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THE RECEPTION OF APPHIA IN THE FOURTH AND FIFTH CENTURIES C.E.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the reception of Apphia (who is mentioned in Philemon 2 as one of the recipients of the letter) in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. For this purpose the available sources are investigated in a chronological order: Jerome, John Chrysostom, Pelagius, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret of Cyrus (Apphia is not mentioned in the commentary of Ambrosiaster). Firstly, it is shown that the difference in the Biblical texts that were used by these five scholars may have had an influence on the way in which they interpreted Apphia's role. Secondly, it is argued that one can identify a slow progression in the way in which the relationship between Philemon, Apphia and Archippus was interpreted. Lastly it is shown that personal views on women and their role had no mean influence on the perception of Apphia. For example, this can be seen in the way in which some of these authors tried to explain why Apphia was mentioned before Archippus in Paul's letter.

1. INTRODUCTION

If one were to select an academic commentary on the Letter to Philemon from a library shelf at random, and then turn to the comments on Apphia¹

- 1 As to the spelling of the name: In Latin it was spelled as *Appia*, and the Graecised version was normally Ἀπφία. A word of thanks to Cilliers Breytenbach who drew my attention to this aspect. Take also note of the remarks by him and Christiana Zimmermann on the use of the name in Lycaonia and the adjacent areas in the third century onwards: The Roman praenomen *Appia* occurs on a third century epitaph from Claneus; in Laodicea the form Ἀππεία is used once, but elsewhere the Graecised form Ἀπφία is used. Take also note that the name does not occur frequently. Cf. Breytenbach & Zimmermann (2016:5.2.3.1).

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(v. 2), there is a strong likelihood that one would be furnished with two points of information, namely that Apphia was a Phrygian name,² and that the woman of this name may have been Philemon's wife. Furthermore, in some commentaries, the reason for her being one of the three recipients of the letter may also be mentioned. Usually one of two reasons is provided. Some scholars believe that Paul mentioned her because she was the lady of the house and thus had an interest in the fate of the slave who was the reason for the letter, whereas others are of the opinion that Paul addressed her as a member of the house church which would be involved in the decision that had to be taken.³ There is perhaps a small chance that the particular commentary taken randomly from the shelf might challenge this broad scholarly consensus. Should this prove to be the case, one might find oneself confronted with one of the following options: Some scholars attempt to broaden the range of possible relationships that may have existed between Philemon and Apphia. For example, Thompson (2005:208) proposes the following possibilities: Apphia may have been Philemon's sister, i.e., an unmarried or widowed woman living in his house, or even his daughter or mother.⁴ Others categorically reject the idea that Apphia could have been Philemon's wife. For example, according to Leutzsch, this assumption is based on an androcentric approach to the text: "Eine Frau scheint in dieser Vorstellungswelt nur als Frau von jemandem denkbar zu sein, nicht als ein eigener Mensch" (Leutzsch 1994:76; Leutzsch's emphasis). This logic is then developed as follows: *Frau = Ehefrau; Ehefrau = Hausfrau, Hausfrau = Heimchen am Herd* (Leutzsch 1994:76-78). Instead of following this line of reasoning, Leutzsch focuses on the fact that Paul addresses Apphia as one of the members of this particular house church, and the role that she may possibly have played in bringing about the intended outcome of his letter. Thus, one possibly misses the point by focusing on the relationship between Apphia and Philemon. This objection is also raised by other scholars. For example, Bieberstein (2000:106) finds "it exceptionally significant that a woman, Apphia, is summoned as witness precisely in this 'test case' of liberating praxis." According to Bieberstein, Apphia was one of the two independent witnesses (the other one being

2 Cf. Arzt-Grabner (2003:82-82), as well as Huttner (2013:84-85), for examples of inscriptions from the first century containing the name Apphia.

3 Some examples: Stuhlmacher (1981:30), Dunn (1996:312), Hübner (1997:28), Lampe (1998:209), Fitzmyer (2000:87-88) and Wilson (2005:334). There are many more.

4 Cf. also Kreitzer (2008:30-34) for a good overview of possible scenarios that have been suggested by scholars with regard to the relationship between Apphia and Philemon, as well as other issues such as their relationship to Archippus.

