



# Evangelical Quarterly

An International Review  
of Bible and Theology

Editors: John G F Wilks, I Howard Marshall,  
Richard Snoddy

## CONTENTS Vol. LXXXVI No. 2 April 2014

---

- **Subverting Slavery: Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul's Gospel of Reconciliation**  
*Bernardo Cho 99*
- **The book of Ruth and the house of David**  
*Gregory R. Goswell 116*
- **Tertullian and penal substitutionary atonement**  
*Peter Ensor 130*
- **Patristic study debunked – or redivivus?**  
A review article  
*Andrew Gregory 143*

**Reviews** (see list on pp. 156-7)

# Subverting Slavery: Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul's Gospel of Reconciliation

**Bernardo Cho**

*Bernardo Cho has an MDiv from Seminário Teológico Servo de Cristo in São Paulo, Brazil, and is currently completing his MCS in New Testament Studies at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada.*

KEY WORDS: Onesimus, Paul, Philemon, reconciliation, Roman Empire, runaway slave, slavery.

## I. Introduction

The advance of the social scientific approaches to the NT has stirred scholars' interest in Paul's interaction with the Roman institution of slavery. Within this discussion, Paul's Epistle to Philemon has played a significant role. Perhaps tantalised by the lack of a systematic approach by the apostle to the specific issue of slavery – even when addressing Philemon – modern scholars have often presupposed that Paul had a 'conservative' stance toward the social issues of his time.<sup>1</sup> However, such an assumption begs the question of whether it is even legitimate to employ the modern category of 'conservative' to label Paul's social stance. Is it really the case that Paul's silence on the specific issue of slavery means that the apostle was somehow indifferent to the matter? How does Paul's own context – namely, one that was thoroughly embedded within the social structures of the first-century Roman Empire – inform the way we interpret his view of slavery? More to the point, if we take seriously the background of slavery in first-century Rome, what does Paul's request in the Epistle to Philemon have to say about the apostle's way of dealing with slavery?

It will be argued in this essay that, although Paul did not explicitly request the manumission of Onesimus, his gospel of reconciliation reframed the way Philemon was to treat his runaway slave around Christ's lordship, and hence subverted the core of slavery from within. First, we shall contend that, despite recent objections, Onesimus was indeed a runaway slave. Then, by examining the backgrounds both of Roman slavery and of the kinds of punishment inflicted on fugitive slaves in the first-century Roman Empire, we shall demonstrate that the most Onesimus could expect was a mitigated punishment by Philemon. Finally, we shall argue that, while the end of slavery was beyond Paul's own horizon, his approach to Onesimus's problem was nonetheless subversive: Paul incarnationally invited Philemon to enact the sharing he had in the gospel of reconciliation by no longer treating Onesimus as property but rather as a true human being, a beloved brother.

---

1 See discussion in R. A. Horsley, 'Paul and Slavery: A Critical Alternative to Recent Readings', *Semeia* 83–84 (1998), 153–200.

## II. Was Onesimus a runaway slave?

The traditional view – namely, that Onesimus was a runaway slave – remained unquestioned until the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> However, some modern interpreters – noticing the ‘astonishing’<sup>3</sup> absence of explicit references in the text both to Onesimus being a runaway slave and to the specific occasion of the letter – have challenged this traditional interpretation.

Some scholars have suggested, for example, that Onesimus did not flee at all, but was rather sent with a gift to Paul.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it has been concluded that the problem which occasioned Paul’s letter was Onesimus’s failure to return in due time.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Paul’s use of the *hapax* ἄχρηστος (‘useless’, v. 11a), which denoted one’s lack of responsibility within the social structures of the Greco-Roman world,<sup>6</sup> seems to undermine such assertions. Despite recent claims that Paul’s use of ἄχρηστος refers to the stage when Onesimus was not a Christian,<sup>7</sup> the tone of the letter makes it very difficult to conceive that Onesimus’s former ‘uselessness’ was essentially due to his not being a Christian. In other words, even if one grants the contentious idea that Paul’s view of a person’s worth was solely based on one’s religion, it seems highly unlikely that the apostle would have used a peculiar word such as ἄχρηστος had Philemon not regarded his slave precisely in that manner. Truly, Onesimus might have well been regarded as ‘useful’ (εὔχρηστος, v. 11b) having been disciplined by the apostle; nevertheless, by referring to Onesimus as someone who had formerly been ἄχρηστος, Paul was most likely evoking the slave’s former character, which had been clearly evidenced through his flight. Hence, the proposal that Philemon would have given a useless (hence not trustworthy) slave the important task of sending a gift to Paul becomes thoroughly implausible.

Other interpreters in turn, presumably recognising the weaknesses of the arguments discussed above, have proposed a slightly different view – namely,

2 Cf. John Chrysostom, *Hom. Phlm.* 2. For further discussion see C. Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 126–31.

3 J. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 303.

4 See especially, J. Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul: A New View of Its Place and Importance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935); S. Winter, ‘Paul’s Letter to Philemon’, *NTS* 33:1 (1987), 1–15; A. D. Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997), 8–12. See also the discussion in J. Nordling, *Philemon*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 10–11.

5 See F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 400.

6 E.g., Plato, *Resp.* 411b; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1, 19. See the other references cited in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG), s.v. ‘ἄχρηστος’.

