2. Onesimus as *Fugitivus*: The Runaway Slave of Philemon?

Since at least the time of John Chrysostom (c. 347–407 CE) it has been traditional to interpret the letter of Philemon as the story of a *fugitivus*—the letter is taken to be about a runaway slave named Onesimus, who was estranged from his master, Philemon. As Chrysostom (1889: 545) says: 'This excellent man had a certain slave named Onesimus. This Onesmus, having stolen something from his master, had run away.' Why Onesimus stole from his master, and where he ran away to, are matters unknown; at one level these are secondary questions which do not greatly affect the essential point of Onesimus being understood as a *fugitivus*. However, the status of Onesimus as a runaway slave does have an important role to play in the traditional interpretation of the letter. This is so because the traditional interpretation of the letter asserts that the reason why Paul writes to Philemon in the first place arises directly out of his (Onesimus's) status as a runaway slave. In this scenario Paul's letter to Philemon is seen as an attempt to effect a reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus, the aggrieved master and the runaway slave. Paul is generally understood to seek to forge a new relationship between the two men, one which takes into account their common commitment to Christ.

Specific points of geography are brought in to support the traditional reconstruction of the original occasion and setting of the letter. The assumed close connection with the letter to the Colossians has often been invoked in this regard. For example, the fact that the letter to the Colossians contains reference to Onesimus (4.9), to Archippus (4.17), and above all to Epaphras (4.12), has been taken by many as confirmation that Philemon was indeed from the city of Colossae. This is significant, because nowhere within the letter of Philemon itself is there any explicit reference to Colossae or a clear statement that infers that Philemon was from the city.

Similarly, the fact that Paul describes himself as ‘a prisoner’ (vv. 1, 9) and speaks of his ‘imprisonment’ (vv. 10, 13), has prompted much discussion by scholars over the years as to the place of that detention. The place of imprisonment has implications for the reconstruction of Onesimus’s life as a runaway slave. Traditionally Rome has been regarded as the place where Paul was imprisoned; this was the opinion of John Chrysostom and it probably remains the majority view among New Testament scholars even to this day. However, others suggest that it is more
likely that Onesimus made his way to Ephesus or Caesarea, rather than Rome, which was much further away. On the other hand, others maintain that Rome was just the sort of place a runaway might go to get lost in the crowds and live in obscurity.

This leads us to consider how and under what circumstances Paul may have befriended Onesimus.

3. Onesimus as Christianos: The Convert of Paul

The traditional interpretation of the letter of Philemon takes Onesimus to have been a convert of the apostle Paul. It infers that the young runaway slave came into contact with Paul during the apostle's imprisonment, probably in Rome sometime between 58 and 64 CE. The textual basis for this interpretation rests upon several key phrases within the letter. Verse 10 is of special importance in this regard for in it Paul uses family language about the father-son relationship to address Philemon about Onesimus: ‘I, Paul, appeal to you about my child, whose father I have become in this prison (REB)’. According to J.D.G. Dunn (1996: 327) Paul was probably between 50 and 60 years old when he wrote Philemon, if the term presbutes in v. 9 is any indication. Similarly, Philip Dodderidge (1756: 593) suggested Paul was about 53; F. Godet (1887: 145), gave his age as about 55; and Joachim Gnilka (1982: 43), suggested Paul was slightly older than 55. Onesimus, on the other hand, was probably in his early twenties, well before the emancipation threshold of 30, the age at which many slaves were manumitted by their masters.

