

SLAVE, BROTHER, OR OTHER? A NEW HYPOTHESIS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHILEMON AND ONESIMUS

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Onesimus has most commonly been interpreted as the runaway slave of his master, Philemon. Conversely, Philemon has long been interpreted as a leading Christian in Colossae and a slave owner. This view remains the most popular view among both scholars and popular level readers of Paul's letter to Philemon. The view that Onesimus was a runaway slave derived from Paul's words in Phlm 16, "no longer as a *slave*, but more than a *slave*, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord," (emphasis added). However, recent scholarship as prompted most notably by Peter Artz-Grabner, Allen Callahan, and Sarah Winter² has commenced another look into the relationship of Philemon and Onesimus. This essay will serve as an exploration of differing hypotheses of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus while also introducing one new hypothesis. That is, Onesimus as a deacon in Philemon's house church with Philemon being an elder in this same congregation.

Who Exactly Was Philemon?

The traditional view of Philemon is that he is a wealthy Christian in Colossae. Though Philemon is not mentioned by name in Paul's letter to the Colossians, Onesimus, on the other hand, is

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² D. F. Tolmie and Alfred Friedl, eds. *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter*. Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft Und Die Kunde Der Älteren Kirche 169 (New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 4–7.

called “one of you” in Col 4:9. Presuming Onesimus had gone back to Philemon after meeting Paul (as Paul suggests will happen in his letter), this must imply that Philemon is in fact a member of the Colossian community. If Philemon was a landowner (perhaps even a farmer), he would have undoubtedly utilized slave labor as did most every free person in 1st c. Roman culture. Regardless of how Philemon received his wealth, the apparent presence of slaves from v. 16 and the ownership of a home that could host weekly gatherings (v. 2) illustrates a significant level of wealth. However, one must remember that the early Christians did not place a significant amount of emphasis on the physical location of worship. Instead, the community that was gathered was viewed as the place of worship.³ Thus, it is important to realize that the letter begins by referencing the ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*; assembly) meeting in Philemon’s home. This implies a home that is functional enough to host a plurality of people.

F. F. Bruce suggests that Philemon was not only the man who owned the facility where the congregation would meet but was also an overseer of all the congregations in the Lycus valley.⁴ Bruce goes on to suggest Philemon was not a resident of the Colossian community but instead resided in Laodicea. Bruce references John Knox’s argument that the request made on Onesimus’s behalf was not made to Philemon but to Archippus. Knox suggests a cryptic message exists at the end of the letter to the Colossians where Paul directs the church to tell Archippus to make sure to fulfill the ministry that he has received in the Lord (Col 4:17).⁵ However, this hypothesis does not seem to fit with Paul’s own teachings concerning church

³ Everett Ferguson presents a masterful exploration of early church worship in the 1st century. as they relate to the assemblies of Christians today. Fergusson notes the early church understanding of the church as temple. Everett Fergusson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 219.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 199.

⁵ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 199.

order as it exists in the book of Acts. Note Paul's practice when establishing congregations in Acts 14:23. "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." One must take special notice of the plural πρεσβυτέρους (*presbuterous*; elders). It was not the practice of Paul (or anyone else in the early church) to establish one person as the overseer of a collective group of congregations. It is wrong to suggest that Philemon would have fulfilled a role by himself that was part of a system of plurality as made evident by 1 Tim 3:1–7 (cf., Acts 20:17), Tit 1:5, and Acts 14:23. It is not impossible to suggest that Philemon was in fact *one* of the overseers (as will be explored later); however, to suggest that Philemon was the singular overseer of a group of congregations simply does not fit with Paul's own teaching.⁶

The ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*; assembly) is said to meet in the home (οἶκος; place of residence)⁷ of Philemon. The term ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) has long been labeled as "the called out" or "those who have been/are called out" based on the compound form of the Greek word. Ἐκ (*ek*) means "out of" and καλλέω (*kalleō*) means "I call." Yet, this is a rather literal and rigid translation often mistaken to mean something more celestial than is truly intended by the word. The *ekklēsia* most often referred to guilds, meetings of the government, and town-hall meetings. At the very least, the term is used to describe a regularly summoned legislative body. A good

⁶ There are disputes as to whether the Paul of Acts is the historical Paul. Ben Witherington III suggests there are four sources about Paul: (1) the Paul of undisputed letters, (2) the Paul of the later canonical Paulines, (3) the Paul of Acts, and (4) the Paul of extracanonical sources. I agree with Witherington on this point: "As for the Paul of Acts versus the Paul of the letters...the former is quite compatible with the Paul of the undisputed letters—especially given that Acts focusses on Paul the missionary and his efforts in that role, not Paul the pastor of Christian churches." Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 10.

⁷ Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

English alternative would simply be the “assembly.”⁸ The term is not, in its original state, a theologically loaded term.⁹

Floyd Filson¹⁰ notes that the house church seems to serve four primary purposes: (1) the house church allowed the early church to have a distinctly Christian worship and fellowship, (2) the house church explains the great amount of focus Paul places on the family and family life, (3) house churches introduce a glimpse into the social construct of early Christians,¹¹ (4) the existence of house churches gives a glimpse into the lives and characteristics of its leaders.