7 See e.g., B. Thurston and J. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, Pagina Sacra (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 181.

either Onesimus had knowingly left due to a personal conflict with Philemon in order to beg for Paul's intercession,<sup>8</sup> or the slave, having been threatened by Philemon, went after Paul's protection.<sup>9</sup> So, on the basis of one technical definition of 'runaway slave' (*servus fugitivus*) provided by the Roman Digest,<sup>10</sup> the proponents of this interpretation have concluded that Onesimus was not a fugitive. However, as J. A. Harrill has pointed out, the juridical term *servus fugitivus* was not a monolithic idea in the Digest, but rather represented different and conflicting concepts.<sup>11</sup> While the term *servus fugitivus* could classify a slave who had hidden himself from the master,<sup>12</sup> or deliberately left his master,<sup>13</sup> it could also refer to a slave who, having acted as a wanderer (*erro*), returned home at a late time.<sup>14</sup> Hence, even within the scenarios which postulate that Onesimus intentionally went after Paul, the slave would have likely been regarded as a fugitive. Moreover, given that the Digest itself is a sixth-century CE compilation of various early legal traditions, its definitions of *fugitivus* already represent a complex development of a technical juridical concept, and thus should not be taken uncritically as if they exactly stood for the actual social practices in the first century CE.<sup>15</sup>

Conversely, Paul's use of the passive verb ἐχωρίσθη ('he was separated', v. 15) may suggest that Onesimus had indeed fled from his master. Although the passive of χωρίζω often had the general sense of being 'separated' or 'departed' from someone,<sup>16</sup> there is one instance wherein the term clearly referred to runaway slaves. An Egyptian papyrus fragment from the mid-second century BCE describes in detail two runaway slaves who had 'absconded' (ἀναεχώρησαν) with a considerable amount of their master's property.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, while paucity of other evidence supporting Paul's use of χωρίζω with reference to fugitives (cf. e.g., φυγαδεύω in the extra-biblical literature) should prevent us from overstating the matter, the papyrus fragment at least serves as a parallel for Paul's unique

8 P. Lampe, 'Keine "Sklavenflucht" des Onesimus', *ZNW* 76 (1985), 135–37, referred to in Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, 128. See also S. Bartchy, 'Epistle to Philemon', in *ABD*, ed. D. N. Freedman et. al., vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 305–10; R. Wall, *Colossians & Philemon*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 184–85; B. Rapske, 'The Prisoner Paul in the Eyes of Onesimus', *NTS* 37 (1991), 187–203; and E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 196–97.

9 According to Deut. 23:15–16; cf. Philo, *Virt.*, 124. E. R. Goodenough, 'Paul and Onesimus', *HTR* 22 (1929), 181ff.

10 Cf. *Dig.* 21.1.17.4, 5; 21.1.43.1.

11 J. A. Harrill, 'Using the Roman Jurists to Interpret Philemon: A Response to Peter Lampe', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90 (1999), 135–38.

12 *Dig.* 21.1.17.

13 *Dig.* 21.1.17.2.

14 *Dig.* 11.4.1.5; cf. 21.1.17.14.

15 Harrill, 'Jurists', 136.

16 E.g., Polybius, *Hist.* 3.94.9; cf. Acts 1:4; 18:2.

17 *UPZ* 121. See discussion in J. Nordling, 'Onesimus Fugitivus: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon', *JSNT* 41 (1991), 99; cf. C. F. Moule, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 34–35.

terminology in our letter. Furthermore, if one assumes Paul's pastoral approach to such a delicate situation, it is quite likely that the apostle was addressing the event in an euphemistic manner, which may also explain the lack of explicit references to the slave's flight<sup>18</sup> (Onesimus is not mentioned until v. 10, and Paul's subtle use of a conditional clause in v. 18 only obliquely refers to the slave's defrauding of his master).<sup>19</sup> Before we discuss Paul's argument *per se* and how his approach to Onesimus's issue intersected with the cultural expectations of his own time, however, we shall examine in the next section how fugitive slaves were dealt with in the first-century Roman Empire. For now, although the exact reason for Onesimus's flight remains uncertain, it seems appropriate to conclude that the traditional view – that Onesimus was a fugitive slave – is still the best way of interpreting the occasion of Paul's Epistle to Philemon.<sup>20</sup>

### III. Roman slavery and the issue of runaway slaves

Slavery constituted the very foundation of the social structures in the Greco-Roman world, and generally slaves had no legal rights throughout Roman antiquity.<sup>21</sup> As the slaves themselves (not only their labour) were viewed as commodities, they were expected to do whatever was asked of them by their masters (e.g., even sexual favours).<sup>22</sup> Although slaves were often looked after with food and shelter,<sup>23</sup> benevolence to them was not normative. It is true that there is good evidence for masters' cultivating warm feelings towards their slaves.<sup>24</sup> Yet, considering that slaves were seen as mere household assets, charity was usually motivated by their masters' own financial concerns.<sup>25</sup> Further, the fact that slaves

---

18 D. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 300; J. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, NTG (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 103.

19 See N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 166, 187.

20 See e.g., R. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 504; M. A. Getty-Sullivan, *Philippians and Philemon* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1980), 78–79; M. J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 241; J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 312; M. Soards, 'Some Neglected Theological Dimensions of Paul's Letter to Philemon', *PRS* 17 (1990), 209–19.

21 See the survey by R. A. Horsley, 'The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars', *Semeia* 83–84 (1998), 19–66.

22 Horace, *Sat.* 1.2.116–19; Seneca, *Ben.* 3.19; Petronius, *Sat.* 75.11; the Delphic manumission inscriptions. For further discussion, see W. W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1908), 10–72; M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), 74–5.

23 Cf. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 4:1:37.

24 See the important discussion in J. Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 103–21, and the references cited therein.