Once Onesimus was converted to the faith he seems to have proved himself to be of great assistance to the apostle in his imprisonment. Indeed, traditionally the epistle has been seen as Paul’s petition that Onesimus be released from his slavery to Philemon so that he might be sent back to him (Paul) as a freed man, in order to continue this service to the cause of Christ. The conversion of Onesimus to faith underlies the epistle as a whole, and there are several phrases within the letter to Philemon hint at this way of reading the text. Most importantly, in v. 11 Paul makes a pun on the meaning of his name (‘Onesimus’ = ‘useful’), emphasizing that the slave has undergone a change of character which has altered him from being formerly ‘useless’ to now being ‘useful’. In v. 13 Paul says that he would be ‘glad to keep him with me’ for the service of the gospel, and in v. 20 Paul addresses Philemon as a Christian brother and boldly states that ‘I want some benefit from you in the Lord’.
Occasionally the figure of Onesimus the Christian convert of the imprisoned Paul has been the subject of artistic interest. Yet, it is quite rare to find celebrated artists who have executed oil paintings which depict Onesimus as a figure in his own right. A notable exception is the French painter Georges Rouault (1871–1958), who painted a small head-portrait entitled *Onesimus* in 1952; the signed painting measures 15 1/4 × 9 1/4 inches and is in a private collection in Paris (see Pierre Courthion 1962: 349, for a colour photograph of it). Unfortunately, there is nothing within the painting which suggests either the subject’s status as a runaway slave or his relationship with Paul the apostle. However, other images of Onesimus as a convert to Christianity are extant which do pick up these themes. This is especially true in woodcuts and engravings illustrating versions of the runaway’s story during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Generally these images depict Onesimus with the apostle Paul during his imprisonment. A good example is the tract *Onesimus; or the Run-Away Servant Converted* which was first published in 1796. The youthful Onesimus stands before Paul, who is seated, the bars in the window behind him indicating that they are in Paul’s prison cell. The apostle hands Onesimus a letter, presumably the epistle to Philemon, which he is to deliver to his master in Colossae. Interestingly, subsequent editions of the tract from 1798 and 1800 show Paul standing outside his prison cell, sending Onesimus on his way, his hand raised in what could be construed as a gesture of commissioning. In this case Philemon holds the aforementioned letter to Philemon in his hand (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Title page illustrations of *Onesimus; or, the Run-away Servant Converted* (1796, 1798)
4. Onesimus as Episkopos: The Bishop of Ephesus
Assuming for a moment that Paul's letter to Philemon affected a reconciliation between the slave and his master, what happened to Onesimus afterwards? Did he carry on his ministry as a Christian leader? Certainly Col. 4.9 has been interpreted by some scholars to indicate that Onesimus was released by Philemon in order to assist Paul in his apostolic ministry (this assumes that Colossians was written after Philemon, an opinion adopted by those who take Colossians to be a Deutero-Pauline document). Not surprisingly, the traditional interpretation of the epistle of Philemon has often incorporated the legends and stories about Onesimus becoming an important leader within the early church. Several different locations are included within these traditions.

For example, there is some evidence to suggest that following his release Onesimus went on to become the bishop of Ephesus, perhaps even succeeding Paul's co-worker Timothy in the post. Thus, Ignatius of Antioch, writing from Smyrna in c. 110 CE, acknowledged a certain Onesimus to be a model of Christian behaviour within the church at Ephesus. He described him in Ephesians 1.3 as a man 'of inexpressible love and your bishop (en agape adiegeto humon de episkopo)'. Other early sources associate him with Beroea in Macedonia. According to Apostolic Constitutions 7.46.1, 3–5, Onesimus served as bishop of the city:

Now concerning those bishops which have have been ordained in our lifetime, we let you know that they are these ... Of Laodicea in Phrygia, Archippus. Of Colossae, Philemon. Of Borea in Macedonia, Onesimus, once the servant of Philemon.

Some images of Onesimus as a bishop also have survived in Christian art. One of the most intriguing examples is found in the city of Göreme in Cappadocia in eastern Turkey. The eleventh-century Yilanli (Snake) church, a part of the Göreme Open Air Museum contains a fresco of Onesimus on the eastern wall of its central vault (see Figure 5). The painting is somewhat damaged, but the saint's name in capital Greek letters can be still made out on the right side of the work, as can his youthful features and his splendid red robe of his office.

What about the ultimate fate of Onesimus? According to some western traditions Onesimus died as a martyr in Rome, and his
body later being transferred to Ephesus where he had been bishop. Thus, *The Roman Martyrology* offers the following eulogy for Onesimus on 16 February:

> At Rome, blessed Onesimus, of whom St Paul the Apostle writes to Philemon, and whom he ordained Bishop of Ephesus after St Timothy, and committed to him the work of preaching. He was brought bound to Rome and stoned for Christ’s faith, and was first of all buried there; later his body was removed to the place where he had been ordained bishop (cited in J.B. O’Connell 1962: 34).

Other ancient traditions similarly describe Onesimus’s death. For example, one Greek eleventh-century miniscule (designated 42) contains a subscription to its text of Philemon which describes Onesimus’s martyrdom in Rome at the hands of Tertullus, the provincial administrator. In addition, another eleventh-century manuscript contained in the Österreichische

![Figure 5: Eleventh-Century Frescoe of Onesimus in Yilanli Church, Göreme in Cappadocia, Turkey](image)