Archippus) who were selected by Paul from this house church, and it is important to realise that the outcome of the letter would have had to be met with her approval (Bieberstein 2000:106).⁵

The aim of this brief study is not to delve more deeply into the possible relationship between Apphia and Philemon, or the role(s) that Apphia might have played in this household or house church. Instead, the aim is of a more moderate nature, namely to investigate the reception of Apphia in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. When contemporary scholars discuss Apphia, they sometimes refer to comments made by Biblical interpreters of this period about her; but as far as I was able to determine, no systematic study of the perceptions regarding this interesting figure during this period has as yet been carried out. The aim of this article is to fill this lacuna – an exercise which might be important, since it seems as if contemporary reception of Apphia has been influenced to a large extent by the perceptions that prevailed in the fourth and fifth centuries.

2. JEROME⁶

Jerome wrote his commentary⁷ on the Letter to Philemon between 386 and 388 C.E., shortly after he had settled in Bethlehem. It represents the first of his exegetical works on the Pauline letters (Friedl 2010:289-290). In his explanation of this letter, Jerome depended largely on Origen's commentary on the letter (which has unfortunately been lost); to such an extent that we may assume that through Jerome's work on Philemon, we have access to Origen's interpretation, which probably comprised the first written interpretation of this letter (Friedl 2010:291).⁸

5 For other scholars who stress the role that Apphia might have played in the organisation of the house church, cf. Cotter (1994:351), MacDonald (1999:206-207), Polaski (2005:44-45) and Müller (2012:89).

6 In Ambrosiaster's discussion of the Letter to Philemon in his commentary on the Pauline epistles, he does not mention Apphia (or Archippus).

7 As Friedl (2010:294) points out, strictly speaking, Jerome did not call his study on Philemon a "commentary". Jerome used the word *dissero* (discuss) in the introduction to this work, and later used the term *interpretatus* in the introduction to his work on Galatians, in which he referred to his work on Philemon. The latter had been completed a few days before he started working on Galatians. In view of the foregoing, Jerome's work on Philemon could be called either a "dissertation" or an "interpretation". Friedl opts for "dissertation".

8 Cf. also the detailed investigation of this issue by Heine (2000:117-133). Heine's conclusion:

We may, therefore, be fairly confident that in this commentary we have the exposition of Origen dressed in the garb of Jerome's Latin. This, in

In his explanation of the letter, Jerome refers to Apphia in his discussion of verses 1-3. Later on, towards the end of his exposition of the letter, he explains the meaning of the names of all the people who are mentioned in the letter, including Apphia. For the purposes of our investigation, the following three aspects warrant particular mention:

First, in his discussion of verses 1-3, Jerome quotes the Biblical text and then adds a brief explanation of who Apphia was: “*Also to Apphia, sister,*⁹ who does not have in her anything false or any hypocritical sisterhood.”¹⁰ This is a very positive description, the first part of which reminds one of the description of Nathanael in the Gospel of John, as Scheck (2010:363, n. 83) points out. Jerome does not provide any motivation for this positive evaluation of Apphia, but he might have deduced these imputed qualities from Paul’s use of the word “sister” in referring to her. Such a positive evaluation of Apphia also compares favourably to the way in which Philemon and Archippus are described by Jerome. Nevertheless, there is one aspect that needs to be noted: Whereas the positive evaluation of Philemon and Archippus is linked to what they were or what they had done, in Apphia’s case it is linked to what she was *not*. In Jerome’s view, Philemon was a co-worker of Paul, addressed by the latter as “beloved”, because Philemon was involved in the same work of Christ as Paul (*in Philm.* 1-3, 87.172-4), whereas Archippus was a co-soldier of Paul because he fought alongside of Paul and Timothy against the enemies of Christ, and was victorious in this war, together with them (*in Philm.* 1-3, 87.175-88.179).¹¹ In the case of Apphia, the evaluation that Jerome provides is also positive, yet it is expressed in negative terms: She did not have anything *false* in her, nor did she have any form of *hypocritical* sisterhood. As Arjava (1989:5-18)

turn, means that we have a commentary on Philemon from the mid-third century rather than from the late fourth century. Furthermore, it makes the exposition contained in the commentary the earliest known exposition of the Epistle to Philemon. Indeed, this exposition, in all likelihood, represents the first commentary ever written on the epistle (p. 133).