25 *Ibid.* E.g., Philo, *Leg.* 2:83, 90–91; and the earlier evidence in Aristotle, *Oec.* 3.1344.

were sold despite their family status indicates the level of contempt shown for them.<sup>26</sup>

Manumission was certainly possible and, in fact, desired by arguably most slaves.<sup>27</sup> While there were a variety of possible reasons for a slave-owner to manumit a slave (e.g., gratitude or the desire to marry a slave),<sup>28</sup> in many instances manumission was also motivated by the master's desire to be seen as a benefactor or even by his interest in the sometimes profitable manumission-price.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, as J. Barclay has pointed out, the terms of manumission were solely under the control of the slave-owners.<sup>30</sup> Hence, freedom was not an absolute reality; because masters often ensured they retained advantages from their former slaves while not being responsible for their maintenance, the freedmen frequently found themselves saddled with continuing obligations.<sup>31</sup>

It is often said that the Stoics, particularly Seneca, tried to cultivate a positive stance towards slaves by inspiring a more tolerable legislation.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as Seneca himself believed that slaves lacked the power of self-originated actions possessed by the wise (and thus free) people, his agenda was far more concerned with the moral effects that slavery could potentially have on owners than with the conditions under which slaves actually lived.<sup>33</sup> Hence, in practice, Seneca was never against slavery itself. To be sure, cruel attitudes towards slaves were expected, in theory, to be checked by the Roman censors in the Republican jurisprudence.<sup>34</sup> However, there is not a single piece of evidence attesting to actual punishments on masters by the censors.<sup>35</sup> Even if one grants the unlikely sce-

26 Juvenal, *Sat.* 11.152–53. See K. R. Bradley (*Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* [Brussels: Latomus, 1984], 47–80) who presents some parallels of this practice in Roman Egypt.

27 Cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Orat.* 14.1; Philo, *Leg.* 2.84; Seneca, *Ben.* 3.19.

28 S. Treggiari, *Roman Freedman during the Late Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 11–20; A. M. Duff, *Freedman in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), 15–21.

29 Cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Orat.* 15.22; Seneca, *Ep.* 80.4. See K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 131; cf. J. Edmondson, 'Slavery and the Roman Family', in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 337–61.

30 J. Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon, and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', *NTS* 37 (1991), 169.

31 *Ibid.*; cf. Hopkins, *Conquerors*, 133–71. E.g., the *obsequium*, the *operae*; cf. the legal restrictions found in some Delphic manumission contracts.

32 Seneca, *Ep.* 47.1, 5–8, 10–14; cf. Plutarch, *Cat. Min.* 5.1–2, 5.

33 See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (OCD), s.v. 'slavery'; cf. K. R. Bradley, 'Resisting Slavery at Rome', in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 362–84.

34 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 20.13. Buckland, *Slavery*, 36; see also A. H. Greenidge, *Infamia: Its Place in Roman Republic and Private Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 63.

35 A. Watson, *Roman Slave Law* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 116–17.

nario that slaves had real access to a ‘state censor machinery’ by the first century CE, solidarity amongst Roman citizens would have constituted a significant obstacle to any practical intervention by the state.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, though later juridical compilations reflected a level of concern for the welfare of slaves, Roman law clearly favoured the practice of the *dominica potestas* thus regarding the *paterfamilias* as having absolute power to implement his own sense of justice when necessary, by whipping his *servus* or, at the very least, confining him in prison.<sup>37</sup>

Particularly by the beginning of the first century CE, the relationship between slaves and masters had been increasingly characterised by fear. The growth in the number of slaves in the last period of the Republic had occasioned a strong sense of insecurity, especially for masters (a sense which was intensified after the slave revolts in Sicily and Italy by the end of the second century BCE).<sup>38</sup> Pliny’s account of the assault of a slave owner by his own slaves exemplifies such tension:

Admittedly he [Larcus Macedo] was a cruel and overbearing master, too ready to forget that his father had been a slave, or perhaps too keenly conscious of it. He was taking a bath in his house at Formiae when suddenly he found himself surrounded; one slave seized him by the throat while the others struck his face and hit him in the chest and stomach and – shocking to say – in his private parts. [...] The guilty slaves fled, but most of them have been arrested and a search is being made for the others. [...] There you see the dangers, outrages and insults to which we are exposed. No master can feel safe because he is kind and considerate; for it is their brutality, not their reasoning capacity, which leads slaves to murder masters.<sup>39</sup>

By the time of Paul, the hostility of masters towards slaves had already become fairly common.<sup>40</sup> The relevant sources from around the first century CE suggest that slave-owners performed all sorts of cruel actions, especially when they thought themselves wronged by their slaves. In Seneca’s moral essay on anger, for instance, it is assumed that slaves were often disciplined by being flogged or having their legs broken:

---

36 *Ibid.*, 118–24.

37 Gaius, *Inst.* 1.52; Justinian 1.8.1; *Dig.* 1.5.4.1. W. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1955), 75; O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 26. J. F. Gardner (‘Slavery and Roman Law’, in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 436) has stated: ‘The apparent humanitarian concern for slaves occasionally visible [...] in Roman law is perhaps better seen as a form of manipulation in the interests of owners, aimed, like the possibility of manumission, at encouraging servile acquiescence. The concessions are few, and dependent almost entirely on the initiative of owners. Throughout the history of Roman law, the legal reality is unchanged: slaves are property.’

