

# Paul's exercise of authority in the Letter to Philemon: A perspective from the 4th and 5th centuries CE



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The way in which Paul exercises his authority in the Letter to Philemon has been studied from various angles, but as far as could be determined, the reception of this aspect of his letter by its interpreters in the fourth and 5th centuries CE. has not yet received much attention. Accordingly, this aspect is addressed in this study. The views of the following six interpreters are discussed (in chronological order): Ambrosiaster, Jerome, Pelagius, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret of Cyrus. It is shown that each of them has his own view in this regard, but that two general trends can nevertheless be identified: Firstly, all of these writers accept that Paul had authority over Philemon; and secondly, the commendable way in which Paul exercised this authority is a regular theme in their works.

## Introduction

The way in which authority is exercised in Paul's Letter to Philemon has already been investigated from various angles. I refer to three examples in this regard:

More than 30 years ago, Bengt Holmberg (1980:84–85) already noted the following:

Paul could indeed give Philemon orders concerning his slave Onesimus, who is Philemon's property. But Paul purposely uses a lesser normative force than that available to him, probably because he wants to preserve the personal, 'father-son' character of the relationship with Philemon. This choice is an important indication that Paul may be able to choose between different degrees of normative force when manifesting his will, and that he does not necessarily use the maximum available degree.

About 20 years later, Sandra Polaski (1999:199) came to the following conclusion about the same matter:

Attending carefully to the complex power relations which animate this text makes the reader aware that Paul apparently understands himself to have broad-ranking authority. Significantly, though, the reader sees not only what power Paul implies is theoretically his, but also what he virtually exercises, and the grounds on which that power is based. By virtue of his physical and social location, as well as the nature of his message, the relations of power in which Paul participates are complex, both wide in latitude and significantly constrained, both individually internalised and enforced by the surveillance of the community.

And, some years later, Efrain Agosto (2005:119) pointed out:

This letter, short as it is, reflects many elements of the complex nature that is in Paul's leadership. He praises leaders, in this case both Onesimus and Philemon, for their service to the saints and to Paul. He shows his dependence on them – Philemon in the local congregation, Onesimus directly with Paul during the latter's imprisonment. Subtly at first, but very directly by the end of the letter, Paul shows how he sees his leadership over the church as wide-ranging. He can exact compliance with theological truth (e.g., Galatians) as well as moral behaviour (1 Cor 5–7), and even with such apparently 'mundane' matters as the status of a slave (Philemon).

The aim of this study is not to offer my own discussion of the way in which authority functions in the Letter to Philemon; this would merely comprise more of the same. Instead, I will focus on an issue that, as far as I am aware, has not received much attention, namely how interpreters of this letter in the 4th and 5th centuries CE. viewed Paul's use of authority in the letter. Of course, their primary aim was not to discuss this particular issue; they focused on the implications that they thought the letter had for Christians of their own times. Nevertheless, one can still obtain a clear

**Note:** It is a privilege to dedicate this study to Fika Janse van Rensburg, a colleague and a friend. I have known him for many years, and it has been an enriching experience! I respect him greatly, not only for his academic contributions, but also for the wonderful way in which he interacts with other people. This study is a revised version of a paper read at the international conference of the Society of Biblical Literature in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on 23 July 2015, and in the light of the exemplary way in which Fika has always exercised his powers in the many offices that he has held and still holds, I have decided to dedicate this study on Paul's authority in the Letter to Philemon to him.

idea of the way in which they understood Paul's use of authority and the power relations portrayed in this letter; and it is on this issue that this study will focus. I will discuss the six scholars whose interpretations of the letter are still extant, in chronological order.

