

Commentary on Philemon

Claudius of Turin

Translated by Brandon P. Otto

Introduction

Claudius' early life is unclear: a common story was that he was born in Spain. Louis the Pious called Claudius to his court sometimes before becoming emperor in 814; in 817, Claudius was named Bishop of Turin. In Italy, he saw the streams of pilgrims coming to Rome to venerate relics and icons, and he grew wroth against them, preaching iconoclasm and attacking pilgrimages, as well as denigrating papal authority. He was branded a heretic, and he seems to have died in 827 or shortly before.

Most of Claudius' writings were biblical commentaries: he wrote a long commentary on Genesis, as well as commentaries on Leviticus, the historical books of the Old Testament, Matthew, and all of the Pauline Epistles. Among the latter, the most important were his commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians, in which he most fully expressed his iconoclasm. In addition to commentaries, he wrote a *Chronicle* of world history.

The commentary below, besides being a rarity due to his subject matter (the miniscule and oft-overlooked Epistle to Philemon), is also intriguing in how it came down to us. The published text is the result of the ingenious labors of Cardinal Angelo Mai (1782-1854), who discovered many lost texts by reading (with the use of chemicals) the erased writing of palimpsests. One of the collections containing these new-found texts is the 10-volume *Spicilegium Romanum* (1839-1844). A few texts from Claudius are found in Volume IX (1843): the *Commentary on Philemon* is found in SR IX:109-117; it is also reprinted by Migne in PL 104:911B-918B.

Commentary on Philemon

He wrote familiar letters to Philemon about Onesimus, his slave. But he wrote to him from the city of Rome, from prison, and this is his opening: *Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ* (v. 1). In no epistle did he use this name, although in the body of epistles—namely, those to the Ephesians, the Philippians, and the Colossians—he testifies that he is in chains because of his confession. But, to me, it seems more haughty to call oneself a prisoner of Jesus Christ than an apostle: for the apostles glory that they were worthy to suffer contumely for the name of Jesus. But the authority of chains is necessary. To plead for Onesimus, he ought to plead who could attain what he desired. Happy is he, without a doubt, who glories, not in wisdom, not in riches, not in eloquence and secular power, but in Christ's sufferings! But not everyone who is a prisoner is a prisoner of Christ; but whoever is imprisoned for Christ's name, and for confession of Him, he is truly called a prisoner of Jesus Christ; as the shedding of blood which is poured out for Christ's name makes one a martyr. *And brother Timothy* (v. 1). He thus says this so that we know that it was also dictated from prison and among chains, in which Timothy always persevered with him: it is apparent that the epistles to the Philippians, the Colossians, and to the Ephesians were dictated at the same time. *To Philemon, our beloved and helper, and to the beloved sister Appia* (vv. 1-2). Therefore, Paul and Timothy wrote to Philemon the beloved and cooperator, who was thus called beloved, since he is involved in the same work of Christ. Also sister Appia, who is believed to be either his sister or wife. Indeed, between the two men and apostolic ones, between the cooperator of Paul and his comrade-in-war, the name of Appia is inserted in the middle, so that, thus supported on both sides by attendants, she is seen, not in the order of sex, but of merit. *And to Archippus our comrade-in-war* (v. 2). This Archippus is to side with Paul and Timothy against their adversaries, for the sake of Christ's name, to stand forth as the struggle's victor, and, therefore, he is now called "comrade-in-war," since he would be victorious in that struggle and war. *And the church which is in your house* (v. 2). He writes to the church which is in his house. Truly, this is ambiguous, whether it be the church which is in the house of Archippus, or that which is in the house of Philemon; but, so that it would be more certainly considered, this should be directed, not to the person of Archippus, but to Philemon, to whom this epistle is also sent.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 3). Until now, he wrote from two to many, and in nearly all the epistles the opening is the same: grace and peace from God the Father and from Christ the Lord are prayed for. This shows that there is one nature of the Son and the Father, when the Son can bestow the same as the Father, and the Father is said to bestow