38 Westermann, *Slave*, 41.

39 Pliny, *Ep.* 3.14.

40 Cf. Livy, *Hist.* 21.41.10; Propertius, *Eleg.* 4.7.45.

A fine thing we shall have done, no doubt, if we send a wretched slave to prison! Why are we in such a hurry to flog him at once, to break his legs forthwith?<sup>41</sup>

According to Seneca, punishment of slaves could have been even worse; he cites this representative instance of the sadism of a slave-owner:

When one of his slaves had broken a crystal cup, Vedius ordered him to be seized and doomed him to die, but in an extraordinary way he ordered him to be thrown to the huge lampreys, which he kept in a fish-pond. Who would not suppose that he did this merely for display? It was really out of cruelty. The lad slipped from his captors and fled to Caesar's feet, begging only that he might die some other way – anything but being eaten.<sup>42</sup>

Whether Seneca's accounts represent his use of rhetorical devices or genuine portraits of reality, they still strongly indicate the sort of discipline wreaked upon mischievous slaves. Additionally, it is suggested by Petronius's satirical stories that slaves could also be crucified (or thrown to the wild beasts), depending on the seriousness of their fault:

On the same date: the slave Mithridates was led to crucifixion for having damned the soul of our lord Gaius.<sup>43</sup>

Tacitus likewise provides evidence for the Romans' execution of criminal slaves:

Soon afterwards one of his own slaves murdered the city-prefect, Pedanius Secundus, either because he had been refused his freedom, for which he had made a bargain, or in the jealousy of a love in which he could not brook his master's rivalry. Ancient custom required that the whole slave-establishment which had dwelt under the same roof should be dragged to execution, when a sudden gathering of the populace, which was for saving so many innocent lives, brought matters to actual insurrection.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, a text by Achilles Tattius (second century CE) implies that torture was a common way of disciplining slaves, particularly when they were interrogated in court.<sup>45</sup>

Fugitive slaves (*fugitivi*) in turn constituted a major socio-economic problem in the Greco-Roman world,<sup>46</sup> especially in the Roman Empire – they generated serious losses both of property and of valuable services to their *domini*.<sup>47</sup> While

41 Seneca, *Ira* 3.32; cf. also Plautus, *Asin.* 2.4 from the second century CE.

42 Seneca, *Ira* 3.40.

43 Petronius, *Sat.* 53; cf. *Sat.* 45.

44 Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.42.

45 Tattius 8.10.2. See discussion in T. Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 167–9; Finley, *Slavery*, 94–5; and Buckland, *Slavery*, 86–97.

46 The existence of runaway slaves is well attested throughout the early Classical literature: e.g., Andocides, *Pace* 3.29; Aristophanes, *Au.* 752; Demostenes, (*Neaer.*) 59.9; Plato, *Leg.* 11.914; Strabo, *Geogr.* 6.2. See S. Bartychy, 'Slavery (Greco-Roman)', in *ABD*, vol. 6, 69–70.

47 Westermann, *Slave*, 107.



the *fugitivi* sometimes sought asylum in a shrine, they usually delivered themselves in to banditry.<sup>48</sup> Several texts from around the first century CE portray the *fugitivi* as the main cause of the increase in brigandage.<sup>49</sup> Ironically, yet, it was the harsh treatment by the *domini* that often caused the flight of slaves.<sup>50</sup>

Accordingly, the *fugitivi* were punished with the same level of cruelty outlined above.<sup>51</sup> Our sources show that violence was employed not only as an attempt to solve the problem of the *fugitivi*, but also as a way of preventing it. Since very early on, masters seem to have taken precautionary actions by chaining slaves or affixing tags around their necks.<sup>52</sup> Some of the literature even takes it for granted that slaves were often branded and had an ear clipped either to make later identification easier or as a mode of punishment.<sup>53</sup> Also, the aforementioned *UPZ* 121 and Pliny's story of Macedo indicate that masters posted 'wanted' signs or even employed slave-catchers in the event of desertion;<sup>54</sup> and Roman legislation obliged whomever gave refuge to a *fugitivus* to return the slave to his owner, especially if the latter was a Roman citizen.<sup>55</sup> A papyrus from AD 298 illustrates what had commonly occurred throughout the first century CE:

[A]nd when you [a slave-catcher] find him [a *fugitivus*] you are to deliver him up, having the same powers as I should have myself, if present to [...], imprison him, chastise him, and to make an accusation before the proper authorities against those who harbored him, and demand satisfaction.<sup>56</sup>

In short, assuming the cruel means by which masters disciplined common slaves, it is reasonable to conclude that no practical limits existed for slave-owners to express their anger on the *fugitivi*.<sup>57</sup>

It is quite striking that substantial discussions on the specific question of how slaves (particularly runaway slaves) were treated in the first-century Roman Empire are often absent in many (even recent) commentaries on the letter to Philemon.<sup>58</sup> It is even more surprising that some scholars do not even mention the

48 *Ibid.*, 40–41, 90–92, 126–28. See Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.29.59–61; 4.1.33–36; Pliny, *Ep.* 10.74.

49 Cf. Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 77.10.5; Juvenal, *Sat.* 8.173–82; Petronius, *Sat.* 98, 107; Pliny, *Ep.* 9.21.1.

50 Nordling, 'Fugitivus', 106.

51 *Dig.* 47.2.6.1, for instance, regarded the *fugitivi* as serious criminals.

52 Xenophon, *Mem.* 2.1.16 (third century BCE).

53 Petronius, *Sat.* 103; Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.24.

54 Barclay, 'Paul', 170. Cf. Xenophon, *Mem.* 2.1.16 (third century BCE).

55 *Dig.* 11.4.1.1–6; cf. Apuleius, *Metam.* 6.4. Westermann, *Slave*, 108.

56 *P. Oxy.* 14.1643. See discussion in J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, AYB (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 17–28.

57 Cf. Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.72; Petronius, *Sat.* 107.4.

58 E.g., R. W. Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, IVP New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993); even the seminal work by D. J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); and M. F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, NCCS (Eugene: Cascade, 2009).

problem of slavery in first-century Rome at all.<sup>59</sup> Granted, the point tends to be neglected precisely by those who interpret Onesimus's status in terms of his not being a runaway slave.<sup>60</sup> However, as we have demonstrated in the previous section, Onesimus was most likely a *fugitivus*, and thus Paul's request to Philemon is best understood in light of a historical reconstruction of the complexities involved in a master's dealing with a runaway slave. If we are to conclude anything regarding Paul's view of slavery as presented in the Epistle to Philemon, the most reasonable way to do it should be by placing the apostle's argument in the setting just outlined above.

