemon, but we can gain insights from what is known generally about how written materials were produced. Writing was a collaborative process where one person spoke aloud and another wrote down what was spoken.[36] Usually other persons would be involved in gathering, manufacturing, or preparing the required writing materials such as stylus, ink, wax tablets, and papyrus.[37] Paul spoke his letters aloud, the exceptions being where he explicitly stated he was writing in his own hand, as is observed in Phlm 19 (ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρί, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω; cf. Gal 6:11; 2 Thess 3:17). It was common for the scribe to set down the spoken words first on wax tablets (*cerae*) and, subsequently, to transcribe them on to papyrus.[38] It is possible, perhaps likely, that this method was used by Paul and his coworkers to prepare the Letter to Philemon. Writing on wax tablets could be easily corrected or revised as dictation went along or at some later time. A text could be corrected, altered, or amended when it was transcribed in final form to papyrus. Papyrus was expensive, so writing on it directly from dictation would be avoided. Papyrus also required some amount of preparation by smoothing the writing surface with an ivory or shell tool or pumice. The scribe typically sat on the floor or ground, using a propped leg to support a wax tablet or some papyrus. The actual physical writer or scribe usually became forgotten, though Tertius raises his own voice as a writer of the Letter to the Romans (Rom 16:22). Apart from the physical acts of writing and transcribing, the process depended on sound spoken and sound heard. The letter would have been dictated by Paul in one session, but revised in the transcription to papyrus when Paul could have entered his own handwritten words. The scribe wrote what was heard spoken aloud, giving best effort to record the grammar, sound, and wording correctly, perhaps even to make corrections. Writers spoke aloud with

36. See ibid., 29–30, with Greco-Roman examples.

37. See the video descriptions by Daniel B. Wallace, *Scribal Methods and Materials*, The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, iTunesU, https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/scribal-methods-materials/id446658178.

38. Lee and Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament*, 16–18, with examples. See "Ancient Writing Materials: Wax Tablets," University of Michigan Library website, http://www.lib.umich.edu/papyrus-collection/ancient-writing-materials-wax-tablets. See more images in an Internet search of "wax tablets."

a view to the text being read aloud to its recipient(s). Consequently, the entire authorial process was oriented to sound and was decidedly rhetorical.[39] Texts were intentionally composed to be spoken.[40] The Greek words for reading, verb *ἀναγινώσκω* and noun *ἀνάγνωσις*, refer not to silent reading but to public vocal reading, hence to the hearing of a message read aloud to an audience.[41] Few people read individually or silently. What was spoken and heard was rhetorical and dependent on the minds of author and recipients much more than on the written text. Authors arranged topoi, imagery, and argumentation in their minds, and recipients similarly interpreted and understood topoi, imagery, and argumentation in their minds. An author's message was conveyed by spoken and heard sounds.

Who Delivered the Letter?

The intermediate step of letter production was physical transport of the letter and delivery of its rhetorical presentation aloud. Based on the narration and names of greeters in Col 4:7–17, particularly the appearance of the name Onesimus (Col 4:9), many have taken the view that the Letter to Philemon was transported and delivered by Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus, who was "sent back" to Philemon by Paul (Phlm 12).

> Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.
>
> Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions—if he

39. Lee and Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament*, 24–28. They are texts prepared for utterance. See the helpful comments of Bryan, *Listening to the Bible*, chapter 10, "The Drama of the Word," 114–26.

40. Lee and Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament*, 69. They were not, however, composed or delivered by "performance." On this see Larry W. Hurtado, "Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies? 'Orality,' 'Performance' and Reading Texts in Early Christianity," *NTS* 60 (2014): 321–40.

41. See Rudolf Bultmann, "Αναγινώσκω, *ἀνάγνωσις*," *TDNT* 1:343–44; Jeal, *Integrating Theology and Ethics in Ephesians*, 28n71; see also Lee and Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament*, 24.

> comes to you, welcome him. And Jesus who is called Justus greets you. These are the only ones of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you. Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord." (Col 4:7–17)

Greeters mentioned in the closing of Philemon are noted in Colossians, with more information given about some of them. Onesimus, here called "faithful and beloved brother,"[42] which sounds like Paul's description and request for him in Phlm 16, is "one of you," which many have taken to mean that he is a resident of Colossae and a member of the *ekklēsia* there. This implies that Philemon, too, was resident in Colossae. Letter carriers were commonly present when the document was prepared and when it was read aloud to its recipients.[43] This connection depends, of course, on the view that Philemon and Colossians were written at or about the same time and that the Onesimus of Col 4 is the same Onesimus of Philemon. Both of these notions are questionable, because the overall content and themes of the two letters are vastly different and, more particularly, because the view and role of Onesimus seem to be very different in Colossians compared to Philemon.[44] Onesimus was a common name for male slaves, and there is nothing in either Colossians or Philemon specifying the same person as referent. Still, while the evidence is not certain, it is possible to imagine that the Onesimus who met the prisoner Paul was himself

42. As is, interestingly, Tychicus (Τυχικὸς ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφός).

43. See the report of an essay presentation by Peter M. Head, "Onesimus and the Letter to Philemon: New Light on the Role of the Letter Carrier," *RBECS*, 31 May 2012, http://rbecs.org/2012/05/31/peter-m-head-letter-carrier.

