


THE AUTHENTICITY OF PHILEMON

The Problems and Assumptions in the Consensus Position

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Abstract: The authenticity of Philemon is taken for granted by the vast majority of academics today, with almost no attempts to justify its inclusion among the traditionally accepted seven epistles. The present article seeks to problematize that assumption. Instead, it is concluded that there is not enough evidence to conclude that Philemon is authentic based on the current arguments which have been offered.

Keywords: Philemon. Pauline authenticity. Letter writing. Authenticity.

La autenticidad de Filemón: los problemas y supuestos en la posición de consenso

Resumen: La autenticidad de Filemón se da por sentada por la gran mayoría de los académicos de hoy, sin casi ningún intento de justificar su inclusión entre las siete epístolas tradicionalmente aceptadas. El presente artículo busca poner en duda ese supuesto. Y concluye que no hay suficientes evidencias para concluir que Filemón es auténtico con base a los argumentos actuales que se han ofrecido.

Palabras clave: Filemón. Autenticidad paulina. Escritura de cartas. Autenticidad.

1. Introduction

Authenticity is a problem which pervades Pauline studies for a variety of reasons. Whether Paul had a hand in the production of a letter is often seen as a sign of its authority as a source of information, whereas there has often been a dismissive element attached to pseudonymic and pseudepigraphic texts, especially when conversations of the historicity of Paul's ministry (or the life of Jesus) come into play.

Despite the generally acknowledged importance of the question, most mainstream scholars have been reticent to even contemplate the possibility that any of the generally accepted seven epistles (1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) could potentially be inauthentic, that is, not written under the auspices of the apostle Paul (i.e., not by Paul's own hand or under Paul's supervision)¹. This is, however, not to say that challenges have not proffered. To the contrary, several arguments against the authenticity even of the *hauptbriefe* have continued in recent times². They have, unfortunately, been ignored and deemed unworthy of much response. This is particularly true of Philemon, whose authenticity (if remarked upon at all) is usually asserted as certain in the span of a single paragraph, sometimes as little as one sentence, before the issue is passed over³.

¹ Space does not permit an exhaustive treatment of what does or does not qualify as "authentic" or how we interpret this concept. Helpful overviews, however, have been given recently in HART, *A Prolegomenon*, 85-133 and also the works of VERHOEF, see "Determining the Authenticity of the Paulines", and "The Authenticity of the Paulines Should Not Be Assumed"; MOSS, "The Secretary", provides also some more complications due to the ancient habit of making the creative and material contributions of secretaries and amanuenses invisible. She, in fact, points out that the named authors would rather claim a mistake in their own work than admit the agency of their own scribes, as scribes were seen more as extensions of the "author", rather than as contributors in their own right. See also, ELMER, "I, Tertius" for more discussion on secretary contributions as well. See also various entries in BERARDI – FILOSA – MASSIMO, *Defining Authorship*.

² Most recently, DETERING, *Paulusbriefe ohne Paulus?* and PRICE, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle*. See also CRÜSEMANN, *The Pseudepigraphical Letters to the Thessalonians*.

³ To date, I have not found a single detailed argument for authenticity in any leading English language commentary on Philemon. As a sample of those I have checked, see BARTHE – BLANKE, *The Letter to Philemon*, 130-131; BEALE, *Colossians and Philemon*, 367; MOO, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 361; DUNN, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 299-300; LOHSE, *Colossians and Philemon*, 188; BIRD, *Colossians & Philemon*, 4; KREITZER, *Philemon*, 1; EHORN, *Philemon*, digital edition unpaginated dismisses the issue noting only Baur as a challenger; WILSON,

This is not, however, due to any lack of criticisms of Philemon's authenticity. On the contrary, there have been scholars (often regarded as fringe or no longer worth taking seriously) who have quite often raised their voices in concern about the smallest of Paul's letters. Doubts were already raised in antiquity, as known from John Chrysostom's *Homilies on Philemon* (argument), Jerome's *Commentary on Philemon* (preface), and Theodore of Mopsuestia's *Commentary on Philemon*. The Syrian Church likewise seems to have omitted the letter. More on this will be discussed below but suffice to say that in antiquity the authorship and authority of Philemon was not universally asserted⁴.

In 1792, Edward Evanson argued for the primacy of the Acts of the Apostles and contended that because the Pauline letters contradicted it (along with other texts), we should likely regard them as forgeries. This included Philemon of course, though he saw very little to comment upon⁵. After this, F. C. Baur in his *Paulus, der Apostel Jesu Christi* (1845) raised his own contentions, which were then defended by Bruno Bauer⁶. The Dutch Radical school from Holland and also their defender, the Swiss theologian Rudolf Steck, also found numerous reasons to consider the epistle to be a forgery (along with all of the Pauline epistles generally)⁷. While most of these concerns died by the middle of the twentieth century, exceptions persist

Colossians and Philemon, 317; FITZMYER, *The Letter to Philemon*, 8-9; TARAZI, *Colossians & Philemon* assumes authenticity throughout; M. THOMPSON, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 193; WRIGHT, *Colossians and Philemon*, 168; MELICK, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 336; MCKNIGHT, *The Letter to Philemon*, 37; EBNER, *Der Brief an Philemon*, 4 just assumes authenticity (I could find no reference to any challenges, not even F. C. Baur); MÜLLER, *Der Brief an Philemon*, 80 briefly notes Van Manen and Baur and then dismisses the issue without defense; BARCLAY, *Colossians and Philemon*, 97; BRUCE, *The Epistles*, 192-93; KEEGAN, *First and Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 67; STUHL-MACHER, *Der Brief an Philemon*, 19-20; McDONALD, *Commentary on Colossians & Philemon*, 151; GORDAY (ed.), *Colossians*, 309; A. THOMPSON, *Colossians and Philemon*, 5; PATZIA, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, 10; CARTER, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 265; PAO, *Colossians & Philemon*, 341-342; TAMEZ – KITTREDGE – COLOMBO – BATTEN, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 201 briefly discusses authenticity but largely assumes it without retort; VERHOEF, *Filippenzen, Filemon*, 93; O'BRIEN, *Colossians, Philemon*, 269; THOMPSON – LONGENECKER, *Philippians and Philemon*, 151-152.

⁴ See FITZMYER, *The Letter to Philemon*, 8-9.

⁵ EVANSON, *The Dissonance*, 320 (using the 1805 Walker edition).

⁶ BAUR, *Paul*, 308 and BAUER, *Kritik der paulinischen Briefe*, III, 117.