- 9 Take note that the text that Jerome used read “sister” and not “beloved”, as was the case in the texts used by some of the other Church Fathers. Cf., for example, the discussion of John Chrysostom’s perceptions regarding Apphia, *infra*.
- 10 *Appiae quoque sorori, non habenti in se falsae aliquid et fictae germanitatis* (*in Philm.* 1-3, 87.174-5). I have used the critical edition by Bucchi (2003:75-106), citing page and line numbers. The translation above is based on Friedl (2010:302). Scheck (2010:362) translates the passage as follows: “Also ‘to Apphia the sister,’ one who does not have anything false in herself and of feigned sisterhood.”
- 11 Earlier on, Jerome also mentioned the possibility that Archippus might have been the bishop of the Colossian church (*in Philm.* 1-3, 85.119).

points out, Jerome's views about women were inconsistent. Sometimes he reflected notions absorbed from the world in which he lived, "according to which women were a weaker variety of the human race, without citizenship and without equal rights, with lesser talents and with graver faults" (Arjava 1989:16), whereas at other times, one can gather from his writings that he accepted intellectual equality between men and women.¹² In this instance, the fact that he finds it necessary to describe Apphia in terms of negative traits that she does not hold, might be indicative of the former tendency in his thinking about women in general.

Secondly, after having discussed Archippus and the expression "to the church that is in your house," Jerome finds it necessary to return to Apphia specifically, in order to explain the fact that Paul mentions her before Archippus. Jerome begins by referring to Galatians 3:28, where Paul claims that, in Christ, it does not matter whether one is Gentile or Jew, man or woman, slave or free. According to Jerome, the truth of this premise is demonstrated in this particular passage in Philemon, since Apphia's name is inserted between the name of Paul's co-worker and that of his co-soldier, i.e., between the names of Philemon and Archippus (*in Philm.* 1-3, 88.191-194). It is interesting to note how Jerome describes what Paul is doing here. Jerome refers to Philemon and Archippus as two "men and apostles"¹³ and argues that Apphia's name is inserted between theirs so that she, who is a woman, can be supported on both sides by the two of them.¹⁴ This reminds one of Exodus 17:12 (thus Scheck 2010:363, n. 86), although the point that Jerome is making is certainly not that Apphia was a new Moses, but rather that she needed support from males in order to maintain her (unnatural) position in the list. Furthermore, he adds that she is placed in the second position on the list because of merit, and not on the basis of gender.¹⁵ In other words, if she were to be ranked in terms of gender, she should have been placed third, after Archippus.

Thirdly, Jerome ends his discussion of the Letter to Philemon with an explanation of the meaning of all the proper names found in the letter. It is generally accepted that this, too, is based on the work of Origen (Friedl 2010:199, n. 90). In the case of Apphia, he explains the meaning of her name as *continens aut libertas* (*in Philm.* 25.638). This could be translated as "continence¹⁶/the containing¹⁷ or liberty". Jerome does not provide any

12 In this regard, cf. also the discussion by Brown (1988:369-372).

13 ... *inter duos quipped uiros et apostolicos* (*in Philm.* 1-3, 88.194).

14 ... *ex utroque latere fulta comitatu* (*in Philm.* 1-3, 88.196).

15 ... *non uideatur ordinem sexus habere, sed meriti* (*in Philm.* 1-3, 88.196-7).

16 Scheck (2010:381) translates *continens* as "continent".

17 This is Friedl's (2010:302) translation of *continens*.

justification for this interpretation of Apphia's name, nor does he indicate what this knowledge contributes to our understanding of Apphia or of the letter. Thus, he may merely be following Origen here. On the other hand, it might be important to bear in mind that the notion of continence or chastity played a vital role in Jerome's theology.¹⁸ As Rebenich (2002:18) puts it:

Central to his (= Jerome's) programme was sexual abstinence, and he did not cease to encourage his audience to maintain virginity and chastity, to give alms, to visit the sick, to reject the amenities of civilized life, to keep a strict diet, to neglect clothing, to separate from relatives and friends, to ignore worldly company, and to avoid carnal temptation.

The notion of continence is also encountered frequently in cases where Jerome describes what he regards as exemplary women. To cite two examples: In Epistle 45 (To Asella), he describes the widow Paula¹⁹ as follows: "... for whom her song was the Psalms, her speech the Gospel, her delight continence, her life fasting."²⁰ And in Letter 48 (To Pammachius) he distinguishes between three groups of chaste women: "If virgins are first fruits to God, then widows and married women living in continence must be placed after the first fruits, i.e., in the second and in the third place."²¹ The other concept used to describe Apphia here, *libertas*, is also sometimes used by Jerome in similar contexts, for example in the Letter to Gaudentius, where he describes people who are married as *slaves* of the flesh, and those who are not married as people who are *free* (ep. 128.3). In the light of considerations such as these, one should raise the question: Did Jerome merely follow Origen's explanation of the meaning of the name Apphia as "continence or liberty", without taking any further notice of it, or was this aspect important to him? For example, did he perhaps imagine Apphia as being more or less similar to one of the aristocratic widows of

18 Cf. also Jerome's remark in his interpretation of v. 21 (*in Philm.* 22, 101.530-532), where he mentions that virginity is accorded a greater reward, because it goes beyond a command of the Lord.

