

Framing Your Mind, or How to Pronounce *Zmrzlina*

Supplemental Materials

As supplemental material to chapter one in the textbook, the following three sections provide something to get the exegetical blood flowing, so to speak. If exegesis is a frame of mind, then these exercises may contribute toward setting up that mindset.

Section one anticipates some of the agenda for chapter two in the textbook (§2.3), asking students to give some thought to the various categories of tools available for New Testament exegesis. Awareness of these tools will make the discussion in chapter two more meaningful.

Section two puts feet to the “big picture” diagram of the interpretive process found in figure 1.1 in the textbook. As an illustration of the overall exegetical task, it takes a small passage from the letter to Philemon and traces it through the stages that exegetes apply to most other texts in the New Testament. The demonstration will not answer every question; in fact, it will more likely raise a host of questions. But that’s exactly what it intends to do, besides giving an overview of where the textbook is taking us.

Section three, finally, offers four somewhat randomly selected examples of interpretive problems that typically confront exegetes. They, too, like the longer example presented in section two, provide a foretaste of the fascinating and multifaceted task ahead of us.

I. Basic Tools of Exegesis

A. This exercise will provide some hands-on background to the discussion of exegetical tools in chapter two of the textbook (§2.3). Using the bibliography provided in the textbook, together with the catalog of a local library, find two or three examples for each of the following categories of exegetical tools. If there is no library near you that owns such tools, go online to various seminary or divinity school libraries and search their holdings. Likewise, search through the offerings of various online bookstores. Give yourself a “budget” of \$500 and see how many of these tools you could buy.

Greek New Testament	Biblical dictionaries	Monographs
Hebrew Old Testament	Theological dictionaries	Journals
Septuagint (LXX)	Lexica	Commentaries
Concordances	Computer-based tools	Translations
Handbooks/Introductions	Histories	Abstracts

B. Define the difference between *translations* and *editions* of the Bible.

- Would it make sense to speak of the Nestle-Aland translation of the New Testament? Why or why not?
- Is the New Revised Standard Version ecumenical study Bible, with annotations (1994), a translation or an edition? Or both? Explain your answer.

C. Consider how dictionaries and handbooks or introductions help in orienting an exegete to a text. How could we use the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (IVP, 1993), for example, to get a good preliminary foothold in analyzing the meaning of Romans 4?

II. Exegetical Treatment of a Sample Text: Philemon 5

ἀκούων σου τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν, ἣν ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους

(very literally) “hearing of your love and faith, which you have toward the Lord Jesus and to all the saints”

Assuming this text represents a fragment of divine revelation, list every thing you can think of which would help you understand the passage and its significance for us today. What do you need to know or to find out?

Think of it this way: Suppose you laid this snatch of Greek text before a randomly selected passerby in a shopping mall, and you told her that these little symbols contained at least part of the answer to her life’s questions (and assume she believed you!). What would she need in order to extract that answer accurately from this text? Or what would you need to provide for her?

Referring to the “Big Picture” diagram provided as figure 1.1 in the textbook, we might list the following as helpful information of this kind.

- source of the text (genre, specific “book”)
- persons involved in the text
- reliability of the actual text
- translation and grammatical structure
- literary context (boundaries, discourse structure, coherence)
- rhetorical devices
- special meaning for certain vocabulary
- historical context (setting, background, cultural issues)
- relation to other Scripture (themes, theology)

The purpose of these various stages in the exegetical process is to enable us modern readers to *enter into the original context* of a passage of scripture. Naturally this entering-in will be only partial and often inadequate. Yet it is the best way we currently have of bridging ourselves back to the situation in which the text first made good sense.

The following discussion takes up these stages one-by-one. It provides an introductory overview of the process recommended throughout the textbook.

Source. The passage cited above constitutes a portion of the apostle Paul’s brief message known to us as the letter to Philemon. Long after Paul wrote the letter, the entire text was sectioned up into twenty-five parts, or verses, and this one is the fifth of those, and thus, Philemon 5 (or Philem 5).