⁷ VAN MANEN, *A Wave of Hypercriticism*, 149-151 (this is from the edited collection of Van Manen's English writings); VAN MANEN, *Handleiding voor de Oudchristelijke Letterkunde*, 59; VAN DEN BERGH VAN EYSINGA, "Paulus' Brief aan Philemon" and *La littérature chrétienne primitive*, 139-141; STECK, "Plinius im Neuen Testament", 570-584.

even to this day. Starting in the 1990s, a neo-“Dutch”⁸ Radical school began forming due to the publications of Hermann Detering and Darrell Doughty⁹. Others, not a part of these schools of thought, have likewise seen fit to raise concerns with the authenticity¹⁰.

The response of most commentators, if they give any, has been to assert a few points they deem substantial enough to ward off these criticisms, but without engaging with the actual contents of the critics of Philemon. As such, in my view there does not seem to be a consensus based on any careful consideration of Philemon’s authenticity. To the contrary, it seems that it is more a consensus of repetition, where critics of Philemon have been routinely ignored in favor of scholars simply repeating the authenticity of the epistle without giving due consideration to arguments against its authenticity. As such, in what follows I will hope to accomplish the following: (1) demonstrate that the few arguments in favor of Philemon’s authenticity are incorrect or faulty, and (2) offer additional arguments against Philemon’s authenticity, including presenting some reasons as to why such a small letter might be fabricated and to when it might date. In my view, when all the evidence is considered, there is no particularly convincing reason to consider this epistle to be an authentic Pauline letter. Instead, at best we should

⁸ In truth, none of the current members of this “school” of thought are actually Dutch. This title of Neo-Dutch Radicals was applied primarily due to the continuation of thought and also for one of the chief originators of this new school, Hermann Detering, who was partly in contact with some of the last adherents of the original school of thought, see HANSEN, “An Evaluation of the Neo-Dutch Radical School”, and DETERING, *Paulusbriefe ohne Paulus?* for more discussion.

⁹ DETERING, *Paulusbriefe ohne Paulus?* 332-336; DOUGHTY, “Pauline Paradigms and Pauline Authenticity” who cites Detering and the classical Dutch Radicals on 119. These were followed by Doughty’s student, Robert M. Price, see PRICE, *The Pre-Nicene New Testament*, 467-468; IDEM, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle*, 502-4; IDEM, *Holy Fable III*, 151-154. Following Price and Detering, others have also expressed their doubts about Philemon and more broadly the Pauline corpus in general, see SALM, *Nazareth Gate*, 400, 408, 434-444, 474; CARRIER, *On the Historicity of Jesus*, 261, n.13 on Philemon being inauthentic.

¹⁰ SCHWAB, *Echtheitskritische Untersuchungen zu den vier kleineren Paulusbriefen*, 87-199; PALEY, “Questioning the Pauline Authorship of Philemon”; SEESGOOD, *Philemon*, 79-83 who raises a number of reasons to have skepticism toward Philemon; BRODIE, *The Birthing of the New Testament*, 586 (who suggests Philemon was copied from Philippians). Brodie later came out in favor of the idea that Paul himself never existed, independently of the Dutch Radical school and its modern variants (see BRODIE, *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 137-154). I will elaborate more on the reception of Philemon and its authenticity in my upcoming volume *The Empty Prison Cell*.

remain “agnostic”¹¹ and at worst there may even be some evidence that tilts us in favor of inauthenticity.

2. The Arguments for Authenticity: An Evaluation

One of the more recent scholars to offer at least a few points in favor of Philemon’s authenticity is Joseph Fitzmyer. In his commentary on the letter, he writes:

Today the authenticity of the Letter to Philemon is almost universally admitted, for there is no serious reason to question it. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine why a pseudepigrapher of later date would want to concoct such a letter and pass it off as written by Paul of Tarsus. The language, vocabulary, style, and structure of the letter, as well as its argumentation, are notably Pauline¹².

The vocabulary of Philemon in particular is a point which is consistently harped upon. Stuhlmacher is more forceful, writing:

Inzwischen hat die Exegese gelernt, den Phlm als authentisch zu betrachten, weil Form, Stil und Wortwahl auf einen genuinen Paulusbrief weisen und sich die schon von F. Chr. Baur notierten Besonderheiten des Ausdrucks aus der speziellen Situation des Briefes aufhellen lassen¹³.

I will address each of these points in turn (the issue of imagining a scenario for fabricating the letter I will address further below).

Firstly, the language of Philemon cannot be described as “Pauline” for a number of critical reasons. Seesengood notes the concerning number of *hapax legomena*¹⁴, and it has been similarly noted by numerous commentators that Philemon shares a close relationship with Colossians-Ephesians whose authenticity is far from resolved¹⁵. In fact, the similarities be-

¹¹ That is, we should withhold from asserting a truth value as to whether the epistle is authentic. I.e., we do not assert its authenticity or inauthenticity. It is simply in a state of epistemological limbo, where we cannot say where it belongs. To say this answer may not be satisfactory is certainly true. I prefer knowing the answers as much as anyone.

¹² FITZMYER, *The Letter to Philemon*, 8.

¹³ STUHLMACHER, *Der Brief an Philemon*, 19-20.

¹⁴ SEESGOOD, *Philemon*, 80.

¹⁵ PALEY, “Questioning the Pauline Authorship of Philemon”, 18; CAMPBELL, *Framing Paul*, 259-260; BEALE, *Colossians and Philemon*, 368; PATZIA, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, 10; A. J. THOMPSON, *Colossians and Philemon*, 5; PAO, *Colossians & Philemon*, 22-23.

tween the two are so strong that, it is hard to even see how Philemon would have entered the canon without being attached to Colossians to begin with (this will be elaborated on below). Only in Flm and the deuterio-Paulines does *desmios* appear as a title of Paul (cf. Ef 3:1, 4:1; 2 Tm 1:8)¹⁶. In all the other Pauline epistles, Paul ensures to identify himself as either a “slave” or “apostle” of Jesus (the only exception being 1 Ts, however, it does identify him as an apostle soon after in v. 2:6). This difference was concerning enough that scribes felt the need to alter the introduction on several occasions to better align Philemon with Paul’s other letters¹⁷. In Flm 17, the phrase *ei oun* appears, which only elsewhere occurs in Col 3:1. Likewise, *eidōs hoti* in v. 21 is a unique construction in Philemon. Numerous words and phrases are either unique to Philemon or only occur in letters of dubious authenticity¹⁸. Stylometric analyses have been inconsistent on where

