

CHAPTER ONE

“No Longer as a Slave”

Reading the Interpretation History of Paul’s Epistle to Philemon

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Trivial, insignificant, banal, unspiritual: these are some of the adjectives that have characterized the early church’s reading of Paul’s letter to Philemon in the initial era of its interpretation history.¹ According to J. B. Lightfoot, the ancient church did not lavish much attention on this letter because it was taken up with questions about life in this world and “the gospel is not concerned with trivia.”² That is, this short letter did not address an issue of importance for the early church, as did Paul’s theologically profound epistles (excluding the deuteropaulines)—Romans and Galatians—or those laden with explosive polemics and ethical significance, such as the Corinthian correspondence, or 1 Thessalonians and Philippians. Philemon addressed a mundane issue at best, at least in the opinion of the early church: slavery. Slavery, historians of classical antiquity have noted, was commonplace throughout the Roman Empire. This subject did not require or demand the attention of early interpreters. Perhaps the only reason the brief letter found its way into the canon is that it happened to carry the name and influence of the great apostle Paul.³ As a part of the Christian canon, circumstances eventuated the necessity to offer interpretation and commentary to justify and rationalize Philemon’s place in the canon, its usefulness for doctrine and praxis, and its importance and meaning for the church.

Overview and Approach: An Ideological Optic/Option

Over the many centuries, Philemon has attracted hardy *yet redundant* commentary by elite interpreters in the church and academy, especially in the last three centuries. One reason is perhaps the extremely brief nature of the letter (in comparison to Paul’s other letters);⁴ another is the development of what has become known as the “traditional” or “normative reading” of Philemon, about which more will be

said below. In the normative reading, Paul pleads the case of a runaway (fugitive) slave, whom he is returning to his master, though in a repentant and “converted” state; but this transformation in no way alters his social condition or status as a slave. This very brief normative reading, first developed in the early church, supplied the basic structure upon which many subsequent commentaries and interpretations have been built. In addition to this normative reading, the perspective of many interpreters/readers in the history of the West can be viewed as valuing the epistle to Philemon according to three overarching foci: (1) as a resource for teaching Christians moral lessons, especially for expressing the character of Paul, or even as an example of the gospel’s power to convert so low an example of humanity as a “good-for-nothing” slave (an opinion especially held in the early church up to the Reformation era—since the letter was viewed early on as lacking significant theological value); (2) as a resource for debating and negotiating the ethical-religious and social-political circumstances that would seem to invite Philemon into the discourse, that is, the historical, religious, and social issues related to slavery (evidenced both in the ancient and modern contexts); and (3) as a means or resource, particularly for modern scholarship, to advocate for or support the Pauline “authorship” of Colossians.⁵ In general, a historical interpretive/reading paradigm and perspective has dominated the normative or traditional interpretation of Philemon.

More recent approaches to reading Philemon are a result of newer currents in the global reading community that came to fruition in the 1990s. These readings and interpretive perspectives are also nonetheless influenced by political, social, religious, and historical circumstances, but they are increasingly more cognizant of the lingering effects of the history of European empire-building and quests for the political domination of non-European peoples. These interpretive perspectives (at least in theory and intention) attempt to “read from the margins,” that is, from a perspective of those who have been traditionally locked out from the dominant elite discourses and rhetorics. This interest has come primarily from biblical scholars belonging to one or another minority group within Western culture or from those in countries not accounted as a part of the dominant culture of the West.

In this regard, biblical scholars have increasingly explored how biblical criticism serves to advance and advocate for particular ideologies and political agendas. One of the primary challenges to biblical interpretation is that the enterprise of biblical studies has been traditionally Eurocentric. According to David deSilva, “There is an uncanny collusion between the spread of the gospel and the spread of European imperialism throughout the world. Traditional biblical criticisms have tended to be used to answer questions of interest to white males who spoke from the vantage point of the dominant culture, and have only recently begun to be used to address questions of interest to the less-empowered (for example, women, people of color, and so on).”⁶ The questions and interests of those that are outside of the dominant mainstream of Western culture and concern appear to share a common focus: their readings are focused through the lens of ideological criticism. Ideological approaches within recent biblical interpretation comport well with the experiences and perspectives of those who are “less-empowered” and who speak from within and perceive life “from the margins”—that is, readings influenced by postcolonial, African American, and feminist perspectives, to name a

few, all of which can be viewed as focusing their approaches through the lens of ideological criticism.

