The Letter to Philemon in the Context of Slavery in Early Christianity

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Philemon in Perspective

Interpreting a Pauline Letter

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The Letter to Philemon in the Context of Slavery in Early Christianity

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Paul's short Letter to Philemon is loaded with rhetorical nuances. It carries benevolent wishes and prayers, as well as requests and appeals which, for many reasons, would have been difficult to turn down, and which, for that reason, were more than requests. The subtext communicates powerfully to those readers who have the insight to understand it, since Paul's letter to his friend Philemon contains a rich variety of rhetorical strategies used by Paul in his attempt to persuade Philemon to comply with his wishes regarding Onesimus, Philemon's former slave. An investigation of these rhetorical strategies will hopefully enable observant readers to gain some insight into the nature of slavery in the first century CE — as well as into early Christianity's response to it. However, before we turn to the decoding of rhetorical strategies, the historical phenomenon of slavery in the Roman Empire during the first century CE requires our attention. What was the nature of this phenomenon? Should we assume that the slavery of that time was more or less the same as those slavery systems that were nearest in time to our own era — that is, the slavery systems established in European colonies and America? Or was it a different — perhaps a less severe — kind of slavery?

To provide a brief answer is not possible. The true nature of slavery in the first century is at present still a matter of debate. There are two main routes to the acquisition of knowledge on, and the historical reconstruction of, slavery in the first-century Roman Empire. Some of the most enthusiastic proponents of each of these two routes hold the view that their route alone can lead us to a proper understanding of the slavery of that time, and that the other route is a cul-de-sac. The two routes in question are: 1) the investigation of Roman legal texts; and 2) a social and historical analysis of slavery systems. We should consider the claims to truth made by the proponents of each of the two routes, in order to understand more about the nature of slavery in the first-century Roman Empire.
I. Investigating Roman Legal Texts

One method of describing the nature of slavery in the Roman empire of the first century is to investigate ancient Roman legal texts, in search of any information on the position of slaves. Such texts are combed to find information regarding the frequency of, and conditions for manumission,\(^1\) and in order to determine whether slaves were regarded by Roman law as persons and therefore as accountable; whether a specific slave was a runaway slave (fugitivus), a truant (erro) or a slave who intended to return to his owner, but who had asked another slave-owner (or a person of similar social standing) for protection, in the hope that this person would intercede for the runaway slave with his original owner; and other related matters.\(^2\)

However, the study of legal texts as a route to reconstructing slavery in antiquity has been criticised on the basis of a number of points. It is argued that: 1) Legal texts may or may not reflect the actual legal codes which were applied in a specific place and time in antiquity. Furthermore, legal texts may possibly reflect the idealistic views of philosophers in terms of what they thought the situation should be — but not the laws as they were actually applied. 2) Even legal codes may not mirror real practices at grassroots level; and even legal codes are prescriptive, which means that it cannot simply be assumed that they describe real legal practices.\(^3\) 3) Some legal codes, such as the \textit{Digest of Justinian}, which are often relied upon for the study of slavery in the first century, were compiled many years later, and it is uncertain whether these codes actually reflect the way in which they were applied in the first century.\(^4\) 4) It is difficult to determine the extent to which Roman laws were fully implemented in the Roman provinces. Roman law often applied only to Roman citizens, while non-Romans retained their own laws.

In the light of the foregoing, some historians have rejected the investigation of legal texts as a means of determining actual conditions of slavery. They point out that this approach has often induced historians to reconstruct first-century slavery as a benign form of mass employment for the under-class, as well as a means of integrating foreigners


\(^{2}\) See P. Lampe, Keine "Sklavenflucht" des Onesimus, ZNW 76 (1985) 135–137. W.L. Westermann, The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity (MAPhS 40), Philadelphia 1955, 107: "The problem of the runaways (fugitivi, errones) was a serious one in all parts of the Empire."

\(^{3}\) See Harrill, Manumission (see n. 1), 23.

into society, thereby supplying an avenue for upward social mobility for some, such as the slaves in managerial positions.  

Criticism relating to the use of legal texts was vehemently expressed by Orlando Patterson in his very influential *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*:

Many modern students of slavery, in failing to see that the definition of the slave as a person without a legal personality is a fiction, have found irresistible a popular form of argument ... [which] has a standard formula. The scholar ... declares as a legal fact that the slave is defined and treated by the slaveholding class as a person without legal or moral personality. He then digs into his data and comes up with “proof” that the slave is indeed treated as a person in law—for is he not punished for his crimes? and are there not laws restricting the powers of the master? ... “You may define a person as a thing,” goes the flourish, “but you cannot treat him as one.”

Patterson’s point is that it is “irrelevant” whether Roman law defined slaves as things or persons. In fact, he admits: “No legal code I know has ever attempted to treat slaves as anything other than persons in law.” Roman law defined slaves as persons, he concedes; but a social-historical analysis of slavery in that period clearly demonstrates that slaves were indeed regarded not as persons (whatever their legal definition), but simply as things. Therefore, Patterson and others argue, the optimal route to reconstructing first-century slavery can only be attained through a thorough analysis of slavery as a historical and social phenomenon.

We will heed the arguments of Patterson and others; but it also needs to be pointed out that their arguments do not diminish the importance of analysing legal texts. The texts do offer valuable information with regard to many details relating to slavery, for example, the degrees of manumission. Furthermore, it should also be noted that many of those scholars who have used legal texts, have done so without claiming that the information drawn from legal texts alone is adequate for the purposes of drawing a clear and complete picture of slavery. William Westermann’s *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* and Thomas Wiedemann’s *Greek and Roman Slavery* both make

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5 Ibid., 116f.
7 Ibid., 23.
8 See Harrill, Manumission (see n. 1), 54.
9 Westermann, *Slave Systems* (see n. 2). His book helps researchers to understand that one should guard against speaking about Greek and Roman attitudes (and those in other cultures) as if one monolithic view of slavery existed in antiquity. On the contrary, there were many different approaches, and researchers of Christian origins should at least be aware of the arguments of Westermann and others. Westermann draws our attention to a paradox: Slavery in the Greek-speaking eastern part of the empire was less severe than in the Latin-speaking West, even though slavery in the Greek East was racially motivated. In the Greek East, slavery was “grounded in the theory of innate differences, both quantitative and qualitative, in the moral and intel-
liberal use of legal (and also literary, philosophical and political) texts, but do not use this material in an attempt to diminish the severity of the slavery systems of the ancient Greek and Roman cultures. It is admittedly true, for example, that a scholar such as Westermann cautions against the view that, in Roman and Greek systems, slaves were seen merely as objects, and nothing else. But Westermann issues this caution, not in order to contend that ancient slavery was a benign system, but simply to point out that, despite the fact that slaves were regarded as mere human chattel when it came to buying and selling, in terms of Roman law, they were regarded, at least formally, as human beings.11

M.I. Finley is another example of a scholar who used legal texts, but, who, at the same time, did much to deconstruct the perception of slavery in the Roman Empire in the first century as a humane institution. He held Roman legal distinctions to be crucial for a proper understanding of slavery.12 Peter Lampe13 also used information from Roman legal texts as the basis for his conclusion that Onesimus was not a fugitive slave — without arguing that slavery in the Roman Empire in the first century was a mildly benign social institution. In his Slaves and

lectual capacities of individuals which extend to include racial groups" (p. 28). In the Roman Latin-speaking West, the treatment and working conditions of slaves were more severe, even though the Romans — unlike Aristotle — did not regard slaves as racially designed to serve. With regard to slavery in the Roman West, Westermann points out that:

In marked contrast with the severity of the Roman treatment of slaves, with the unlimited powers of control which lay with the pater familias and with the view, clearly expressed by Cicero, that it was beneath the dignity of a Roman official to grant too great latitude of influence to a slave, stands the broad-minded attitude of the Romans in admitting talented slaves after their manumission into the intellectual life of the Roman community. They were accepted into its political and economic life without any manifestation of prejudice arising from their former status. (p. 79.)