¹⁶ VAN MANEN, *A Wave of Hypercriticism*, 148; VAN DEN BERGH VAN EYSINGA, *La littérature chrétienne primitive*, 140 who relates it to Colossians and Ephesians. See also SEESGOOD, *Philemon*, 81. McKNIGHT, *The Letter to Philemon*, 51-52 notes this peculiarity, but writes: “The term ‘prisoner’ also intentionally identifies Paul with the analogous marginal condition of Onesimus, who could well have experienced the humiliation of being shackled: one ‘in bonds’ in prison is far closer to the slave Onesimus than Philemon” (*Letter to Philemon*, 52). McKnight’s claim is made relatively absurd by the fact that the much closer parallel would have been for Paul to call himself a slave, as he does elsewhere (Flp 1:1). In fact, calling himself a “prisoner” makes *less sense* and is a *worse* parallel than one of Paul’s usual titles, especially since Paul also emphasizes Onesimus’s conversion and brotherhood in Christ, which is how Paul defines his slavery as well. In short, McKnight inadvertently demonstrates that this terminology is even more conspicuous by pointing out this parallel. As noted below, in fact, one such scribe did not this and changed *desmios* (“prisoner”) to *doulos* (“slave”), confirming this language difference was significant for early Christians. The noun *desmos* (“bonds”) appears elsewhere (Flp 1:7, 1:13, 1:14, 1:16), but again this only euphemistically refers to the shackles on Paul.

¹⁷ The *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th Edition) actually notes several variant readings [655] including: *apostolos* (“apostle”), *doulos* (“slave”), and the combined *apostolos desmios* (“apostle prisoner”).

¹⁸ In v. 1 *desmios* as noted above and also the name Philemon is unique to this epistle; v. 2 Apphia is attested nowhere else; v. 8 *anékō* is found only in Flm and Ef 5:14 and Col 3:18; Flm 9 *presbytēs* is the only occasion where Paul is ever described as “aged” (see VAN DEN BERGH VAN EYSINGA, “Paulus’ Brief aan Philemon”, 12); Flm 11 has *ajréstos* which is a *hapax legomenon* and also refers to Onesimus as *eujréstos* (“useful”), which only occurs elsewhere in 2 Tm 2:21 and 4:11; v. 12 has *anapempō* which appears in no other Pauline letter; Flm 19 has *apotinō* which is a *hapax legomenon*; Flm 20 contains *oninémi*, another *hapax legomenon*; Flm 22 has *xenia* which appears in no other Pauline letter; Flm 23-24 contain the names of Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke which are otherwise only found in Col 4:10-14. As such, there are at least nine terms that are either only found in Philemon or only

to place Philemon in the Pauline corpus and its relationship to the other epistles¹⁹.

A potential counterpoint for this would be that Philemon's sample-size is so small that we cannot possibly hope to use stylistic and linguistic variances to argue against its authenticity. As Campbell observes, most stylo-metric analyses need at least 500 words for any effectiveness²⁰ and other scholars like Beale are even more skeptical on this front²¹. Academics have also rightly challenged the usage of style as a basis for determining authenticity for numerous reasons, especially how differences in genre, emotionality, and age can affect style changes²². In my view, however, this counter is a double-edged sword. If the stylistic evidence is too little to argue *against* authenticity, it is likewise too small to be *in favor* of authenticity either. Which means that any claim that Philemon's style is akin to that of Paul's is inherently inaccurate from the start, since we cannot affirm any such claim based on the meager sample-size. Thus, we are left at an impasse. Either the sample size is too small to make any claims about the letter's stylistic authenticity, or it is and (as noted above) we have potential reasons for considering it inauthentic (depending on how much force we grant such arguments). Another argument against the stylistic differences would be that perhaps Timothy was the primary compositionist of the letter (as some have suggested with various letters²³). However, in this case an interesting ques-

shared with the deutero-Paulines, along also with five names only shared with Colossians (of dubious authenticity), and two (Philemon and Apphia) which are unique to Philemon. Likewise, there are numerous grammatical forms of other words which either only appear in Philemon or are only shared with the inauthentic Paulines, though these are admittedly less convincing.

¹⁹ SAVOY, "Authorship of Pauline Epistles Revisited" places it outside the authentic corpus, but notes its small size makes it a outlier problem in general. Older studies concluded it was authentic, e.g., BARR, *Scalometry and the Pauline Epistles*, 93-94, 147; KENNY, *A Stylo-metric Study of the New Testament*, 98. MEALAND, "The Extent of the Pauline Corpus," 65 and NEUMANN, *The Authenticity*, 124 declare that Philemon is simply too small to work with.

²⁰ CAMPBELL, *Framing Paul*, 259. In agreement with Campbell that Philemon is simply too small of a sample, see MEALAND, "The Extent of the Pauline Corpus," 65; NEUMANN, *The Authenticity*, 124.

²¹ BEALE, *Colossians and Philemon*, 439-442. See also NEUMANN, *The Authenticity*, 124.

²² See VAN NES, *Pauline Language and the Pastoral Epistles*. Style analysis in general has come under fire for what are often deemed lacking methods. See also, O'DONNELL, "Linguistic Fingerprints or Style by Numbers?" and HERZER, "Narration, Genre, and Pseudonymity."

²³ See BEALE, *Colossians and Philemon*, 1-2 for overview of this possibility. More recently, see PALEY, "Pauline Pseudepigrapha and Early Christian Literacy".

tion emerges in that should we not then consider Timothy a forger or primary author? Or, if he did so even with Paul's approval, why should we then call this one of Paul's letters at all, and not a letter of Timothy (which Paul has coopted with his name)? Similarly, if an amanuensis were the producer of this letter, why is it still referred to as Paul's²⁴? In my view, the potential of a secretary being the primary writer of the letter only makes notions of "Pauline authenticity" more obscure and nebulous. Perhaps we should stop subsuming letters written by Paul's secretaries under his name and give authorial credit where it is actually due.

What becomes more difficult is the potential evidence that Philemon was constructed utilizing other letters. For instance, Flm 1, 3-5 contain numerous similarities and overlaps primarily with Col 1:1-4²⁵. Other close overlaps occur in Flm 8 and Col 3:18; Flm 10, 12, 13 and Col 4:8, 4:9, 4:18. These verbatim overlaps, in fact, led a few academics in the nineteenth century to conclude that at least Flm 4-5 were interpolations based on Colossians²⁶. Several reasons exist for thinking Philemon may be dependent on Colossians instead of the other way around. Firstly, Colossians appears to be written prior, assuming Paul knew no one from Colossae (2:1), a mistake that the author of Colossians could not have made if being dependent on Philemon, which showcases Paul knowing a number of people and expecting to even stay with them. Likewise, Epaphras is imprisoned in Flm but not in Col, indicating new events took place in the interim narrative. These and other narrative elements seem to be nebulous unless, as James D. G. Dunn suggested, we contend that either (A) Colossians and Philemon were written jointly and so are codependent (this does not explain Epaphras well),

²⁴ For discussion of the issues surrounding the amanuensis hypothesis, including its troubled origins and up to this point poor defenses, see WILLIAMS, "The Amanuensis Hypothesis in New Testament Scholarship." Williams notes that the hypothesis largely developed in an attempt to defend the epistles from claims of pseudepigraphy, but that there has been a dearth of detailed historical research justifying that an amanuensis would actually undermine a conclusion of pseudepigraphy.