An Overview of Slavery in the First Century

Paul’s letter to Philemon has been used throughout history to both validate and nullify the act of slavery. If one is to interpret Philemon as a slave-owner, it is necessary that one first understand this type of slavery within its appropriate 1st c. context. Slavery in the 1st c. was just as common as driving a car is today. Few in the 1st c. seemed to understand slavery as something immoral. Not only was slavery an accepted part of the culture, it was also considered part of the social order. Slavery was not a result of racism in the ancient world. Slaves could be prisoners of war or a next-door neighbor who owed a significant debt. Roman women even had slaves whose sole purpose was to be their hairdressers.¹² According to the Roman legal and social system, slaves

⁸ BDAG, s.v. “ἐκκλησία.”

⁹ Richard Last, “Ekklēsia Outside the Septuagint and the Dēmos: The Titles of Greco-Roman Associations and Christ-Followers’ Groups,” *JBL* 4 (2018): 959–80.

¹⁰ Last, “Ekklēsia Outside the Septuagint and the Dēmos,” 109–112.

¹¹ Last, “Ekklēsia Outside the Septuagint and the Dēmos,” 111.

¹² Albert Bell, *Exploring the New Testament World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 246.

were considered the property of the slaveowner. Roman law did, however, separate human property from object property, though this separation could and did become blurred at times. Because slaves were considered property, the legal implications of property also applied to them. Slaves could be bought, sold, traded, mortgaged, or even given away. Slaves simply had no rights.¹³

Though slaves did not have any true national identity and were considered to be the property of the slaveowner, many slaveowners would free their slaves after a period of time, though scholars still debate the frequency of this practice. The slave ultimately had no national identity and no family. On the other hand, Pliny the Younger thought of himself as a father to his slaves. Pliny believed slaves should be treated mildly and even indulgently.¹⁴ Of course, this was not the frame of mind that all Greco-Roman slaveowners possessed. However, for the majority, treating slaves fairly meant a decreased possibility of an uprising.

One can certainly respect the remarks of Allen Callahan, Richard Horsley, and Abraham Smith when they write, “Slavery is a species of social murder.”¹⁵ They argue that slavery in ancient Greece and Rome was not, as some ancient sources have suggested (e.g., Pliny), somehow more humane than recent American slavery. They argue this point largely because masters had the right to crucify their slaves for any given reason. This was not only a torturous method of execution but also a great display of shame.

¹³ Sandra Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 38.

¹⁴ Pliny, *Letters* 1.4, 5.19.1.

¹⁵ Allen Callahan, Richard Horsley, and Abraham Smith, “Introduction: The Slavery of New Testament Studies,” *Semeia* 83 (1998): 1.

Josephus and Slavery

Flavius Josephus never explores the concept of man being made in God's image (Gen 1:26–27), though he often refers to slavery.¹⁶ As a 1st c. historian and one of Jewish heritage, his opinion and understanding of slavery is significant to this discussion. Rather than use a “catch-all” term, Josephus instead employs different words to describe different categories of slaves.

First, Josephus uses the term *αἰχμάλωτοι* (*aichmalōtoi*) to denote those who are prisoners of war (lit. “captured in war”). However, a prisoner of war may not always be treated as a “slave.”¹⁷ The Roman prisoner of war would often be led through the public streets before being the target of gladiators in the arena or killed by means of strangulation.¹⁸ Thus, *αἰχμάλωτοι* (*aichmalōtoi*) cannot always denote one who is a “slave” as such. The term *δοῦλος* (*doulos*) is used to commonly refer to a person or group of people in utter submission to someone else. This is the term most used to denote a “slave” in the biblical text where the *δοῦλος* (*doulos*) is presented opposite the *δεσπότης* (*despotēs*; master). Further, in Josephus, the *δοῦλος* (*doulos*) can refer to temple servants who return from exile. The last term that will be discussed here is *οἰκέτης* (*oiketēs*; domestic slave, household slave). In Josephus' own writings, Joseph (the son of Jacob) is called a *δοῦλος* (*doulos*) but is said to have his own *οἰκέτης* (*oiketēs*). Therefore, *οἰκέτης* (*oiketēs*) only denotes a slave who serves in the house while a *δοῦλος* (*doulos*) could have his own slaves.

¹⁶ The following will provide a brief summary of the excellent research presented by John Gibbs and Louis Feldman, “Josephus' Vocabulary for Slavery,” *JQR* 76 (1986): 281–310.

¹⁷ Cf. Josephus own experience. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 3. 8. 9.

¹⁸ Arnold Krammer, *Prisoners of War: A Reference Handbook* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008), 4.