the same as the Son. But it is *grace*, since we are saved neither by merit nor by work. *Peace*, by which we are reconciled to God through His Christ. Although Paul and Timothy write equally, and to Philemon, and Appia, and Archippus, yet, in the following, Paul is shown to thus write to Philemon, and to speak one on one. *I give thanks to my God, always remembering you in my prayers* (v. 4). This is not said now by Paul and Timothy to Philemon and the rest, but by Paul alone to Philemon alone. But we can find this custom of writing in his other epistles, that, when many [senders] and many [recipients] are placed in the preface, afterwards, throughout the whole body of the epistles, one speaker is indicated. Indeed, this saying, “I give thanks to my God always, and remember you in my prayers,” is ambiguous regarding whether he gives thanks to God always, or he remembers him in his prayers always. But yet both can be understood, since he who commands others to give thanks to God in everything, could not be constrained, by any anguish, from always giving thanks to God. But Paul always prays for the saints and for their bettering, but Philemon is also a saint, having such faith and charity in himself that he is not only known to him by hearing, but by work; it is also credible for Paul to always pray for Philemon, namely, because of the faith and charity which he had in Christ, and because, in all His saints, through the communication of faith and the operation of knowledge in every good thing, Christ’s mercy is served.

Hearing of your charity, and the faith which you have in the Lord Jesus, and in all the saints (v. 5). That charity which Philemon had in the Lord is not difficult to interpret, since, after God, we are commanded to love our neighbors too; and we believe that faith and charity towards God, and towards His saints, alone could not suffice us, but that what we believe should be completed in work. *So that the communication of your faith, being evident, would be for the knowledge of every good thing in Christ Jesus* (v. 6). By how many steps and how many apostolic advances does the sermon reach higher! So that, whatever good is lauded in Philemon, is gathered from the apostles’ example: and thus it would be good, since it is led from Christ’s font. *For I had great joy and consolation in your charity, since the bowels of the saints rested through you, brother* (v. 7). He fully explains and teaches about why he said, “I give thanks to my God, always making memory of you in my prayers.” So worthy was it to give thanks to God always for the charity of Philemon, who, receiving them, comforted the inner affection of the heart and the deep depths of the souls of the saints.

Because of which, having much trust in Christ Jesus to enjoin upon you that which pertains to the matter, and, for charity’s sake, I rather beseech, you being such a one, as Paul the elder, but now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ (vv. 8-9): with many praises toward Philemon as advance-dispatches, since the thing he will plead for is such that it would be useful for the one presenting and pleading for it, Paul could better attain what he asks; but this came from trusting that that he who did such works for Christ could certainly not be unequal to Him in the rest. But he wants to ask rather than

command, setting forth the authority through which he begs with great pleading: “apostle” and “elder” and “prisoner of Jesus Christ.” But all that he prays for is this. Onesimus, the slave of Philemon, in a secret flight, stole some household goods, gathering them up. He, going to Italy, lest he be easily apprehended by a neighbor, squandered the master’s wealth through luxury. In what follows, he teaches that one should not judge this rashly, as we often do. For Paul would never say, “If he has injured you or owes you anything, charge it to me; I, Paul, have written with my hand, I will repay” (vv. 18-19), nor would not be a sponsor to stolen goods, unless what was stolen had already been scattered. Therefore, with Paul being in prison in Rome for the confession of Christ, he believed in the Lord Jesus, and, being baptized, with worthy repentance, he wiped off from himself the stains of his former life, in such a way that an apostle—who once rebuked Peter for not walking with right step in the gospel’s truth (cf. Gal 2:11ff)—would be the witness of his way of life. Therefore, whatever pertains to sin and to deeds which hurt men, does not deserve pardon. But whatever pertains to the apostle’s testimony—he who fully knew [Onesimus’] way of life—presses with great weight on him who is pleaded; since, from a fugitive and thieving slave, he became a minister to an apostle. But what other ministry did the apostle have, except the gospel of Jesus Christ? Now he is forgiven, not as if by a master, but as if by a fellow-slave and fellow-evangelist, he who similarly served Christ’s minister.