## Ambrosiaster

The oldest extant commentary on the Letter to Philemon is that of an author whose name is unknown to us, but who was later called 'Ambrosiaster'. His commentary on the Pauline Letters was probably composed in Rome, between the years 366 and 384 CE.<sup>1</sup>

The most striking feature of the way in which Ambrosiaster interprets Paul's authority in the Letter to Philemon is the fact that he views it in a strictly hierarchical way. As Hunter (2009:14–21) shows in his evaluation of Ambrosiaster's contribution, Ambrosiaster was a 'church man'; and the nature of the authority of bishops, presbyters and deacons was a hotly debated issue in his time. It is therefore not surprising that his reception of the Letter to Philemon tended to focus on the hierarchical relationship between Paul and Philemon. For example, in Ambrosiaster's discussion of the setting of the letter, he explicitly points out that Philemon was not ordained to any church office; according to Ambrosiaster, Philemon was a praiseworthy man and one of the lay people (*in Philm. arg.*, 337.4–5)<sup>2</sup>. In his exposition of verses 1–3 he again mentions that Philemon was not one of the clergy (*in Philm.* 1–3, 337.17–338.1). On the other hand, he points out that Paul was an apostle, thus having the apostolic authority to 'command' Philemon, who was his disciple (*in Philm.* 8–9, 338.29–339.1). In his explanation of verses 10–14, Ambrosiaster again refers to Paul's right to command Philemon (*in Philm.* 10–14, 339.20). Earlier on, in Ambrosiaster's interpretation of verse 7, a similar emphasis on hierarchy may be seen. In verse 7 Paul expresses his joy regarding the fact that Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the saints. According to Ambrosiaster, the reason for Paul's joy is that he was certain that Philemon would obey his requests as outlined in the letter, because he (Paul) was 'superior' to the people whose hearts Philemon had refreshed (*in Philm.* 1–7, 338.24). Apart from this, Philemon was also in debt to Paul. Linking up to what Paul writes in this regard in verse 19b, Ambrosiaster stresses that, as a result of this indebtedness, Philemon was constrained to oblige Paul by taking Onesimus back (*in Philm.* 19, 341.9–10).

Ambrosiaster also points out that Paul did not need to use his apostolic authority in this letter in order to force Philemon to consent to his wishes, because Philemon was a good man; and therefore, an appeal was enough for Paul (*in Philm.* 8–9, 339.1). Furthermore, Philemon was fond of Paul and would thus have been willing to comply (*in Philm.* 8–9, 339.2).

1. For good discussions of Ambrosiaster's contribution, see Kannengiesser (2006:1081–7) and Hunter (2009:1–26).

2. I have used the text of Vogels (1968), citing the verse number in the Letter to Philemon, followed by the page and line numbers according to Vogel's text. For an English translation of Ambrosiaster's commentary on the Letter to Philemon, see Bray (2009).

Ambrosiaster adds that Philemon was about the same age as Paul and also, like Paul, a prisoner of Christ, and that he would therefore be eager to do what the Lord required of him (*in Philm.* 8–9, 338.27–28).<sup>3</sup>

Another interesting aspect of Ambrosiaster's interpretation of the way in which Paul uses his authority in this letter is the place that he assigns to Onesimus in terms of the hierarchy that is so important to him (Ambrosiaster). In terms of this hierarchical structure, Onesimus would be at the bottom, that is, Paul (apostle) would take first place – followed by Philemon (Paul's disciple) – followed by Onesimus (Philemon's slave). However, interestingly enough, Ambrosiaster also points out that Paul calls Onesimus his 'brother' and 'son', which, according to Ambrosiaster, implies that Onesimus has thus become Paul's equal. In other words, he has been promoted from the bottom of the hierarchy to the top. Because Paul was Philemon's senior, this implied that Onesimus had also become Philemon's senior. As Ambrosiaster puts it: '... as he was now not only equal to his master in merit, but also the brother of his teacher' (*in Philm.* 15–16, 340.8–9). Paul's request that Philemon should receive Onesimus as he would have received Paul is even linked to the saying of 'Solomon' in Sirach 10:25 that free people (in this instance, Philemon) would serve a wise slave (in this instance, Onesimus) (*in Philm.* 17, 340.16–22).