19 Paula and Eustachium asked Jerome to write interpretations of the Pauline epistles; this is mentioned by Jerome himself (*in Philm.* 1-3, 81.7).

20 ... *cuius canticum psalmi, sermo euangelium, deliciae continentia, uita ieiunium* (ep. 45.3.2, 325.15-17). I have used the CSEL edition by Hilberg (1996), citing page and line numbers.

21 *si uirgines primitiae dei sunt, ergo uiduae et in matrimonio continentes erunt post primitias, id est in secundo et tertio gradu* (ep. 48.10.2, 365.15-18).

his time who were his primary patrons²² (such as Paula), or perhaps even as a lifelong virgin (such as Asella)?

3. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

John Chrysostom did not write a commentary on the Letter to Philemon; rather, he wrote homilies, in the first of which he refers to Apphia. It is not known exactly when these homilies were written; some scholars, for example Quasten (1960:448-449), place them within the period of his ministry in Antioch (386-397 C.E.), whereas others, for example Kelly (1995:132-133), place them within the years of his ministry in Constantinople²³ (397-404 C.E.). This means that his homilies on the letter were written either at more or less the same time as Jerome's interpretation of the letter, or a little later.

In his discussion of the argument (ὑπόθεσις) Chrysostom describes Philemon as a believer and a noble man,²⁴ and in explaining Paul's description of Philemon as "beloved" and "fellow-labourer" in verse 1, he concentrates on its rhetorical impact: The fact that Philemon was "beloved" shows that Paul's confidence that Philemon would grant his request was not presumptuous, but an indication of affection. The fact that Philemon was a "fellow-labourer" not only shows that he should feel honoured by

22 This aspect of Jerome's life is discussed thoroughly by Cain (2009), who points out that:

His (= Jerome's) lineage was obscure and his family, although moderately prosperous, could not rival a senatorial family in economic or social prestige. Because he was not independently wealthy he had to rely on affluent patrons to fund the literary *otium* that he required in later life. His primary patrons were aristocratic Christian widows ... (p. 2).

Cf. Sággy (2010:129) for information on the important role that questions on Hebrew played in Jerome's correspondence with Marcella and Paula.

23 Wendy Mayer brought to my attention that Quasten's opinion derives from Joannes Stiltling via Lietzmann whereas Kelly's derives from von Bonsdorff via Baur. Cf. Mayer (2005: Part 1, *passim*, as well as the summary in Table 13.a-b) for the complete range of options. Cf. also Mayer (2014:211-225) for an excellent discussion of Chrysostom's attitude towards women. The conclusion to which she comes is worth quoting:

Just as his preaching and theology are increasingly being shown to be sympathetic in most respects towards women, this overlooked evidence of his actions and attitude towards women at the day-to-day level disproves the charges both of misogyny and of an exclusive interest in ascetic women (Mayer 2014:225).

24 Ἄνθρωπος τις Φιλίμωνος τῶν πιστῶν καὶ γενναίων ἀνδρῶν (*hom. in Philm. arg.*, 6.325.2-3). I have used the text of Field (1849-1862), citing volume, page and line numbers.

being approached about this matter, but also that he should regard it as a favour. In fact, by granting the request, Philemon would be doing himself a favour, since he was carrying out and consolidating the same work as Paul (*hom. in Philm.* 1.1). Turning to Apphia²⁵ (v. 2), Chrysostom remarks that it seems to him that she was Philemon's wife.²⁶ Chrysostom thus seems to be the first person to raise this possibility.

About Apphia herself, Chrysostom does not elaborate further. He concentrates on another matter, namely the fact that Paul mentions Timothy in verse 1 as his co-author, and that he directs his request both to Philemon and to his wife (as well as to Archippus). All of this is interpreted by Chrysostom as an indication of Paul's *humility*: he does not only ask the husband, but even the wife (as well as a friend, i.e., Archippus).²⁷

In the case of Archippus, Chrysostom surmises that he may have been a member of the clergy.²⁸ In Apphia's case, such a possibility is not mentioned – probably owing to the fact that this would not fit in with Chrysostom's views in this regard: Apphia was married, and in Chrysostom's time, deaconesses were usually either virgins or widows (Martimort 1986:126; cf. also Karras 2004:272-316). In fact, the only aspect that Chrysostom mentions with regard to Apphia is the possibility that she was married to Philemon.