44. The disputed authorship of Colossians is actually not itself an objection to the Tychicus theory. Authorship, as we have seen, had a measure of fluidity to it because of its oral nature and the input of scribes. The real issue is whether Colossians and Philemon were written at about the same time, i.e., when Paul was imprisoned and met Onesimus. See below, n. 69.

the letter carrier and deliverer of the message to Philemon. Paul is explicit about sending Onesimus to Philemon. Could Onesimus have made his own personal, vocal appeal to Philemon, along with the letter? We cannot know, but the possibility is intriguing. It is plausible that Onesimus knew Paul was preparing a letter to Philemon and knew he was going to be sent back to Philemon. Against this is the question of why Paul would direct Onesimus to undertake a long and arduous journey back to a slave owner who had power over his life and future. But Paul did have confidence in the now Christ-believing Onesimus and confidence that Philemon would do the right thing despite significant social pressure.

The Audience

The intended end stage of letter-writing is delivery to the audience, the recipients of the communication. The audience members are not, in the ancient Mediterranean context, readers of letters, or few of them are; they are listeners. Letters and other documents were read aloud to their recipients as audible, aural communications from the sender. As we noted above in the discussion of the author, texts were first spoken aloud with the expectation that they would be spoken aloud again by a reader and heard, interpreted, and understood by audiences as meaningful *sounds*. This means that oral delivery and aural reception of the letter were as rhetorical as its composition. As with the precise circumstances of composition, we cannot know exactly how the letter was heard, what intonations and nuances were conveyed, nor how they were received and interpreted. But we can surmise that, even if Paul's words had been amended during the scribal and delivery process, Philemon understood Paul's argumentation.

The clearly intended recipient of the letter is Philemon. Despite some amount of historical speculation that it was directed toward Archippus,[45] a natural reading that notes the repetitive uses of second person singular pronouns demonstrates that Philemon is the single person meant to get the message. It is equally clear that other people were members of a larger audience who, though not direct recipients of the argumentation, were present with Philemon or were near enough to listen, that they heard the letter and its message, and that they were at least tangentially interested

45. See John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul* (1935; repr., New York: Abingdon, 1959); and Sara C. Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," *NTS* 33 (1987): 1–15.

parties. People were "looking over his shoulder," observing Philemon's reactions and behaviors. These persons are Apphia, Archippus, and the *ekklēsia* that met in Philemon's home (καὶ Ἀπφίᾳ τῇ ἀδελφῇ καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν καὶ τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ, v. 2). While it is a nice, romantic notion, there is no evidence to support the common view that Apphia was Philemon's wife and Archippus his son. We cannot know who this woman and man were, other than being persons known to Paul and Philemon. Other people were present with Paul who were members of the audience—certainly Onesimus—and incidentally, but perhaps not unimportantly, Timothy, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (vv. 1, 23–24). Philemon's knowledge of persons in multiple spaces being privy to his letter from Paul, including God and Christ Jesus, places implicit pressure on him to do the right thing regarding Onesimus. All of these audience members are real beings, human and divine, understood to be alive and conscious of the persons and situation under consideration.

Philemon and the others with him are Christ-believing gentiles who are members of the assembly, the *ekklēsia*. They are ἅγιοι, holy ones (vv. 5, 7), for whom Philemon has provided significant and memorable care. They are imagined as faithful people who are acquainted with Paul. Paul imagines them as coworkers in the gospel. There is a difference, however, between the kind of recipient Philemon is and the kind of recipients the others are. Philemon is the person being called on to act, to receive Onesimus as his beloved brother. As the recipient who is expected to do something, to respond intellectually and behaviorally, he is a judge, a κριτής. The other third-party listeners are spectators, θεωροί,[46] people who watch and contemplate, who learn as observers. Spectators are influential, however, and will themselves be moved to take points of view that coincide with those of an author or speaker. The physical space of Philemon and those with him is the household. Philemon is the owner of the home, the paterfamilias who possesses authority. He is sufficiently affluent to have a home large enough to accommodate the *ekklēsia*, which could have been composed of thirty or more persons. It appears that his home was spacious enough for him to be able to accommodate Paul in hospitality space (ἅμα δὲ καὶ ἑτοίμαζέ μοι ξενίαν, v. 22). Clearly he had at least one slave, perhaps more, and it is reasonable to imagine family members also living in the

46. See Aristotle, *Rhet*. 1.3.1–3; LSJ 797; Wilhelm Michaelis, "θεωρέω," *TDNT* 5:318; G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 649.

house. Some interpreters wonder, if Philemon had been a Christ-believer for some time, why Onesimus the slave was not a believer before he met Paul. It would be common for an entire household to follow the religious and other social, cultural, and behavioral views and practices of the senior householder. There is no evidence leading to determining a reason for why Onesimus was not a believer before his separation from Philemon.

Canonicity

To some readers Philemon has seemed to be an odd or questionable letter for inclusion in the New Testament canon. It is very short relative to the other letters in the Pauline corpus (though not so short relative to ancient Hellenistic letters more generally), and its argument is personally focused on Philemon and his reception of Onesimus. Its apparently highly manipulative rhetorical ethos can seem to be unfairly pressuring Philemon. Many have considered its direct personal concern to be peripheral to the issues addressed in the New Testament. Many have claimed the letter has no theological or doctrinal content.[47] Even though it is in the canon, its brevity and personal argument have often pushed it to the neglected edge of scholarly study. Why would an apparently private matter, even if Apphia, Archippus, and the *ekklēsia* are listening in and applying pressure to Philemon, be preserved and become part of wider canonical concern? It is not enough simply to say that it was included in the New Testament canon, because it was written by Paul the apostle and its authority relies on his name.[48] It is clear that Paul wrote other letters that were not included in the canon and are lost (see 1 Cor 5:9; 2 Cor 2:4; Col 4:16), and it may be imagined that some of them were short and personal.