I beg you for my son whom I begot in chains, Onesimus (v. 10). Wanting to obtain what he has set forth, now he asserts himself to be pleading, not for the slave of Philemon, but for his own son, and that son whom he begot in the chains of the gospel, that is, [the chains] he bore for Christ’s gospel. *Who was once useless to you* (v. 11). To you alone, he says, not to the rest. Now, through the contrary compensation of usefulness, by which he is useful to his own master and to Paul, and to the rest [of the Church], through Paul, he merits more charity than the hate he merited before. Wherefore he says: *but now he is useful to you and to me* (v. 11); since, he being detained in prison and chains, he can, through him, minister to the gospel. *But you, receive him as my bowels* (v. 12). Bowels sometimes signify the heart’s affection, and the full will of the soul, which, with all that comes from us, is received in pleading. But, in another way, all free-men are to be understood as the bowels of their parents. *Whom I myself want to retain, so that he would minister to me, for your sake, in the chains of the gospel* (v. 13). Therefore, he impresses and repeats that he is his son and the son of chains and the minister of the gospel, constituted in chains, so that Philemon, being praised prudently and with such practicality in the preface, would not dare to deny, nor be seen as unworthy of, his praises. *But I wanted to do nothing without your counsel, so that your good would not be by necessity, but willingly* (v. 14). Therefore, the apostle Paul could retain Onesimus as a minister to himself without Philemon’s will; but, if he did this without Philemon’s will, it would indeed be his good, but not willingly. But that which is not done willingly can be argued, in another

manner, to not be good. For nothing can be called good, which is not done willingly.¹ Because of this, the apostle's prudence, considering, sent him, a fugitive slave, to his master, so that he could be profitable to his master, he who would not be profitable if he was kept absent from his master.

Perhaps this is why he departed (v. 15). But, beautifully adding “perhaps,” he tempered the sentence; for the judgments of God are hidden, and he is, as it were, fearful of declaring certain what is dubious. “Perhaps,” he says, “this is why he departed.” Cautiously, timidly, with trepidation, and not with a wholly fixed step. If he did not have the “perhaps,” servants would be fleeing everyone, in order to be the apostle's disciples. *Away from you for an hour* (v. 15). But when he adds “for an hour,” we ought to understand “an hour” as meaning “time.” For, in comparison to eternity, all time is brief. *So that you would receive him eternally, now not as a slave, but, instead of a slave, as a beloved brother* (vv. 15-16). No master is eternal for his slave; for his power, and the condition of either, is ended by death. But Onesimus, who was made eternal for the eternal Philemon by the faith of Christ, since he also believed in Christ, Whom he accepted with a spirit of freedom, now began to be, not a slave, but a brother, from a slave, a beloved brother, an eternal brother, both for the eternal apostle and for his master, to whom he attached Onesimus as if by a work of the flesh,² and afterwards, much more fully, through the spirit. And back then, indeed, when he was subject to him in the flesh, he was not joined to him in the Lord. By which we understand that the slave who comes to believe in Christ is bound to his master by a double law, so that, as he is joined to him by fleshy necessity in time, so he is joined to him in eternity by the spirit. *If, therefore, you have me as a companion, receive him as me* (v. 17). What he means to say is this: “if you want to have me as a companion, have also Onesimus, whom I hold as my consort and son and bowels; if you do not want to receive or have him, you should understand that you cannot have me either.”