²⁵ DETERING, *Paulusbriefe ohne Paulus?* 335; VAN DEN BERGH VAN EYSINGA, "Paulus' Brief aan Philemon", 12. SCHWAB, *Echtheitskritische Untersuchungen zu den vier kleineren Paulusbriefen*, 87-199; LEPPÄ, *The Making of Colossians*, 225-255.

²⁶ HOLTZMANN, "Der Brief an den Philemon"; HAUSRATH, *A History of the New Testament Times*, 4:122-123; BRÜCKNER, *Die chronologische Reihenfolge*, 200-203. More recently, O'NEILL, "Paul Wrote Some of All," 169 claims that Philemon has interpolations, but does not specify which passages.

or (B) that Philemon was written after Colossians²⁷. Likewise, Flm 24, while having some other parallels, is found verbatim in Phil 4:23²⁸.

Another issue, as Van Manen notes, is the inconsistent and downright confusing intermixing of plural and singular forms in the introduction, which potentially indicates that Philemon is utilizing Pauline phraseology and then imperfectly modifying it for a personal letter²⁹. In fact, the introduction itself seems confused as to who is even the addressee of the letter. Is it Philemon, Apphia, the church of their household, all of them at once? Certainly, the primary contents of the letter seem directed only at a singular individual (and the pronouns revert to singular for most of the text). The intermixing of the singular and plural in the introduction makes these confusions even more apparent. All of this is rather telling since, as Ehrman notes, the intro and outro salutations are generally the easiest parts of a letter to fabricate in someone's style³⁰. Given these sections are also where there are the closest overlaps with the Pauline epistles in general, this likewise means studies that have concluded the authenticity of Philemon on the basis of "Pauline" language are necessarily built on problematic assumptions.

What of the structure of the letter? Contra Fitzmyer, one cannot say that the "structure" of Philemon is remotely akin to Paul's traditionally accepted authentic letters. Even following Campbell, who accepts the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians, we would find no parallel with Philemon at all. The letter is, unlike Paul's others, not as overtly concerned with theological issues surrounding a church community. It does not quote from scripture, nor does it attempt to counteract false gospels and teachings, and it also does not relay any noteworthy biographical contents of Paul's life, unlike how Romans, Galatians, and Philippians do all of these things. Likewise, it is formatted much more similar to a personal letter of recommendation, akin to Pliny, *Ep.* 9.21 and 9.24, which it has been frequently compared to in scholarly literature³¹. In short, structurally this

²⁷ DUNN, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 37-38.

²⁸ DETERING, *Paulusbriefe ohne Paulus?* 336.

²⁹ VAN MANEN, *A Wave of Hypercriticism*, 147-148.

³⁰ EHRMAN, *Forgery and Counterforgery*, 158. We even have practical examples of this in the forged 3 Corinthians, Epistle to the Laodiceans, and Salvian's *Ad ecclesiam* which all mimic Paul/Timothy's opening style to make the forgeries more convincing.

³¹ STECK, "Plinius im Neuen Testament", 570-584 goes as far as to suggest that Pliny's letter was a possible model for Philemon, cf. VAN MANEN, *A Wave of Hypercriticism*, 145-146, 149-150 and IDEM, *Handleiding voor de Oudchristelijke Letterkunde*, 59; VAN DEN BERGH VAN EYSINGA, "Paulus' Brief aan Philemon", 16-17; DETERING, *Paulus-*

letter has very little in common with Paul's others, and Knox contends it even has little in common with papyri letters as well³². Philemon is an oddity all around, and this again counteracts Fitzmyer's claim. It might have more similarities structurally with 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, but Campbell has made a persuasive case that these texts in fact might have an anti-Marcionite slant to them, placing them well in the deuterio-Pauline category³³. Thus, Philemon's structure appears to have more in common with letters typically regarded as un-Pauline³⁴.

Fitzmyer also thinks we can trust the claim that Paul wrote the letter with his own hand from v. 19³⁵. However, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, Crüsemann's comments on 2 Thessalonians are noteworthy here, who contends that a similar claim in 2 Ts 3:17 is likely meant to disparage 1 Ts as a forgery by asserting its own claim to authenticity by Paul's own hand³⁶. In short, that a letter claims to be written in Paul's hand is no guarantee that it was.

Others like Knox have asserted Philemon's authenticity and even attempted to find evidence of the letter's use in the Ignatius' *Letter to the Ephesians*³⁷. The arguments, however, are hardly convincing and seem somewhat strained at points, especially linguistically. As a result, we can dismiss such claims. Additionally, even if Ignatius made use of the letter, this does not confirm the letter's authenticity and likewise depends on how we would even date Ignatius' letter corpus to begin with (assuming they are authentic, which some have challenged)³⁸. In reality, the first secure refer-

briefe ohne Paulus? 336; PRICE, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle*, 503. Some have tried to unconvincingly eschew the similarities between these letters, e.g., FITZMYER, *The Letter to Philemon*, 20-23; KNOX, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul*, 16-18; SEESEN-GOOD, *Philemon*, 61-62.

³² KNOX, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul*, 51-52.

³³ CAMPBELL, *Framing Paul*, 339-403.

³⁴ Though again, this does not immediately mean the letter should be regarded as inauthentic. For a detailed reflection on the issues related to structure and genre, see HERZER, "Narration, Genre, and Pseudonymity," who contends 2 Timothy and Titus could be interpreted as authentic.

³⁵ FITZMYER, *The Letter to Philemon*, 8-9.

³⁶ CRÜSEMANN, *The Pseudepigraphical Letters to the Thessalonians*, 248. Cf. PRICE, *Holy Fable III*, 152.

³⁷ KNOX, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul*, 85-87.

³⁸ For instance, Knox contends that Ignatius' and Paul's greetings overlap in the letters, but the overlaps could be due to several letters, including Colossians and Ephesians (the former of which would also give him the name of Onesimus). The only argument Knox offers which has any force, in my view, is to note that both Ig-

ence to Philemon in any text is Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.21, at which point Tertullian claims it was in the Marcionite *Apostolikon* in his own day. Problematically, Tertullian claims it was without alteration by Marcion, while Epiphanius (*Panarion* 42.12.1) claims that it had been textually mutilated by the heretic. As a result, we may have to acknowledge that Marcion's Philemon may have looked quite different from our own as well³⁹. Firm conclusions simply cannot be drawn on the basis of this mention.