We cannot say, of course, just why this letter was included. But it is not peripheral at all to early Christian thought, and it has no lack of theology.

47. As Norman R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 201. See also Robert McL. Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*, ICC (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 317. Fitzmyer, *Letter to Philemon*, 34, notes that St. Jerome (ca. 347–420 CE) reported that people said the letter "has nothing that can edify us."

48. Some interpreters have suggested that Philemon was preserved by Onesimus, presumed to be the bishop mentioned in Ignatius, *Eph.* 1.3; 2.1; 6.2. See Barth and Blanke, *Letter to Philemon*, 201–2; Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 201.

Indeed, interpretation of it demands theological thinking.[49] Sociorhetorical analysis reveals aspects of what Paul believed had been brought into the world in Christ Jesus and how those things may be lived out in a wisdom space and context. In the wisdom, household location, love and faith, refreshment, family inclusion (brotherhood), and freedom are provided for *all* persons, including slaves who, in the social and cultural setting of the Roman Empire, were persons with no inherent or legal status in family affairs.[50] They were there to do as they were directed for the wishes and comforts of their masters. In Paul's understanding, all Christ-believers, including slaves and other disenfranchised persons, are members of the *ekklēsia* and are to be received and treated as family members (Onesimus is a *brother*). This means that slaves are not to be treated as slaves, even if they have formerly been considered to be "useless" (v. 11). Those who have been slaves are now, in Christ, no different from those who are not or have never been slaves. This is how Paul in Christ sees the world; it is the ideology he presents.[51] Because of Christ the world is a changed space. It is apparent that early Christians who were interested in preserving authoritative documents saw such values in Philemon.

Occasion/Circumstances

The occasion and circumstances of the letter are straightforward enough, even if they allude to larger social, cultural, historical, and sacred contexts. Philemon, slave owner, and Onesimus, slave (δοῦλος, v. 16), are separated from each other, or, to use the grammar of the text, Onesimus "has been separated" from Philemon (τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὥραν, v. 15). *This is the foundational circumstance of the letter*. Because the language is given in the passive voice, the impression is given of a "divine passive" where God is the implicit subject of the separation and Onesimus the object.[52] No other reason is given for the separation. During the separation, Onesimus and Paul have met and Onesimus has become a Christ-believer. Paul, who is imprisoned when the letter is composed, imagines

49. See Fitzmyer, *Letter to Philemon*, 34–40.

50. See the commentary on **intertexture** and **social and cultural texture**.

51. On this see the **ideological texture** and rhetorical force as emergent discourse sections in the commentary.

52. Of course Onesimus *is* the subject of the verb, but the passive voice means that the action is being done *to* him, presumably by God.

Onesimus now as someone who serves with him, or at least can serve if Philemon will permit it (χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, v. 14), in the service of the gospel (μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, v. 13). Paul has become so close to Onesimus that he views him as his own child, figuratively or spiritually "begotten" by Paul during his imprisonment (παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς Ὀνήσιμον, v. 10), as his own viscera (τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα, v. 12). Formerly perceived to be "useless" to Philemon, now he is "useful" (τόν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὔχρηστον, v. 11). Paul, for his part, does not see the separation as being permanent. He is sending Onesimus back to Philemon (ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι αὐτόν, v. 12) with the request that Philemon receive the Christ-believing Onesimus as a "beloved brother" (οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλὰ ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, v. 16), as if Onesimus were Paul himself (προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ, v. 17). Paul suggests that if Philemon is materially aggrieved due to the separation, he himself, Paul, will cover any amount owing (εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα· ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρί, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω, vv. 18–19). Paul is confident that Philemon will do the right thing (πεποιθὼς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι, εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις, v. 21). The simple fact is that we do not know more about the occasion and circumstances of the letter than this.

Still, the pressure to reconstruct the historical situation of Philemon has moved interpreters to spend much time and take up much space hypothesizing about the situational context of the letter, without, it should be admitted, any hard evidence. Most commentaries also include discussions of slavery in the ancient Mediterranean basin, some of them very extensive.[53] Why were Philemon and Onesimus separated? It is known that slaves could be separated from owners for many reasons: conducting business for the owner, delivering letters, assisting other persons, working where required and directed by the owner. Or they might be runaways, or they might seek asylum from an owner or from a difficult situation. There are a number of theories about why Onesimus and Philemon were separated.[54]

53. For example, Barth and Blanke, *Letter to Philemon*, 3–102.

54. For a very helpful survey see Larry J. Kreitzer, *Philemon*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 38–69. See also J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 6–16, 165–92. See also the essays in Matthew V. Johnson, James