Knowing this much, we exegetes will take up a *preliminary self-orientation to the book* of Philemon, as one of the first steps in returning to the ancient setting. This preliminary orientation can take several forms:

- making ourselves acquainted with the text of the entire book, by reading through it several times, listing various items of interest
- consulting dictionary and/or encyclopedia articles on the book
- consulting introductions in commentaries or general introductions to the New Testament

From a process such as this we would learn that Philemon fits the genre of letter and the “register” of a letter of personal recommendation. (A “register” is a “variety of language proper to a particular situation” [J. F. A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1972), p. 17], in this case a type of letter appropriate for a personal recommendation.)

Persons involved. As a result of the “preliminary orientation,” we also learn that Paul, the author, was apparently in prison as he wrote, in the company of his protégé Timothy, and that a runaway slave, Onesimus, had found him there and had been converted to way of Christ. We gather that Paul knew the slave’s owner, Philemon (or Archippus?), and his wife (?), Apphia, and that these people were Christians and hosted a church in their home. Comparing this letter with Paul’s letter to the Colossian church (cf. Col 4:7-17 with Philem 23-24) strongly suggests that Philemon lived at Colossae in the Roman province of Asia, inland from Ephesus, near the west coast of modern Turkey.

Reliability of the actual text. We will discuss this kind of problem in chapter two of the textbook. The compelling question is whether the text we handed to the shopper at the mall accurately reflects the text Paul himself originally wrote. The NA²⁷ textual apparatus indicates that there are two points of uncertainty about this in the manuscript tradition for Philemon 5 (i.e., there are some discrepancies at this point among the ancient manuscripts [“external evidence”] that preserve the text of Philemon).

(a) Transposition:

- did Paul write (i) τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν “[your] love and faith,”
- or did he write (ii) τὴν πίστιν καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην “[your] faith and love”?

External evidence: There is stronger manuscript support for (i) than for (ii).

Internal evidence: (i) is the more difficult reading, and therefore is more likely to be “fixed” by a helpful scribe than (ii) is. Oddly, the more difficult reading is more likely to be the original!

Together these two considerations give us confidence that (i) is the original reading.

(b) Alternate wording:

- Did Paul write (i) πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν “toward the Lord Jesus”
- or (ii) εἰς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν “to the Lord Jesus”
- or (iii) εἰς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν “to the Lord Jesus Christ”
- or (iv) ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ “in Christ Jesus”?

Scanty external evidence rules out (iii) and (iv), and the external evidence for (ii) is significant but not overwhelming.

Internal evidence: Only one other place in the New Testament (1 Thess 1:8) collocates πρὸς “toward” with πίστις “faith” or with πιστεύω “believe,” whereas εἰς “to” is the usual preposition in this construction. This suggests that the text at Philemon 5 is more likely to have been changed from πρὸς to εἰς, not vice versa, πρὸς being the more “difficult” reading.

Together, as with the textual problem (a), the internal and external evidence supports reading (i).

Translation and grammatical structure. The text could be translated literally to read: “hearing of your [sing.] love and faith, which you [sing.] have toward the Lord Jesus and to/for/in all the saints.”

The singular pronoun σου “your” and singular verb ἔχεις “you have” match the singular references in verses 2 and 4 and focus on one of the three recipients named in verses 1-2.

The antecedent of the relative pronoun ἣν “which” is unclear: is it πίστιν “faith” or ἀγάπην “love”? Or both? Ordinarily, the nearest eligible noun is the antecedent, πίστιν in this case, but then what would Paul mean here by “the faith which you have...for/to all the saints”? This difficulty explains variant reading (a/ii), above, since it makes for an “easier” reading: Paul praises Philemon for the love he has for all the saints. But we have rejected that “easier” reading as not likely to be the original.

If we compare this language with similar language elsewhere in Paul (here a good concordance or electronic Greek New Testament is very useful), we discover two similar passages.