Ambrosiaster does not explain what the practical implications of Philemon's 'serving a wise slave' might have been; but it may be assumed that, if Ambrosiaster was right, such a situation would have placed great pressure on Philemon. Therefore, it is not surprising that one can also discern indications in Ambrosiaster's commentary, that he may have been of the opinion that Philemon might have found it difficult to comply with Paul's request. Some examples in this regard: In his explanation of verses 15–16, he points out that masters sometimes had an arrogant attitude towards their slaves, and argues that Paul refers to Onesimus as his brother in order to prevent Philemon from taking up such an attitude (*in Philm.* 15–16, 340.7–12); and in his discussion of verse 18 he states that Paul's purpose in this verse is to remove any excuse for anger that Philemon might have believed he had (*in Philm.* 18, 340.24–25). He also stresses several times that Paul deliberately tries to induce Philemon to be obedient, for example, by mentioning his intention to visit him (*in Philm.* 22, 341.21–22). The point is that, according to Ambrosiaster, the possible impact that Onesimus' (new) relationship to Paul might have had on the structures of authority between Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus might have been disconcerting to Philemon.

3. This explanation may seem strange to modern readers, because we are used to the Greek text of the letter, according to which Paul refers to himself in v. 9 (... τοιοῦτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτερος νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ [... as I, Paul, an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus]); but it should be noted that Ambrosiaster used a version of the Vetus Latina according to which these words referred to Philemon and not to Paul: *cum talis sis* ... [since you are the same kind of person...] (*in Philm.* 8–9, 339.27–28). All the other manuscripts of the Vetus Latina also read *sis* [you are], with some differences in word order (see Frede 1983:981). The translation in the Vulgate is wrong, too (*cum sis talis* ... [since you are the same kind of person...]). As Barth and Blanke (2000:320) rightfully point out, the correct Latin translation would have been *cum sim talis* ... [since I am such a person ...].

## Jerome

Jerome penned his interpretation of the Letter to Philemon between 386 and 388 CE., shortly after he moved to Bethlehem. It was the first of his four works on the Pauline Letters (Friedl 2010:289–90). Jerome made use of Origen's commentary on the Letter to Philemon – to such an extent that it is usually accepted that one has access to Origen's commentary through Jerome's exposition of the letter.<sup>4</sup>

In Jerome's explanation of Paul's letter, the issue of authority is not nearly as important as in the case of Ambrosiaster's commentary. Jerome does mention it occasionally. For example, in his discussion of verses 8–9, he refers to the fact that Paul could have commanded Philemon instead of appealing to him. However, according to Jerome, Paul prefers to appeal to Philemon, thus rather emphasising his authority as an old man and as a prisoner of Jesus Christ (*in Philm.* 8–9, 94.333–335)<sup>5</sup>. Earlier on, Jerome also refers to Paul's use of the expression 'prisoner of Jesus Christ', a description that Jerome regards as something of which Paul was more proud even than of being called an apostle. Jerome refers to this as the 'authority of chains', which he then links to the sufferings of Christ – which he regards as a much better reason for boasting than wisdom, wealth, eloquence, or secular power (*in Philm.* 1–3, 83.68–84.74). In other words, even when Jerome uses the concept 'authority', he does not emphasise the same aspects as Ambrosiaster.

In general, Jerome only rarely mentions the concept 'authority'. Instead, he concentrates on other aspects that are important to him when explaining the way in which Paul, 'the admirable one',<sup>6</sup> interacts with Philemon. In this regard, Jerome stresses Paul's admirable conduct, in the sense of virtuous behaviour. Some examples: In his discussion of Paul's reference to Timothy as co-author in verse 1, he explains that this allusion to Timothy shows that Paul was not jealous in any way: If the Spirit had suggested anything to Timothy while Paul was dictating the letter, Paul would have added this to his letter without any resentment. In this way, Paul was practising what he preached, because he told the Corinthians (in 1 Cor 14:30) that if something was revealed to someone while another person was prophesying, the one who was prophesying should be silent (*in Philm.* 1–3, 86.138–149).

Further on, in his discussion of verses 10–13, Jerome stresses Paul's magnanimity, his greatness of soul, and the fact that his mind was aflame for Christ. Jerome found these qualities

4. Origen's commentary on the Letter to Philemon has unfortunately been lost. Von Harnack offers a cogent discussion of the extent to which Jerome depended on Origen; see Von Harnack (1918–19:141–6). See also the discussions of this matter by Souter (1927:100–38), Bammel (1995:187–207) and Heine (2000:117–33). Friedl (2010:289–315) offers a detailed discussion of Jerome's dissertation on the Letter to Philemon.