As is the case in language studies, a word cannot have a rigid once-for-all definition. Words are fluid depending on their context.¹⁹ Yet, each of the words discussed here share one commonality: emphasis on submission and authority. This proves significant when discussing the potential relationships among Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. The submission/authority relationship is the most significant theme in the letter to Philemon. The letter leads the reader to believe that Onesimus is to be submissive to Philemon. Philemon is called to be submissive to Paul (Phlm 8–10). Paul is called both a slave and prisoner of the Lord (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; Phlm 1). Conversely, there is a theme of authority throughout the letter. The Lord has authority over Paul. Paul has authority over Philemon. Philemon has some form of authority over the congregation and his household. Paul is also authoritative in his relationship to Onesimus (note the father/child language of v. 10). Finally, Onesimus is a master to himself as he must make his own decision to return to Philemon.

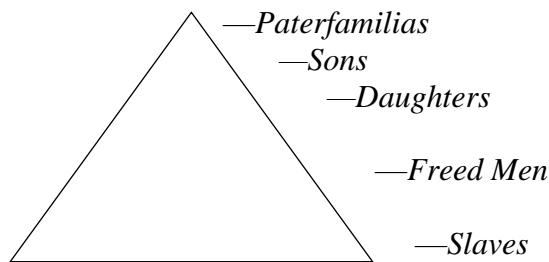
A Master's Relationship to His Slave

To understand the relationship between a master and his slave(s), one must understand the Greco-Roman *familia*. The Roman family dynamic was significantly different than what one might think of in today's western culture. The *familia* included both slaves and freed persons but not the wife of the *paterfamilias*. She was considered to be part of her father's *familia*.²⁰ Therefore, it is more appropriate here to use the term *household* when discussing the Roman *familia* so the modern reader can better associate unrelated slaves within the household network.

¹⁹ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 37–43.

²⁰ Dale Martin, *New Testament History and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 43–48.

The hierarchy of a Roman household resembles that of a triangle. The *paterfamilias* (i.e., the oldest living man) is at the top followed by his sons then daughters then freedmen then slaves at the very bottom.



A slave would often be freed for the purpose of signing legal contracts or engaging in business transactions. A slave could oversee a business but only a freedman or a free man could legally sign documents, lend money, or borrow money. Therefore, wealthy Romans would free slaves in order that they might gain better business opportunities. Based on Ignatius's reference to an Onesimus who is a bishop in Ephesus, Philemon may have allowed Onesimus to become a freedman (assuming the slave theory and assuming this is the same Onesimus) after receiving Paul's letter. However, the letter to Philemon challenges Onesimus to return to Philemon as one who is still subservient. Further, Paul also challenges Philemon to be a better leader. Paul is ultimately showing Philemon how to be a better *paterfamilias* fitting the mold of Eph 6:5–9 and Col 4:1.

Paul is likely not writing with the expectation that Philemon will free his slaves (perhaps Onesimus) simply because slavery is an immoral thing. Paul's purpose in writing to Philemon is to teach that, even though Onesimus deserves severe reprimanding for his actions (whatever

these actions may be), Philemon as the *paterfamilias* and as a leader in the congregation is to treat his whole household (including slaves) and his congregation in a fair and just way.

If one interprets Onesimus as the slave of Philemon, there is some evidence to suggest that Onesimus was eventually freed. Ignatius provides such information in his letter to the Ephesians. The opening of this letter refers to an “Onesimus” who serves as a bishop in Ephesus.²¹ If Onesimus became a freedman at the command of Philemon, Onesimus would have been able to set up a branch of Philemon’s business in Ephesus and operate it from there while also serving the church as one of its leaders. This would imply that Philemon not only took Onesimus back as a slave but ultimately taught him the responsibilities of being a church leader and businessman.

The Hypothesis of Philemon as an Elder of the Church in His House

There is no question that Philemon served as an influential and vital part of the Colossian congregation. He was the one who provided the location for the meeting place of the Colossian church.²² Without Philemon, the church in Colossae may have never had a comfortable place to worship. Some suggest the letter explicitly refers to Philemon’s wealth based on the apparent presence of slaves and his willingness to host the congregation each week.²³ However, the

²¹ Ign. *Eph.* 2.221.

²² It is not uncommon to hear of Archippus as the owner of the house and that the letter was actually addressed to him. However, the arguments for these views are unconvincing. See Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, 381–82.

²³ Carl Hermon Dudley, *St. Paul’s Friendships and His Friends* (Boston: The Gorham Press, 1911), 221.

presence of slaves does not inherently infer Philemon as a wealthy individual.²⁴ Philemon would have been charged with the role of feeding the congregation each week implying he had the physical means to perform such a task.²⁵ While some may suggest that Philemon's wealth would have undoubtedly made him a leader in the church, the question of Philemon as a church leader cannot lie with Philemon's bank account. While the qualities/qualifications of elders would not be written down until the mid 60s, the qualifications/qualities of an elder²⁶ still must be evaluated to some extent. These are arguably found in three places in the NT: 1 Tim 3:1–7; Tit 1:5–9; 1 Pet 5:1–5.

While it can be argued that the reader cannot truly know if Philemon was ever “given to much wine” or truly the “husband of *one* wife,” the inference that Philemon is one of the elders can be adequately made based on Paul's introductory words in vv. 1–2. The relationship between Apphia and Philemon has often been understood as that of a husband and wife ministry team comparable to the ministry team of Aquilla and Priscilla.²⁷ Archippus has also been the subject of different interpretations not least of which is that he is the son of Philemon and Apphia.²⁸ To interpret Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus in the realm of a family dynamic is a convincing interpretation of the relational status between those specifically named in the introduction.