Colossians 1:4

ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους

“hearing of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints”

Ephesians 1:15

Διὰ τοῦτο κἀγὼ ἀκούσας τὴν καθ’ ὑμᾶς πίστιν ἐν τῷ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην τὴν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους

“Therefore, when I myself heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and of your love for all the saints”

From these two passages, one of which (Colossians) was probably written at the same time Philemon was written, we can see that they portray “faith” as directed toward Christ

and “love” as directed toward the saints. This suggests that Philemon 5 is constructed in the shape of a chiasm, a rhetorical device fairly common in the ancient world:

A your love
 B your faith
 C which you have
 B' toward the Lord Jesus
A' and for all the saints

A and A' belong together, as do B and B'; C stands in the middle. This may explain Paul's use of the prepositions *πρός* in B' and *εἰς* in A', instead of using *εἰς* twice: it indicates that each abstract noun (“love” and “faith”) goes with a separate person or persons (“the Lord Jesus” and “all the saints”), and that they do not *both* go with *both* parties. It also suggests that the singular relative pronoun *ἣν* “which” has *both* *ἀγάπην* and *πίστιν* as its referents. The use of a singular relative pronoun to refer to more than one antecedent is common in koine Greek.

Since chiasms do not play a well-recognized role in contemporary rhetoric, we should probably translate Philemon 5 “dynamically”: “hearing of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus,” as the NRSV does it. Even so, we should keep the chiasm in mind as we continue with the exegesis, for it is a significant *rhetorical device*.

Rhetorical devices. Rhetorical questions have to do not just with *what* is said, but also with *how* it is said. The fact that Paul phrased this passage in chiasmic format emphasizes that he is primarily concerned with the *organic unity of horizontal and vertical piety*. Faith in Christ is intimately connected with love for fellow believers, in whom Christ dwells (as we know from elsewhere). The fair assumption is that Paul would insist that we cannot have the one without having the other as well. And this perspective becomes *very* relevant in presenting to his argument to Philemon.

Literary context (boundaries, discourse structure, coherence). These issues will be taken up in chapters three and four of the textbook. Meanwhile we may propose that the letter to Philemon can be structurally analyzed into five parts.

Greetings 1-3
Opening tone-setter 4-7
New situation with Onesimus 8-16
Paul's expectations of Philemon 17-22
Farewells 23-25

This scheme, or something similar, can be established either by conducting our own analysis or by depending on analyses done by others and made available in introductions and dictionary articles.

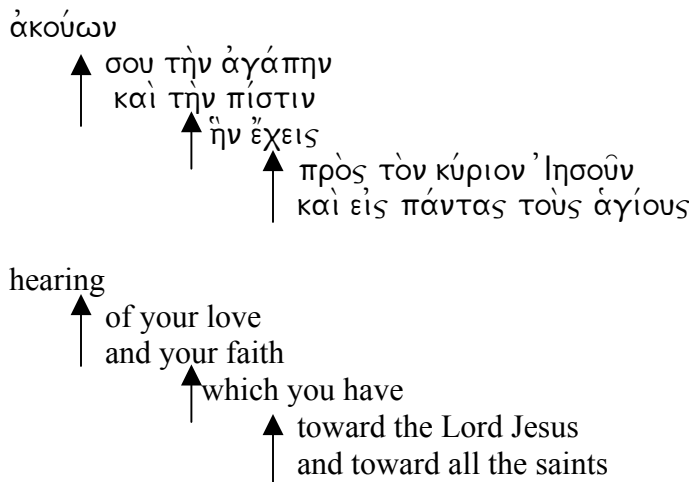
From this we see that Philemon 5, Paul’s affirmation of Philemon for his well-rounded piety, functions as part of Paul’s attempt to establish a good rapport with Philemon before presenting his special request.

The context for this small text, then, narrows down from (a) an ancient letter of recommendation to (b) the rapport-establishing portion of such a letter. Context is *all-important* for discerning meaning. The meaning of any given element (linguistic or otherwise) is heavily determined by the context in which that element occurs.

We can say, then, that the reason Paul mentions hearing of Philemon’s piety is because he wants to assure Philemon of his regard. And we may surmise that he wants Philemon eventually to see a connection between his own recognized piety and the request Paul is about to make of him. It is part of a set-up.