As already pointed out, Paul's letter is not explicit as to the reason for Onesimus's flight. If Philemon was a Roman citizen, then Onesimus should have been returned to his master as soon as he was found. The fact that Onesimus was in prison may suggest that he had been caught, and was waiting to be sent back to his master. How it happened that Onesimus met Paul in prison, we do not know.<sup>61</sup> At any rate, since Onesimus was most probably a fugitive slave, one thing can be stated with certainty regarding the situation addressed by Paul: as Barclay points out, realistically, the most Onesimus could have hoped for was that his penitence, along with Paul's letter of appeal, would somehow mitigate the punishment a *fugitivus* would normally expect.<sup>62</sup> The question now concerns how Paul addressed Onesimus's problem. Is there any parallel in the Classical literature for Paul's appeal to Philemon, or was his approach completely unprecedented? What did Paul require from Philemon anyway? To these questions we shall turn our attention now.

#### IV. Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul's gospel of reconciliation

There is no well-established precedent in the Classical literature for the kind of request Paul makes to Philemon, which by itself strongly indicates that his approach to Onesimus's flight was unique. To be sure, some scholars have attempted to find parallels between Paul's epistle and Pliny's intercessory letter on behalf of a client of Sabinianus:<sup>63</sup>

The freedman of yours with whom you said you were angry has been to me, flung himself at my feet, and clung to me as if I were you. He begged my help with many tears, though he left a good deal unsaid; in short, he convinced me of his genuine penitence. I believe he has reformed, because he

59 E.g., the otherwise helpful work by C. F. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957). Also, Callahan, *Embassy*, and L. J. Kreitzer, *Philemon*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).

60 Though Moule subscribes to the view that Onesimus was a runaway slave, Callahan ('Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum' *HTR* 86 [1993], 357–76) does not present an exposition on slavery based on the assumption that Onesimus was Philemon's brother.

61 Pace Rapske, 'Onesimus', 187–203.

62 Petronius, *Sat.* 107.4. See Barclay, 'Paul', 170.

63 Especially Knox, Winter, and Callahan.

realizes he did wrong. You are angry, I know, and I know too that your anger was deserved, but mercy wins most praise when there was just cause for anger. You loved the man once, and I hope you will love him again, but it is sufficient for the moment if you allow yourself to be appeased. You can always be angry if he deserves it, and will have more excuse if you were once placated. Make some concession to his youth, his tears, and your own kind heart, and do not torment him or yourself any longer – anger can only be a torment to your gentle self.<sup>64</sup>

However, it would be legitimate to argue that Paul's letter echoed Pliny's request only if one assumed, quite unrealistically, that Onesimus was a freedman, and not a slave – let alone a *fugitivus*! Additionally, while Pliny's words are 'more forthright, direct and explicit than Paul's,'<sup>65</sup> the apostle's request is more elliptical and goes much beyond the proposal by the former.<sup>66</sup> If there is anything really helpful in comparing Pliny's argument with Paul's, it seems to be the portrait by the former of one's desperation when facing the anger of his patron. How much worse would the fear of a *fugitivus* be in expectation of meeting his owner?

Paul surely found himself in a delicate situation – it involved not only the legal aspects of Roman culture, but most importantly, the very essence of the message he preached.<sup>67</sup> Onesimus was a runaway slave, Philemon, the wronged – and, presumably, angry – master; both now owed their salvation to Paul (v. 19). As we shall discuss, Paul addressed this situation in a way that was altogether skilful, moving, and subtly subversive.

The letter is carefully crafted so as to persuade Philemon to obey Paul's request.<sup>68</sup> While Philemon was the *paterfamilias* (and hence the actual host of the church), Paul makes sure to address his letter to the whole congregation (vv. 1–2). Thus, by placing Philemon in the position of being accountable to the Christians gathering in the house-church, Paul subtly relativises what might have been the cultural expectations on the slave-owner, and proposes that Onesimus's issue should be dealt with as a matter pertaining to the community of faith.<sup>69</sup> Addi-

64 Pliny, *Ep.* 9:21.

65 As Knox himself (*Philemon*, 17) admits.

66 Moreover, as B. Witherington III (*The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 27–28) has pointed out, Pliny's letter follows the rhetorical convention of *deprecatio* (a plea for mercy), whereas in Paul's argument there is not a single hint that Paul is pleading for mercy.

67 Wright, *Philemon*, 166. (Given that this paper was finished prior to the publication of Wright's most recent book on Paul, I regret that my argument lacks a thorough interaction with it. For Wright's up-to-date reading of the Epistle to Philemon, see *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* [London: SPCK, 2013], 3–22.)

68 Barclay, *Philemon*, 103.

69 See N. R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 99. See also J. A. Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 109–10.

tionally, while Paul expresses the hope that Philemon would act based on love, Paul's use of *praeteritio*<sup>70</sup> reminds the slave-owner of the apostle's authority (e.g., the term 'to command' in v. 8),<sup>71</sup> and that, though Philemon was the creditor of Onesimus, he was nonetheless Paul's debtor (v. 19).<sup>72</sup> The praise of Philemon for his love and faith (vv. 4–7) was thus aimed at a specific outcome: just as the 'hearts of the saints have been refreshed' through Philemon (v. 7), Philemon was to 'refresh' Paul's own 'heart' (v. 20) by following the apostle's request.<sup>73</sup>