²⁴ Note the slave who owned his own slave in Jesus' parable found in Matt 18:21–35.

²⁵ Valery Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development, and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 58.

²⁶ These terms are interchangeable in the NT to denote the same congregational office. Benjamin Merkle, *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2009), 17–28.

²⁷ Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 382.

²⁸ J. B. Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 131.

If Philemon is in fact an elder with, as suggested later in this essay, Onesimus serving as a deacon in the congregation, it may be interpreted (because Onesimus had gone away for some reason) that Philemon was an overbearing bishop (cf. 1 Pet 5:3). Sarah Winter proposed the idea that the letter was not addressed to Philemon alone but rather to the congregation as a whole.²⁹ Since the letter is of a personal nature and not a “private” letter, it stands to reason that Philemon as the main addressee would be one of the overseers of this congregation.³⁰

Who Exactly Was Onesimus?

Though the letter bears the name of its addressee, Onesimus is clearly the main subject of the letter. Yet, the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon is only at best inferred from vs. 10–16. John Knox first rejected the slave interpretation and was followed later by Sarah Winter, Peter Lampe, Loyd Lewis, Allen Callahan, and Peter Artz-Grabner. Three notable hypotheses concerning Onesimus will be evaluated here.

Onesimus as the Estranged, Biological Brother of Philemon

The hypothesis that Onesimus was Philemon’s estranged blood brother is held most notably by Allen Callahan.³¹ According to Callahan, the first reference to Onesimus as Philemon’s slave

²⁹ S. C. Winter, “Paul’s Letter to Philemon,” *NTS* 33 (1987): 1–15.

³⁰ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 382.

³¹ Allen Callahan, “Paul’s Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative *Argumentum*,” *HTR* 86 (1993): 357–76. Margaret Mitchell’s “John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look” offers a response to Callahan. Mitchell suggests that Chrysostom’s motive to speak on slavery was because he campaigned for a quiet and peaceable life. Mitchell’s conclusion is that the hypothesis that John Chrysostom invented the idea of Onesimus as Philemon’s slave simply cannot be upheld. Margaret Mitchell, “John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look,” *HTR* 88 (1995): 135–48.

does not appear until John Chrysostom's *Homiliae in epistolam ad Philemonem*. Having written many articles on slavery, not least slavery in the 1st c., Callahan offers significant points as he asserts his arguments based on the absence of detail. For example, Callahan argues that the letter seems to lack the harshness of potential punishment expected from slave owner to a runaway slave.³² Rather, Paul tells Philemon to treat him "as a brother" (v. 16). Callahan argues the δοῦλος relationship is, on the one hand, allegorical, but, on the other hand, could possibly denote a freedman status. However, the term in question from v. 16 should not be δοῦλος but ὡς (*hōs*; as). Callahan suggests this term indicates a virtual state of affairs. Callahan argues this is made evident in the simile construct later found in v. 17 (i.e., "as you would me"). Therefore, Onesimus was to be received as Paul's virtual presence. Further, Callahan observes that there is no possessive construction linking Onesimus to Philemon nor is Philemon ever called the δεσπότης (*despotēs*; master). In fact, this word is never used in Paul's letter to Philemon.

In addition, Callahan's article offers hostile commentary toward John Chrysostom's *Homily*. Callahan suggests the slave relationship is merely the opinion of Chrysostom noting Chrysostom's words, "Therefore, it seems to me..." in the early part of Chrysostom's *Argumentum*. Regrettably, Callahan's evaluation of Chrysostom's *Homily* is unconvincing. As Margaret Mitchell suggests, the burden of proof for Callahan relies totally on Chrysostom's phrase "οὕτω μοι δοκεῖ" (*outō moi dokei*; thus, it seems to me).³³ Mitchell asserts that this phrase does not refer to Onesimus as a *fugitivus* slave but instead refers to Chrysostom's notes about "the church that is in your house." Therefore, according to Mitchell, Chrysostom is saying, "thus

³² Callahan, "Paul's Epistle to Philemon," 359.

³³ Mitchell, "John Chrysostom on Philemon," 137.

it seems to me the man's house was a lodging for all the saints."³⁴ This is a more convincing argument.

Callahan is correct in that the relationship of Onesimus to Philemon is not made verbally explicit in the letter. However, explicitly stating the relationship in the letter is not a necessity for Paul. The letter is a personal letter written to a specific audience for a specific reason. Each of the individuals mentioned in the letter's preface (including the congregation) would have known the relationship and circumstance between Philemon and Onesimus. There is, therefore, no real reason why Paul would have to explicitly state this relationship at all.

Lastly, Callahan's argument of Onesimus as a blood brother to Philemon is severely flawed for the same reason he claims the slave theory is flawed—there is simply no textual evidence to suggest that Onesimus was a blood brother to Philemon. In fact, the heaviest argument in favor of this view from a historical perspective is derived from a misreading of John Chrysostom's *Homily*. While it is true that the lack of evidence does not make this hypothesis impossible, it does not make any other hypothesis less possible either. Callahan has undeniably offered a new outlook on the relationship between the two key figures of the letter. However, one should not take this interpretation as the be-all-end-all of the story. It can only be counted as another possibility.

