Onesiphorus

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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 αὐτῶ (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, Épitres Pastorales, 735]; Scott, Pastoral, 99).
2. Both refer to Jesus (e.g., Boudou, Épitres 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
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, Épitres 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, Épitres 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 (δωθη, 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 2 Timothy, 237). Fee argues that a wish-prayer hardly can be understood as an intercessory prayer (Fee, I and 2 Timothy, 186).

Onesiporus in Noncanonical Literature
Onesiporus 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, Épitres Pastorales, 732).

Bibliography