The fact that Chrysostom regarded marriage as a kind of hindrance to one's spiritual life (albeit a hindrance which could be overcome) can be gathered from his remarks in Homily 30 on the Letter to the Romans, in which Philemon and Apphia are also mentioned. In discussing Paul's greetings to Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:2-5), Chrysostom writes about these two (i.e., Priscilla and Aquila) in glowing terms, with particular reference to their excellence, how they put their own lives in danger for Paul, as well as their hospitality and the assistance that they rendered to him. Paul's request that the church in their house should be greeted is then taken as a further indication of their worth and of the high esteem in which they were held, since Chrysostom deduces from this that they had caused all the people in their home to become believers, and also opened their home to strangers. This is then linked to 1 Corinthians 16:19, in which Paul also greets both of them, as well as the church in their house. The notion of having a church in one's house is then linked to the Letter to Philemon,

25 Take note that the text that Chrysostom used read "beloved" (6.328.29).

26 Ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ σύμβιον εἶναι τούτου (*hom. in Philm.* 1.2, 6.329.35).

27 Ὅρα Παύλου τὸ ταπεινόν· καὶ Τιμόθεον παραλαμβάνει πρὸς τὴν ἀξίωσιν, καὶ οὐ τὸν ἄνδρα μόνον ἀξιοῖ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα, καὶ ἕτερόν τινα ἴσως φίλον (*hom. in Philm.* 1.2, 6.329.35-38).

28 Δοκεῖ μοι οὗτος εἶναι τῶν ἐν κλήρῳ κατειλεγμένων· ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῦτον παραλαμβάνει εἰς τὴν ἀξίωσιν... (*hom. in Philm.* 1.2, 6.330.6-8).

in which Paul greets Philemon and Apphia *and the church that is in their house* (Chrysostom does not mention Archippus). Chrysostom goes on to comment on the notion of having a church in one's home: According to him, this shows that it is possible even for a married man to be admirable and noble. Here, he uses exactly the same words as those that are used to describe Philemon in his discussion of the argument of the Letter to Philemon.²⁹ Chrysostom argues as follows: Although Priscilla and Aquila were married, they became honourable, because their married state (and their lowly occupation) were covered by their virtue.³⁰ Neither their trade nor their married state counted against them; what mattered most was that they had the love which Christ required.³¹ Although the focus is on Priscilla and Aquila, one may safely infer that Chrysostom viewed Philemon and Apphia along similar lines, i.e., as people who were honourable and who had virtue in spite of being married.

4. PELAGIUS

Pelagius's commentary on the Pauline letters arose as a result of his oral instruction of Christians in aristocratic circles in Rome and was composed between 405 and 410 C.E. (Kannengiesser 2006:1236; cf. also Levy 2011:24); i.e., before the controversy about his teachings erupted.³² The relationship between his commentaries on the Pauline letters and those of Theodore of Mopsuestia is not quite clear, but it seems as if Theodore was familiar with Pelagius's commentary on the Pauline letters (Greer 2011:xi), which would imply that Pelagius's work preceded that of Theodore. Pelagius's commentary on the Pauline letters was revised

29 Ἐνὶ γὰρ καὶ ἐν γάμῳ ὄντα θαυμαστὸν εἶναι καὶ γενναῖον (*hom. in Rom.* 30, 1.467.2-3). For the description of Philemon, cf. note 24.

30 Wendy Mayer brought to my attention two of Chrysostom's homilies in *In illud: Salutate Priscillam et Aquilam* (PG 51, 187-208), where he refers to the positive state of marriage in relation to the apostles. In this instance he differentiates between spouses of apostles who shared the faith and those who did not. Cf. for example, *hom.* 1 (PG 51, 191-192).

31 Ἴδου οὖν καὶ οὗτοι ἐν γάμῳ ἦσαν, καὶ σφόδρα ἔλαμψαν, καίτοι γε οὐδὲ τὸ ἐπιτήδευμα αὐτῶν λαμπρὸν ἦν· σκηνοποιοὶ γὰρ ἦσαν· ἀλλ' ὅμως πάντα ἀπέκρυψεν ἡ ἀρετὴ, καὶ ὑπὲρ τὸν ἥλιον αὐτοὺς ἔδειξε· καὶ οὔτε ἡ τέχνη οὔτε ἡ συζυγία αὐτοὺς παρέβλαψεν, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἀγάπην, ἣν ὁ Χριστὸς ἀπήτησε, ταύτην ἐπεδείξαντο (*hom in Rom.* 30, 1.467.3-8).