³⁴ Mitchell, "John Chrysostom on Philemon," 138.

Onesimus as a Thief

If Onesimus is to be understood as a *fugitivus* slave, what was it that prompted Onesimus to run away in the first place?³⁵ R. E. Glaze Jr. suggests the traditional view of Onesimus only as a runaway slave is insufficient because it lacks motive. Thus, Glaze suggests what prompted Onesimus's flight was that he had stolen something of value (perhaps money) from Philemon. This view has gained substantial popularity based on Paul's supposed promise to repay Philemon (Phile 18–19).³⁶

It does make sense that Onesimus, on the one hand, would need money in order to travel to Ephesus.³⁷ As a slave, he would not have been given any source of income. On the other hand, rather than rob Philemon as a means by which he could escape, the robbery may have been what prompted the flight from Philemon in the first place. In other words, Onesimus had robbed Philemon and thus he was forced to flee for his life.

While the theory of Onesimus as a thief is a well-established theory, the theory is only applied in direct relation to the slave theory. The problem here is that there is a necessary assumption that the robbery was an apparent, historical event. However, no such remark is made in the letter. Yes, Paul does offer to pay Philemon *if* Onesimus owes him *anything*. Note vv. 18–19. “*If* he has *wronged* you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write

³⁵ This research for this section is largely taken from R. E. Glaze Jr., “Onesimus: Runaway or Emissary?” *TTE* 54 (1996): 3–11.

³⁶ The “thief view” is held by Caird, Lightfoot, Moule, and Stuhlmacher. See Bonnie Thurston and Judith Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 181.

³⁷ Paul was imprisoned at least three times in the book of Acts: once in a Philippian jail overnight (Acts 16:19–34), for two years in Caesarea (Acts 23:23–26:32), and for two years in Rome (Acts 28:11–31) where Paul wrote his pastoral epistles (i.e., 1, 2 Tim and Tit). It seems likely that Paul also had other imprisonments during his three years in Ephesus. Therefore, as Douglas Moo suggests, there are three plausible options for Paul's prison location: Ephesus (A. D. 52–55), Caesarea (A. D. 57–59), or Rome (A. D. 60–62). Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 42.

this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self” (emphasis added). One must realize that Paul does not mention money outright. Rather, Paul says “If he has *wronged* you.” This could be a rhetorical tool. Onesimus had certainly wronged Philemon by deserting the *paterfamilias*. The last part of Paul’s words in v. 18 says, “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, *charge that to my account*” (emphasis added). The thief theory is forced to suggest that Paul is saying Onesimus would return fulfilling his role as a slave now that he is a convert of the same faith held by Philemon.³⁸ This theory is significantly flawed, however, in that there is simply not enough evidence to suggest that Onesimus had “obviously” or “apparently” stolen anything from Philemon.

Onesimus as a Sex Slave

It was not uncommon for slaves to fulfill the sexual desires of their masters in the 1st century. Note Petronius, *Satyricon* 75.11, “For fourteen years I pleased him; it is no disgrace to do what a master commands. I also gave my mistress satisfaction.” Seneca went so far as to say, “Unchastity is a crime in the freeborn, a necessity for the slave, a duty for the freedman.”³⁹ It is not a unique approach to suggest Paul’s letters address some type of sexual issue as it stands juxtaposed to the intended sexual purpose set forth by God. This is made most evident by Paul’s strong words to the sexually immoral, adulterers, homosexuals, etc. in 1 Cor 6:9–10. It is of no

³⁸ See 1 Pet 2:18; Tit 2:9; Eph 6:5; 1 Tim 6:1; Col 3:22.

³⁹ Joseph Marchal, “The Usefulness of an Onesimus: The Sexual Use of Slaves and Paul’s Letter to Philemon,” *JBL* 130 (2011): 749.

question that the world of the 1st c. was sexually promiscuous—not least masters with their slaves.

It is suggested that slaves used for solely sexual purposes were abused by their masters. These slaves are commonly perceived as nothing more than victims of rape. Further, only female slaves have been predominantly interpreted as “sex slaves,” though homosexuality was common in the 1st c. world and especially prevalent in Greco-Roman society. One must remember that the slave’s body was entirely the property of his master. Their physical being was at the master’s disposal whenever the master so desired.⁴⁰ In order for the master (most always presumed to be a man) to maintain his masculinity in the sexual act, the act of penetration always belonged to the master while the reception of penetration was to be performed by the slave. The master could not be the “passive partner.”⁴¹

Bringing the attention then to Philemon and Onesimus, Joseph Marchal suggests the uselessness of Onesimus had stemmed from his inability to sexually fulfill his master. The slave’s inability to fulfill the sexual desire of the master was not an uncommon occurrence. Note the slave Gastron’s response to his master Britinna in Herodas, *Mimes* 5.6, “Bitinna, I am a slave: use me as you wish.”⁴² Joseph Marchal takes note here of the imperative “use me” as it relates to Britinna’s sexual fulfillment. As such, Gastron is making himself nothing more than a sex toy for Bitinna’s enjoyment. Thus, Gastron is then free to have meaningful sex with the one whom he loves while remaining a sex object for Bitinna. Thus, the slave would have been perceived by the master in the same way sex toys would be perceived today.