5. I have used the critical text of Bucchi (2003), citing the verse number in the Letter to Philemon as well as page and line numbers according to Bucchi's text. For an English translation of Jerome's interpretation of the Letter to Philemon see Scheck (2010).

6. This is Jerome's explanation of the meaning of the name 'Paul' in Hebrew, because it was 'wonderful' that 'Saul' (the word 'Saul' meaning 'desired'), who was 'desired' by the devil to persecute the church, had subsequently become a chosen vessel (*in Philm.* 1–3, 83.60–64; see also 25, 105.637). It is generally accepted that Jerome borrowed these explanations of the meaning of the proper names from Origen. See Friedl (2010:199, n. 90).

highly admirable. Paul was in prison, yet he was not overcome by grief. All that he could think of was the gospel of Christ (*in Philm.* 10–13, 95.373–377.) A little later, in his discussion of verse 18 (in which Paul asks Philemon to charge anything that Onesimus owes him to Paul's account), Jerome makes a similar observation: He calls Paul an imitator of Christ; one through whom Christ spoke. Paul did what Christ had done: Christ carried our weaknesses and suffered the blows that we deserved; in the same way, Paul 'pledged himself'<sup>7</sup> for Onesimus (*in Philm.* 18, 99.468–472).

In the last part of the letter, Jerome refers to Paul's admirable behaviour again. According to him, Paul's request for a 'lodge'<sup>8</sup> to be prepared for him (v. 22) does not imply that Paul was wealthy and that he would not have been content with one small room to stay in. He needed a big house so that he would have enough room for the great number of people who would turn up to listen to his preaching.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Paul's request for a large house was not aimed at his own advantage, but was meant to advance the gospel (*in Philm.* 22, 103.533–104.549).

Jerome also portrays Paul as one who is trying to encourage virtuous behaviour in the Letter to Philemon. In his discussion of Paul's statement that he wishes to 'have joy' in Philemon (v. 20), Jerome points out that Paul does not find joy in anyone, except in people who have many virtues working together harmoniously – the type of virtues that were found in Christ, such as wisdom, justice, continence, mildness, sobriety, and purity. Paul is pleading for these particular virtues in Philemon, so that when he has them in abundance, Paul may have joy in him (*in Philm.* 20, 100.500–505).

A last aspect that should be highlighted in terms of the way in which Jerome perceives Paul's interaction with Philemon, is what I wish to call Jerome's portrayal of Paul as an outstanding theologian. Several times, Jerome points out the accuracy of something written by Paul in the Letter to Philemon; in some cases he even highlights the accuracy of a single word chosen by Paul. Two examples: In Jerome's discussion of Paul's description of Philemon as 'loveable' (v. 1), he points out that the Greek does not have ἠγαπημένω ('beloved'), but ἀγαπητῶ ('loveable')<sup>10</sup>. According to Jerome, the former may refer to anyone, even someone who is not deserving of love, whereas the latter is only used in cases where someone deserves to be loved. Jerome then explains this distinction further by citing several examples: Our enemies are 'beloved' although they might not be 'loveable'; the title of Ps 44 (45) refers to Christ and therefore means

7. Literally, pro Onesimo se opponit [he pledged himself for Onesimus] (*in Philm.* 18, 99.472). Scheck (2010:374) translates it as 'lay himself down for Onesimus', but 'pledged himself' seems closer to the Latin.

8. As Scheck (2010:376, n. 143) points out, Jerome understood the word 'hospitium' [guest-room/lodge] as referring to an inn or separate house, and not to a guest room within Philemon's house.

9. Jerome adds other requirements for the house that Paul would need: It would have to be situated in a well-known part of the city, and not in a 'shameful' area of the city (e.g., close to the theatres); and it should be on the ground floor, rather than on the upper floor. In other words, according to Jerome, the setup had to be more or less the same as the one that Paul enjoyed in Rome (*in Philm.* 22, 103.533–104.549).