However, far from imposing a rule of conduct on Philemon, the driving force of the letter rests upon Paul's emphasis on the 'fellowship' or 'interchange' (κοινωνία, v. 6) that both Philemon and, now, Onesimus had with the apostle (and, ultimately, with Christ).<sup>74</sup> Hence, Paul's prayer in v. 6 – that the κοινωνία of Philemon's faith may become effective in knowledge of every good in Christ – is fleshed out in v. 17 by the encouragement that Philemon should freely receive Onesimus as though he was the apostle himself.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, throughout his request (vv. 8–22), Paul never acts as a judge objectively deciding over Philemon and Onesimus; rather, Paul identifies himself with both parties, and pointedly speaks of himself out of an intimate relation with both master and slave.<sup>76</sup> Onesimus had become Paul's 'child' (τέκνον, v. 10) while in prison; Philemon, who had already been in κοινωνία with Paul, was now to receive Onesimus as the apostle's own 'heart' (σπλάγγνα, v. 12). Whatever Onesimus owed to his master, which he probably did,<sup>77</sup> the latter should expect Paul to pay him back; yet, Philemon owed his very self to Paul (v. 19). Thus, Paul 'incarnationally' presented himself to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Martin Luther has insightfully drawn the analogy: what Christ had done for humanity with God the Father, Paul was doing for Onesimus with Philemon (cf. Phil. 2:7).<sup>78</sup>

70 That is, a disclaimer which is precisely intended to affirm something; see Barclay, 'Paul', 171.

71 The verb ἐπιτάσσω ('I command') is never used by Paul elsewhere.

72 Petersen, *Paul*, 74–78.

73 R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 147.

74 Wright, *Philemon*, 168. For discussion on κοινωνία, see F. Hauck, 'κοινωνός', in *TDNT*, ed. G. Kittel, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 797–809. See also M. D. Hooker, 'Interchange in Christ and Ethics', *JSNT* 25 (1985), 3–17; and J. P. Sampley, *Pauline Partnership in Christ: Christian Community and Commitment in Light of Roman Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 176f.

75 Dunn, *Philemon*, 323. See also D. Daube, 'Onesimos', *HTR* 79 (1986), 41; and H. Riesenfeld, 'Faith and Love Promoting Hope: An Interpretation of Philemon v. 6', in *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C. K. Barrett*, ed. M. D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982), 251–57.

76 M. Barth and H. Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 306.

77 See J. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 133–39. Aside from the likelihood that Onesimus had stolen from his master, his very flight would have represented a significant financial loss to Philemon.

78 M. Luther, 'Preface to the Epistle of Saint Paul to Philemon, 1546 (1522)', in *Luther's Works*, ed. E. T. Bachmann, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 390. Wright

The key issue involved in interpreting Paul's request to Philemon concerns the meaning of Philemon 16.<sup>79</sup> Whereas some interpreters have taken Paul's words in v. 16 – 'no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother' – as an indication of his desire that Onesimus would be freed,<sup>80</sup> the matter is not as clear-cut as one may think. From a historical perspective, the on-the-spot manumission of a *fugitivus* would have denigrated Philemon's reputation as a Roman slave owner and affected the way the Empire viewed the Christian community – one must bear in mind that the Roman Empire was not very sympathetic towards movements that suggested social change.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, it is virtually impossible that a *fugitivus* would have been able to pay for his manumission-price. If Onesimus was to be manumitted for free, then Philemon would have been expected to manumit the other 'not-so-bad' slaves as well lest they feel outraged.<sup>82</sup> However, the emancipation of all slaves from the household would have occasioned a very complicated situation both to Philemon and to the slaves. Slavery was a key social component of the world wherein the early Christians lived, and as the *paterfamilias*, Philemon certainly needed to keep slaves in his household in order to host the house-church meetings (1 Cor. 1:11, 16; 16:15; Acts 16:15, 34; 18:8; cf. Exod. 1:10–14; 5:6–14; Lev. 25:44–46).<sup>83</sup> Additionally, how were the 'just freed slaves' supposed to provide for themselves, given that there was no such thing as 'absolute freedom', never mind a job at hand, in the Roman Empire?<sup>84</sup> Even if Onesimus alone was to be emancipated, that would have hardly represented his benefit – he would have probably ended up having to give himself into banditry or slavery again. In fact, to expect that Paul would request Philemon to pioneer an abolition of slavery of sorts seems quite anachronistic – neither the slave revolts of the second century BCE nor the Stoics envisaged the termination of the institution of slavery.<sup>85</sup> As R. Horsley has pointed out, since slavery was an essential part of the Roman political-economic-religious structure, 'the only way even to imagine a society without slavery would have been to imagine a different society'.<sup>86</sup>

---

gives us a similar insight: 'God was in the Messiah, reconciling the world to himself, [Paul] says in 2 Corinthians 5.19; now, we dare to say, God was in Paul reconciling Onesimus and Philemon' (*Paul*, 20).

79 Virtually all commentators agree on this matter.

80 E.g., Bruce, *Philemon*, 217; Bartchy, 'Philemon', 308.

81 See Wright, *Philemon*, 169.

82 Unless otherwise noted, this paragraph is indebted to Barclay, 'Paul', 176.

83 See G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 83–94; A. H. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire A.D. 284–602* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), 851; and M. Killingray, 'The Bible, Slavery and Onesimus', *Anvil* 24 (2007), 85–96. For the Jewish background of Paul's view of slavery, see Fitzmyer, *Letter to Philemon*, 29–31. For a helpful discussion on how Christians dealt with slaves in the post-apostolic period, see Kreitzer, *Philemon*, 74–77.

84 Wright, *Philemon*, 169.

85 Historians largely agree that the revolts of the second century BCE were aimed at the improvement of the living conditions of slaves, and not the abolition of slavery itself. See further discussion in Westermann, *Slave*, 102f.