But we can take the structural analysis even further. We can analyze the relationships among the very phrases making up this text and its immediate linguistic context.

A phrase-structure analysis of Philemon 5 might look like this:



The diagram roughly indicates the interrelationships of the component parts of the passage. The participle ἀκούων “hearing of,” modifying Paul, “governs” the double direct object τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν “your faith and your love” together with the modifier σου “your,” which belongs to both nouns (note ἔχεις “you have”).

The relative clause ἣν ἔχεις . . . ἁγίους “which you have . . . saints” functions like σου “your,” modifying *both* the nouns preceding it. And the two parallel prepositional phrases, πρὸς . . . καὶ εἰς “toward . . . and for,” modify the verb ἔχεις. This verb, like ἀκούων, also “governs” the double object τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν “[your] love and [your] faith,” but it does so through the relative pronoun ἣν “which.”

This means that the entire verse functions as a unit tied together and governed by the participle ἀκούων.

Taking into account the larger section, verses 4-7, enables us to see how the unit governed by ἀκούων (v. 5) fits into its larger linguistic context. The main assertion is “I thank my God” (v. 4a) which is followed by two participial clauses: “always making mention of you in my prayers” (v. 4b) and “hearing of your faith and love...” (v. 5). The first of these two participial clauses describes *when* Paul remembers to thank God for Philemon, and the second (our passage) most likely indicates *why* he does so.

This then is followed by the content of Paul’s prayer on Philemon’s behalf (v. 6). Paul wraps up this rapport-creating section by insisting that he has derived much joy from Philemon’s treatment of the saints. This thanksgiving and prayer for Philemon, as well as the praise of his behavior, set the stage for what is to come.

The *rhetorical emphasis*, then, is probably less on Paul’s giving thanks (even though this is the “main” verb phrase) than it is on *Philemon’s reputation as a pious supporter and encourager of the church*. In a very clever way, Paul is “setting up” Philemon by a psychological preparation. Having heard these soothing words of praise, Philemon will find it correspondingly difficult to refuse to act in accordance with his own reputation, even if it means doing the culturally difficult thing that Paul is about to spring on him.

Special meaning for certain vocabulary. Specific words in this passage most susceptible to further investigation would probably include the nouns “love,” “faith” and “saints.” But in fact their usage in this context does not present any surprise or difficulty. The term “saints” (ἅγιοι) certainly refers to Christian believers. A full-blown “word study” would probably not be warranted. Still, perusing articles on these words in standard New Testament Greek lexicons (e.g., BDAG) or in Bible dictionaries (e.g., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* or IVP’s *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*) would be interesting as general background to a wide variety of New Testament passages, including this one.

Historical context (setting, background, cultural issues). At least three historical contexts come into play here, all of which need to be reconstructed in their mid-first-century, Roman-Asian dress. There are many other historical issues as well that impinge on a text—even this text. But I will mention just these three for now.

The nature of slavery in the Roman world. Since Paul’s letter to Philemon deals with the problem of a runaway slave and his treatment, it will be useful to get some idea of how slavery functioned as an institution in Roman society, particularly in the province of Asia. How were slaves acquired? What, if any, were their legal rights? What were the laws governing their treatment? Under what circumstances were they set free? What were the social conventions surrounding slavery and the relationship of slaves to their owners and to free society at large?

Under Roman law, for example, slaves were permitted to appeal to a third party in cases of dispute or abuse.

On the other hand, a slave owner owed a certain tacit debt to his or her fellow slave-owners not to be overly lenient toward his slaves, lest the discrepancy in treatment foment unrest among the slaves of other households. Similarly, a slave owner would have to be careful to maintain both discipline and morale among slaves at home. If Philemon were to appear to reward Onesimus with freedom for having run away, how would that affect the other slaves in his house?