10. Jerome distinguishes between dilectus [beloved] and diligibilis [lovable] (*in Philm.* 1–3, 87.151).

'loveable'; and in the case of Isaiah 5:1, the 'loveable vine' is Christ, who deserves to be loved (*in Philm.* 1–3, 87.150–174). Jerome's point is that Paul chooses exactly the right (Greek) word when referring to Philemon. Another example: In his discussion of verses 15–16, and in particular, of Paul's statement that perhaps the reason why Onesimus was separated from Philemon for a while, was that Philemon might have him back for good, Jerome draws attention to the word 'perhaps': Paul added this word deliberately, thereby toning down his thought, because God's judgements are hidden and it is imprudent to describe something as certain, when it is actually dubious (*in Philm.* 15–16, 98.438–440). Thus, the picture presented by Jerome is one of Paul carefully selecting the appropriate word, with a view to conveying the correct theological idea. Or, to cite Jerome's own description of Paul elsewhere: Paul's words were always striving 'towards deeper things' (*in altiora; in Philm.* 6, 92.298).

## John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom did not write a commentary on the Letter to Philemon; rather, he wrote homilies. It is not known exactly when the three homilies that he wrote on the letter were composed; some scholars, for example, Quasten (1960:448–9), place them within the period of his ministry in Antioch (386–397 CE.), whereas others, for example, Kelly (1995:132–3), are of the opinion that they were written during the years of his ministry in Constantinople (397–404 CE.).

The prevailing impression of Paul that one obtains from Chrysostom's homilies is that of a skilful orator at work, utilising his authority over Philemon as a basis for a masterful piece of persuasion. This can be seen throughout Chrysostom's three homilies on this letter; but for the purposes of illustration, I will only refer to his discussion of the first verse of the letter.

According to Chrysostom, the effect of the salutation of the letter on Philemon would have been to calm him down and keep him from being shamed, and also to quench his anger. Furthermore, by referring to himself as a prisoner, Paul would make Philemon feel guilty, thereby forcing him to gain control of himself, and to realise that present things are not important. Paul also calls himself a prisoner to show that he is worthy of respect; this is done in order to obtain the favour that he wants from Philemon. Furthermore, Chrysostom elaborates on the powerful effect that this would have on any person: It would strike anyone with awe, and would even make one willing to give up one's own life; parting with one slave would not be any problem at all (*hom. in Philm.* 1–3, 328.32–329.14)<sup>11</sup>.

According to Chrysostom, Paul includes Timothy's name in the salutation because this would help to persuade Philemon, because it implies that the request does not come from one person only, but from many (*hom. in Philm.* 1–3, 329.14–16). Furthermore, Chrysostom interprets the way in which Paul

11. I have used the text of Field (1849–1862), citing verse numbers in the Letter to Philemon, followed by page and line numbers according to Field's text.

describes Philemon as a further strategy aimed at persuading him: The fact that Philemon is called 'beloved' shows that Paul's confidence that Philemon will grant his request is not presumptuous, but an indication of affection. That Philemon is also called a 'fellow-labourer' not only shows that he should feel worthy as a result of being approached about this matter, but also that he should regard it as a favour (*hom. in Philm.* 1–3, 329.16–24).

Chrysostom interprets the rest of the letter in a similar way, thus creating an image of Paul as a highly skilled orator at work. In Chrysostom's own words: 'If others obtain the things they are asking for, much more so does Paul' (*hom. in Philm.* 4–6, 335.24–25). However, we would be misunderstanding Chrysostom if we assumed that he is implying that all of this happens in bad faith. On the contrary: Chrysostom stresses throughout that Paul acts in a virtuous way in the letter and that the interaction between Paul and Philemon occurs within a relationship of love and mutual trust. Some examples in this regard: Paul is the most remarkable of men (*hom. in Philm. arg.*, 328.18–19), does not exalt himself (*hom. in Philm.* 1–3, 329.4–5), is gracious toward Philemon (*hom. in Philm.* 1–3, 329.16), is humble (*hom. in Philm.* 1–3, 329.25), is careful not to hurt Philemon (*hom. in Philm.* 8, 337.7–9), has the right to command Philemon, but chooses not to do so (*hom. in Philm.* 9, 337.19–22), creates a pleasant atmosphere in the letter (*hom. in Philm.* 17–19, 346.23), and loves Philemon (*hom. in Philm.* 17–19, 346.9; see also 22, 348.10).