These are, generally, the only arguments which have been afforded in Philemon's favor in recent years. As seen above, all such arguments are particularly weak on closer inspection. The language, vocabulary, and style of Philemon is (1) too small in sample size to make much of, or (2) there are numerous caveats to even using these as a metric for determining authenticity (in any direction) as Van Nes and others have argued, and (3) even if we accepted style and such as having value in this case, it is not uniformly "Pauline" in my view. Likewise, Philemon fails to align with the general structure and habits of Paul's other supposedly authentic letters and has its closest similarities in both language and structure to letters of potentially dubious origins. As a result, it seems apparent that if these are the best arguments in favor of the letter's authenticity, then perhaps we should seriously reevaluate the consensus that has formed on this topic. This is not a consensus built on firm footing.

3. Additional Arguments Against Authenticity

There are several additional arguments against the authenticity of Philemon, though only a few can be very briefly discussed here. Firstly, we should note that the setting almost seems strenuous and unbelievable. Ancient Roman imprisonment meant dire and horrific circumstances where

natus and "Paul" make puns with Onesimus' name. Notably, however, they do so rather differently. What really casts a shadow on Knox's argument is that while Ignatius spends a lot of time attempting to make sure the congregations respect the bishop Onesimus, it is completely strange to the point of absurd that Ignatius would not attempt boosting Onesimus' credibility by noting his conversion and acquaintance with the apostle Paul himself, if Ignatius was in fact using this letter. As PRICE, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle*, 504 (per Stephen Huller) notes, this letter would give a lot more force for Onesimus' credibility due to Pauline association. So why not make that association clear? Knox's arguments, as a result, do not convince.

³⁹ This is only further made worse by the exceptionally weak attestation of Philemon in our textual history, with there being no complete copy of the letter found until Sinaiticus, and only fragmentary quotations in Origen.

prisoners were encouraged to betray each other for better treatment, where letters and other writings were frequently intercepted and read, and even worse it often seems to be the case that prisoners were not routinely fed (this was often left to loved ones)⁴⁰. Paul, identifying himself in the introduction as a prisoner, writing a letter which on the surface appears to have some copying at play from other letters (see above), and additionally names his co-conspirators in Christ, is (as far as I am aware) unprecedented among any other known prison letters. Why would Paul name fellow Christians when he would be in danger and ancient letters were often intercepted to track down conspirators? Additionally, where would he have kept other copies of his letters he is using to aid in modelling this one? And where would he get the surplus of money to even acquire the writing materials (which were far from cheap)? Why does the author of Philemon, sitting in a Roman prison (supposedly), just presume he will be walking down to Philemon's house soon and needs a guestroom (Flm 22) when in Philippians he anticipates death in Roman prisons (vv. 18-26)? Paley also notes that slaves typically converted with their masters and the idea of Onesimus converting outside the household (as Flm 8-11 suggests) would be almost entirely exceptional in this regard⁴¹. And many scholars also take the conversion as indicating baptism⁴², but how would that even be possible in a prison?

These all seem to be, at best, only strenuously answerable on the assumption of authenticity. All of this, however, is more explicable if we re-contextualize Philemon as being among the rather widespread tradition of fabricating prison letters in Paul's name⁴³. Christians were intensely interested in presenting Paul as having suffered and been imprisoned for his beliefs and as noted above, fabricated several letters in his name which utilize

⁴⁰ NEUTEL – SMIT, "Paul, Imprisonment and Crisis"; STRANDHARTINGER, "Letter from Prison as Hidden Transcript".

⁴¹ PALEY, "Questioning the Pauline Authorship of Philemon", 19.

⁴² E.g., OSIEK, *Philippians and Philemon*, 139; FITZMYER, *The Letter to Philemon*, 108-109.

⁴³ Colossians; Ephesians; 1 and 2 Timothy; Titus; 3 Corinthians. This imprisonment motif, as a result, is baked into early Christian mythos. Notably, fabricating prison letters was not a uniquely Christian trait either. PHILOSTRATUS, *Life of Apollonius* 4.46 likewise has several fabricated letters supposedly between Apollonius and Musonius Rufus, writing from prison. Essentially, creating fictional letters that utilize a prison scene was fairly common as a Greco-Roman *typescene*. Notably, none of the supposedly "authentic" Pauline letters are written from a prison. The term *praitōrion* (Flp 1:13) refers to the place of judgment, not the prison (STRANDHARTINGER, "Letter from Prison as Hidden Transcript", 117), which is where Paul claims to be writing from. As a result, there are no letters actually from a prison cell in the authentic corpus.

the *typescene* of a prison to emphasize this⁴⁴. As a result, these problems are easily explained as a result of the favorite piece of scenery for forgeries. In my view, there are enough peculiarities that the setting of the letter causes suspicion. Note that this is also majorly in contrast to Philippians, which *does* engage cautious language to hide relations, depicts the horror of the prison (including a lack of funding, needing food, expectations of death, and more)⁴⁵.

Another is the topic. The letter very clearly is concerned with the issues of master-slave relations in early (nascent) Christian circles, but this is not a feature which comes up in any of the authentic Pauline epistles⁴⁶. This is simply not something which seems to have concerned Paul, and, as Boer and Petterson have persuasively argued, Paul's own writing indicates his usage of slave labor in the production of his authentic letters at least⁴⁷. Thus, there is not present in the uncontested authentic corpus (aside from Philemon, the current challenged object of this exercise) a concern over the management of slaves. This, however, is not the context of the later first century CE and the second century CE, when slave-master relations were of a much greater concern leading to numerous remarks in deuterio-Pauline letters⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ 1 Clement 5.5-6 has a clearly unhistorical tradition of Paul being imprisoned exactly seven times (evidently meant to correspond with the frequent use of "seven" throughout the early chapters of 1 Clement). Cyprian, *Epistle* 5.2 and Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 9 also mention the imprisonments and "sufferings" of Paul. See also Peter of Alexandria, *Canonical Epistle* 9-10, 12, 13.

⁴⁵ STANDHARTINGER, "Letter from Prison as Hidden Transcript".