32 Augustine wrote his first work against Pelagius in 412 C.E. Cf. Drobner (2008:405). For a good discussion of Pelagius' attitude to women in general, cf. Yamada (2014:251-270). She shows that Pelagius believed that God gave power and free will to men and women on an equal basis.

twice, *inter alia* by Cassiodorus and his students, who removed what they deemed to be Pelagian errors.³³

In his commentary, Pelagius follows a basic pattern: he quotes the text and then adds some concise comments. This is also true of his explanation of Paul's reference to Apphia: "and to Ap[p]ia, sister: ... Appia is believed to have been his sister or wife".³⁴ The text that Pelagius used read "sister" (as in Jerome's case), and this forms the basis for the first part of Pelagius's comment, namely that she was Philemon's (biological) sister. In the Patristic commentaries that are still available to us, this is the first time that this possibility is mentioned, but the way in which Pelagius formulates it strongly suggests that he was not the first person to raise such a possibility. In the second part of his comment, he mentions the other possibility already raised by Chrysostom – namely that Apphia was Philemon's wife. However, it should be noted that this is still mentioned as a possibility only.

5. THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA

Theodore's commentaries on the Pauline letters were written late in the first and/or at the beginning of the second decade of the fifth century C.E. The order in which they were composed has not been established with certainty, but it seems that some of them (as in the case of his commentary on the Letter to Philemon) were written in response to a request.³⁵ As Fitzgerald (2010:345-354) has demonstrated, two primary concerns can be discerned in Theodore's commentary: firstly, the need to show that the letter was still relevant to Christians of his time; and secondly, the fact that the letter does not call for the manumission of Christian slaves.

With regard to Theodore's comments on Apphia, three issues should be highlighted:

First, Theodore identifies Apphia as Philemon's wife, and Archippus as their son, without expressing any doubt regarding these relationships (*in Philm.* 2, 782.6; 786.25).³⁶ Thus, what was still regarded by Chrysostom

33 Cf. De Bruyn (1993:27-28) for a brief overview of this issue. As he points out, Cassiodorus himself revised Romans and left the remainder of his commentary to be revised by "his less original students" (p. 28).

34 *et Ap[p]iae sorori: ... Appia uero uel soror creditor eius fuisse uel coniu[x]*. (*in Philm.* 2, 536.10-11.) I have used the text of Souter (1926), citing page and line numbers.

35 Cf. Fitzgerald (2010:342-345) for a detailed discussion of these matters.

36 I refer to the text in Greer (2011), citing page and line numbers.

and Pelagius as a mere possibility has by this time come to be viewed as a fact. Actually, Theodore presents Philemon, Apphia and Archippus as a normal and virtuous family:

And the letter was not to someone who was an apostle but to a faithful man and one adorned with virtuous habits, following an ordinary life with wife and child, as can be gathered from what Paul wrote to him.³⁷

Secondly, the text that Theodore used read “beloved” instead of “sister”. As a result, the text is interpreted as referring to both Philemon and Apphia as “beloved”. For Theodore, this point is important, since according to him, it shows that Paul awards the two of them equal respect (*in Philm. 2, 787.6-7*), thereby making no distinction between men and women—a factor that Theodore regards as characteristic of “true religion.”³⁸ However, this is only true when Paul addresses wives as individuals; when it comes to the church, different criteria apply. As Fitzgerald (2010:358) correctly points out, in Theodore’s view, “Paul is no egalitarian”. Theodore believes that there should be decency and order in the church, and that women should take second place, not undertaking duties that should be performed by men (*in Philm. 2, 786.27-31*).

Thirdly, Theodore devotes attention to another issue, namely whether it was proper for Paul to address Apphia as “beloved” (*carissima*). He remarks that “men of this age”³⁹ would frown upon the use of this word, regarding such a reference to love as a reason for accusing the user (of improper thoughts). Theodore then defends Paul against such a notion: There was nothing improper in this; Paul regarded addressing someone in this way as suitable in situations “in which the shame of passion did not interfere”.⁴⁰ Theodore adds that people who are slaves of passion are not “in true love”, but that people who pursue true love are not motivated by passion (*in Philm. 2, 786.21-23*). The word that Theodore uses to describe Paul’s intentions in this instance is “affection” (*affectus*). Fitzgerald (2010:359) has pointed out the importance of this concept, which is used nine times in Theodore’s

37 This is Greer’s translation (Greer 2011:783). Latin text: *et hoc non apostolo existente sed uiro fideli et moribus ornato, communem hanc exequentem uitam, sicut est id colligere ex illis quibus scribit ei, cum uxore et filio ... (in Philm. arg., 782.14-17).*