11 Westermann, Slave Systems (see n. 2), 80:

Fundamentally regarded, however, as an object of ownership, either by a single person, by several persons collectively, or by a corporation such as a collegium or the state, the slave was a chattel (res), subject to all the economic operations which were applicable to any other commodity, such as sale, mortgage ...

But then Westermann goes on to qualify this on p. 81: "Special treatment of the slave as res was necessarily required, however, by the recognition of these human qualities which distinguished him from other objects of use and exchange ", and then concludes on p. 102:

The question whether, in Roman law, a slave was conceived of, in any sense, as a person has been the subject of discussion among the modern scholars versed in the doctrines of ancient law. There seems to be little doubt that in Roman jurisprudence, as in the Greek concept, the slave was regarded as a person as well as a res. (Emphasis GFW.)

13 See Lampe, "Sklavenflucht" (see n. 2), 136.
Masters in the Roman Empire, K.R. Bradley lavishly uses Roman legal texts as points of reference (see, for example, chapter 3), but his reconstruction of slavery convincingly shows how important a factor the use and abuse of power by slave masters was, and clearly demonstrates that slavery cannot be studied without understanding the roles played by power abuse and violence.

In fact, most of the scholars mentioned above, who liberally use legal texts, would agree that an analysis of the texts alone would leave us with only a one-dimensional picture of slavery in the Roman Empire during the first century CE. What is needed to complete the three-dimensional picture is a historical and social analysis of slavery. The legal — and also the literary, historical, moral and papyrus texts can assist one to conduct such an analysis, together with other sources, such as archaeological finds, inscriptions and papyrus and parchment fragments. But it was the social and historical analyses conducted by scholars such as Patterson, Finley and Bradley that significantly influenced the debate on slavery in antiquity.

II. Social and Historical Analysis and Reconstruction of Slavery

Horsley points out that the diversity of vocabulary in various sources poses a problem. The terms δοῦλος and servus, for example, cover wide semantic domains that indicate a variety of people in servanthood. These terms are often used in a metaphorical manner, referring to moral slaves of different social standings. Furthermore, ancient writers often named helots "slaves", which they were not — helots were not imported from outside but were subjugated from within their own native territories and could not be bought or sold. To understand what slavery really was, the historian thus needs to look beyond the vocabu-
lary on the surface and investigate the extent of the power of slaveowners over those they owned, Finley argues. Once scholars begin to do that, they will see that, notwithstanding the recognition of slaves as persons in legal texts, slaves were in reality nothing but chattel, movable possessions, which could be bought and sold by owners without any consideration of the human and cultural relations that slaves might have had. For Finley, 19

The property element remains essential ... what separates the slave from the rest, including the serf or peon, is the totality of his powerlessness in principle, and for that the idea of property is juristically the key — hence the term "chattel slave".

Orlando Patterson agrees with Finley's social historical analysis, but takes it further. Slaves were not simply chattel. Their position was worse. They were dead people walking. Although biologically alive, they were socially dead. 20 That is why he called his book Slavery and Social Death. The slave had been physically and violently removed from his or her native home and environment, "stripped of ethnicity and all dignity" 21, and often forced to learn a foreign language and unfamiliar customs. It would have been virtually impossible for slaves who had been captured by means of an act of imperial conquest, to uphold and pass on to their physical children the customs and culture in which they themselves had been brought up.

Patterson argues that slavery was a form of institutionalised violence, most often upheld by the Roman imperial state. 22 Conquest or reconquest was a primary source of new slaves. 23 During a successful conquest, the rebels, the aged and the weak amongst the enemy were killed, according to many of Josephus' reports, 24 but the able-bodied survivors were captured as slaves. Their fathers were killed; they were enslaved. The powerlessness of these slaves was thus a substitute for death. 25 They were socially dead persons, without birthright, isolated from their social heritage and the traditions of their ancestors, "not allowed to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited

19 Finley, Slavery (see n. 12), 307.
20 See Patterson, Slavery (see n. 6), 1–75.
21 Harrill, Manumission (see n. 1), 16.
22 A critical question which may be posed to Patterson is that of whether he has not perhaps exaggerated the role of the Roman state's conquests as a source of new slaves. According to Harrill, Manumission (see n. 1), 30, the "main sources of ancient slaves were warfare, piracy, brigandage, the international slave trade, kidnapping, infant exposure, some breeding, and the punishment of criminals." The Roman state was responsible for slavery resulting from warfare, but in the other instances, other people played a role.
23 See Horsley, Slave Systems (see n. 17), 29.
24 See Joseph., BJ 1.180, 222; 2.68, 75; AJ 17.289, 295.
meanings of their forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory."^{26}

The argument that the investigation of legal texts may mislead the historian into accepting a historical reconstruction of slavery in the Roman Empire which is superficial and which does not reveal the brutal character of slavery, is convincingly refuted by K.R. Bradley's book, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, published in 1984 (followed by a second edition in 1987). The classical historian Bradley's abundant use of a variety of texts — legal sources (such as the *Digest of Justinian* or the *lex Junia*), as well as the writings of historians (such as Tacitus), politicians (such as Seneca), philosophers (such as Musonius Rufus), moralists (such as Juvenal) and agricultural writers (such as Columella) — does not prevent him from providing an incisive analysis of the way in which these texts reveal how slaves were totally controlled by their masters.^{27}

Bradley illustrates this complete control without vilifying the Roman state or slave-owners. Throughout his book he reminds readers that even among self-centred and pragmatic Romans, moments of kindness could not be ruled out entirely. However, a closer analysis of the motives for many of the ostensible acts of kindness reveals a much harsher treatment of slaves. This Bradley illustrates with a number of examples. Attention will be focused on the aspects of holidays for slaves, slave marriages and slave families, and manumission, with a view to testing, as it were, the friendly face of the Roman system of slavery.