86 Horsley, 'Slave Systems', 59.

Granted, Paul's words in v. 10 may hint the desire expressed in v. 13 that Onesimus would serve the apostle 'on behalf of' (ὕπέρ) Philemon (cf. v. 21).<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, Paul's use of the imperatives 'accept' (προσλαβοῦ, v. 17), 'charge' (ἐλλόγα, v. 18), and 'refresh' (ἀνάπανσόν, v. 20) place the force of the argument primarily on Paul's concern with Onesimus's own welfare.<sup>88</sup> Thus, Paul's way of dealing with the problem had to be, at least in principle, less pragmatic than outright emancipation. On the one hand, the apostle did recognise that it was better for a person to be free than to be a slave (1 Cor. 7:21–23)<sup>89</sup> – and there is nothing in our letter suggesting that Paul forbade Philemon from emancipating Onesimus. On the other hand, still, Paul had to work within the restraints of that specific circumstance, which gave no room for easy answers. How would the apostle address Onesimus's particular situation in such a way that was at the same time redemptive and culturally sensitive – that is, a way which neither represented a direct confrontation with Rome nor endorsed the cruelties of the Roman practice of slavery? In more practical terms, considering the difficulties and consequences involved in manumitting a runaway slave, how should Philemon act as a follower of Jesus towards his fugitive – but now also a Christian – slave so as to reflect the character of the God revealed through the gospel?

The request in Phlm. 16 is the point wherein the significance of the reconciliatory aspect of the gospel in Paul's social ethics seems to come to the surface.<sup>90</sup> The apostle knew that genuine transformation took place insofar as the gospel of reconciliation was experienced (Col. 3:22–4:1).<sup>91</sup> Hence, Paul often sustained his ethical teachings – especially the so-called 'household codes' – by stating that in Christ 'there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all' (Col. 3:11, cf. 3:22–4:1; Gal. 3:28; 2 Cor. 5:17–21).<sup>92</sup> Some scholars have recently argued that the Pauline household codes were not at all distinct from the contemporary Stoics' view of the household relationships, and suggested that the apostle was simply subscribing to the *status quo*.<sup>93</sup> However, other interpreters have noticed some major differences between Paul's household codes and those presented by the Stoics, and pointed out that the way Paul applied Christian rationales to his ethical instructions both

87 Knox, *Philemon*, 22–24. Pace Nordling, *Philemon*, 16–19.

88 See Lightfoot, *Philemon*, 342–43; E. F. Scott, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 110.

89 See the technical discussion in J. A. Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1995), 68–128.

90 See discussion in M. M. Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, *The Two Horizons New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 197.

91 Wright, *Philemon*, 185.

92 Killingray, 'Slavery', 86–93.

93 Cf. e.g., Seneca, *Ep.* 94.1. See J. Glancy, 'Slavery and the Rise of Christianity', in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 468–81; cf. Harrill, *Slaves*, 87–97. See also discussion in Witherington, *Philemon*, 184; and D. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

personalised the relationships between the members of the household and limited the abuse of power by the *paterfamilias* – exhortations to the heads of the households ‘to love their wives, not to break the spirit of their children, and to treat their slaves with equity and justice’ are simply absent in the Greco-Roman sources.<sup>94</sup> Thus, N. T. Wright has concluded:

It is, in fact, extremely unlikely that Paul, having warned the young Christians against conforming their lives to the present world, would now require just that of them after all. Nor does he. The Stoics (who provide some of the closest parallels to these household lists) based their teaching on the law of nature: this is the way the world is, so this is how you must live in harmony with it. Paul bases his on the law of the *new* nature: Christ releases you to be truly human, and you must now learn to express your true self according to the divine pattern, not in self-assertion but in self-giving.<sup>95</sup>

Accordingly, the apostle’s request to Philemon was in a similar way redefining the values of Philemon’s household around the reality of Christ’s lordship.<sup>96</sup> In other words, Paul’s thorough use of familial language with reference to Onesimus indicates that, even though Philemon could potentially remain Onesimus’s master, their relationship was now to be defined primarily on the basis of their being brothers and God’s new humanity in Christ.

This emphasis is reflected particularly in the way Phlm. 16 is phrased. While the word ‘slave’ (δοῦλος) appears in our letter only in v. 16, it should not be read apart from the preceding particle ‘as’ (ὡς), which usually introduced a subjective reality, and not just an objective description (cf. v. 17 where ὡς is used with reference to Paul himself).<sup>97</sup> Thus, as the expression ‘as a slave’ is syntactically contrasted with ‘more than a slave, as a beloved brother’ by means of the conjunction ἀλλά (‘but’), Philemon was ‘no longer’ (οὐκέτι) to regard Onesimus as though he was *merely* a slave, rather as a beloved brother, regardless of whether the latter would remain a slave or become, for example, Philemon’s client. The phrase ‘in the flesh and in the Lord’ (ἐν σαρκί καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ, v. 16b) in turn both expands and qualifies the reality of the transformed relationship between Philemon and Onesimus – a reality which should encompass all spheres of human existence.<sup>98</sup> To be more precise in terms of how Paul’s request to Philemon as a whole is developed, the apostle had expressed earlier in the letter the expectation that Philemon would do what was ‘appropriate’ (τὸ ἀνήκον, v. 8) to Onesimus’s situation; appropriate, however, not to the eyes of Rome – i.e. by whipping and branding the slave, or by hammering his legs – but rather, according to those

---

94 See Witherington, *Philemon*, 184.

95 Wright, *Philemon*, 147. See also the helpful discussion in Witherington, *Philemon*, 184.

96 S. Ruden, *Paul among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His own Time* (New York: Crown, 2010), 162–68.