⁴⁰ Craig Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010): 18.

⁴¹ Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 18.

⁴² Marchal, “The Usefulness of an Onesimus,” 753.

The structure of Paul's words in v. 11 does not differ drastically from that of Herodas. "Formerly he was *useless* to you, but now he is indeed *useful* to you and to me," (emphasis added). Marchal is quick to note the sexual inference based on the term χρῆσις (*chrēsis*; used, useful) in other ancient documents as well (e.g., Athenaeus's *Deipnosophistae*). The name Onesimus (ὄνησις) is similar to if not entirely synonymous with χρῆσις (*chrēsis*). The slave exists not for his own benefit, profit, or pleasure but for the enjoyable use of the master. Paul's description of Onesimus in terms of his utility (ἄχρηστον/εὐχρηστον) reinforces the status quo of this erotically kyriarchal system.⁴³

However, the reader is not led to believe there is a sexual use for Onesimus to either Paul or Philemon. While Col 3:5 does display Paul's command to put to death sexual immorality (πορνεία; *porneia*), no text suggests Philemon was one who struggled with this sin. Even if he had used Onesimus for sexual purposes, the letter to Philemon seems to imply a mature Christian who has put away the practice of πορνεία (*porneia*). The argument of Onesimus's name meaning "useful" is hardly a convincing one as the words, while possibly related, do not demand a sexual context out right. Take for example 1 Clem. 37:4, "The great cannot exist without the small, nor the small without the great. There is a certain mixture in all things, and from thence arises their *use*," (emphasis added).⁴⁴ Note also Herm. Mand. 5. 1. 5.

For if an exceedingly small piece of wormwood be taken and put into a jar of honey, is not the honey entirely destroyed, and does not the exceedingly small piece of wormwood entirely take away the sweetness of the honey, so that it no longer affords any gratification to its owner, but has become bitter, and lost its *use*?

⁴³ Marchal, "The Usefulness of an Onesimus," 760.

⁴⁴ BDAG, s.v. "χρῆσις."

The *use* of a slave would far exceed that of sexual fulfillment. Therefore, to understand Onesimus as a sex slave seems to be reading too deeply into the name ὄνησις and the gentile context of Philemon.

Onesimus as the *Fugitivus* Slave of Philemon

This is the most popular interpretation of Onesimus's relationship to Philemon. However, there is still ongoing debate about the general nature of his running away. Scholars wonder whether Onesimus was a roaming slave (*erro*) or a runaway slave (*fugitivus*). An *erro* slave was one who was allowed to roam about (i.e., a vagrant slave), spend his own money, and later return to his master.⁴⁵ Legally speaking, there are certainly divisions between runaway and wandering slaves. However, the definitions of these terms seem muddled and mixed depending on context. Interpreting Onesimus as a "wondering" slave offers two primary issues. First, the letter to Philemon seems to imply that Paul is the one sending Onesimus back rather than Onesimus returning on his own. A wondering slave would go until he ran out of money or decided to return to his master. Second, Paul's statement of the potential wrongdoing that Onesimus had done to Philemon seems to imply more than an extended trip (Phlm 18). There had been some kind of offense committed. A wandering slave would not be offensive to his master, nor would it cause the relational problems that Paul is trying to mend. Onesimus has broken the trust of Philemon.

If Onesimus was in fact a slave to Philemon, his role is unknown. No evidence is given informing the reader as to what duties Onesimus performed on a daily basis. John Nordling suggests Onesimus was one of the managerial slaves in Philemon's house. Because of this, Nordling suggests Onesimus was a slave on whom Philemon truly relied. In other words,

⁴⁵ John Nordling, "Some Matters Favoring the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," *Neot* 44 (2010): 87.

Onesimus was a vital part of running the Philemon household. Therefore, when Paul discusses Onesimus as potentially having wronged Philemon, he does so because Onesimus has broken the trust of Philemon. Peter Artz-Grabner suggests Onesimus was a field slave.⁴⁶ Regardless of his role as a slave, what is known is that his flight led him to Paul. If Paul is imprisoned in Ephesus, this journey could have been easily made on foot in three days. It must be noted here that Paul's intent in the letter is not to make some statement about slavery outright.⁴⁷ As mentioned previously, the letter to Philemon has been used in the past few centuries to both defend and defy the issue of slavery in the modern American context. Because the moral issue of slavery is potentially presented in the text, Stephen Vail suggested Onesimus's role as a slave only refers to his servitude to Christ, not that of a literal slave.⁴⁸

Onesimus as a Deacon in the Colossian Congregation

To this point, the slave relationship has been evaluated in three different ways: (1) an allegory against a blood brother relationship, (2) an abused sex slave, and (3) simply as the physical property of Philemon. However, there is one more option that does not require Onesimus to be a slave at all. It must be noted, however, that if Onesimus's role was truly that of a slave, the following hypothesis is still not rendered impossible. Slaves were considered part of the Roman *familia*. Therefore, whatever the *paterfamilias* did, the remainder of the household did as well.