1. Acts of Kindness as a "Lubrication" for the Slave System

Even though Bradley reminds one that feelings of compassion and individual deeds of kindness on the part of Roman citizens and even the ultimate authorities who wielded the mechanisms of power over slavery must be recognised, his analysis clearly shows how the system of slavery functioned very effectively to entrench the power of the slaveholder class, despite any individual acts of compassion. In fact, deeds of kindness strengthened the system by making it more flexible, and therefore ultimately stronger. Acts of kindness — favours shown to slaves, as well as incentives and rewards, promises of manumission — may or may not have been granted in a genuine spirit of generosity by

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26 Patterson, Slavery (see n. 6), 2.
27 It is interesting that Bradley's analysis was conducted independently of Patterson's study. Bradley does not refer at all to Patterson in the first edition (1984) of his book. In the supplementary bibliography in the second edition of 1987, Bradley does mention Patterson's 1982 book.
the master; but regardless of the spirit in which they were granted, these acts of kindness functioned as a "lubrication" to allow, as it were, the system to run smoothly: They served to diminish the severity of slavery and to support slavery in order to ensure its survival as a social institution. This can be demonstrated by means of the following examples: slave holidays, slave marriages and manumission of slaves.

a. Holidays for Slaves

Slaves were allowed to celebrate certain holidays on the Roman calendar, when they did not have to work.\textsuperscript{28} As is the case today, many of these holidays were once holy days — feasts celebrating some religious event or honouring some god — for example Saturnalia, Matronalia and Compitalia. According to Catullus, Saturnalia was the most popular of the Roman holidays. Seneca complains in respect of this holiday, that then the "whole mob has let itself go in pleasures."\textsuperscript{29} Pliny the Younger writes that he retired to his room while the rest of the household celebrated.\textsuperscript{30} Slaves had the day off. As often happens with such feasts, "[n]ormal restraints were removed from slaves to the extent that they might gamble and address their masters more frankly than usual; and at Compitalia signs of servitude were removed from slaves."\textsuperscript{31}

An interesting case was the peculiar holiday celebrated on 13 August, on which women washed their hair.\textsuperscript{32} Plutarch was at a loss to explain the hair-washing ritual. The origins and meaning of the feast were obscure to him, and probably to many other Romans; yet 13 August was still celebrated as a holiday — also for slaves. Why were holidays celebrated when their origin and meaning were lost? Bradley offers a possible explanation:\textsuperscript{33} The real reason for the holidays was no longer religious but social. The objective was to lighten up the lives of slaves — for one day — so that, after the brief celebration, they would work harder on other days. In support of this deduction, he refers to the Roman writers Solinus and Macrobius, who explicitly remark that slaves were given banquets (\textit{cenae}) on March 1 and Saturnalia by their owners in order to foster \textit{obsequium} for the immediate future or as a compensation for work completed in the recent past.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{28} See Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 29.
\bibitem{29} Sen., Epist. 18.3.
\bibitem{30} Plin., Epist. 2.17.24.
\bibitem{31} Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 43.
\bibitem{32} See ibid.
\bibitem{33} See ibid.
\bibitem{34} Ibid., 44.
\end{thebibliography}
b. Slave Marriages and Slave Families

Judith Evans Grubbs writes:

Marriage between slaves or between a slave and a free person was a legal impossibility, though relationships between free persons and slaves certainly occurred in real life. If monogamous and long-lasting, such a union would be called contubernium, as would a union between two slaves. Such quasi-marital relationships are often attested in funerary inscriptions from the city of Rome.\(^{35}\)

This state of affairs — namely that slaves entered into informal marriages — is confirmed by what one reads in the New Testament. Matt 18 contains the parable of the ungrateful δοῦλος\(^{36}\) who was threatened that if he did not pay his debt, "his wife and children and all that he had" would be sold to repay the debt. Even though the parable is fiction, it presupposes that slaves could enter into unions which, though not legal according to Roman law, passed for de facto marriages — the contubernia to which Evans Grubbs refers.

Around 200 AD, Tertullian wrote that, in his opinion, married slaves were better disciplined. By that time, many slaves did "marry".\(^{37}\) By 325 AD, Constantine's social legislation forbade the separation by sale of man and wife.\(^{38}\) Legal sources show that offspring from slave women were anticipated as a matter of course. Epigraphic material confirms that slave families existed. On grave epitaphs, for example, slave husbands expressed feelings of bereavement at the loss of their spouses. Bradley notes that

the phraseology was doubtless highly conventional, much like its modern counterpart, but it suggests all the same a view of marriage based at least in part on mutual feelings, love and respect ... [T]he implication is strong that marriage (among slaves) was often regarded, once entered upon, as a binding and permanent union until the intervention of death.\(^{39}\)

Among slaves, such a conventional view of marriage could only have existed if there were de facto married slave couples who lived together as families. "The epitaphs show that slaves referred to one another as mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister, again just as free members of society did."\(^{40}\) However, since marriage among slaves was legally not permitted, yet occurred openly, we must assume that these slave marriages were informal unions, allowed and condoned by slave-owners. Why would the latter allow such unions, for which Ro-

\(^{35}\) Evans Grubbs, Women (see n. 15), 143. See also S.M. Treggiari, Roman Marriage: iusti coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian, Oxford 1991, 81.

\(^{36}\) See J. Vogt, Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man, Cambridge 1975, 142.

\(^{37}\) See Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 47.

\(^{38}\) See C.N. Cochrane, Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine, Oxford 1939, 198.

\(^{39}\) Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 49.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.
man law made no provision? It is possible — even probable — that these "marriages" were allowed by some slave-owners as an act of kindness. Yet, argues Bradley, a very important — possibly the most important — reason for this concession was that such de facto slave unions were beneficial to the slave-owner, in that they preserved social and economic stability among the owner's slaves, and that they might produce, for the benefit of the slave-owner, a new generation of — probably docile — slaves.

The unwritten concessions allowing slaves to enter into "quasi-marital relationships" and have children, paint a picture of reasonably humane treatment of slaves in the Roman Empire. However, says Bradley, the picture changes fundamentally if one considers the question as to how secure these informal slave marriages really were. The answer is: they were highly unstable. Since these unions were, in essence, not formally contracted marriages, before the law they did not exist. Such unions could thus be dissolved at the slave-owner's whim, and were often dissolved when more than a whim was at stake, for example when the slave-owner was in some financial difficulty, and needed to sell some property to raise cash. There was no existing legal impediment preventing the selling off of a "married" slave woman. And slaves could be sold, because they were essentially a form of property, "and as commodities they were hence disposable." Or, if not sold, they could be hired out, or loaned out, or given as gifts. Bradley refers to Martial, who was "seeking a slave from a patron for sexual reasons as if this were quite common." The mechanics of the slavery system were such that, even if, for reasons of kindness, a compassionate slave-owner did not wish to sell a "married" slave, economic pressures could force him to sell such a slave, and thus severely disrupt a slave family.