38 Latin text: *eo quod nulla in parte secundum rationem pietatis ... (in Philm. 2, 786.10-11)*; Greek text: *κατὰ τὴν εὐσέβειαν (in Philm. 2, 786.10).*

39 *Istius temporis homines (in Philm. 2, 786.14).*

40 *ἐφ’ ὧν πάνθους αἰσχρότης οὐκ ἐμεσίτευσεν (in Philm. 2, 786.19).* The Latin version puts this in slightly stronger terms: *in quibus turpitudine passionis inesse minime poterat.*

commentary. For example, Theodore asserts that the primary purpose of the letter is to persuade Philemon to take Onesimus back “with affection” (Fitzgerald 2010:359). In this instance, the term is used by Theodore to portray the relationship between Paul and Apphia, and to exonerate Paul from accusations of any indecent intentions towards her.

6. THEODORET OF CYRUS

The bulk of Theodoret’s exegetical work was produced between 431 and 447/448 C.E. (Guinot 2006:890); and his commentary on the Pauline epistles was also composed during this time. The date of composition is sometimes narrowed down to the mid-440s C.E. (for example, Hill 2001a:2), but this is not generally accepted. In writing his commentary, Theodoret depended to a large extent on the interpretations of Theodore of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom (Guinot 2006:893); and his work could thus be described as an example of Antiochian exegesis. In fact, Theodoret’s work (in general) is evaluated by Guinot (2006:913) as follows: “Theodoret’s interpretation, then, preserves what to our eyes is soundest in Antiochian exegesis, its desire to keep to the historical reality of the text and to give its letter a rational, even ‘scientific’ explanation.”

In his discussion of the letter, Theodoret explains the relationship between the three addressees as follows: Philemon was a believer who lived in the city of Colossae; and his house was still standing at the stage when the commentary was written (*in Philm. arg.*, 287.8-9).⁴¹ With regard to Apphia, Theodoret remarks that Paul links Philemon’s wife⁴² to him (Philemon) as someone sharing the faith. Furthermore, he mentions that Archippus was the person to whom their teaching was entrusted; this is deduced from Paul’s reference to Archippus’s mission in Colossians 4:17 (*in Philm.* 1-3, 288.11-12). Apphia is thus described primarily in terms of her relationship to Philemon (she is linked to Philemon by Paul) and her faith (she is someone sharing the faith). This description is then followed by a rather negative and sarcastic remark: If Apphia had been passed over in the letter, it was probable that she would have opposed what Paul had written!⁴³ As Hill (2001b:265, n. 1) correctly points out, this is “a gratuitously

41 I have used the BPEC edition by Marriott & Pusey Hilberg (1870), citing page and line numbers.

42 Theodoret describes Apphia as τὴν ὀμόζυγα (*in Philm.* 1-3, 288.9), literally meaning “yoke-fellow”, a word used of oxen, but also in a figurative sense for husband/wife, companion, bride, and spouse. Cf. Lampe (1961: ὀμόζυγος).

43 Εἰκὸς δὲ ἦν παραλειφθεῖσαν καὶ ἀντιπρᾶξαι τοῖς γραφομένοις (*in Philm.* 1-3, 288.12-13). Hill (2001b:261) translates it correctly as “she would probably have opposed

grudging remark”, and reveals a rather negative view of women as being narrow-minded and jealous. In this instance, Theodoret apparently holds this to have been true of Apphia, even though she was someone sharing in the faith.⁴⁴

Theodoret also devotes some attention to objections that were raised by some people in his day pertaining to the fact that Paul referred to Apphia as “beloved”. Theodoret’s response to this is that Paul used this term in order to refer to her as someone adorned with faith; in Theodoret’s time some people tended to malign the word, regarding it as a negative term, but in Paul’s time it was used to indicate that someone was noble and worthy of praise (*in Philm.* 1-3, 288.21-23).

7. CONCLUSION

What results has our investigation yielded?

Firstly, one must be aware that the important difference in the texts used by the five scholars who have been investigated in this article may have had an influence on their interpretation. As we have seen, the text that Jerome and Pelagius commented on, read “sister”, whereas the text used by Chrysostom, Theodore and Theodoret read “beloved”. The fact that the text used by Pelagius and others of his time read “sister” might well be the reason for the possible interpretation of Apphia as Philemon’s (biological) sister, as mentioned by Pelagius. On the other hand, in the case of texts reading “beloved”, the implication seemed to be that Philemon and Apphia were being described in the same way – a fact that was important to Theodore, who interpreted this as an indication that Paul accorded equal respect to both of them.

the letter’s contents had she been passed over.” The translation by Iron *et al.* (1999:114) attempts to soften this, but does not interpret the Greek correctly: “For had she been overlooked, it is likely that those to whom this letter was written would have indeed taken offence.”