⁴⁶ Peter Artz-Grabner, "Onesimus Erro: Zur Vorgeschichte Des Philemonbriefes," *Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft Und Die Kunde Der Älteren Kirche* 95 (2004): 92.

⁴⁷ Allen Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997), 45.

⁴⁸ Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus*, 47.

This is why Acts records that whole households were baptized as a result of hearing the gospel message (cf. Acts 10:2; 11:14; 16:15; 16:31, 34; 18:8). The hypothesis then is this: Onesimus is an angered deacon who serves under the Colossian eldership where Philemon is an elder.

It was not uncommon for Paul to establish elders in the congregations that he founded. In fact, Luke records that Paul established elders in every congregation he instituted (Acts 14:23). In addition to appointing men to serve as elders, the role of deacon was also instituted as a formal congregational office (1 Tim 3:8–13). The role of a deacon is denoted by the term's true definition. A διάκονος (*diakonos*) is simply one who serves. Three things must be explored further to establish this theory: (1) the term “slave” and the term “brother” are both allegorical in v. 16, (2) Onesimus served as a deacon in the Colossian church based on Paul's usage of the word διακονῆ in v. 13, and (3) the intended purpose of Onesimus upon his return was to continue in his service to the church.

The most notable point to the discussion of Philemon and Onesimus's relationship is found in v. 16, “not as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.” On the one hand, as has already been discussed in the dialogue with Callahan earlier, the term “slave” can in fact be interpreted as allegorical allowing the term “brother” to be tangibly relational. However, most, if not all, of modern critical scholarship calls for the opposite. That is, the term “slave” is tangibly relational and the term “brother” is allegorical. This is due to Paul's use of ἀδελφός in a spiritual sense in v. 20 when he refers to Philemon in the vocative. However, there is a third option—both terms in v. 16 are allegorical.

It is not uncommon for Paul to use both terms in this way. In Rom 6, Paul discusses quite vividly the relationship that the believer has either to Satan or to God. Paul says the human state is either a “slave” (δοῦλος) of sin or a slave (δοῦλος) of righteousness. Sin and righteousness

serve in the role of master. This of course cannot be taken tangibly, though Paul's argument is well made. Paul even refers to himself as a "slave" of Christ (Phil 1:1), yet, Paul was a free Roman citizen (Acts 22:28). Therefore, it is certainly possible that the slave relationship between Onesimus and Philemon is allegory for an elder who lords over those who serve in his congregation (cf. 1 Pet 5:3). Further, Paul uses familial terms such as "brother" (ἀδελφός) as a way to describe those who share a common bond in Christ. Ἀδελφός (*adelphos*; brother) is a prominent designation within the Pauline corpus. Wayne Meeks suggests Paul's use of the term, as comparable to other ancient Greek documents, is to identify two categories of humans: those within the community of faith and those who are outside.⁴⁹ While this is not an entirely wrong assumption, this does not give adequate weight to the relational aspect of the term "brother" because it limits the term to only association while excluding relation. Philip Harland notes the term is not commonly used when discussing Greek "clubs" but are much more frequent when referring to Greek cults.⁵⁰ Even contemporary scholarship would agree that the emphasis placed on Philemon and Onesimus as "brothers" in v. 16 is that of a spiritually symbolic relationship.

Understanding then that both terms could be allegorical, the next step is to establish the specific role Onesimus served within Philemon's congregation. It is true that Paul's letter does not assign the term "deacon" as a title for Onesimus according to the term's definition as a specific church office. However, Paul does mention in v. 13 his desire for Onesimus to *serve* (ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου; in order that he might *serve* me on your behalf in my imprisonment for the gospel). Paul's use of διακονῇ should cause the reader to

⁴⁹ Philip Harland, "Familial Dimensions of Group Identity: 'Brothers' (ΑΔΕΛΦΟΙ) in Associations of the Greek East," *JBL* 124 (2005): 492.

⁵⁰ Harland, "Familial Dimensions," 492.

pause. Service is an act done voluntarily for the benefit of someone else. Paul, here, is not offering to purchase Onesimus as a slave or to force his service. Rather, it is possible that Onesimus could fulfill his role as deacon with Paul just as he had in Colossae.

