

without having his former statements cast up to him.<sup>1</sup> My reference to Dr. Moffatt was solely due to the fact that he was the latest English writer on this subject, and that he associated himself with the opposite view to that which I hold myself.

The shorter form of text in Ephesians i. 15 is the original, or at least the nearest to the original, we can get. It can be translated, as it was by the Bohairic translator centuries ago, in a way consonant with first century usage and in perfect harmony with Pauline thought and the general tenour of the Epistle. This form of text proves that "Ephesians" cannot be a compilation from Colossians by a later writer.

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### *THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON.*

THE history of the Epistle to Philemon is a very curious one. The value attached to it by different generations, by different schools and by different individuals, provides an interesting criterion of their respective ethical attitude and development. The intellectualist and the dogmatician of any period have no use for such a document. In the fourth century there were those who denied its genuineness on internal grounds. Its subject, the fate of a fugitive slave, was felt to be beneath the dignity of an Apostle and of Scripture. It contributed nothing to doctrine or to edification. So Jerome had to defend it against those who said: "Aut epistolam non esse Pauli, aut etiam, si Pauli sit, non habere quod aedificare nos possit." Even Calvin, though he appreciates the witness of the Epistle to the "singular loftiness" of Paul's mind, makes a kind of

<sup>1</sup> I cited the old article myself simply to date the first modern appearance of this translation in print, and to claim it as my property, so to speak. I neither accept nor reject the entire wording of the note.

apology for the subject "otherwise low and mean." And as Calvin values the epistle for the light it sheds on the character of the Apostle, so Luther connects his appreciation of its beauty with an allegorical interpretation which, however striking and true, is nevertheless of a secondary character: "We are all His Onesimi to my thinking."

Another class of estimates proceeds on the supposition that the epistle contains some authoritative guidance for the Church on the subject of slavery. Whenever that question has been debated, this letter has been appealed to to show that Christianity sanctions the institution. With equal confidence it has been prayed in aid by those who denied it. And even after the controversy has died away, the impression has remained in many quarters that it was on this point that the letter chiefly bore.

Others again, who have recognised that the letter neither provides doctrinal material nor positive guidance regarding slavery in the direction of tolerance or of condemnation, have based their appreciation of it upon aesthetic considerations. They have praised its tenderness, its playfulness, its delicacy of touch, its extraordinary effectiveness as an appeal. And all that they have said is true. It is nothing less than perfect as a specimen of letter-writing. It touches with consummate skill one after another of highest notes in Philemon's character. It betrays a singular combination of perfect confidence in the depth and sincerity of his affection with a wistful desire that it may be able to stand this tremendous test. Both confidence and doubt are here; but the confidence outweighs the doubt.

The letter has had less than justice done to it by our authoritative translations. The Authorised Version not only puts a serious obstacle in the reader's way by its slavishly literal rendering of the word which should be

rendered "heart," with the strangest results for the un-instructed reader ; but it blunts the poignancy of the whole situation by putting (in verse 11) "whom I have sent again," instead of "whom I have sent," or better, "am sending *back*." Perhaps the central passage might be translated thus : "So for all the right I have to speak authoritatively in Christ, and to lay injunction on thee as to what thou shouldest do, yet because of love I rather use entreaty, I, no other than Paul, now aged and at this moment a prisoner of Christ Jesus : I entreat thee concerning my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my prison, Onesimus who was at one time Little Good to thee, but now both for thee and me has become Great Good. Him I am sending *back*, the man who is my very heart. Fain would I have kept him beside me, that he might take thy place in ministering to me in these shackles riveted by the Gospel. But I decided to do nothing without thy consent, in order that thy goodness might be not compulsory but voluntary. For perchance it was for this that he was separated from thee for an hour, in order that thou shouldest get him back for eternity—not any longer in the character of a slave, but more than a slave, a brother beloved, especially by me, but how much more by thee, beloved both as a man and in the Lord."

A little consideration of this central passage and of the circumstances out of which the letter comes will show that of far higher importance than the testimony which it bears to the Apostle's character, his tact and tenderness, or the light which it might throw on Christianity and slavery, is the fact that behind it and through it we gain an invaluable view of Christianity at work. We see, in fact, what the Gospel might be expected to accomplish, and what it did accomplish in governing life and action. The letter brings us acquainted with three men each one of whom is

successively inspired to recognise the will of God presenting itself in demands the most distasteful and most difficult, each one of whom is enabled by the power of the indwelling Christ to *do* what he thus learnt that God required of him.