## Pelagius

Pelagius's commentary on the Pauline Letters was composed between 405 and 410 CE. and was the outcome of his oral instruction of Christians in aristocratic circles in Rome (Kannengiesser 2006:1236; see also Levy 2011:24)<sup>12</sup>.

The section on the Letter to Philemon is extremely brief, even if one takes into account the brevity of the letter itself. Nevertheless, it is possible to obtain a glimpse of the way in which Pelagius perceived Paul, on the basis of his comments on this letter. From the following statement at the outset of this part of his commentary, it can be seen that Pelagius regarded Paul, the 'learned apostle' as he calls him (*in Philm. arg.*, 536.2)<sup>13</sup>, primarily as an authoritative example, in particular in terms of his *humility*. In Pelagius's own words: 'Nothing in this letter deserves more attention than noting the humility with which the disciple pleads; thereby giving us an example (*exemplum*) of how to act amongst our equals' (*in Philm. arg.*, 536.5–7)<sup>14</sup>.

The emphasis on Paul's exemplary behaviour is also found in Pelagius's exposition of the other letters in the rest of the

12. Thus, the commentary was written before the controversy about Pelagius's teachings erupted. Augustine wrote his first work against Pelagius in 412 CE. See Drobner (2008:405). Pelagius's commentary on the Pauline letters was revised twice, *inter alia* by Cassiodorus and his students, who removed what they deemed to be Pelagian errors. See De Bruyn (1993:27–8) for an overview of this issue.

13. I have used the text in Souter (1926b), and refer to page and line numbers according to Souter's text.

14. My own translation, based on the Latin text in Souter.

commentary. As Souter (1926a:69) already pointed out almost a century ago: 'The author is never weary of referring especially to the force of the Apostle's good example in the lives of his converts'. Pelagius also emphasises Paul's humility elsewhere in his commentary; for example, in his discussion of the Letter to the Romans, he mentions Paul's reference to himself as 'a slave of Christ' in Romans 1:1, and points out that Paul was thereby following the example of Christ.<sup>15</sup> In his commentary, Pelagius does not restrict Paul's exemplary behaviour to his humility. Other aspects that he mentions include Paul's willingness to suffer, his prayers, his continence, the way in which his spirit glorifies God, and the fact that he practises what he preaches (cf. Ferguson 1956:128–31 for a good discussion of this aspect). The reason that Pelagius highlights Paul's humility in the Letter to Philemon is probably linked, in particular, to Paul's remark in verses 8–9, in which he mentions that he has the confidence to command Philemon, but that he would rather make an appeal – which Pelagius views as an act motivated by Paul's love for Philemon (*in Philm.* 8, 537.13–18). If this is the case, then Pelagius portrays Paul as one who, in the Letter to Philemon, is deliberately avoiding the use of the authority that he rightfully has over Philemon, humbling himself instead, and thereby setting a praiseworthy example of how Christians should act towards one another.

## Theodore of Mopsuestia

Theodore's commentaries on Paul's letters were written late in the first and/or at the beginning of the second decade of the 5th century.<sup>16</sup> Of the six authors who are investigated in this study, Theodore of Mopsuestia provides the greatest amount of information for our purposes, not only through his depiction of Paul, but also by means of statements about authority and the way in which he believes the world to be structured.