⁴⁶ Some may aver with 1 Cor 7:21-24, but in my view (and those others) this would be a misreading of the passage. The passage does not attempt to encourage slaves to change their earthly status and seek earthly freedom, but a spiritual freedom. To the contrary, the letter context seems to enforce the notion that people should stay in the social context which God assigned them, see LIM, "'Remain in the Calling in Which You Were Called' (1 Cor 7:20)". Likewise, in Galatians the use of "slavery" is metaphorical and is not talking of material slavery. Likewise, Romans 6:15-23 uses slavery simply as a metaphor, again, for the enslavement of sin. If one insists on seeing 1 Cor 7:21-24 as indicating Paul wished for the freedom of slaves materially, then Philemon directly contradicts this, as Paul does not anywhere demand freedom for Onesimus and, in fact, returns him to his master not under the condition that Philemon free Onesimus, but instead that Philemon simply treat him as a brother in Christ. This notion is fairly Stoic, cf. Epictetus, *Discourse* 1.13; Seneca, *Ep.* 42. Regardless, as AUNE, "The Problem of Equality in the Church and Society", 174 notes, "no one, pagan or Christian, advocated the abolition of slavery" in the ancient world. The idea that Paul could easily suggest manumission is strenuous as GREEN, "Paul's Letter to Philemon" has demonstrated.

⁴⁷ BOER and PETTERSON, "Hand of the Master".

⁴⁸ Col 3:22-4:1; Ef 6:5-9; 1 Tm 1:8-10 (who lists slave traders among those of evildoers) and 6:1-2 who orders slaves to respect their masters and for masters to

A third potential reason for suspicion is that the letter evidently did not enjoy universal assent even in the early church. The earliest extant Pauline letter collection, *P. Chester Beatty II* (P⁴⁶), in fact does not contain Philemon and neither did Codex Vaticanus⁴⁹. Notably, the Syrian church abandoned the authenticity of the letter⁵⁰. Doubts about both its authenticity and utility were widespread enough that John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Theodore of Mopsuestia saw fit to respond and affirm the authenticity of the letter against its detractors who declared Paul did not write the epistle⁵¹. In fact, doubts about its authenticity would explain why even when talking of slavery and Philemon would be instructive, Christians from the first two centuries made no mention of this letter, despite regularly requiring issues of slave relations to be resolved⁵².

These reasons (combined with the problematic structure, linguistics, and closer relationship to deutero-Pauline letters which have been discussed above) I believe give us plenty of room to more seriously entertain questions about Philemon's authenticity. Caution about its authenticity should be far more widely exhibited, at the very least.

respect their slaves; Tit 2:9-10 which instructs slaves to subject themselves always to their masters. See also, Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 2.12.4; Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp* 4.3, 6.2; *Didache* 4.9-11; *1 Clement* 61.1-4.

⁴⁹ TROBISCH, *Paul's Letter Collection*, 20-21; LAIRD, *The Pauline Corpus in Early Christianity*, 319. For dating issues with *P. Chester Beatty II*, see NONGBRI, *God's Library*, 145.

⁵⁰ TAMEZ et al., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 201; LOHSE, *A Commentary*, 188.

⁵¹ DECOCK, "The Reception of the Letter to Philemon in the Early Church", 277; HEINE, "In Search of Origen's Commentary on Philemon", 120; FITZMYER, *The Letter to Philemon*, 8. GALLAGHER-MEADE, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity*, 41 additionally note that Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria never mention Philemon's existence either, though they largely think that Philemon's presence throughout numerous other canon lists establishes its early acceptance. The Pauline corpus and the formation of the Pauline canon is thoroughly discussed in entries in PORTER (ed.), *The Pauline Canon*. All entries there accept its authenticity, PORTER (ed.), *The Pauline Canon*, 33-34, 56, 72, 81, 119, 132-133, 137, 152, 170, 206.

⁵² The only Pauline letters which mention slave-master relations are disputed (Col 3:22-4:1; Eph 6:5-9; 1 Tim 6:1-2). Meanwhile, early Christians would certainly have used these letters to help resolve tensions if they knew of them, see Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 2.12.4; Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp* 4.3, 6.2; *Didache* 4.9-11; *1 Clement* 61.1-4. Despite this, none of them mention Philemon at all. Philemon is not quoted until the time of Origen.

4. Philemon as Forgery

Fitzmyer pointedly remarks that it is, “[...] difficult to imagine why a pseudepigrapher of later date would want to concoct such a letter and pass it off as written by Paul of Tarsus”⁵³. On the surface, this contention could, in fact, be the undoing for any argument against the authenticity of Philemon. If one cannot come up with a scenario (or multiple) as to why such a letter would be fabricated, it seems inherently unreasonable to suspect it of being a fabrication. However, one should note the logical limitations of such an argument from the outset. That we modern academics cannot imagine a reason why a certain document X might be forged does not mean that it was not. It may simply be more illustrative of our own lack of imagination or ability to comprehend all the available contexts from which forgeries could arise (or that forgeries could be made for simple and sometimes unremarkable reasons). However, Fitzmyer’s point is well taken and does deserve an answer, for which a number are possible. I will not argue here that any of these are probable. Merely, these serve as an illustration that, no, it is not difficult to imagine such a scenario where Philemon was forged if a scholar is actually willing to explore the possibility.

Steck (followed by Van Manen and Price particularly) considered it rather probable that Philemon was potentially fabricated to create a Christian imitation of Pliny the Younger’s *Ep.* 9.21, 24⁵⁴. There are numerous similarities between the two, and the possibility of other Plinian intertextuality in the New Testament could also incline one more toward this view⁵⁵. Going further, Robert M. Price, influenced by the work of Stephan Huller, argues that it may be possible that the letter utilizes Pliny’s as a base and is then concocted with Onesimus to validate and authorize the bishop Onesimus mentioned in Ignatius’ *Letter to the Ephesians*⁵⁶. This of course is hinged on whether or not we can identify the two Onesimus characters as the same person, however, and several scholars have been inclined to disregard the

⁵³ FITZMYER, *The Letter to Philemon*, 8.

⁵⁴ STECK, “Plinius im Neuen Testament”, 570-584; VAN MANEN, *A Wave of Hypercriticism*, 145-146, 149-150; PRICE, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle*, 503.

⁵⁵ BILBY, “Pliny’s Correspondence and the Acts of the Apostles”.

⁵⁶ PRICE, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle*, 503-504.

arguments of Goodspeed and Knox on various grounds⁵⁷. Regardless, this is a distinctly possible scenario, even if rather unlikely⁵⁸.