But if he has injured [you] or owes [you] anything, charge it to me (v. 18). An imitator of his lord, and having Christ speaking in him, by his own powers, he ought to do what Christ [does]. For if He bore our infirmities, and suffered our blows (cf. Is 53:4), justly does the apostle put himself in the place of Onesimus, and he vows that which he owed. But, as we said above, all that was taken secretly, and lost in luxury, could not be absolved, although he compensated Philemon with a great price when, instead of a fugitive slave and lost money, he received a beloved brother and an eternal brother, and, through him, he made the apostle a debtor to himself. *I, Paul, write in my hand, I will repay* (v. 19). “What Onesimus secretly stole, I myself vow to repay. Of this vow, this epistle and hand is proper witness, which I did not only dictate, as is wont, but I wrote with my own hand.”

1 The text only says “nothing can be called good which is voluntary” (*nihil quippe bonum dici potest, quod ultroneum est*). However, this makes no sense in the context; it seems some negative word is missing in this sentence.

2 The Latin is *ut carnis conditio*.

And I will not tell you what you yourself also owe me (v. 19). “For, because of the word of Christ which I announced to you, through which you also became Christian, you yourself owe me. Since, if you are mine, and all of yours is mine, Onesimus, too, who is yours, is mine. Therefore, I could use him as my own, but I relinquish him to your will, so that, in forgiving him, you would have a reward.” *Therefore, brother, I enjoy you in the Lord* (v. 20). For if he did not add “in the Lord,” but only said, “I enjoy you,” he would place the hope of his blessedness in him, since something is said to be enjoyed most closely when it is used with love. For when he who is loved is near, he will necessarily also bring delight with him; if you pass through it and refer it back to what will remain, you will use it, and, abusively, not properly, would you be said to “enjoy” it. But if you cling [to it] and remain [with it], placing the end of your happiness in it, then, truly, you will be properly said to enjoy it; since it is not to be enjoyed except in that Trinity, that is, the highest and incommutable good.³ *Refresh my bowels in Christ* (v. 20). As he wants Philemon to enjoy in the Lord, so he wills his bowels, Onesimus—whom he called with this name above (v. 12)—to be refreshed by Philemon. *Trusting in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say* (v. 21). He who trusts in one he will plead to in some way pre-judges that trust, [judging] that he cannot deny what is pleaded for. Perhaps, if he knows that he whom he implores will do more than what he pleads, for that reason, he asks for less, so that the one pleaded would have a voluntary and better-paid reward. But if Philemon does this when commanded by men, how much more would he do for love of God? Wherefore, by the apostolic voice, he is also praised in merit, since he fulfilled his commands by work.

But, at the same time, also prepare a lodging for me (v. 22). He therefore says this so that, when Philemon expects him to be coming to him, he will better do what he pleads, and so that, coming to preach the new crucified truth and to proclaim unheard doctrines, he would know that many were running alongside him; and it was most necessary that there would be a house for him to frequent in the city’s place, in which he could easily meet; then, that it be empty of any hindrance and ample to fit many listeners, and not close to the place of spectacles, nor near detestable filth: finally, that it be in a flat⁴ spot: this because he thought he would remain in Rome for a two-year stay. Not small, I think, was that mansion to which crowds of Jews flowed daily. *For I hope, through your prayers, to be given to you* (v. 22). God, being pleaded by the father, indulges the son, and a brother often serves a brother in prayer; but the apostle yields to the prayers of the whole church, to those who will hear him usefully. And this gift is said to be given, not so much to him who, prepared for martyrdom, has his martyrdom deferred, as much as to them to whom an apostle is

3 This distinction between “use” (*uti*) and “enjoy” (*frui*) derives from St. Augustine; here, Claudius is mostly just summarizing *On Christian Doctrine* I.3–5.