This kind of thinking about a text illustrates the importance of using a *creative historical imagination!*

The nature of churches. Philemon's apparent wealth and social standing, together with Paul's words τῆ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησία "the church at your house" (Philem 2), suggest that this was a typical house-church, a community of believers meeting regularly at Philemon's house. Apparently traveling believers found shelter and hospitality with Philemon (vv. 7, 22) and fellowship among the local brothers and sisters. Even instruction to an individual could be delivered to and in the presence of the larger assembly, thereby putting the individual in a place of accountability to the local body.

Paul's own particular situation (his Sitz im Leben). Paul, imprisoned in Rome or perhaps in Ephesus, meets up somehow with the fugitive Onesimus, whom he leads to faith in Christ. Onesimus proves very useful to Paul in his ongoing mission, even from jail (perhaps like Al Capone's captains did for him!). But Paul recognizes the requirements of Roman law regarding runaway slaves and returns the convert to his master, or perhaps sends a letter asking that Onesimus be allowed to stay with Paul. Is he asking for Onesimus to be manumitted?

Relation to other Scripture (themes and theology). Other Pauline references to slavery and the duties of masters and slaves toward each other (e.g., Col 3:22, 4:1; Eph 6:5-8), or to the incorporation of slaves and free persons into one body of believers (1 Cor 12:13), would be relevant as a context in which to understand Paul's concerns here. Similarly, so would teaching on this topic by other, non-Pauline, authors (e.g., 1 Peter 2:18).

Likewise, Paul and others speak in various places about the power of the Body of Christ to obliterate social lines without undermining social responsibilities. Although slaves are expected to respect and obey their masters in the context of the world, slaves and free are placed together on a level playing field within the context of the church.

The question to ask here, then, is how Paul's unexpressed request of Philemon, on behalf of Onesimus, relates to these more general principles of Christian relationships? What is Paul *really* asking of Philemon?

Specifically, how do Philemon's faith in Christ and his love for *all* the saints (v. 5)—including his "sainted" slave Onesimus, now a brother in Christ (v. 16)—how do these recognized qualities in Philemon's character help him to deal with the perplexing problem that Onesimus' conversion and Paul's letter present?

Conclusion—for now. Taking all these factors into consideration throws an amazing amount of light on this little phrase in Philemon 5. Through these efforts, we are permitted to a small extent to enter into the world *behind* the text and into the world *within* the text. We get a glimpse of the ancient situation, painful as it was, and see this little verse within that context in all its painful irony. We see that it is not just idle schmooze, expressing a shallow, syrupy sentimentalism, but rather it is a calculated prelude to a terrible, divine dilemma. It provokes a soul-searching look at the implications of the gospel of Jesus Christ upon human society. Just exactly what *does* it mean, in this context, to have faith in Christ and to love *all* the saints?

This is exegesis, taking us as far as we are going to go for now. But exegesis leads us on to hermeneutics, that is, to asking ourselves the correspondingly appropriate question in our own context (that is, in the world *in front of* the text). One of my students several years ago rewrote the letter to Philemon in the shape of a letter to a Robert DeNiro-type Christian man, father of a newly converted homosexual dying of AIDS. What does it take to find acceptance with God? What does it take to find acceptance with the church?

What does it mean to love all the saints? Can we love all the saints without believing the gospel of Christ? Can we believe the gospel of Christ without loving all the saints? And if we return to our shopper at the mall, what can we say is the answer to her life's big question? Does this little passage—properly understood—give her any indication? Does it suggest to her anything at all about her status in the eyes of God? Can it even possibly help her to articulate her “big question”?

III. Further Foretaste of What Is to Come

The following four “problems” further illustrate the nature of the exegetical task. Look over each one and consider what the modern readers’ “problem” actually is in each case.

Sample of changed perspective. “[Solomon] was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations.” (1 Kings 4:31)

What is odd *to us* about this passage in 1 Kings 4? To say that Solomon was wiser even than Ethan the Ezrahite, and various other people besides, used to tell people how wise Solomon was. But today, since hardly anyone has heard of Ethan and his friends, and since Solomon’s wisdom is “proverbial” (no pun intended), this passage tells us a little of how wise Ethan and Heman were, in case we were wondering! (Cf. Ps 88:1; 89:1.)