What made the situation even worse was the fact that such tragic transactions were not the exception. By analysing fragments of papyrus documents originating from Egypt, Bradley investigated the age of slaves sold in a particular place in Egypt. On the basis of the papyrological evidence available, he demonstrates that, with regard to fe-

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41 Bradley, ibid., 51, quotes the Roman writer Varro with regard to the need to supply women to the foremen, the praefecti:

The foremen are to be made more zealous by rewards, and care must be taken that they have a bit of property of their own, and mates from among their fellow-slaves to bear them children (Varro, RR 1.17.5, Loeb translation). But be the overseer what he may, he should be given a woman companion to keep him within his bounds and yet in certain matters to help him (Col. RR 1.8.5, Loeb translation).

42 Evans Grubbs, Women (see n. 15), 143.
43 Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 52.
44 Ibid.
male slaves, in the case of one batch of papyrus fragments reporting the sale of 30 female slaves, for example, not one female older than 35 was reported as being sold. Bradley comments that this is hardly surprising, since a prospective buyer would presumably be concerned as to whether the purchased slave would be young enough to: a) work and b) produce children, who would in turn become slaves:

The conclusion seems inescapable that any female slave could reasonably expect to be sold during her childbearing years because it was then that she was of greatest economic value to buyers and sellers alike.46

Some papyrus fragments indicate that, when women in the age range of 20–35 were sold, they were likely to be sold alone, thereby being forced to part with their “husbands” and whatever children they might have had together. Of the 21 women over 14 years of age mentioned in Table 1 in Bradley’s book,46 one was “sold with infant” and another “sold with two children”. If we assume that the remaining 19 women had (say) 19 children under 14 years of age with them, this would mean that, of the 21 children sold, only two were sold with their mothers. From this evidence, Bradley logically concludes: “Familial disruption through sale is further implied by the evidence of sales of children who when sold were not accompanied by an adult.”47

Even more disturbing is the large proportion of children who were sold alone, unaccompanied by an adult. According to Bradley’s Table 1, 9 children under 14 years of age were sold alone, out of a total of 30 slaves sold. Their respective ages were: 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 13, 14, 13.

According to Bradley’s Table 2, 11 children under the age of 14 were sold — out of a total of 21 slaves; in other words, more than 50% of the people sold were children! Of these 11 children, three were sold with an adult, and eight were sold alone. The ages of those who were sold with someone else, were 2, 3 and 8. The remaining eight, who were sold on their own, were respectively 3, 4, 7, 8, 8, 8, 8 and 13 years old.48

These few statistics reflect a shockingly high proportion of family disruption when slaves belonging to one family had to be sold. (Even the few children who were fortunate enough to be sold with their mothers were separated from their fathers and siblings.) It seems logical to conclude that, whenever a slave-owner was pressurised to sell a family (or part of a family), or whenever the prices were so favourable that he could not miss the opportunity, the chances that he would sell

45 Ibid., 55. “Menopause in antiquity was thought to have occurred on average between ages forty and fifty” (ibid. 57; here, Bradley is quoting D.W. Amundsen/C.J. Diers, The Age of Menopause in Classical Greece and Rome, HumBiol 42 [1970] 79-86).
46 See ibid., 57.
47 Ibid.
48 See ibid., 53–59.
one nuclear slave family as a unit were extremely low. It was much more likely that the slave family would be broken up and sold, piece by piece, as it were. This made much more sense economically.

The situation was exacerbated by the strong probability that family members might be sold to owners far from their home. The papyrological evidence from Egypt illustrates the forced geographical mobility to which some slaves were exposed — and Bradley gives a number of examples.

This evidence puts the "benign treatment" of slaves who were allowed to marry and stay together as slave families into perspective. The main reason for allowing marriages and families was to stabilise the slave work-force — for the benefit of the slave-owner. When the economic situation of owners changed, slave marriages and families were likely to be broken up. One has to agree with Bradley: "It seems that slave-owners were little troubled about breaking servile familial ties when economic considerations made the sale of their slaves attractive or necessary."

### c. Manumission — Setting Slaves Free

Susan Treggiari starts her book with a chapter on the manumission of Roman slaves. "Public opinion in Rome," she writes, "accepted the freeing of slaves as normal and even desirable." Quoting Cicero, she comments:

> It is admitted (among Roman writers and orators), then, that slaves can, and do, hope for freedom, and that after enslavement in war a man might hope by working well and saving his peculium to win his liberty in a relatively short time.

In fact, towards the end of the Republic, so many manumissions were offered that in 2 BC and 4 AD, Augustus issued laws to limit manumissions.

At first glance, the fact that the freeing of slaves was considered "normal and even desirable" seems odd, given the harsh conditions of

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49 See ibid., 59.
50 Ibid., 60.
51 S. Treggiari, Roman Freedmen During the Late Republic, Oxford 1969, 12. In agreement with Treggiari, Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 81, points out that:

Roman masters were indeed relatively liberal in the extent to which they conferred freedom on their slaves, and at any moment innumerable ex-slaves throughout the Roman world demonstrated by their mere existence that slavery was not of necessity a permanent state but one from which release was possible.

Harrill, Manumission (see n. 1), 53, agrees: "In Roman slavery, manumission — master-sanctioned release from slavery — was regular."

52 Treggiari, Freedmen (see n. 51), 12.
53 This is not the place to open a debate as to why manumissions were limited. See the discussion in Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 86. Suffice it to say that Augustus' legislation regulated manumissions.
the slavery system, as described above. Why would people of the slaveholding class, who thought of slaves as a commodity, as human chattel, regard the freeing of slaves as normal, even desirable? According to Treggiari, there were a variety of motives for manumission. Altruism was indeed a reason. "Even among pragmatic Romans, a philosophic idea cannot be discounted entirely." 54 The Stoics taught that slaves could be the moral equals of their masters. Cicero considered this to be possible. Bradley also acknowledges that one of the motives for manumission was indeed that owners were concerned to attract the esteem of their peers through acts of apparent kindliness, to act generously for its own sake ... or else to reward slaves in return for meritorious service and the personal demonstration of loyalty and obedience over the years. 55

Some slave owners apparently had hearts of flesh and blood. Then again, moral doubts troubled not too many. Even some freed slaves themselves later became slave-owners, and some freedmen's treatment of their slaves "shocked even contemporaries". 56 It is most likely that altruism, as a motive for manumission, was mixed with more self-centred ideas. For example, a slave-owner who freed a slave could reward his deserving slave without incurring any inconvenience himself. On his death, the slave-owner would be honoured as a kind and righteous person. 57 If he made known his intention before the manumission, he could reap the benefit of loyal and hard-working slaves, looking forward to being rewarded with manumission.

But manumission could give a slave-owner benefits more concrete than honour and loyalty. Sometimes slaves were set free to save the slave-owner's skin, for example in cases where a slave's testimony in a court case could be potentially dangerous to the slave-owner. Slaves could be tortured under examination, freedmen not. So, in some instances, a slave-owner manumitted his slave to safeguard his own interests.