1. Most common is the construct that claims Onesimus was a runaway slave, a *fugitivus* according to Roman law.[55] This theory is usually taken to mean that Onesimus had committed the offense of leaving Philemon without permission, thereby becoming a fugitive. It is equally plausible, however, to imagine that Philemon (although already a Christ-believer) had abused Onesimus, causing him to depart.[56] Onesimus, in this scenario, is frequently described as a thief who had stolen from Philemon (based on the wording of verse 18) and made a run for it.
2. A second hypothesis is that Onesimus had been sent to Paul, either by his owner, Philemon,[57] or by the church in Colossae,[58] perhaps with messages or with some kind of assistance for Paul. This would mean, obviously, that Onesimus was not a *fugitivus*, but a servant of Philemon or the *ekklēsia*, who was on a mission to Paul. It would also mean that Onesimus was well trusted by Philemon and/or the *ekklēsia*. Paul writes to request that Onesimus be released in order to engage in gospel work with him.
3. Another hypothesis is that Onesimus was a slave who was seeking sanctuary in a religious site such as the temple of Asclepius in Pergamon.[59] This would mean that Onesimus was indeed a runaway, but that he knew *fugitivi* could, in some circumstances, legally seek asylum in religious structures. A variation on this view is that Onesimus sought out Paul (apparently knowing where to look) in the hope that Paul would be an *amicus domini* (friend of the master) who would intervene on his behalf with Philemon.[60]

A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams eds., *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

55. See, among many examples, John G. Nordling, "*Onesimus Fugitivus*: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," *JSNT* 41 (1991): 97–119; Nordling, *Philemon*, ConC (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2004), 3–4; John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, NTG (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 98–102.

56. Cain Hope Felder, "The Letter to Philemon," *NIB* 11:885–86; Barth and Blanke, *Letter to Philemon*, 73.

57. Knox, *Philemon*, 1959.

58. Winter, "Philemon," 1–15, who extends Knox's ideas. Winter claims that Onesimus was the slave of Archippus, not Philemon, and that the *ekklēsia* met in the home of Archippus.

59. See below on **social and cultural texture**.

60. This view is favored by, among others, James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the*

If Paul was incarcerated when they met, then, practically speaking, Paul's location in prison would be a kind of (unlikely) sanctuary for Onesimus.

4. Yet another hypothesis, proposed by Allen Dwight Callahan,[61] is that Onesimus was not a slave, hence not a *fugitivus*, but was the actual genetic "in the flesh" brother of Philemon and also a brother "in the Lord" (οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλὰ ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, πόσῳ δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ, v. 16). Callahan suggests that the concern of the letter is about encouraging Philemon to receive Onesimus as a *beloved* brother, not simply as a brother. Callahan claims that the conjunction ὡς, "as," in Phlm 16 indicates that Paul's argumentation calls for Onesimus not to be received *as if* he is a slave but *as if* he is a beloved brother. The slavery, on this view, is a "virtual," not real, condition.[62] This construction has not been widely accepted.[63] One major purpose of the construction is to offer an alternative to and argument against the common starting point for study of the letter, namely that Onesimus was a runaway, that is, that Onesimus was "a criminal and a fugitive."[64] While it seems clear that Onesimus was indeed a slave, it is in fact true that it is not necessary and not particularly helpful to think of him as criminal and fugitive.

How did Paul and Onesimus meet? Again, historical reconstructions have proliferated, though they follow lines similar to the theories of separation listed above.

1. The fugitive and thief Onesimus traveled to the known (to him) location (Rome? Caesarea? Ephesus?) of the imprisoned Paul,

Colossians and to Philemon, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 304–7; S. Scott Bartchy, "The Epistle to Philemon," *ABD* 5:307–8; Brian Rapske, "The Prisoner Paul in the Eyes of Onesimus," *NTS* 37 (1991): 187–203; and Peter Lampe, "Kleine 'Sklavenflucht' des Onesimus," *ZNW* 76 (1985):135–37.

61. Allen Dwight Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

62. Ibid., 10.

63. See Fitzmyer, *Letter to Philemon*, 18–20; Kreitzer, *Philemon*, 65–67.

64. Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus*, 4.

was received by Paul, and became a Christ-believer. On this hypothesis, Paul is harboring a criminal. Alternatively, Onesimus by chance (or providentially?) came into contact with Paul or, perhaps, was arrested and imprisoned by chance (or by providence?) in the same jail in which Paul was located.

2. Onesimus, having a grievance with Philemon, fled to seek sanctuary at a religious site and, somehow in the process (chance? arrest? providence?), came into contact with Paul, who was imprisoned nearby, and became a Christ-believer. This theory reduces the pressure on Paul, who would not be harboring a criminal fugitive, but only supporting a refugee or assisting a fellow prisoner.
3. Onesimus was sent by Philemon and/or the *ekklēsia* to the known location of Paul's imprisonment.
4. Onesimus fled to seek out Paul as an *amicus domini* who would appeal to Philemon on his behalf. Somehow he located and came into contact with Paul.

The general assumptions in these scenarios are that Onesimus fled Philemon from Colossae and that he came into contact with the imprisoned Paul. Neither assumption is certain and the evidence ranges from nonexistent to meager. It is possible, for example, that Onesimus and Paul met *prior* to Paul's imprisonment.