F. C. Baur, by contrast, contended that the letter may have been constructed for several reasons⁵⁹. Firstly, it is a prime example to display and extol the character of Paul. Secondly, the letter clearly demonstrates, to Baur, a theological point that Christianity is a faith meant to be founded on eternal reconciliation, thus the master and slave are reconciled *forever* (Flm 15), just as we are to be forever reconciled to God in our liberation from the slavery of sin. In this way, the letter may in fact be taken as somewhat allegorical. This has some similarities to Thomas L. Brodie's own thesis which reads it as an allegorical play on the Philippians hymn⁶⁰. Regardless, for Baur, as a result, this means that the letter is a showcase in the performance of Col 4:6 which instructs Christians to always engage in conversation in a levelheaded and scrupulous manner.

Another reason would be more complicated, but also draws Philemon more in alignment with other potential forgeries in the Pauline corpus (particularly Colossians and Ephesians). Specifically, as noted above, early on there was a relative dearth of instruction on how slaves and masters should behave toward each other in early Christianity. Discussion and instruction on slavery was a clear issue growing in the second century CE and so provides a good context for the letter's origination⁶¹. This lack of instruction

⁵⁷ FITZMYER, *The Letter to Philemon*, 14-17.

⁵⁸ It could be argued that Steck's entire thesis hinges on parallelomania, see SANDMEL, "Parallelomania." For discussion on the reception and nature of plagiarism in the ancient world, see BAUM, "Authorship and Pseudepigraphy in Early Christian Literature," as well as additional entries in PORTER-FEWSTER (eds.), *Paul and Pseudepigraphy* (particularly 197-285). Notably, several academics reject the supposed similarities between Philemon and Pliny, see FITZMYER, *The Letter to Philemon*, 20-23; KNOX, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul*, 16-18; SEESGOOD, *Philemon*, 61-62; CALAHAN, *Embassy of Onesimus*, 7-8.

⁵⁹ BAUR, *Paul*, 305-308.

⁶⁰ BRODIE, *The Birthing of the New Testament*, 586 who writes, "The letter to Philemon seems supremely occasional but it has a curious relationship to other epistles, especially Philippians, and particularly to the hymn on self-giving or self-emptying (Fil 2.1-13). Paul's sending of the beloved Onesimus is like a giving of his own body ["he is my heart," Flm 12], and the change of status from slave to beloved brother is like the exaltation of Onesimus (Flm 15-16). What happened to Christ is being applied to a specific life".

⁶¹ For text examples, see JUSTIN MARTYR, *First Apology* 2.12.4; IGNATIUS, *Letter to Polycarp* 4.3, 6.2; *Didache* 4.9-11; 1 *Clement* 61.1-4. CAMPBELL, *Framing Paul*, 259-260 floats this as a possibility, though only as a hypothetical and ends up affirming the authenticity of Philemon (though without much justification).

would, of course, demand an answer. In my view, we could see Philemon and Colossians (and possibly Ephesians) as likely arising out of the same writing sphere. Recent stylometric analysis on Colossians and Ephesians has indicated it very likely that they were written by the same hand⁶². Even those affirming the letter's authenticity contend that Philemon and Colossians probably circulated codependently⁶³. As noted above, Philemon as this small and out of the way letter would likewise have a lot of trouble being accepted simply on its own⁶⁴. Therefore, if we propose it was written by the same hand that composed Colossians (and maybe Ephesians), then in this three-letter corpus we can see Philemon as a practical instructional expansion of Col 3:22-4:1 (and possibly Ef 6:5-9)⁶⁵. Here, the purpose of Philemon was specifically to give instruction on how to reconcile slaves and masters. The situation that Onesimus and Philemon are in is purposefully left vague to make it widely applicable to various situations and provide a general manual for how masters should receive their slaves when a rift has formed between the two. This also does have the added benefit of actually clarifying the letter and its purpose, in contrast to those who have argued for authenticity and, thus, languished in attempting to discover the crime of Onesimus (or Philemon) and the muddled context behind the letter. In the case of inauthenticity, the context does not matter. Onesimus' wrongdoing is able to be a projection on the part of the (slave-owning) reader, and "Paul's" response serves as a stock default for how master's will approach the issue, Paul being their example. Certainly, this is also potentially compatible with other previous arguments (i.e., that it was modeled off of Pliny, though I am more skeptical of this). Where do many of these ideas on the treatment of slaves arise from?

Early Christianity, especially from the second century CE onward, was certainly familiar with Stoicism. Comparing this to some early Stoic texts may be fruitful then in this regard. Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.13 writes:

Now when someone asked him how it is possible to eat acceptably to the gods, he said, If it is done justly and graciously and fairly and restrainedly and decently, is it not also done acceptably to the gods? And when you have asked for warm water and the slave does not heed you; or if he does heed you but brings in tepid water; or if he is not even to be found in the house, then to refrain from anger and not to explode, is not this acceptable to the

⁶² SAVOY, "Authorship of Pauline Epistles Revisited".

⁶³ CAMPBELL, *Framing Paul*, 259-260 and JOHNSON, *Constructing Paul*, 249-271.

⁶⁴ JOHNSON, *Constructing Paul*, 249-271.

⁶⁵ VAN MANEN, *A Wave of Hypercriticism*, 150.

gods? –How, then, can a man bear with such persons? –Slave, will you not bear with your own brother, who has Zeus as his progenitor and is, as it were, a son born of the same seed as yourself and of the same sowing from above; but if you have been stationed in a like position above others, will you forthwith set yourself up as a tyrant? Do you not remember that you are, and over whom you rule –that they are kinsmen, that they are brothers by nature, that they are offspring of Zeus? –But I have a deed of sale for them, and they have none for me. –Do you see whither you bend your gaze, that it is to the earth, that it is to the pit, that it is to these wretched laws of ours, the laws of the dead, and that it is not to the laws of the gods that you look?⁶⁶

This is a supremely interesting passage as this closely parallels Philemon (vv. 15-16), where Paul instructs Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ, similarly to how Epictetus implores the relation of the slave and the master through their common spiritual father, Zeus⁶⁷. Flm 15-16 says (translation mine):

Perhaps because of this he was separated from you for a time so that you might have him eternally, no longer as a slave but greater than a slave, a beloved brother. He is very precious to me, however how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Additionally, we can find similar statements, in fact even more extensive, in Seneca, *Ep.* 42, which treat slaves far more akin to familial figures:

I am glad to learn, through those who come from you, that you live on friendly terms with your slaves. This befits a sensible and well-educated man like yourself. "They are slaves," people declare. Nay, rather they are men. "Slaves!" No, comrades. "Slaves!" No, they are unpretentious friends. "Slaves!" No, they are our fellow-slaves, if one reflects that Fortune has equal rights over slaves and free men alike. That is why I smile at those who think it degrading for a man to dine with his slave. But why should they think it degrading?⁶⁸

As such, we can propose a scenario here. In a later Christian context, where slavery was becoming more prevalent as the faith gained more elite members who, in turn, owned slaves, there became a necessity to address the issue on how to treat slaves and rectify situations where a rift between master and slave had formed. This was tackled in the production of Philemon as an accompanying commentary and expansion on other letters, and which was steeped in Stoic philosophy on the treatment of slaves. To argue that this was far too little a reason to forge the letter seems specious. Chris-

⁶⁶ Translation from EPICTETUS, *Discourses Books 1-2*, 97-99.