Manumission could also provide safeguards against economic disaster. When a slave was freed, the owner was paid a considerable sum. This was mostly taken from the so-called peculium — the cash property saved by the slave over years and which was at his disposal. According to Bradley, 58 who reminds us that a Roman legionary soldier earned HS

54 Treggiari, Freedmen (see n. 51), 12.
55 Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 60.
56 Treggiari, Freedmen (see n. 51), 13.
57 See ibid., 14: "He might enjoy the prospect of a fine funeral, his corpse attended by grateful freedmen with caps of liberty on their heads, witnesses to their patron's munificence."
58 See Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 107.
1 200 per year, HS 4 000 was mentioned as a manumission price in one case. In another, “HS 10 000 was paid by a dancer named Paris ... and HS 50 000 was paid by a slave doctor.”59 Naturally the slave owner could not expect such a price for a slave in his 50s; but even HS 1 000 was a useful sum of money. It should also be remembered that once a slave came to the end of his working days, he would be an economic liability to the slaveholder. Slaves were expensive to keep; they needed roofs over their heads and food to eat. Once they came to the end of their productive years, they became uneconomical, and virtually unsaleable. “The rush on manumissions in the late Republic was triggered off partly by the fact that poor masters found it cheaper to manumit than to feed and lodge slaves ...”60 If an older slave could be sold his freedom, the slave-owner was not only freed of an economic burden, but in addition was paid some money by the slave. That was a bargain, which had to be considered.61

The peculium mentioned above played a crucial role. Money acquired by slaves became part of their peculium — cash or property at the disposal of the slave. Technically the peculium belonged to the slave-owner,62 but in practice the slave usually had complete use and control of its content. The purpose of the peculium was to provide slaves with the opportunity to save cash, with which, after the age of thirty (for male slaves),63 they could buy their freedom. The very fact that slaves

59 Ibid.
60 Treggiari, Freedmen (see n. 51), 28.
   The manumitted slave, perhaps purchased as a child or even born in servitude, was well past his prime at the age of manumission. He would struggle not to spend his declining years in penury. Surely the shrewd slave owner was more than happy to dispense with the slave, the ultimate dispensable “tool”, after having obtained from him the best years of his life ... An ageing philosopher describes the situation: “... after garnering all that was most profitable to you, after consuming the most fruitful years of your life and the greatest vigour of your body, after reducing you to a thing of rags and tatters, he (the master) is looking about for a rubbish heap on which to cast you aside ceremonially, and for another man to engage who can stand the work.” (Lucian, De mercede conductis, 39.)
62 See Wiedemann, Slavery (see n. 10), 52:
   In theory, a slave’s savings (peculium) were absolutely the property of his master ... nevertheless, the Romans recognised that a slave could use such savings to buy his freedom, and under the emperors the law was prepared to enforce such a contract.
63 Callahan et al., Introduction (see n. 61), 7, point out that the age of thirty for male slaves should not be misunderstood:
   The legal evidence ... shows not that a slave must be manumitted at age thirty, but rather that he should not be manumitted before his thirtieth birthday — not
saved for their *peculum* indicates that they did receive some kind of wages, even if such payments were meant to provide nothing more than pocket money. In addition, at least some slaves received formal wages for their work.64 Others who worked as doorkeepers, actors, doctors, prostitutes and so on, had jobs which held the potential for the collection of tips.

Although money from the *peculum* could also be used for other purposes, the *peculum* was mainly regarded as a kind of savings account with a view to buying one’s manumission, soon after one reached the age of thirty. In this way, the *peculum* served as an incentive for slaves to save. It was a regular reminder to slaves that freedom was a long-term prospect, but not wholly beyond reach.65 In this manner, the incentive of saving for the *peculum* served to maintain acquiescence among slaves, who did not wish to spoil their chances of acquiring freedom. Slaves were never sure that they would be set free at some stage before they were 40; but it was worthwhile to maintain their chances.

Everything combined to produce subordination in the slave to the master during slavery and to create a situation in which total domination over and the exploitation of the slave were feasible.66

Bradley explores the latter theme further. Slaves were manipulated and controlled by their masters — but this control was not simply exercised by means of direct force. Rather, as a result of the fears and anxiety which conditioned the life of slaves, as described above, it may be inferred that the role of the slave, as envisaged by the slave-owner, became *internalised* within the slave to such a degree that it created the response of apparent obedience, “variously sincere or disguised according to the individual slave’s wish to safeguard himself and his privileges.”67

Then, of course, after the actual event of a manumission, there was the benefit of *operae*: As a condition of release, it was often agreed by the slave seeking freedom that he would continue to do some *operae* — works — for his ex-owner, for a certain length of time, without the ex-

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64 Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 108, gives an example from a papyrus of the late second century which records the arrangements between a female slave-owner in Egypt and a local weaver who was to teach the woman’s slave his craft:

Technically the wages must have belonged to the owner who could have reimbursed herself for the slave’s expenses; but it may also be that the slave was allowed to keep some of the money, perhaps to be saved for eventual manumission.

65 See ibid., 111.

66 Ibid., 112.

67 Ibid., 143.
owner being responsible for the slave’s food and lodging.\textsuperscript{68} This benefit, too, belonged to the slave-owner. The agreement regarding \textit{operae} served the interests of slave-owners (work was done for them by ex-slaves, at no expense). But the illusion was created that the arrangement benefited freed slaves: They were now free. They no longer belonged to someone else! And yet they were not free: They were obliged by contract\textsuperscript{69} to carry out their designated \textit{operae}.

Liberating a slave did not entail that he was immediately free to do as he pleased. When a Greek slave paid his master to become free, a contract was often drawn up which was guaranteed by a god; and many of these contracts survive, inscribed on the walls of public buildings at Delphi and similar religious centres. They are called \textit{"paramone-agreements"}, because they usually stipulate that the ex-slave must remain with (\textit{paramenein}) his or her master for a number of years \textsuperscript{70}

2. Bodies but not “Somebodies”

From the above, it is evident that the degree to which the lives of slaves were dominated by an external, as well as an internal locus of control was immense. Thus, the outward appearance of a relatively benign system of slavery\textsuperscript{71} cannot be accepted as an accurate picture. In fact, the very elements of Roman slavery that endow it with a milder character — allowing slaves informal slave marriages and families, slave holidays and manumission — served to make the system slightly flexible, but therefore also much stronger and more controlling. Slavery was indeed a ruthless system, geared to benefit slave owners. This was only possible if the people who were enslaved were submitted to an extreme process of objectification. They were not regarded, in the first place, as other human beings, but as objects, which had to be controlled;\textsuperscript{72} they were viewed as chattel\textsuperscript{73} or as socially dead people.\textsuperscript{74}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{68} See ibid., 81. According to Treggiari, Freedmen (see n. 51), 16, the abuse of this opportunity might be one of the reasons why Augustus, in 56 BC, took measures to limit manumissions: “The institution of corn dole encouraged poorer masters to turn their slaves into \textit{cives Romani} and so transfer the obligation of feeding them to the state.”
\item \textsuperscript{69} See Wiedemann, Slavery (see n. 10), 46:

Some \textit{paramone}-agreements specify that the act of liberation is void if the freedman fails to obey his patron. Athenian law provided that if a patron sued his freedman for disobedience and he was acquitted, all obligations towards the patron would cease.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{71} As suggested by S.S. Barty, \textit{Mallon chrēsai:} First Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21 (SBLDS 11), Missoula 1973, 84, who argues that most slaves were treated relatively well, and that, with the prospect of an early manumission, “the vast majority of slaves in the first century accepted their lot and were satisfied with it.”
\item \textsuperscript{72} See Bradley, Slaves (see n. 14), 30, 43.
\item \textsuperscript{73} See Finley, Slavery (see n. 12), 68.
\item \textsuperscript{74} See Patterson, Slavery (see n. 6), 22.
\end{itemize}
Recent studies by J. Glancy and J.A. Harrill have built on this interpretation of slavery in the Roman Empire. Glancy's study stresses "the corporeality of ancient slavery."\textsuperscript{75} She points out that the Greek term σώμα "body", functioning as a synonym for δοῦλος, "slave". This aptly expressed the way in which members of the slave-holding class looked upon slaves. They were "bodies" — living robots, not "somebodies". The bylaws of some fraternal societies indicated that when members failed to comply with the rules, they had to be punished, or if they were not available, their slaves could be punished in their stead. Such bylaws referred to slaves who received their masters' punishment as σώματα, bodies: "Slaveholders relied on slaves as body doubles."\textsuperscript{76}

These bodies were not neatly defined and protected. They were "vulnerable to abuse and penetration."\textsuperscript{77} Slaves who ran away could be marked as chattel, and were branded. Glancy quotes an inscription, dating back to the fourth or fifth century, on a bronze collar that was placed around the neck of a slave: "I am the slave of archdeacon Felix. Hold me so that I do not flee."\textsuperscript{78} This slave's body was looked upon by the archdeacon as that of an animal, such as a dog.

The bodies of slaves did not belong to them. Slave owners had free sexual access to the bodies of their slaves, and it was female slaves who were mostly exploited.

A householder who impregnated a female slave increased his stock of slaves. A maternal who gave birth to the child of a slave disrupted the household; the event would likely be the occasion for a divorce.\textsuperscript{79}

The frequency of manumission inscriptions that imply that the freed slave was the master's sexual partner indicates the prevalence of such liaisons in Roman society.\textsuperscript{80} "The assumption seems implicit in Roman society that intercourse with a slave, who had no moral responsibility and no choice, was morally neutral for the free initiator."\textsuperscript{81} In the Acts of Andrew, a Christian document of the second century, we find the story of a Christian woman, Maximilla, who came under the influence of the apostle Andrew, and rejected sexual activity as polluting. Maximilla's husband, a non-Christian, did not appreciate her resistance to his sensual overtures. Maximilla found a solution by sending her slave Euclia, as a "body double" to assume her position in her husband's

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{80} See ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{81} Treggiari, Marriage (see n. 35), 301.
bed. Maximilla’s approval of her slave’s sexual union with her husband suggests that she regarded her slave’s body as a surrogate for her own body — an instrument at her disposal.

Harrill explains the possible philosophical basis for this way of thinking: Aristotle regarded the “natural slave” (κατὰ φύσιν δοῦλος) as “a tool that breathes” (ἐναρμόνων δραγανον), who was deficient in reason (λόγος). According to Aristotle’s body theory, a slave’s body was biologically built for slavery:

The intention of nature therefore is to make the bodies of the freemen and of slaves different — the latter brawny for necessary service, the former erect and unserviceable for such occupations.

Although this theory was rejected by Euripides and the Stoics, it nevertheless persisted into Hellenistic and Roman times. It certainly contributed to a perception among people of the slaveholder class that slaves were sub-human: available bodies to invade, sexually abuse or mistreat. To physically hurt the body of slave was a morally neutral action — or at least, not as serious as an offence committed against the body of a free person.

These perceptions of the slave body affirm the definitions of slavery in the Roman Empire put forward by Patterson, Finley and Bradley. All three emphasise that slavery could only flourish within an environment where those who were captured, sold and kept as slaves were regarded as lesser human beings — to the extent that they were not even thought of as human beings. They were simply a commodity; they were chattel, objects, socially dead people. This is the context of slavery in which Phlm was written.

III. Implications for Reading the Letter to Philemon

What should strike every reader of Phlm, is that it is so much like other Pauline letters — and yet so different. The greeting, blessing and prayers are there at the beginning, as usual. Key Pauline phrases — such as the ἐν Χριστῷ φυλαχθεῖσας — are there; the appeal on the basis of love — which should be understood as referring to the love of God, revealed in the Christ event — is similar to the exhortations on the grounds of God’s mercy demonstrated in Christ, which one finds in the other Pauline letters.

Yet the tone of the letter is different. There is an abundance of terms and expressions of endearment. Philemon is “our dear friend and fel-

82 See Glancy, Slavery (see n. 75), 22.
84 Ibid., 38.
low worker" (v. 1), "brother" (vv. 7.20), Paul's great helper in the past (v. 13) and "partner" (v. 17). Philemon is thanked for his love, which has given Paul such "great joy and encouragement" and "refreshed the hearts of the saints" (v. 7). Philemon is also treated with great respect. He is discreetly reminded that Paul, as a senior, could give orders, but has chosen not to. Paul has chosen, instead, to appeal to Philemon (vv. 8–9) — something one would only do if one were convinced that the person appealed to was gracious and merciful and would therefore consider the appeal favourably. Philemon, the junior partner, is assured that Paul does not wish "to do anything without your consent" (v. 14) — again expressing a gesture of great trust on Paul's part. Philemon is assured that the decision asked of him will in no way cost him anything: Paul will take care of that; Philemon does not need to worry. (And while money and possible debts are mentioned, Paul very subtly reminds Philemon that he owes Paul his "very self" — by explicitly "not mentioning" this [v. 19]. This brief but powerful phrase is meant to persuade Philemon not to misunderstand Paul's friendly tone and perhaps refuse.) And then, just in case Philemon is likely to be irritated by the remark in respect of his existential debt to Paul, he is once again showered with compliments regarding his spiritual ministry, as the senior apostle, who rightly should bless others, asks him, Philemon, for a blessing: "I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ" (v. 20).

Who could refuse such a request? Such humility? From such a great man? Not many. Paul knew that. So what else was there to say, save "Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask" (v. 21)? Possibly just "one thing more": in order to make sure that Philemon does not later change his mind, he is reminded that this letter will be followed by a visit from Paul himself — and he is not only coming for a fleeting visit: "Prepare a guest room for me ..." And the very last words before final greeting are devoid of any threats, merely expressing a wish for male bonding: "I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers" (v. 22).