A slave would most likely be incarcerated in a prison for slaves, not in a place where Paul would have been held.[65] It is very difficult to envisage how a slave, working independently, could have come into contact with a prisoner, even if the slave did know the location of the imprisonment. Apart from being a Christ-believing slave who had become closely associated with Paul, Onesimus's status and location at the time of the writing of the letter are unknown. We do not know whether he was a *fugitivus*, a thief, a messenger, a truant seeking asylum, or something else (such as the estranged brother of Philemon). We know that Philemon and Onesimus, owner and slave, were separated (v. 15), but we do not know the reason(s) for or circumstance(s) of the separation. We do not know the circumstances of how Paul and Onesimus met. We do know that Onesimus has become a Christ-believer. No amount of reconstruction or analysis of the metanarrative is determinative or even helpful for reconstructing anything else about

65. Fitzmyer, *Letter to Philemon*, 13.

the historical situation. Examination of Col 4:7–17 offers only incidental and possibly disputable information that tells us nothing about the situations indicated in Philemon. The limitless hypotheses[66] are so unlikely that they can scarcely be considered. They are fascinating, of course, and interesting for their own sake, but they do *not* add to our understanding of the letter; indeed, they have the potential to detract from or skew understanding, because they lead to interpretations oriented toward contrived situations. The possibilities remain just that, possibilities, but they are very far from being probabilities. The complete situational history remains unknown. In this commentary, we will leave it there.[67]

Locations and Date

Consideration of locations and dating—as with studies of the chronology of Paul's life and writings—necessarily involves speculation and dispute without full resolution. In the speculative process, though, it is important to think of "locations" in the plural, because there are both senders and receivers of letters and, in the case of Philemon and other Pauline letters, multiple parties directly involved with the content of the letter. There are, of course, Paul and Timothy, the declared authors (v. 1), and Onesimus, who is present with Paul when the letter is composed (vv. 10–13). It is likely that other named persons, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, are also present with Paul or near enough to be in contact with him (vv. 23–24). If Col 4:7–17 is connected with Philemon, then there seem to be even more people in view at the composition location (Tychicus, Jesus Justus). Epaphras is called "my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus" (Επαφρᾶς ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, v. 23), which might or might not indicate that Epaphras is incarcerated with Paul or in another location.[68]

66. See, for numerous examples, Barth and Blanke, *Letter to Philemon*, 145–50. Houlden is a rare commentator who notes that we do not know the situation and cannot know it from the letter or from any available information (J. Leslie Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians* [London: Penguin, 1970], 226).

67. For a thoroughgoing analysis see Peter Arzt-Grabner, "How to Deal with Onesimus? Paul's Solution within the Frame of Ancient Legal and Documentary Sources," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*, ed. D. François Tolmie (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 113–42.

68. There is a range of possible meanings: Epaphras could be incarcerated with Paul; he could be incarcerated in another location; he could be understood as a

On the receiving side are Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the *ekklēsia* gathered in Philemon's home.

Paul calls himself "prisoner of Christ Jesus" (δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, v. 1), and it is hard not to take him literally and not to imagine him being physically incarcerated when the letter was composed. But where? Directly linked to this question is the location of Philemon and the people closely connected with him. Where were they? The straightforward fact is that we do not know with much certainty where any of them were located. The letter does not provide any information regarding the geographical locations of the imprisoned Paul with Onesimus, Timothy, and others or of Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the *ekklēsia* that met in Philemon's home. This fact causes much perplexity regarding aspects of the circumstances and the dating of the letter. The only clear information given is that the leading characters in the visual scene are separated by a significant distance, making the letter itself necessary for communication.

Onesimus is being "sent back" to Philemon (v. 12). Paul expects to travel to Philemon's location and stay in Philemon's house (v. 22). Many interpreters have assumed that the situation described in Col 4:7–17, where Tychicus and Onesimus are described as traveling shortly to Colossae, indicates that Philemon was a resident of that town, not far from Laodicea and Hierapolis (see Col 4:13) in the Lycus Valley in Phrygia. This assumption has resulted in Colossians and Philemon frequently being closely connected in people's minds and in commentaries on the two letters being bound together in single volumes. It presumes that both letters were prepared and sent at about the same time. It is possible that Colossians and Philemon are this closely related, but it is not historically certain.[69] Colossians seems to indicate that Paul had not himself ever been to Colossae or the Lycus towns (Col 2:1) and that Epaphras,[70] mentioned

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metaphorical or spiritual prisoner of Christ Jesus along with Paul. See below on *repetitive texture*.

69. The question of the authorship of Colossians becomes significant to many at this point (see above, n. 44). The majority of scholars think that Colossians is deutero-Pauline, written after Paul's death, but before 100 CE. On this see Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 615–17. I suggest, given what we have learned about how Hellenistic letters were composed, that the important question is not about the authorship of Colossians, but whether it was composed and sent while Paul was still alive. See my forthcoming commentary on Colossians.

70. Who is unlikely to be the same person as Epaphroditus, mentioned in Phil 2:25; 4:18.

only in Philemon (v. 23) and Colossians (1:7; 4:12), had proclaimed the gospel there.[71] Colossians could have been composed later than Philemon, using names and circumstances recalled from earlier times during Paul's ministry. Conjecture rules the day due to lack of information. However, the sharing of names makes a reasonable, indeed the only, starting point, a possibility with strong plausibility, namely, the presumed residence of Philemon in Colossae or at least in the relatively small Lycus Valley region in Phrygia.[72] We can build possible scenarios on this basis.