4 *Planus* can also mean “lowly” or “humble.”

sent. And that Paul was often in prison and then freed from chains, he himself says in another place: *frequently in prisons*;⁵ from which sometimes, I think, God helping, he was released by his persecutors, finding nothing worthy of death in him. Not yet did Nero's sword dedicate Christian blood, but they, being sent into prison through the novelty of the preaching, or the envious Jews, or because of those who saw their idols destroyed, or by the furor of the popular assembly, they, again, through impetus and furor, were released from bondage. And the Acts of the Apostles witness that what we say is so, when Agrippa says to Festus that he could have released Paul, if he had not called upon Caesar, and because he found no cause [for punishment], except some questions of proper religion, regarding a certain Jesus, Whom Paul preached as living (cf. Acts 25:32, 19). From which we consider that they can even, similarly, be released from the other judgments, through the Lord's act, so that the new preaching would be sown throughout all the world.

Epaphras, my co-captive, greets you in Christ Jesus; also Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Lucas, my helpers (v. 23). The names of those who are greeted also teach what we said in the beginning, that the [epistle] to Philemon was also written at the same time as the epistle to the Colossians, and was written through those who bore the letters: for even in this it is thus written out fully: "Aristarchus my co-captive greets you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas ... and Epaphras, who is a servant of Christ from among you" (Col 4:10, 12). And a little later: "Luke the beloved doctor greets you, and Demas ... And say to Archippus: see to how you fulfill the ministry which you have received in the Lord ... And be mindful of my chains" (Col 4:14, 17, 18). If someone still does not consider the writings equal [in time], because there are a few names in Colossians that are not found written here, let him know that not all are either friends or acquaintances to all; and one epistle might be, in one way, private to one man, and, in another way, public to the whole church. But who is Epaphras, Paul's co-captive? From what is added here, "in Christ Jesus," we can assume that he suffered chains in Rome for Christ, like Paul, and that he can be called a prisoner of Christ, as being also his co-captive. Or, certainly, [we can also consider him] to be noble among the apostles, like Andronicus and Julia, of whom he wrote to the Romans: "Greet Andronicus and Julia, my kinsmen and co-captives, who are noble among the apostles, who were also before me in Christ" (Rom 16:7). So regarding Epaphras.

Among the other cooperators in the gospel and its prisoners, when he writes the epistle to Philemon, he places Mark, whom I consider to be the author of the Gospel, and Aristarchus, of whom we made mention above, and Demas, of whom he says in another place, "Demas left me" (2 Tim 4:10), and Luke the doctor, who, in writing, handed on the gospel and the acts of the apostles to the churches. For as the apostles, from fishers of fish, became fishers of men, so he, from a doctor

5 Claudius seems to be misremembering 2 Cor 11:23: "in many more labors, in prisons more abundantly, in wounds beyond measure, frequently in deaths."

of bodies, turned into a doctor of souls, of whom he also says in another place: “we sent with him a brother, whose praise is in the gospel, through all the churches” (2 Cor 8:18);⁶ as often as his book is read in the church, so often does his medicine not cease.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (v. 25). For when the divine grace is in the spirit, it makes the whole man spiritual, so that he adheres to the Lord in mind and body, and there is fulfilled in him what is written: “who adheres to the Lord is one spirit” (1 Cor 6:17). But, according to the Hebrews, [these names] are thus interpreted: Paul, “admirable”; Timothy, “beneficent”; Philemon, “wonderfully given,” or “mouth of bread,” from “mouth,” not from “bone”; Appia, “continent” or “freedom”; Archippus, “length of work”; Onesimus, “responding”; Epaphras, “fruitful and seeing” or “growing up”; Mark, “sublimely commanded”; Aristarchus, “mountain of work”; Demas, “silent”; Luke, “raising himself.” If we want to understand these names according to their interpretation, it is not difficult: it is especially *admirable* and *beneficial* to write to him for whom all vices have passed away, and whose *mouth* is *open* to the heavenly things, that is, *continence* and *freedom* and *length*.

6 No name is mentioned in this verse; however, tradition often claims that it is referring to Luke. St. John Chrysostom, in *Homilies on Second Corinthians*, Homily 18, notes that some say it refers to Luke, others, to Barnabas.