Why this exquisite rhetorical tour de force? And from someone who, when it was necessary, could be very blunt (think of Gal 1,6)? I do not know for sure, but submit this suggestion: Paul was convinced that a crucial decision had to be made — but not by him. The decision was in Philemon's hands. And in this case — in contrast to the Jewish/Gentile issue — there was little support for Paul in the form of joint decisions by the ecumenical church, such as the one referred to in Acts 15. Onesimus — whether a runaway slave, a truant or a slave looking for an
intercessor\textsuperscript{85} — had to be received back. And the decision was Philemon's. Paul's power was limited. This was not a situation for orders or commands. However, he had other options. So, instead of orders (which, as he reminds his readers, he was perfectly entitled to give), Paul opts for some "soft" talking. He greets his readers (as always), but then goes on to pray for Philemon (v. 4). He requests, he appeals, he reassures. He reminds his readers of the partnerships they share. He gives only one, very carefully disguised, threat. He reminds his readers of all the blessings and benefits that a positive answer on Philemon's part would bring: 1) Onesimus could now become really useful to Philemon, 2) Philemon's debt to Paul would be settled, 3) Philemon would have Onesimus back — "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave" (v. 16).

What did Paul mean by the latter expression? Did he mean that Philemon should receive Onesimus back, settle any matters of debt, welcome him as part of the house church — but remind him that he was still a slave, who, when the economy became unfavourable, might be put on the market? Or was Paul suggesting that Philemon should accept Onesimus as a fellow Christian, a brother in the church — and then go even further and set him free?

A minority of scholars think that Paul did not actually challenge the system of slavery, and that he was not suggesting Onesimus' manumission in Phlm, and also did not advocate manumission in any of his other letters. S. Schulz\textsuperscript{86} argues that Paul did not make use of the opportunity to instigate a social protest against slavery. J.A. Glancy\textsuperscript{87} warns against attempts to idealize early Christianity's involvement in slavery. A. le Grys is very emphatic: "The recent hermeneutic that finds subtle counter-cultural signals embedded in scripture is simply wishful thinking."\textsuperscript{88} J.A. Harrill is of the opinion that Paul, in his letters (other than Phlm), far from criticising contemporary attitudes towards slaves and slavery, "strengthened beliefs that his Gentile readers already had

\textsuperscript{85} See ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{87} See Glancy, Slavery (see n. 75), 3.
about the morality of control, domination and abuse of human chattel.”

A second group of scholars agrees that Phlm heralds a dramatic change in the relationship between Philemon and his former slave. No longer would this relationship be that of a slaveholder and slave, but that of two fellow Christians. Paul alludes to the possibility that Philemon will do more; but we do not know for sure what he meant by this. Others are convinced that “more” refers to possible manumission, but emphasise that this was merely mentioned tentatively to Philemon, as a possibility. Some scholars insist that the text of the letter does not make any reference to manumission, although some see in this proposed new egalitarian relationship between Philemon and Onesimus a seed that would later flourish into a Christian activism for the abolition of slavery, for example F.F. Bruce: “What the Letter to Philemon does is to bring the institution into an atmosphere where it could only wilt and die.” Others, notably J.M.G. Barclay, argue forcefully that the letter does not contain an “unambiguous request” for manumission. Barclay is therefore “driven to conclude that it is deliberately open-ended.”

A third group of scholars argues that Paul’s insistence that Philemon accept Onesimus, “no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother ... both in the flesh and in the Lord” (v. 16), was not ambiguous. Once Philemon was accepted as a fellow Christian in Onesimus’ house church, it would be impossible to regard him any longer as a piece of chattel that could be sold if the price was right. Paul’s mes-

90 See P. Stuhlmacher, Der Brief an Philemon (EKK 18), Zürich etc. 1975, 43.
93 Barclay, Paul (see n. 91), 175.
sage could be refused by Philemon, but it could not be misunderstood: Paul wanted Philemon to set Onesimus free. Some scholars are very cautious, like Michael Wolter, who emphasises that Paul “never demands distinctive actions”, but stresses that the Christian faith confessed by Philemon, of which Paul reminds his friend, “creates a new reality and demands [my emphasis: G.F.W.] performance not only ... in the social world ... of the congregation, but also in the everyday life of Philemon’s household.” Others, like J.H. Roberts, are more forthright: “The phrase ‘you will do even more than I say’ can really only have one meaning here: Philemon should set Onesimus free.”

I agree with the arguments brought forth by scholars who accept the third interpretation. The reasons for supporting this interpretation may be summed up as follows:

1. First, manumission was possible, as pointed out earlier in the discussion of slavery in the Roman Empire. Paul’s failure to denounce slavery as a system and to campaign for the abolishment of slavery in the Roman Empire should be explained in terms of the fact that the abolishment of slavery did not even fall within the realm of possibility in Paul’s day — this must be conceded. But the manumission of a specific slave was not hard to imagine. It happened every day. So, the manumission of Onesimus was indeed an option open to Philemon.

2. Second, the cumulative significance of Paul’s suggestive phrases — that Philemon should receive Onesimus back “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother”, both “in the flesh and in the Lord” (v. 16), and “welcome him as you would welcome me” (v. 17), as well as the phrase, “knowing that you will do even more than I say” (v. 21) — can hardly be understood as implying that Philemon should merely receive back his slave without punishing him. Even the very critical Harrill, who sees very little critical awareness of slavery in the New Testament, concedes that in Phlm, Paul’s phrase “more than a

95 M. Wolter, The Letter to Philemon as Ethical Counterpart of Paul’s Doctrine of Justification, pp. 169–179, here: 179, in this volume. In the same cautious vein, R.R. Melick Jr., Philippians, Colossians, Philemon (NAC), Nashville 1991, 345, states that slavery “was not even the issue it was written to solve ... The issue was Christian relationships. Nevertheless, genuinely Christian relationships bring an end to such evils as slavery.”
96 J.H. Roberts, Vryheid, Gelykheid en Broederskap in die Brief aan Filemon: die Evangelie as Maatskappy-Omvormende Krug, in: C. Breytenbach/B.C. Letegan (eds.), Gelooi en Opdrag: Perspektiewe op die Etiek van die Nuwe Testament (Scriptura S9a), Stellenbosch 1992, 259–274, here 274: “The phrase ‘you will do even more than I say’ can really only have one meaning here: Philemon should set Onesimus free.” (My translation: G.F.W.)
97 See Barclay, Paul (see n. 91), 161ff.
slave”, as well as the phrase referring to a brother “in the flesh and in the Lord” (v. 16) “may imply that Paul hopes to secure the manumission of Onesimus.”

This possibility is supported, writes Harrill, by Paul’s confident phrase in v. 21: “... knowing that you will do more even than I say.”

But, one may ask, if manumission was so clearly the desired option in Paul’s view, why did he not explicitly ask for it in his letter? Barclay is of the opinion that Paul did not know what to say. He points out that it was quite possible for Stoicism (represented by Seneca’s famous 47th epistle in which he insists that servi are also homines) to reconcile idealistic words about the humanity of slaves with an acceptance of slavery, but he concedes that it would not have been so easy for Paul. Barclay concludes: “It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that ... there must be some tension here between the Pauline ideals of brotherhood and the practical realities of slavery.”