At the time of the letter's composition, Paul could have been imprisoned in Caesarea Maritima (Acts 23:23–26:32) or Rome (Acts 28:14–31). Onesimus and Paul had met and were apparently together. Rome seems much too far away from Colossae (direct distance approximately 1,500 kilometers) and much too expensive to reach for Onesimus to have traveled there, whether entirely on his own or with assistance. Caesarea Maritima was much closer to Colossae (approximately 800 kilometers), hence a somewhat more plausible location, but still a long distance, whether overland or by sea. The third possibility is that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus, much closer (approximately 200 kilometers) and more readily reachable for Onesimus. The major problem with this third hypothesis is that there is no record of Paul being imprisoned there. Some interpreters suggest that several of Paul's statements about difficulties he experienced in Ephesus support an incarceration there (Rom 16:7; 1 Cor 15:32; 16:9; 2 Cor 1:8–9; 6:5; 11:23–24).[73] Of the three possible locations, Ephesus is more strongly plausible, on the view that Philemon was resident in the Lycus Valley.[74] On this hypothesis, Philemon was written sometime during the span of years from 54 to 58 CE. A fourth, less plausible hypothesis, taking seriously the language of 2 Cor 11:23 about imprisonments in the plural, is of an unreported imprisonment for some short period of time in some

71. Epaphras is a bit of an anomaly when Philemon and Colossians are compared. In Col 4:12 he is referred to as "one of you," but in Phlm 23 as Paul's fellow prisoner who sends greetings to Philemon.

72. For a general history of the Lycus Valley as regards the New Testament, see F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part One: Jews and Christians in the Lycus Valley," *BSac* 141 (1984): 3–15.

73. See Fitzmyer, *Letter to Philemon*, 10.

74. There are other hypothetical scenarios if it is considered that Paul was released from prison in Rome and was able to travel and work up until about 65–67 CE. See Barth and Blanke, 126, n. 48; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

unknown location, presumably in Asia Minor. The wording of the letter that offers information useful for dating is where Paul calls himself "an old man" (τοιοῦτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης, v. 9), which indicates that he was more than fifty years old when the letter was composed.[75] This makes dating in the mid- to late 50s or later plausible.

The fact remains that we do not know the precise geographical and physical locations relevant to the letter. We are left with something less than probabilities and likelihoods, only with possibilities. I have here engaged in a level of historical reconstruction where Colossae is the location of Philemon and people close to him and Ephesus is the location of Paul and those near him, but nothing leads to final decisions. What we do know is that Philemon and Onesimus are separated; we take as a given that Paul is in prison at some distance from Philemon, that Paul and Onesimus have met, and that Onesimus is being sent back to Philemon. As is suggested in the section on **social and cultural texture** in the commentary, it is actually best, for interpretive purposes, to avoid hard conclusions. We are studying an intensely personal letter that leaves out things already understood by the correspondents. What we do have is the rhetoric of the letter.

Purpose and Goals

The purpose of the Letter to Philemon comes across clearly from reading verses 16 and 17: Paul wishes to move Philemon, carefully yet without allowing Philemon any other righteous option, to receive Onesimus, not as a slave but as a beloved brother and as if he were Paul himself. We presume that Onesimus was agreeable to this.[76] How Paul gets to this point and how he employs language to move Philemon to do what he wants is taken up in the commentary. The rhetoric and argumentation are focused on Philemon, not on Onesimus or slavery, even though these are critical features of the texturing of the letter. The result is anticipated, not enacted. Paul aims to influence Philemon's understanding, behavior, and

75. Paul is usually estimated to have been born ca. 5 to 10 CE. See Brown, *Introduction*, 423. See below on **intertexture**.

76. Did Onesimus want to return to Philemon? We cannot know his views but can only presume he accepted Paul's leadership in these matters. Was Paul being excessively patriarchal regarding his "child" Onesimus? See the introduction and essays in Johnson, Noel, and Williams, *Onesimus Our Brother*, and Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament*, 16. See below on **social and cultural texture**.

faithfulness in Christ. Onesimus has become a Christ-believer and is to be treated as all other Christ-believers in kinship, community, and partnership relationships. Philemon viewed Paul as a "partner" (κοινωνός). He would not, therefore, receive Paul into his home and into the *ekklēsia* that met in his home as a slave. Onesimus should be treated in the same way, as partner, as an equal, not as slave. As partner and brother, Paul in fact (as a feature of his argumentation) mentions that he planned to come to receive hospitality—including physical space in a room—from Philemon (ἅμα δὲ καὶ ἑτοίμαζέ μοι ξενίαν, v. 22). Given this, Philemon could scarcely imagine that Paul wanted anything less provided for Onesimus. The clear meaning is that Onesimus will in fact "no longer" (οὐκέτι)[77] be a slave. Although Paul does not call explicitly for manumission, it would be, for Philemon, easily surmised and a logical and understood goal.[78] Paul builds a powerful yet concise, nearly irresistible, rhetorical case. The goal and anticipated result of the letter is major social formation for Philemon, Onesimus, and for the new society of "holy ones," the *ekklēsia*. Onesimus is a partner, like Paul, not a slave. This in fact is the explanation of the letter: it was written because Paul wanted Philemon to go against the expectations of his geographical, social, and cultural locations and receive his (former) slave as a brother and as if he were Paul himself.