We have first of all the Apostle himself. It is not difficult to imagine what it meant for him to have Onesimus for a companion and minister to his physical needs. He was now old in years, and older still through suffering, broken in health, and in prison. Others besides Onesimus must have had access to him. But we may assume some special devotion on the part of the grateful slave, some special gift of ministration to Paul's need, which made his presence inexpressibly valuable to the Apostle. And a day came when the conviction formed itself in the Apostle's mind that this must stop. He must no longer indulge himself in the enjoyment of this fellowship and help. It was wrong. Onesimus belonged to another. Paul must send him away, even though to do so was like tearing out his own heart.

What was it that led Paul to recognise this most distasteful course as a duty? We may call it the voice of conscience. He would probably have described it as a word of the Lord. It was certainly no law, no precept, no rule of life, to which his attention was called, and to which he submitted. The situation was wholly new, unprovided for in any code of ethics. But the right course presented itself to Paul's mind with all the authority of duty: he knew it, though in no other way than men can know it now who truly desire to be taught of God.

Yet it was not a duty which could be described as obvious though new. On the contrary, many quite plausible arguments might have been advanced in favour of keeping Onesimus, e.g. that slavery itself was an anomaly in God's world, that Philemon had no right as a Christian to keep

slaves at all, still less to have Onesimus returned to him, that God had allowed Onesimus to make good his escape, and man had no right to cancel the Divine concession. If any such arguments had occurred to Paul, there is no trace of them in the Epistle. Either they did not occur to him, or they had been finally dismissed by the influence of a great imperative. One such argument still more plausible he does suggest, but that half playfully and only to dismiss it. He was persuaded of Philemon's genuine love toward himself, and that no one would be prompter to yield him unthrift service

Had love but the warrant  
Love's gift to dispense.

It seemed providential, another might have argued, that accident had brought to the Apostle's prison this quasi-representative of Philemon, able and ready to do that service which his master would fain be rendering in his own person. This thought certainly occurred to Paul, but he put it away from him. Philemon must have an opportunity of proving his love, but in a different way from that, and with the full and informed consent of his will. The Apostle saw his way clear through all the tangle of conflicting motives. He held firmly to the dominating consideration, that Onesimus must be restored to his master and allowed none of these arguments to sophisticate his conscience. He let Onesimus depart. We may ask whether even Paul ever gave stronger proof of the veracity of his saying: "I can do all things in Him that strengtheneth me."

Then there is Onesimus. To most men it will appear that he had a yet harder task laid upon him than the Apostle. But first of all he had to take it in, to recognise that this was what God required of him. In his case it may be presumed that the ethical sense itself was non-

existent or at least dormant. In this respect the slave stood at the other extreme of experience from the Apostle. He was one of the world's Ishmaelites, with as little sense of duty as of debt to the society which had denied him the rights of manhood. It is such an one who is now called upon to use the liberty wherewith Christ has made him free in order to sacrifice the liberty which he has captured for himself. Of all the many conversations of which we would fain have the record, is there one which would exceed in interest the conversation between Paul and Onesimus in which this matter was first broached and discussed? To leave his new-found friend, to turn his face again towards Colosse, to travel back all that way in order to surrender the liberty he had gained, to face Philemon, to submit to any treatment to which an indignant master might expose an insurgent slave, to accept at the best a life-long bondage, and at the worst a death by torture—to do this voluntarily and to do it because it was right, argues an extraordinary conviction both as to the reality of the Divine command and as to the imperative obligation to obey.

Once more there was abundant opportunity for debate and honest dubiety. Had Onesimus had the wit and the willingness, he might well have met the Apostle's arguments (supposing he used any) out of his own lips. Had not Christ made all men free, all men brothers? Was not Philemon's right cancelled by the higher right of the free-man of Christ Jesus? To which the Apostle could only reply, Yes, but it must be left to Philemon to acknowledge that. And if there were present to the mind of the Apostle and of Onesimus the thought that Philemon would act not as a non-Christian slave-holder might be expected to act, if his Christianity were reckoned into their calculations, this only throws further light on what they understood

Christianity to mean ; they trusted the power of Christ over another man even as they bowed to it in themselves.

And yet it may be doubted whether any conceivable argument or persuasion on the part of the Apostle is in itself sufficient to account for the action of Onesimus. It is not by argument that conscience is quickened, enlightened and enthroned. Paul must have used some swift unerring stroke of the word that pierces as a two-edged sword : "Ye are not your own, ye are brought with a price" : not your own even to assert your civil liberty at the cost of another man. "For freedom Christ has made us free," freedom to submit joyously and spontaneously to the conditions which are called for by justice. Does that involve suffering ? Christ also suffered for us and left us an ensample. Such considerations occur to us as possible in the circumstances. But how did they come to be adequate ? They could only be so to a man who in sober earnest "counted all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus." But all explanation is probably incomplete which stops short of recognising that this poor slave shared in the same experience as Paul claimed when he said : "We have the mind of Christ." If the Thessalonians were "taught of God" to love one another, Onesimus too may have seen his duty simply because God showed it to him. And when he saw it he did it. And the Christianity which Paul preached and his disciples practised, must be credited with results such as these. God in Christ, unseen, unheard, save by faith, was One whose "lightest whisper moved them more than all the ranged reasons of the world."