- 44 Generally speaking, Theodoret was a little less androcentric than some of the other Church Fathers. Cf., for example, Harrison’s (2001:205-249) comparison of the views of Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret on human beings as the divine image of God. She shows that Diodore and Theodore restricted this notion to males, but that Theodoret moved towards mainstream exegesis on this issue, and expanded the concept to include females, albeit in a secondary way. However, in this particular instance in his commentary on Philemon, Theodoret seems to have succumbed to male chauvinism. Cf. also Jensen (2003:89-140) for a pertinent discussion of the role played by Theodoret in the growing tendency to marginalise women in the church.

Furthermore, we have noted a slow progression in the way in which the relationship between Philemon, Apphia and Archippus was interpreted. Jerome (and Origen?) did not refer to the relationship between Apphia and Archippus, but raised the possibility that Archippus may have been a bishop; Chrysostom raised the possibility (“It seems to me ...”) that Apphia was Philemon’s wife, and that Archippus was a friend and one of the clergy; Pelagius notes that some people are of the opinion that Apphia was Philemon’s sister or wife, and calls Archippus a “deacon”; Theodore is the first to identify Apphia as Philemon’s wife, and Archippus as their son, without leaving room for doubt; whereas Theodoret also identifies Apphia as Philemon’s wife, but does not mention the possibility that Archippus may have been their son; instead he claims that Archippus was responsible for the instruction of both of them. What is important to realise is that the identification of Apphia as Philemon’s wife was a relatively late development, that it arose hesitantly, and that it was only accepted as a fact early in the fifth century, i.e., around the time of Chrysostom, Pelagius and Theodoret. This should perhaps serve as a caution to scholars of our time who merely pass on the suggestion that Apphia may have been Philemon’s wife. It should at least be mentioned that this is but one way of interpreting the text, and that the other possibilities that were mentioned in the introduction of this study deserve equal consideration.

Another issue that has come clearly to the fore is the fact that personal views on women had no mean influence on perceptions regarding Apphia. Jerome (as well as Origen?) was apparently disturbed by the fact that Paul mentioned her before Archippus – particularly because, in Jerome’s view, Archippus had the position of a bishop. Jerome had to resort to Galatians 3:28 and the Old Testament to try to explain this. Once it had been accepted that Apphia was Philemon’s wife, it became easier to explain the fact that she was mentioned before Archippus. For example, Theodore pointed out that Paul followed the “order of nature” when he mentioned father and mother before referring to their son. Theodore appreciated the fact that Paul awarded Philemon and Apphia equal respect by calling them both “beloved”, but also did not fail to point out that this did not imply equality when it came to matters of the church. Furthermore, in the eyes of some, the fact that Philemon and Apphia were married diminished their esteem somewhat. Chrysostom found it necessary to point out that the example of Philemon and Apphia (as well as that of Prisca and Aquila) proved that marriage was a hindrance that could be overcome by true service to the Lord. And in the case of Jerome (as well as Origen?), who does not discuss the relationship between Philemon and Apphia, is it far-fetched to surmise that he might have imagined Apphia as being similar to one of the widows

who played such a prominent role in his own ministry? Or perhaps even as a virgin?

Towards the end of the period that we have investigated, we have also noted a certain discomfort with the fact that Paul used the term “beloved” when referring to Apphia. For Theodore this was a sign of equal respect, but he also found it necessary to point out that Paul had no improper motives in using the term. Theodoret commented on the matter in a similar way.

In our evaluation of perceptions regarding Apphia, we should also be fair to the five Biblical commentators whose interpretations we have scrutinised. Some of them spoke very highly of Apphia indeed. Jerome described her as a person without any falsehood, nor any hypocritical sisterhood; Theodore emphasised the fact that she received the same kind of respect from Paul as her “husband” did, and Theodoret described her as someone who was adorned with faith. However, the fact that this same Theodoret also made the grudging remark that Apphia would have been very upset if Paul had forgotten to mention her in his letter, reminds us that our ideologies quite often lie just beneath the surface, and tend to suddenly emerge when we least expect them to do so. This makes one wonder: To what extent is this also true in respect of our reception of Apphia in the twenty-first century?

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