There are a number of subsidiary goals. Paul aims to place much moral and Christ-believing, ideological pressure on Philemon while subtly expressing himself in loving, brotherly terms. He does this in a highly rhetoricized manner (vv. 8–9). Throughout the letter, Paul aims to support both the idea and the reality of the new society of believers, the "holy ones," the *ekklēsia*, that meets in Philemon's home. Certainly he has the same concern for the *ekklēsia* everywhere. Knowing the value of the good

77. Rather than μηκέτι, which would be expected and would suggest *possibility* rather than the *indicative reality* of οὐκέτι. It is too relativizing to interpret the comparative conjunction ὡς in verse 16 (οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον) to indicate the idea "in spite of," that is, that Onesimus should be treated as a brother "in spite of" (presumably *despite* is actually meant?) still being a slave (as David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon* ZECNT [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 347, 395–96), with the implication that Paul was not (and Philemon need not be) concerned for Onesimus's legal and physical status as a slave. See the commentary on *argumentative texture*, **intertexture**, and **social and cultural texture**. See also much discussion in the commentaries, e.g., Barth and Blanke, *Letter to Philemon*, 414–20.

78. Whether he did formally emancipate Onesimus is, of course, not known, despite the legendary stories of Onesimus eventually becoming a bishop.

things Philemon has done for the holy ones as a man of love and faith, Paul has in mind to promote his continuing work of refreshment of the viscera of believers (vv. 5–7). Paul clearly shapes his rhetoric in order to place Philemon in a position where it would be very difficult to refuse his requests. He draws in Apphia, Archippus, and the entire *ekklēsia* that meets in Philemon's home as observers, informing them of his requests to Philemon, in order to intensify the pressure. Paul very strongly and stylishly aims to impress Philemon with the notion that Onesimus is indeed a "useful" person, even if he was formerly seen to be "useless" (v. 11). Paul emphasizes this by stating that he would like "to keep" the now productive Onesimus himself for gospel service (v. 13).[79] Paul also aims to show that God is at work in people's lives. He suggests that the separation of Philemon and Onesimus was a divine act with a divine purpose in mind. This divine purpose has an apocalyptic goal beyond the immediate situation in which Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon are participants. In Paul's mind it has a view toward eternity (ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχῃς, v. 15). The letter also has the goal of giving Onesimus hope for avoidance of penalty and punishment and for peaceful Christian living with Philemon. Paul presents a case against slavery in subtle, indirect ways. One of the results the letter anticipates is a kind of social equalizing where there is a lowering of the relatively wealthy homeowner and slave owner and a raising of the relatively poor, propertyless slave. In the process, Paul the prisoner and the "holy ones" of the *ekklēsia* are also imagined in a rising condition due to the anticipated actions of Philemon.

Despite the occasionally stated view that Philemon has "no theology" and the reality that the letter has often been overlooked by scholars, these purposes and goals demonstrate the letter's major concerns for Christian social formation and theology.[80] It tells us much about Paul's gospel logic and ideology as "a carefully crafted witness to an emerging

79. Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament*, 14–16, hypothesizes that the purpose of the letter was to request that Onesimus "be apprenticed to Paul for service in the gospel." Harrill claims that Philemon is a "letter of recommendation" with similarities to apprenticeship contracts. The language of Phlm 16–17, however, makes the central purpose clear enough.

80. On the importance of Philemon for understanding Paul and his theology see now N. T. Wright, "Return of the Runaway?" in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 3–74.

Christian ethos."[81] No one may be considered a slave in Christ (vv. 8, 20, 23), the property of another human, even if one has been a slave until now in Roman or legal terms. This because there is, certainly in Paul's understanding, full and complete freedom because of what Christ has done.[82] It turns out that Philemon is one of the keys to understanding Paul and to grasping his underlying thinking, his approach to faith and behavior, and his Christ-believing theology. In Christ people are free and are brothers and sisters. There is a new society where love and freedom are gifts and are to be used in the practice of wisdom. This coheres fully with the Christ-believing theology Paul presents elsewhere in his corpus of letters. Humans are by the grace and action of God in Christ free, in family relationship, partners in the gospel and in the assembly of believers, the *ekklēsia*. Onesimus, now a Christ-believer, is therefore free, and Philemon may not treat him in the way slaves were treated according to the social and cultural expectations and traditions (and indeed laws) of Mediterranean and Roman societies. This is what N. T. Wright calls "the profound, and profoundly revolutionary, theology" leading to "the social and cultural earthquake which Paul is attempting to precipitate—or, rather, which he believes has already been precipitated by God's action in the Messiah."[83] The sociorhetorical analysis of this commentary shows how the letter presents this theology. Philemon is a key text because it gets at nothing less than the nature of the new life, the new society, the communal life, the ecclesial life, the new existence, of Christianity. Paul also turns out to be deeply theologically oriented. He functions as a committed Christ-believer, having faith and theological aims in mind. He has the continuation of living in Christ Jesus, that is, wisdom living, in mind. He uses wisdom rhetorolect, overall, to support this and to get what he wants.

It is worth noting that Philemon has been employed at various times to take a strong stand against slavery and, at others, to stand strongly in support of it.[84] These interpretive claims have more to do with the interpreters and their own sociocultural locations than with Paul, Philemon,

81. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 387.

82. See especially the discussions in the sections on **intertexture** and **social and cultural texture** and **ideological texture** in the commentary.