To take this hypothesis further, the letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians refers to an Onesimus who is a bishop over the Ephesian congregation. While it is true that both offices of elder (i.e., bishop, overseer; πρεσβύτερος, ποιμήν, επίσκοπος) and deacon (διάκονος) differ in form and function, one can see the obvious connections. Benjamin Merkle is correct when he suggests the role of deacon is not and should never be viewed as a stepping stone to the eldership.⁵¹ Yet, while the prerequisites of elder and deacon are laid out clearly in 1 Tim 3:1–13 and Titus 1:5–9 (arguably 1 Pet 5:1–4 and Ezek 34:1–24), it is nonetheless true that one who serves in the role of deacon may later be willing to accept the role of elder. Ignatius’s mention of Onesimus as an elder in Ephesus adds validity to the claim that his “service” to both Philemon and to Paul was that of a deacon. This view aligns partially with the hypotheses of first John Knox and later of Sarah Winter. Knox questions the “escaped slave” narrative in the first chapter of his commentary while Winter more forcefully denies an “escaped slave” narrative.⁵² Both Knox and Winter argue Onesimus as an emissary sent on behalf of the church to Paul.⁵³

This view is met with opposition, however, considering Paul’s words in v. 10. “I appeal to you *for my child*, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment” (emphasis added). This verse has long been understood as proof that Onesimus became a Christian during his time

⁵¹ Benjamin Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 246.

⁵² John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 17–18.

⁵³ Peter Artz-Grabner, “Onesimus Erro: Zur Vorgeschichte Des Philemonbriefes,” *Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft Und Die Kunde Der Älteren Kirche* 95 (2004): 132.

with the apostle. However, Paul often uses the phrase “my child” (ἐμοῦ τέκνου) to refer to those to whom Paul shared a close spiritual relationship.⁵⁴ Paul never uses the term τεκνόν to refer to one of slave status. Further, the ESV’s translation, “whose father I became” seems to miss the intended inflection of the original words ὃν ἐγέννησα (*hon egennēsa*). Thus, the inflection is not on Onesimus’s “spiritual birth” but on Paul’s influence over Onesimus. Therefore, Onesimus is not required to undergo conversion while with Paul. Further, it seems unlikely, were Onesimus a slave, that he would have neglected becoming a Christian along with the rest of Philemon’s household at their initial conversion.

The argument that Onesimus was a deacon in the church that meets in Philemon’s home finds its most firm foundation based on Paul’s words in v. 13. Serving Paul on behalf of Philemon (or the church as a whole; v. 2) denotes a ministerial role of loving service—one that is not performed out of compulsion. There is an issue, however, with this theory as it relates to v. 18, “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.” However, there are two things that must be further noted. First, the issue, as it is presented in the letter, is that of Onesimus having *wronged* Philemon. BDAG suggests ἀδικέω (*adikeō*; wronged) in the context of Phlm 18 means, “if he has caused you any loss.”⁵⁵ However, the same word can be used of things that are damaged or mistreated. The loss here is of Onesimus’s disrespect or lack of submission to leadership. Second, the promise of Paul to repay Philemon does not seem to fit with an issue of money. Paul calls himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus (v. 1) allowing a pun to be made based on his contextual situation of being in prison and his symbolic relationship to the Lord. Because Paul was in prison, it seems that Paul would not have possessed any great amount

⁵⁴ Philip Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 52.

⁵⁵ BDAG, s.v., “ἀδικέω.”

of money with which to repay Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. This view does though ignore the slim possibility of a house arrest. Regardless, Philemon is also depicted as owing something to Paul (v. 19). It seems unlikely that a wealthy man in Colossae would owe a monetary amount to a man in prison—especially if that man had never been to Colossae.⁵⁶ What then does Philemon owe Paul? He owes Paul the same thing Onesimus owes Philemon—respect given to an authoritative position.

Conclusion

The slave-master relationship of Philemon and Onesimus is not without its flaws. Depending on how the interpreter deciphers terms such as “slave,” “brother,” and “serve” in the letter further add to this ongoing debate. Thus, as has been explored to the extent it can be here, the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is reduced to three valid options based on how one interprets these words: (1) Philemon is the master of the slave Onesimus, (2) Philemon is the blood brother of Onesimus, or (3) Philemon is an elder in the congregation that meets in his home with Onesimus serving as a deacon in this congregation. Understanding the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is vital in understanding the purpose of the letter itself. Paul’s letter to Philemon offers the third act of a four-act narrative. The first act is that of Onesimus’s departure. The second is that of Onesimus meeting Paul. The third is of Onesimus returning to Philemon with the composed letter. The last is that which happens after Philemon receives the

⁵⁶ Colossians 2:1 suggests Paul was not the founder of the Colossian congregation. The evidence seems to suggest that the gospel spread to Colossae during Paul’s nearly three-year ministry in Ephesus.

letter. As a result, there are three things that can be concretely known when interpreting the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.

First, there is a theme of submission versus authority that applies to each character of the letter. Second, the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus was fully restored. While the letter itself as the “third act” does not tell the reader outright that the broken fences of the relationship were completely mended, the fact that the letter (having such a personal nature) is not only extant but included in the canon of Scripture assumes Paul’s request was respected, followed, and circulated in the Lycus valley. Third, Onesimus had to make the decision to return to Philemon. Though Paul was sending him back, Paul could not control Onesimus. One would expect, knowing Onesimus and Philemon were at serious odds with one another, that Onesimus would leave Paul’s presence not willing to return.

The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is not as cut-and-dry as one might think. Theories are being presented concerning this relationship for the intended purpose of better understanding the letter itself and what the letter means for people today. There is much about the letter that cannot be known. However, diving into the unknown proves significant for furthering one’s understanding.

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