Onesimus was moved and enabled by the same Spirit whom it is open to all men to receive. What he did was, from the point of view of certain modern moralists, a piece of Quixotic absurdity ; but it was a triumph of the Cross.

It represented the sacrifice of the individual to the social ideal of justice, which is the very nerve of ethical progress. And it was accomplished in the power of the Crucified and Risen Lord.

There remains Philemon. From some points of view what was proposed to him was the most difficult task of all. He was called on to forgive, frankly and completely, to forgive one who had wronged him with a forgiveness which would be as public as the wrong. That he would have to do before entering on the question of how he was to treat Onesimus in future. The relationship of an ordinary slave-holder with a renegade slave would have no future. It was not only worldly wisdom, it was a deep understanding of the working of Christianity, which led the Apostle to overleap this preliminary step, and to ask for the all-inclusive thing, viz., that Philemon should recognise in Onesimus a brother. From a lower ethical standpoint the appeal would have been for mercy, for the application of a stoical *ἀραξία*, a dispassionate consideration of how little would be gained by vengeance. Paul leaves all such considerations below him. He presents to Philemon a God-given opportunity to find another friend, one who had indeed been a slave, who might possibly continue in the same status in the eyes of the world, but all the time would be that inestimably precious thing, a brother in Christ. Paul counted first of all on Philemon's joy that Onesimus had become a Christian, and his readiness to admit him as such into the Brotherhood.

This is the central motive whose spring Paul seeks to release. But there are others. He reminds Philemon of the course of life he has already adopted, the ideal he is known to aim at, in practising "love" towards God's people. This which he is now asked to do is but a special, though a very difficult, case of the same principle. He

waives the obligation which Philemon is under to himself, but even in waiving reminds him of it. He appeals to the relation now established between himself and Onesimus, so close that Philemon cannot despise the one without despising the other. And finally he appeals to Philemon's affection for himself as well as to his faith in Christ. "For all the right I have to speak authoritatively in Christ and to lay injunction on thee what thou shouldst do, yet because of love, I entreat rather." The letter shows not only what the new religion could accomplish in cases of individual duty, but what it could effect in creating a common life to which men made appeal because they knew it to be real.

How did Philemon meet this appeal? It cannot be said that we know. And yet we may rest confidently in the belief that his response was worthy of the trust reposed in him by Paul. That seems to be the only view consistent with the survival of the letter. In the other event there is nothing to account for its having been preserved either by Philemon or by the Christians at Colosse. He would not keep it to reproach him; he would not show it to his shame. Paul was not mistaken either in the man to whom he wrote or in the power of the Gospel in which he trusted. That to which first he and then Onesimus had bowed their hearts was mighty to control Philemon also to a task not less difficult perhaps, considering the circumstances of his life.

Apart from the many other excellencies which have been found in it, the letter to Philemon provides invaluable evidence as to the working of Christianity. We see men of three very different types lifted to new conceptions of duty, called on in various ways to do the most unlikely and the most unpalatable things, and doing them because they were Christ's men.

And the Gospel which we here see at work is the same

Gospel which the Apostle states, expounds and defends in his other Epistles. Looking back over it, we see that, short as it is, it strikes several of the great notes of the Pauline Gospel. Both Philemon and Onesimus are "new creatures," Onesimus having been "begotten again" in Paul's prison, Philemon having believed to the winning or the saving of "himself." This common experience constitutes a common relationship of the most binding and the most fertile description, a relation which co-exists with, but interpenetrates, any previously existing relations. Onesimus may remain a slave of Philemon; but if he does he will be a "super-slave," because he is at the same time a brother. All these relationships, all this life, in fact, belong to a new sphere. They are "in the Lord." Paul's well-worn principle is not trite only because it is a living one. Wear makes it stronger. On that plane these men meet and see one another in the light of eternity; and their relations and mutual obligations become clear. They can even meet as master and slave, the one forgiving because he has been forgiven, the other doing his service "with anxious heed" because both are "thralls of the Lord Christ." So far is this Epistle from being of secondary importance or of merely private interest, it might well be placed in the forefront of our study of Paulinism.

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