83. Wright, "Return of the Runaway," 9.

84. For a very helpful survey of the history of the interpretation of Philemon see Kreitzer, *Philemon*, 39–173.

Onesimus, and the document itself. There is, of course, a natural tendency to see oneself and one's own time and culture when looking at something from the distant past. Interpreters are people of their own times. Ancient texts can seem to be symbols of modern understandings, and people inevitably see themselves at least in some ways in the stories told by ancient texts, particularly at points that seem flattering to their ideologies.[85] Biblical scholars know this and frequently mention it. Understanding does become bound up with the interpreters themselves, and it can be difficult to separate them from each other. The sociorhetorical analytic aims to assist careful thinking about the purposes and goals of the text by investigating and explaining how the document brings about theological thinking and aims.

Epistolary and Rhetorical Structure

New Testament letters are typically analyzed, at least in major part, according to the standard epistolary structure of ancient Hellenistic letters. A look at the range of commentaries and scholarly articles demonstrates this. For many interpreters this is the "proper" way to engage in the exegetical task.[86] This is structural analysis that is a kind of form criticism.[87] It is aimed at the task of developing an understanding of a letter in its historical circumstances. Certainly Philemon and other New Testament letters have epistolary structure,[88] even if it varies fairly significantly across the corpus, and Sociorhetorical Exploration Commentaries take it into account. Epistolary analysis, however, does not reveal everything. It identifies and helps explain the epistolary framework (though interpreters frequently disagree about where one structural feature ends and another begins), but it does not in itself provide a full understanding of letter's function, particularly

85. This is why it is impossible for people today to be Christians in exactly the same way first-century CE believers were Christians, even though the Bible is taken to be authoritative Scripture and a sure guide for faith and practice.

86. "The proper interpretation of any Pauline letter must involve an analysis of the letter's structure and its epistolary conventions" according to Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "Paul's Persuasive Prose: An Epistolary Analysis of the Letter to Philemon," in Tolmie, *Philemon in Perspective*, 29–60, here 29.

87. See ibid., 29. See Jeal, *Integrating Theology and Ethics in Ephesians*, 26–27.

88. Four typical parts: prescript (or introductory greeting), thanksgiving, body, postscript (closing greeting). Not all of the New Testament letters employ this pattern exactly.

with regard to argumentation and the force of argumentation.[89] Consequently, many interpreters employ additional approaches in their work.

Many scholars analyze New Testament letters according to the forms and styles of classical rhetoric. While this approach has been very fruitful, the problem with it is that the letters actually are *not* speeches or oratory, even if they were composed by being spoken aloud, transcribed, and spoken and heard aloud when they were received.[90] New Testament letters frequently display oratorical features, but they are still letters. Philemon is *like* a deliberative speech in some respects (i.e., it is a kind of wisdom discourse, as described above), and it might be delivered *like* a speech, but it is *not* a speech prepared for and delivered in the public square or for politics. It is a letter that has profound rhetorical force intended to move Philemon ideologically and behaviorally. It relies on sound spoken and sound heard, the voice of Paul, and the voice of the reader. Many aspects of classical rhetoric are helpful, particularly for stylistic analysis. But in its social, rhetorical, and ecclesial context it remains a letter, not a speech.[91] The New Testament has its own rhetorical features and categories that do not correspond neatly to Greco-Roman rhetorical methods.

While interpreters differ about where the body ends and the closing begins, an analysis of the epistolary structure of Philemon has this typical pattern:

Prescript (introductory greeting) (vv. 1–3)
Thanksgiving and prayer (vv. 4–7)
Body (vv. 8–22; or vv. 8–18 or vv. 8–20, with closing vv. 19–22 or vv. 21–22)
Postscript (closing greeting) (vv. 23–25)

Rhetorical structure according to the formation of speeches presented by the classical rhetoricians, while also divergently presented by interpreters, could have this fairly typical pattern (with the epistolary prescript and postscript removed):

89. See the commentary on *opening texture*. See also Jeal, *Integrating Theology and Ethics in Ephesians*, 26–27.

90. As indicated in the description above.

91. The classical handbooks of rhetoric and the *progymnasmata*, it is worth noting, address the formation, not the analysis, of speeches.

Exordium (vv. 4–7)
Narratio (vv. 8–16)
Argumentatio (*probatio*) (vv. 17–21)
Peroratio (v. 22)

In this Sociorhetorical Explorations Commentary, however, the sociorhetorical analytic is guided by the inner stages of *opening-middle-closing texture* and *progressive texture* and by what seems to be the natural forward movement of what is seen or imagined visually (rhetography), heard narrationally (*narrational texture*), presented argumentatively (*argumentative texture*), and perceived sensorily (*sensory-aesthetic texture*). *Opening-middle-closing texture* sets the foundational pattern:

Opening (vv. 1–7)
Middle (vv. 8–20)
Closing (vv. 21–25)

Within this structure, various steps and topoi move the rhetoric, meaning, theology, and thinking of Philemon along. The term "step" is employed to indicate specific movement ahead in the progressive texture of the letter. While readers may anticipate neat and consistent structural arrangements of texts in a commentary, the multidimensional approach of sociorhetorical analysis reveals that structural arrangements of "steps" do not always correspond across the textures. Readers should not be surprised to see variations among the steps as they read through the sections of the commentary. It is a function of sociorhetorical interpretation to reveal these differences. As an interpreter analyzes and reanalyzes the text from the various vantage points of sociorhetorical interpretation, it becomes clear that sometimes the interweavings of images and ideas overlap, sometimes they are elaborated or abbreviated, and sometimes they are reshaped, recolored, and reoriented. Different textural functions often produce differing movements in the discourse that in turn produce variation of the steps. These steps and topoi are fully described in the commentary.