Sample of chiasm as an exegetical clue. Section two, above, refers to the rhetorical device known as a *chiasm*, in which the segments of a text are arranged in such a way that the members reflect each other in a kind of descending-ascending pattern, as if the first half of the chiasm were reflected in a mirror. The first member reflects the last member; the second member reflects the second-to-last, and so on. The center two members, or the solitary center member, function as the core of the chiasm, and the outer members often function to comment on the core idea in some way, often as a contrast to it. The word “chiasm” comes from the name of the Greek letter X, *chi*, because a graphic arrangement of chiastic text looks like the left half of the letter X. Consider the way the apparent chiasm in Mark 15:21-39 operates:

- | | |
|----|---|
| A | v. 21: Simon, a diaspora Jew, carries the cross for Jesus |
| B | vv. 22-24: Wine, crucifixion, garments divided |
| C | vv. 25-26: Third hour; King of the Jews |
| D | v. 27: Two robbers crucified |
| E | vv. 29-30: Passersby mock him |
| E' | vv. 31-32a: Priests mock him; seeing is believing |
| D' | v. 32b: Two robbers taunt him |
| C' | vv. 33-35: Sixth and ninth hours: My God! Why? |
| B' | vv. 36-38: Vinegar, death by crucifixion, curtain torn |
| A' | v. 39: Roman centurion sees and confesses (believes) |

The structure of this chiasm suggests that this text is intended to portray Jesus as the new temple, the new Holy of Holies. Some Jewish citizens and leaders see, but do not believe (D, D'; E, E'). Their inability to grasp the significance of Jesus is contrasted with the openness of outsiders (A, A'), who respond otherwise. Just as Jesus is “unveiled” (cf. vv. 20, 24), so is the Holy of Holies (B, B').

Sample of intercalation as exegetical clue. Another text from Mark’s Gospel illustrates what is called an “intercalation.” Texts are “intercalated” when they are divided into parts and their parts are made to alternate with one another. Consider the structure of Mark 11:12-33:

- A. Cursing of the fig tree (vv. 12-14)
 - B. Cleansing of the temple (vv. 15-19)
- A'. Withered fig tree; teaching on faith and prayer (vv. 20-25)
 - B'. Reaction to temple cleansing; further questioning (vv. 27-33)

Such “intercalations” are designed to encourage readers to view each of the intercalated stories in terms of the other(s). Other examples include the story of the woman with the hemorrhage, which is sandwiched into the midst of the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Mk 5:22-43, note vv. 25-34), the parable of the sower and its explanation (Mt 13:3-9, 18-23), which is wrapped around the discussion of why Jesus uses parables (Mt 13:10-17).

In Mark 11:12-33, the author’s intention may be to encourage us to see in the mystifying story of the fig tree Jesus’ judgment on the temple cult as it had developed (or degenerated) in the early first century. In fact, not only is the cleansing of the temple intercalated between halves of the story of the fig tree, but also the teaching on faith and prayer following the observation of the withered fig tree is itself sandwiched between the halves of the temple-cleansing story. Thus, not only should the temple cleansing be interpreted in terms of the fig tree story, but also the teaching on faith and prayer should be interpreted in terms of the temple cleansing. Jesus then finds the trappings of the temple cult as disappointing as the inedible leaves of the figless tree; yet if the temple is in his judgment no longer viable as a center of spirituality, where are people to pray? They are free now to pray anywhere, anytime. We may say, “Yeah. So?” But we need to hear it just as it would probably have sounded to Mark’s first audience.

Sample of historical situation as exegetical datum. Consider Ephesians 1:15 and 3:2.

Ephesians 1:15: “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason...”

Ephesians 3:2: “for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you”

These two passages suggest that their author has not personally met his first readers; they know of each other by reputation. But this is puzzling if Ephesians is a letter from the apostle Paul to the church at Ephesus. What does the textual tradition lying behind Ephesians 1:1, where some ancient manuscripts omit the words “in Ephesus,” contribute to this issue?