97 See P. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 297.

98 See M. R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians and to Philemon*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), 188.

who have been made partakers of the gospel of reconciliation. Although Onesimus had been absent from his owner for a while (v. 15a), Philemon could ‘duly receive’<sup>99</sup> Onesimus back ‘eternally’ (αἰώνιον αὐτόν ἀπέχρησ, v. 15b; cf. Exod. 21:6; Deut. 15:17); yet, no longer as a walking utility of the household, but as a beloved brother both in the flesh and in the Lord, as Paul himself was.<sup>100</sup>

The fact that Paul chose not to confront directly the institution of slavery itself – that is, by not explicitly requesting for Onesimus’s manumission – does not necessarily imply an indifferent stance towards the social issues of his time; rather, it only suggests that the apostle had to work with society as he found it, and grapple with the problems of his own world by means which were actually available to him. As an apostle of Christ, Paul most likely regarded the reality of slavery as incompatible with the Christian view that all human beings were made in God’s image.<sup>101</sup> Yet, given the pervasiveness of slavery in the first-century Roman Empire, a direct attack on the problem in the public sphere would have not occasioned the positive outcome envisaged by the apostle. Perhaps the only viable solution would be to act within the fabric of the world wherein the early Christians lived, and embed the Christian ethical values in – or ‘put the leaven of the gospel’ into – the rigid social structures of the Empire.<sup>102</sup> Thus, as Paul understood that the living out of the Christian life always had social implications, he refused to address Onesimus’s particular situation according to the way of the kingdom of Caesar. By placing Jesus Christ in the center of human relationships, Paul humanised the members of Philemon’s *familia*, subtly relativised one of the key cultural values of the Greco-Roman society of the first century – namely, the supreme power of the *paterfamilias* in the household – and consequently showed the way to true social transformation. Keeping in mind that the household was considered the nucleus of the Empire, whose ultimate *paterfamilias* was Caesar himself,<sup>103</sup> Paul’s redefining of Philemon’s household structure around Christ was by no means witless.

Hence, Paul’s request to Philemon represented neither ‘imperialist conservatism’ nor ‘socially disengaged pietism’.<sup>104</sup> Quite the contrary. Given what we have argued in the previous section regarding the way the *fugitivi* were treated in the first-century Roman Empire, the subversive tone of Paul’s request must not be understated. It would have already represented a huge social stretch for a first-century Roman *paterfamilias* to regard a slave as a brother; how much more radical would it have been for Philemon to treat Onesimus, a *servus fugitivus*, as

---

99 BDAG, s.v. ‘ἀπέχω’.

100 Dunn, *Philemon*, 335.

101 Moule, *Philemon*, 11–12.

102 Witherington, *Philemon*, 30.

103 M. Harding, *Early Christian Life and Thought in Social Context* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 208.

104 These categories are often attributed to Paul’s social stance based on the untenable assumption that the language of slavery in Paul was always metaphorical. See discussion in Horsley, ‘Paul’, 153–96.



a beloved brother? We certainly need not push the argument as far as to say that Paul did not envisage the emancipation of Onesimus at all, nor should we infer that the apostle regarded Philemon's treating of Onesimus 'as a beloved brother' as being necessarily better than granting the slave his freedom. In fact, although Paul did not explicitly request the manumission of Onesimus, the possibility – with all the aforementioned difficulties, to be sure – seems to have remained wide open (cf. vv. 13–14).<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, in the specific context of Onesimus's being a runaway slave in the Roman Empire, the *ad hoc* solution proposed by Paul in the Epistle to Philemon was probably the only way possible to the immediate welfare of all parties and thus to genuine social change. By the same token Paul's suggestion was indeed viable precisely because of the way of the kingdom of God, whose gospel reconciled humanity through Christ. In sum, Paul expected Philemon to recognise that Christ had restored Onesimus's very humanity and act accordingly both by forgiving his slave and regarding him as a fellow partaker in the gospel. In this way Paul's dealing with Onesimus's problem went far beyond the proposals sketched by the people contemporaneous with him (e.g., Seneca and Pliny). Although Paul did not directly confront the institution of slavery *per se*, he reframed the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus according to Christ's lordship, and radically subverted the core of slavery from within: Philemon was no longer to treat Onesimus, a former runaway slave, as a household asset worthy of punishment, but as a beloved brother.

If we try to appreciate Paul's words in their own context, we realise that he was far more engaged with the social issues of his world than modern interpreters have often supposed. In fact, Paul's redemptive rationale behind the argument of the Epistle to Philemon has played a crucial role throughout Western history as a seed inspiring the implementation of genuine social change and eventually splitting the rock of slavery.<sup>106</sup> Even more important, in a world where the power of the gospel of reconciliation has not been tasted in its fullness, Paul's letter to Philemon provides us with a solid biblical ground through which to sow into the social struggles of our own time.<sup>107</sup>

### Abstract

The lack of a taxonomic exposition by Paul on the issue of slavery in the Roman Empire has led modern scholars to regard the apostle as a socially disengaged religious figure. However, given the risks of anachronistically employing modern

---

105 Moo, *Philemon*, 373; cf. Barclay, 'Paul'.

106 G. A. Buttrick, 'The Epistle to Philemon: Exposition', in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), 561.

107 For discussion on how the Bible's way of dealing with the problem of slavery can be relevant to our own social ethics, see the very interesting argument for a 'redemptive-movement hermeneutics' by W. J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 30–66.

categories to describe Paul's social stance, it seems imperative that interpreters take seriously the context of the first-century Roman Empire when exegeting Paul's view of the specific issue of slavery. By taking Paul's Epistle to Philemon as a case study, this paper examines Paul's particular request to Philemon in light of the concurrent Greco-Roman sources, and analyses how the apostle's stance towards slavery intersected with the cultural expectations of his time. The intended outcome of this study is both to elucidate how Paul addressed the problem of slavery in the early Christian communities and to provide modern readers with a theological framework through which to engage their own social struggles.