Theodore's views may be summarised in terms of two aspects: Firstly, he places much emphasis on the structure of society as willed by God. The background to this issue seems to have been an ecclesiastical debate that was prevalent in his time regarding the question as to whether slaves who became Christians should be emancipated or not. In this debate, the Letter to Philemon and the way in which Onesimus was treated by Paul played a very important role (Fitzgerald 2010:351). Theodore was against the manumission of Christian slaves, his argument being that Paul thought it best for people to stay in their 'rank' (*ordo*), as the diversity between people was willed by God. According to Theodore, it would have been easy for God to make everyone equal; yet he chose not to do so. This applied to distinctions such as those between rich and poor, and slaves and free people. Theodore also claims that this was the reason why Paul told people to be submissive to their rulers. Paul believed that all authority came from God and that it was expected of everyone to render to each authority what was due to him

15. See the translation by De Bruyn (1993:59).

16. See Fitzgerald (2010:342–5) for a detailed discussion of this and other matters regarding the composition of Theodore's commentaries on Paul's letters.

(*in Philm. arg.*, 778.17–780.5)<sup>17</sup>. Elsewhere, Theodore points out that when it comes to true religion, women do not differ in any way from men, and that Paul accordingly pays equal respect to Philemon and Apphia in the salutation of his letter. However, Theodore then draws attention to the fact that Paul still keeps to the 'order of nature' (*ordo naturae*) by naming Philemon before Apphia (*in Philm.* 2a–b, 786.5–788.6). Elsewhere, Theodore also refers specifically to those who fulfil a role in the church (for example, presbyters and deacons) and the fact that they have been instructed by Paul how to fulfil their roles (*in Philm. arg.*, 776.1–12).

This brings us to the second aspect. Theodore refers several times to the way in which people in leadership positions in the church should use their authority. For example, he stresses that such people should do what is of benefit to the church, in the sense that their actions should benefit many people in the church (*in Philm. arg.*, 774.12–20). Furthermore, he emphasises that people in leadership positions should not order other people about; they should not act authoritatively but in a gentle way (*in Philm. arg.*, 776.22–28). For Theodore, Paul is the perfect example<sup>18</sup> in this regard. He cites Paul's behaviour in 2 Corinthians 1:24 as an illustration of how this should be done: not to act like masters, but to be fellow workers for joy (*in Philm. arg.*, 776.28–30). In the Letter to Philemon, it is Paul's humility, in particular, that is clearly discernible – more so than in any of his other letters (*in Philm. arg.*, 782.12–14). Paul is writing to one of his own disciples – according to Theodore, not even a distinguished one – and he thus has full authority and control over him, yet he does not order him about, but rather pleads with him (*in Philm. arg.*, 782.25–32). Theodore returns to this issue several times in the rest of his commentary on the Letter to Philemon. For example, the fact that Paul does not refer to himself as an apostle is interpreted by Theodore as a deliberate strategy on Paul's part to avoid creating the impression that he is using his apostolic authority to get Philemon to do what he wants him to do (*in Philm.* 1a, 784.10–15). The fact that Paul mentions Timothy as co-author in the salutation is also interpreted by Theodore as a sign of humility (*in Philm.* 1b, 784.222–24).

Thus, in the case of Theodore, we find a two-sided approach to authority: on the one hand, his insistence that structures of authority were 'natural', that is, willed by God, which meant that people should stay in their 'rank'; and, on the other hand, the emphasis on the humane and gentle way in which people in leadership positions should use their authority, with Paul's behaviour in the Letter to Philemon being put forward as a prime example of how this should be done.

## Theodoret of Cyrus

Theodoret produced the bulk of his exegetical work between 431, 447 and 448 CE. (Guinot 2006:890); and his commentary

17. I have used the text of Greer (2011), citing the verse number, followed by the page and line numbers according to Greer's text. Greer also provides an English translation.

18. Theodore's high regard for Paul can also be seen elsewhere in his commentary. Two examples in this regard: In his discussion of verse 9b, he mentions that the 'highest good' was in Paul (*summus bonus*; *in Philm.* 9b, 792.32), and in his explanation of v. 17, he refers to him as a preacher and teacher of God's true religion (*in Philm.* 17, 802.10–11.)

on the Pauline epistles was thus also composed during this time.<sup>19</sup> Compared to the commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Jerome, his commentary is quite brief, albeit not as brief as that of Pelagius.