⁶⁷ AUNE, "The Problem of Equality in the Church and Society", 173.

⁶⁸ Translation from SENECA, *Epistles 1-65*, 301-303.

tians certainly ended up gaining much utility from its instruction on slavery, in fact, as the various commentaries attest (even in spite of those who protested it)⁶⁹. In this case, Paul is meant to act as an archetypal master. Calm, collected, and extending compassion to a slave who had formed a rift with his master. The letter, as a forgery, can be read as a blank slate, where any crime the slave has committed can be imprinted by the reader. Paul serves as the benchmark for how to resolve any insertable rift that has formed between the master and their slave⁷⁰. Thus, it serves as a useful tool in addressing these specific concerns.

Given the specificity of the forgery and its context, this would explain multiple issues: (1) why Philemon is never quoted by scribes who were familiar with other Pauline letters and also having difficulties with slave management in the second century (explanation being that it was forged in this century and was thus in early circulation); (2) it then explains later protests against its apparent lack of utility. As it was addressing specific situations in the second century, its usage and apparent utility waned in other early Christian circles. It lastly resolves nicely the issues of Onesimus' "wronging" of Philemon, and other ambiguities in the text as well, if they are read for basic instruction (particular issues being projectible by the reader).

As such, there are certainly some very plausible scenarios for why this letter may have been forged, which are not all mutually exclusive either (meaning they could compound). This does not make any particular one probable just because it is possible, but it does disavow the common argument that such a forgery scenario is unimaginable or impossible per Fitzmyer. To the contrary, forgers have done their business for far less motivation than the stakes described above⁷¹. This is not to say any of these specific scenarios did happen, or that Philemon *is* a forgery⁷². However, the contention that there is no readily conceivable scenario why Philemon would be

⁶⁹ AMBROSIASTER, *Commentary on Philemon*, for instance finds numerous elements of use and persuasion in the letter (for instance, seeing v. 17 as essentially meaning to frighten Philemon into accepting Onesimus back into service). Likewise, JEROME, *Commentary on Philemon* attests to just how much use Christians could get out of this letter, especially on the matter of slavery. The letter, in fact, would find a rather comfortable home among slave-owners well into the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and be used with rather horrifying effect as a result.

⁷⁰ A notable part of which is that the slave will return to being useful (Flm 11).

⁷¹ Salvian's *Ad ecclesiam* was forged simply to address problems in a single congregation, for instance.

⁷² This issue will be addressed in more depth in my forthcoming volume on the matter.

forged is, simply, without merit. It reflects more a lack of imagination or willingness to entertain challenges to the letter, than a genuine lack of any imaginable scenarios.

5. Concluding Thoughts

In this article, I have endeavored to show that contemporary arguments which have been put in favor of the authenticity of Philemon are defective. These only supplement further comments from Justin Paley's recent evaluation⁷³, who notes numerous double-standards that have been at play in evaluating the authenticity of Philemon in comparison to other letters, like the Pastorals, as well.

In this article, it has been shown that the language of Philemon cannot be accurately construed as "authentic" Pauline style in accordance with the other six generally accepted epistles. To the contrary, it is quite arguable that numerous stylistic issues pervade the letter. However, even if we take note of the opinions of Campbell, Beale, Mealand, and Neumann (among others) that the sample size is far too small to make any proclamations, or that style is not an accurate indicator of authenticity, then we are left with much the same result, i.e., the language and style of Philemon cannot be said to be authentically Pauline. This neither proves nor disproves Pauline authorship, but it demonstrates that a typical argument in favor of Philemon's authenticity is baseless.

Similarly, numerous other problems arose in the construction of the letter and its narrative. The structure and contents of the letter are atypical of the other Pauline epistles but bear much closer resemblance to the supposedly deutero-Pauline epistles. Likewise, the internal contents often do not seem to make much historical sense if written by a man suffering from imprisonment (how does Paul baptize a slave in jail, and how is it even plausible that Onesimus happened to find him there?). This contrasts with the commonly accepted Philippians, which engages in cautious and euphemistic language owing to Paul's arrest and likely impending trial and demonstrates clearly the deprivation and oppression inherent to Roman imprisonment. Additionally, it was even shown that there was not universal acceptance of the letter in early Christianity, and it is even absent in some codices collecting Paul's letters. Lastly, the contention that there is no imaginable scenario where Philemon was forged is faulty, as there are some readily avail-

⁷³ PALEY, "Questioning the Pauline Authorship of Philemon".

able scenarios previous critics offered which scholars have simply ignored or brushed off.

In general, then, we can contend that the consensus position should no longer be upheld uncritically. It is past time that academics in New Testament studies stopped taking the seven generally accepted letters for granted and instead defended their authenticity thoroughly. Contra Campbell, authenticity is not a default position which we should assume until proven otherwise⁷⁴. This claim is logically questionable for multiple reasons. It treats the issue as a binary discussion, either Philemon is authentic or inauthentic. While this is seemingly true, this ignores states of knowledge claims, for which there is always a third available position: that we simply cannot make a judgment with regard to authenticity. While an object itself may be authentic or inauthentic, as a matter of its “true” origins, scholars do not have access to this directly (we do not have the autograph of Philemon, nor of any of the New Testament documents, which can demonstrate their clear origins to us). We only have our individual knowledge and ability to make judgments on these objects, for which there are at least three available positions on issues of authenticity: (1) we either say it is authentic, (2) inauthentic, or (3) that we have not or cannot determine its authenticity in any direction. This effectively means that disproving one side of a debate does not inherently mean the other side is correct (e.g., if I disprove arguments that 2 Thessalonians is inauthentic, this does not therefore mean it is actually authentic, that position has yet to be justified). All sides which make a claim carry a burden of proof to validate that claim⁷⁵. Negative arguments against the *other* side do not equate to positive arguments for your side.

As such, even if one takes issue with the arguments above, that does not therefore mean that Philemon’s authenticity has been established. One must formulate a positive case for Philemon’s authenticity, and not simply argue the negative. As such, I contend that the consensus on the authenticity of Philemon has not been established convincingly.

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⁷⁵ WALKER, *Interpolations in the Pauline Letters*, 57-58

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