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ONESIPHORUS (Ὀνησίφορος, *Onēsiphoros*, “profit bringer”). An Ephesian friend of Paul mentioned in 2 Timothy.

Overview

In the New Testament, Onesiphorus is mentioned only twice, both times in 2 Timothy. After Paul mentions that everyone in the province of Asia had deserted him (2 Tim 1:15), he expresses his gratitude for Onesiphorus: “May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he refreshed me many times, and was not ashamed of my imprisonment” (2 Tim 1:16). Earlier, when Paul was in Ephesus, Onesiphorus had served him in various ways (2 Tim 1:18). In 2 Timothy 4:19, Paul greets Onesiphorus’ household.

Exegetical Issues Regarding Onesiphorus in 2 Timothy

Onesiphorus Finds Paul in Rome

Paul recounts how Onesiphorus searched for and found Paul in Rome when he was in prison (2 Tim 1:17). Fee suggests that the text implies Paul was not in a public prison and therefore was hard to find (Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy*, 237). Alternatively, Paul might have been in Campus Martius (on the outskirts of Rome), where military prisoners often were taken (Witherington, *Letters*, 324). Witherington (who assumes that Onesiphorus has died; see below) notes that, in the first century, visiting a criminal constituted a high risk, and “it appears that Onesiphorus paid for it with his life” (Witherington, *Letters*, 325).

Against the view that Onesiphorus actually traveled to Rome, it has been suggested that Ῥώμη (*Rhōmē*, “Rome”) should be understood as the noun ῥώμη (*rhōmē*, “strength”). Thus, the phrase γενόμενος ἐν Ῥώμῃ (*genomenos en Rhōmē*, “arrived in Rome”) could mean “when he had recovered strength.” However, this reading has been discounted as unlikely (Dibelius, *Pastoralbriefe*, 79; Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 126).

The Repetition of κύριος (kyrios) in Paul’s Prayer

The peculiar double reference to κύριος (*kyrios*, “Lord”) in Paul’s prayer for Onesiphorus in 2 Tim 1:18 has prompted debate. Jeremias argues that this may be a conflation of two formulae (Jeremias, *Briefe*, 42). Lenski, on the other hand, argues that κύριος (*kyrios*) is repeated because of the use of the pronoun αὐτῷ (*autō*, “him”) to refer to Onesiphorus; if the pronoun were repeated in reference to “the Lord” (in place of the second κύριος, *kyrios*), the meaning would be ambiguous (Lenski, *Interpretation*, 775). Hanson (*Pastoral Epistles*, 127) observes four possible interpretations:

1. Both uses of κύριος (*kyrios*) refer to God the Father (e.g., William Estius [according to Spicq, *Épîtres Pastorales*, 735]; Scott, *Pastoral*, 99).
2. Both refer to Jesus (e.g., Boudou, *Épîtres Pastorales*, 251–52; Lenski, *Interpretation*, 775; most ancient commentators, according to Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 127).
3. The first κύριος (*kyrios*) refers to God the Father, and the second to Jesus (e.g., Belser, *Briefe*, 169; Bisping, *Erklärung*, 186).
4. The first κύριος (*kyrios*) refers to Jesus, and the second to God the Father (supported by most scholars, e.g., Bernard, *Pastoral Epistles*, 114; Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy*, 238; Hanson, *Pastoral*

Epistles, 127; Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 170; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 496; Spicq, *Épîtres Pastorales*, 735; Witherington, *Letters*, 325).

Several scholars cite the anarthrous (without an article) second κύριος (*kyrios*) as evidence for option four, since the Septuagint consistently renders the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) with an anarthrous κύριος (*kyrios*) (e.g., Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 127; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 496; Spicq, *Épîtres Pastorales*, 735).

A Possible Prayer for the Dead

Some scholars speculate that Onesiphorus was dead when Paul wrote 2 Timothy (Hanson, *Pastoral Letters*, 81; compare Dibelius, *Pastoralbriefe*, 79; Spicq, *Épîtres Pastorales*, 733; Bisping, *Erklärung*, 185). Those who hold this view find it significant that 2 Tim 1:16–18 refers to Onesiphorus' past acts of goodness. Later, in 2 Timothy 4:19, Paul greets the house (family) of Onesiphorus but does not mention him separately. Paul's prayer (2 Tim 1:18) for a man who possibly was dead has been taken as a reference to the existence of a purgatorial state, indicating a need to pray for the dead (Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 498; Montague, *First and Second Timothy*, 154; Dibelius, *Pastoralbriefe*, 79).

However, Paul never explicitly states that Onesiphorus is dead (for discussion, see Bernard, *Pastoral Epistles*, 114). Hendriksen finds it strange that this would not be mentioned if indeed Onesiphorus were deceased (Hendriksen, *I and II Timothy*, 238–39). Lenski points out that Paul on more than one occasion (compare 1 Cor 16:15) greets a house (family) without any indication that someone has died. He also would expect Paul to pray for comfort for the house of Onesiphorus rather than mercy (2 Tim 1:16), if Onesiphorus were dead (Lenski, *Interpretation*, 773). Moreover, Paul's blessing upon Onesiphorus and his family comes across more as a general blessing on the basis of what Onesiphorus had already done rather than as a prayer of intercession. In other letters, Paul several times states his wish of eschatological blessings upon people that are alive (e.g., 1 Thess 5:23; Hendriksen, *I and II Timothy*, 240). Wiles states that the prayer fulfills one of the formal criteria for wish-prayers by the usage of the aorist optative form (δῶν, *dōē*) of the desiderative verb (δίδωμι, *didōmi*, "to give"; Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers*, 32). Mounce states that the "verse is not a prayer, nor is it necessarily addressed to God as if it were an intercessory petition" (Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 494; see also Dibelius, *Pastoralbriefe*, 79, and Fee, *I and II Timothy*, 237). Fee argues that a wish-prayer hardly can be understood as an intercessory prayer (Fee, *I and II Timothy*, 186).

Onesiphorus in Noncanonical Literature

Onesiphorus plays a prominent role in the noncanonical *Acts of Paul*; he is also mentioned in the noncanonical *Acts of Peter and Andrew*, in which he is brought to faith by the two apostles (Barrett, *Pastoral Epistles*, 99; Spicq, *Épîtres Pastorales*, 732).

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