Theodoret also accepts that Paul had authority over Philemon: Because Philemon was his disciple, he owed him the service that a disciple owes his master (*in Philm.* 13, 290.14–16)<sup>20</sup>. This aspect is mentioned only once; elsewhere, Theodoret points out the virtuous and exemplary way in which Paul – of whom he is a great admirer<sup>21</sup> – uses his authority. Three examples: In his discussion of the setting of the letter, Theodoret points out Paul's compassion, noting that he even had compassion for Onesimus, who was a runaway slave and a thief (*in Philm. arg.*, 287.14–16). Later on, in his comments on verses 8–9 (Paul's remark that he has enough confidence to command Philemon, but is rather appealing to him), Theodoret highlights Paul's humility (*in Philm.* 8–9, 289.15–19). Lastly, in his discussion of verse 10, he expresses his astonishment regarding the fact that Paul was willing to call Onesimus his son (*in Philm.* 10, 289.29–32).

## Conclusion

In the discussion above, it has become clear that each of the six interpreters whom we have investigated has his own perspective on how Paul used his authority in the Letter to Philemon. To summarise very briefly: *Ambrosiaster* accepts a threefold hierarchical structure of authority, with Onesimus being moved to Paul's level, and thus to a higher level than Philemon – a situation that might have been difficult for Philemon to accept. *Jerome* portrays Paul as a superb theologian and an admirable leader behaving in a virtuous way. For *John Chrysostom*, Paul was a masterful orator who, in persuading Philemon to do what he wanted him to do, still remained well within the boundaries of a relationship of mutual love and trust. *Pelagius* regarded Paul as an example of humility *par excellence*, to be emulated by every Christian. *Theodore of Mopsuestia* emphasised, on the one hand, that structures of authority were God-willed (people should thus stay in their 'rank' and be obedient) and, on the other hand, that people exercising authority should do so in a gentle and humane way. In the case of *Theodoret of Cyrus*, the predominant impression is that of the awe that he expresses regarding the way in which Paul exercises his authority over Philemon.

In an endeavour to identify general trends in the way in which these six interpreters viewed Paul's use of his authority, two aspects should be highlighted:

19. Scholars sometimes try to narrow the date of composition down to the mid-440s CE. (e.g., Hill 2001a:2), but this is not generally accepted. In his commentary, Theodoret depended to a large extent on the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom (Guinot 2006:893); and therefore his work is usually classified as an example of Antiochian exegesis.

20. I have used the BPEC edition by Marriott and Pusey (1870), citing page and line numbers according to this text. For English translations of Theodoret's commentary on Philemon, see Hill (2001b) and Irons *et al.* (1999:111–17).

21. Cf., for example, his comment on vv. 8–9, in which Paul refers to himself as 'Paul, an old man': 'To hear "Paul," is to hear "the preacher to the world," "the farmer of land and sea," "chosen instrument," and all the other things needing incalculable tongues to be told' (*in Philm.* 8–9, 289.21–3).

Firstly, all six interpreters accepted that Paul had authority over Philemon. For two of them, this aspect was particularly important: *Ambrosiaster* read the letter in terms of a threefold structure of authority, whereas *Theodore of Mopsuestia* emphasised that structures of authority were God-willed.

Secondly, a clearly discernible recurrent theme in the interpretation of Paul's authority pertains to the commendable way in which he exercised his authority over Philemon. This was mentioned by all six interpreters, but was particularly important to *Jerome*, *Pelagius*, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, and *Theodoret of Cyrus*. The predominant trend in this regard is the emphasis on the humble and gentle way in which Paul exercised his authority in this letter. In fact, the regularity with which this idea – and, in particular, the notion of Paul's humility – surfaces in the works of these six scholars, leaves the impression that it was this specific aspect of the way in which Paul exercised his authority in the letter that appealed most to its interpreters in the 4th and 5th centuries CE.

I trust that this investigation has shown that current studies of the way in which Paul used his authority (such as those of *Holmberg*, *Polaski*, and *Agosto*, mentioned at the beginning of this article) can be enriched and broadened by studies focusing on the way in which this aspect was interpreted by the Church Fathers. To my mind, such an approach could prove fruitful in other areas in New Testament Studies, too.

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