It was this tension in Paul’s own mind, Barclay argues, that caused the ambiguity of the whole letter to Philemon.

Barclay’s solution must be rejected. The reason for Paul’s reluctance to tell Philemon what to do must be sought in the power relations at play. There was always the possibility that a blunt order, issued by an apostle in prison, requiring an enormous concession from the leader of a house church in Colossae, might be refused — with disastrous consequences for Paul’s position of authority. Moreover, it was important that Philemon’s authority as a house church leader should be upheld and respected — for the future development of the church in Colossae. So, instead of addressing Philemon like a servant and issuing a blunt command to him, Paul uses all his rhetorical strategies in order to convince Philemon to do the right thing, and in the process enables Philemon to save face — almost as if setting Onesimus free would be Philemon’s own idea. Lampe argues that Paul only uses this authority in a subtle manner. “He renounces the status of the superior,” in order to set an example to Philemon. This “renunciation of reactive aggression is a Christian group norm,”

so Philemon is subtly pressurised to follow this example by forgiving and receiving Onesimus.

3. Third, Paul’s understanding of the church as a body in which members were reconciled not only “in the spirit” but also “in the flesh”

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98 Harrill, Slaves (see n. 84), 14.
99 See ibid.
100 Barclay, Slave-Ownership (see n. 86), 182.
102 Ibid., 72.
made no allowances for receiving a former slave as "a beloved brother" only in spiritual terms. Roberts\textsuperscript{103} concludes:

It was not possible (in terms of Paul's understanding of the church) that Christians could accept one another in the church as fellow freed people, as one another's equals and brothers and sisters, and then operate in society as non-equals.

Petersen\textsuperscript{104} puts forward a forceful argument in favour of this position in his monograph:

[Philemon] finds that "being in Christ" makes a totalistic claim upon him from which there are no exceptions. If he is to remain in the service of Christ the Lord, he cannot be "in Christ" only when he is "in church".

In her 2005 commentary, Marianne M. Thompson convincingly argues that a reading of the letter to Philemon which views Paul as asking for Onesimus' spiritual reception as a brother in Christ, without the setting free of his body as a slave, assumes "a dualistic anthropology"\textsuperscript{105} in Paul, which his writings do not confirm.\textsuperscript{106} Thompson emphasises that Paul did not work according to a dualistic understanding of body and spirit. Therefore, for example, he vigorously resisted an attempt to condone a church practice in Antioch which would establish a spiritual unity of Jewish and Gentile Christians without a bodily fellowship (Gal 2,11–14). She concludes: "To imagine that unity in Christ does not assume tangible shape in the church, in relationships among people, and in the church's witness to and work in the world simply sells out the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ."\textsuperscript{107} For Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother "in Christ", it was necessary, by implication, that Philemon should free him from the bonds of slavery, which made it possible for him to be sold as chattel. The phrase "more than a slave", according to Peter Arzt-Grabner,\textsuperscript{108} could even refer to Paul's suggestion

\textsuperscript{103} Roberts, Vryheid (see n. 96), 265 (my translation: G.F.W.).
\textsuperscript{104} Petersen, Paul (see n. 88), 269.
\textsuperscript{105} M.M. Thompson, Colossians and Philemon (THNTC), Grand Rapids 2005, 247. According to this reading of Paul, when he "spoke of 'unity in Christ,' he had in mind an invisible unity of those saved, a 'spiritual' equality that did not encompass social realities" (ibid.).
\textsuperscript{106} I.J. du Plessis, How Christians Can Survive in a Hostile Social-Economic Environment: Paul's Mind Concerning Difficult Social Conditions in the Letter to Philemon, in: J.G. van der Watt (ed.), Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament (BZNW 141), Berlin/New York 2006, 387–413, fails to appreciate Paul's rejection of such a dualism: "Paul's dualism between flesh/spirit is probably decisive for his attitude towards slavery" (p. 410). This failure to appreciate Paul's non-dualistic anthropology is the reason why, despite many useful observations made in the course of his 30-page article, Du Plessis finally comes to the wrong conclusion: "Paul's concern with social questions is mostly focused on the situation within the church and shows remarkable reticence for such issues beyond the confines of the church" (p. 410).
\textsuperscript{107} Thompson, Philemon (see n. 105), 254.
\textsuperscript{108} See P. Arzt-Grabner, How to Deal with Onesimus? Paul's Solution within the Frame of Ancient Legal and Documentary Sources, pp. 113–142, here: 139f., in this volume.
that Philemon should receive Onesimus not only as a "full member of the Christian community" but as a partner in business.

4. Fourth, Paul sent his letter not only to Philemon, but also to the church members who met in his house. The letter is therefore a public letter and public knowledge of the letter should thus be assumed. This implies that Philemon, in his decision as to whether to comply with Paul's suggestions or not, is also accountable to "the church that meets in your home" (v. 2). When Paul returns to visit (v. 22), he will visit not only Philemon but also the church. So, the issue as to what should be done with Onesimus is not only Philemon's decision. Petersen\textsuperscript{109} writes, "The return of the house-master's slave as a born-again slave requires the rest of the community to renegotiate its relations with each of them." The public knowledge of Paul's wishes would place even more pressure on Philemon to comply. It would make it much more difficult for him to keep the new brother in the position of a slave.

Thus, we have to conclude: Even if the picture of slavery painted in the first part of this study is only reasonably accurate, it is clear that slaves — notwithstanding any acts and gestures of individual kindness, such as being admitted to the local house church as members — remained a commodity. They were mere tools. At best, they were chattel — socially dead people.

Whenever Paul dealt with the challenge as to how people from different religious backgrounds were reconciled and united in the local church, he was adamant that such reconciliation should not simply be a platonic, spiritual reconciliation. Jew and Gentile were reconciled in Christ, therefore they could — and should — have fellowship together (Gal 3:28). It is hard to believe that, in taking the trouble to effectuate reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon, Paul would have been satisfied with at a platonic, spiritual reconciliation - especially if the ominous possibility remained that Onesimus could be sold whenever times became difficult. Manumission was not only a theoretical possibility; it was regulated by law and was socially accepted. Why would Paul not have longed to see Onesimus freed? Why not indeed — if he was already willing to refund Philemon for whatever losses he had suffered?

With all this evidence at hand, it seems to me that the conclusion is inevitable: Paul's guiding suggestion that Philemon should receive Onesimus back — "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Phlm 16) — can best be understood as a request to set Onesimus free. Whether or not this request was heeded, we do not

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\textsuperscript{109} Petersen, Paul (see n. 88), 99.
know. If we accept the information found in Col 4.7–9 as historical information, as Du Plessis suggests, then it may well be possible that Du Plessis is right: "... then it seems as if Onesimus was indeed freed by Philemon."\textsuperscript{110} But we do not know for sure. And why, in the following decades, the early churches did not continue to press for the manumission of — at least — Christian slaves, we are not sure either. But that is a matter that warrants attention at its own right.

\textsuperscript{110} Du Plessis, Christians (see n. 106), 407.
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