Ideological criticism, in simple terms, explores the relationship between rhetoric and power.⁷ According to Sonja Foss, "The primary goal of the ideological critic is to discover and make visible the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in an artifact and the ideologies that are being muted in it."⁸ Ideological criticism, then, in itself is a kind of rhetorical criticism and finds a ready partner within biblical studies because "ideographs and the ideological commitments they are assumed to represent have undeniably rhetorical natures."⁹ This is an important connection for biblical critics because (biblical) texts are rhetorical: they seek to persuade, to advance an agenda, to limit and constrain readers in multiple ways. Thus we can see how an ideological approach within biblical criticism can effectively contribute to the kinds of questions and concerns "marginalized readers" might bring to the interpretation of biblical texts.¹⁰

An ideological examination can begin with the investigation of the *interpreters of texts* in order to understand how the ideology of an interpreter affects the way the text is interpreted and what ends that ideology serves. In this regard, one seeks to understand how sociocultural location, ethnicity, and gender can constrain an interpreter, either past or present, and how this might contribute to the results of any investigation of a text. Another level of investigation seeks to explore the *ideology of texts themselves*—that is, the ways in which ideology has shaped biblical texts and how the text affects readers in their own situation. Ideological criticism, then, "is a deliberate effort to read against the grain—of texts, of disciplinary norms, of traditions, of cultures. It is a disturbing way to read because ideological criticism demands a high level of self-consciousness and makes an explicit, unabashed appeal to justice."¹¹

Finally, this investigation must be applied also to *investigators themselves*. While there is no formal methodological procedure in place for engaging these broad examinations, ideological criticism invites the investigator to repeated close readings of the text from the standpoint of a new set of questions, which has the potential to open new interpretive possibilities and to reach new conclusions.

In order to uncover new interpretive possibilities of Paul's letter to Philemon, an examination requires "detailed critical engagement and interaction with not only the passage itself, but also with the history of its interpretation and application."¹² Why is engaging the interpretive history of Philemon as important as examining the passage or text itself? The importance of such an examination is that it can expose the ideological tendencies that have guided the traditional interpretation history of Philemon and its application. On one hand, the traditional history of interpretation has muted the voices and viewpoints, the commitments and concerns of marginalized groups:

The traditional "history of the interpretation" of the Bible focuses on the pursuits of German, French and English scholars (and their American followers). These observations are important because, taken as a whole, they strongly suggest that biblical interpreters have hitherto been far too concerned with Europe, what comes out of Europe and what is of interest to Europeans. In many instances the message of Scripture may have been limited or even undermined and subverted because of the interests of Europeans and Euro-Americans; they have not been allowed to speak prophetically "from the margins" as well.¹³

On the other hand, it is important to ask, “What traditionally has been the purpose and goal of a history of interpretation?” The exercise was developed in the early church in the battle between orthodoxy and heresy. “In these contexts,” for example, Clement of Alexandria “produces ‘false’ and ‘true’ genealogies [i.e., “histories”] of Christian teachings; this rhetorical strategy functions to define his particular vision for Christianity as its true form while making other forms of Christian thought and practice appear fragmented and illegitimate . . . particularly [by] contrasting claims to authoritative interpretation of scripture and the practices inferred from these interpretations.”¹⁴ In other words, the purpose of a “history of interpretation” has been to show that a particular interpretive tradition is in line with a particular authoritative/normative reading of Scripture. This practice has continued in the modern context within the tradition of biblical studies. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza exposes the complicity of institutional procedures in constructing and perpetuating certain interpretive lineages that have marginalized and excluded other readings of Scripture: “Students being tested on their knowledge of biblical interpretation, for instance, will be certified if they know ‘whitemale’ Euro-American tradition of biblical interpretation. Their knowledge of African-American or feminist biblical interpretation does not count. Conversely, students who have no knowledge of either African-American, Hispanic, or biblical interpretation will be certified as competent.”¹⁵

The present “interpretation history” seeks to contribute to the study of Philemon and to explore its potential interpretive possibilities by realigning its reading perspective. Instead of situating my reading perspective with elite interpreters and their reading locations and claims of “normativity,” I situate my reading with those who have been marginalized—whose readings and interpretations of scripture have not been included in normative “histories of interpretation.” In terms of the characters in the text of Philemon, the traditional interpretations have read from the perspective either of Paul (a nominally free person of Hellenistic Jewish descent, living under Roman political domination) or of Philemon (a presumably well-to-do free person and a householder and owner of one or more slaves). My reading will be situated from the *presumed* perspective of Onesimus, an enslaved and marginalized (non)person in the Greco-Roman imperial context.

Situating one’s reading is important because each reading perspective has a different set of questions, values, and concerns. Moreover, I will utilize an ideological optic and option in order to “read the readings” (interpretations) of the letter to Philemon. What is meant by the choice of an *ideological optic* is, I think, fairly clear: I will examine the interpretation history of Philemon in an effort to expose the ideological commitments of the reading perspectives of previous interpretive traditions. In terms of an *ideological option*, I mean that I do not hedge on the question of my own commitments and values or hide behind a veil of objectivity, which might mask my real agenda. I admit up front that I am making an open choice to read from this perspective, recognizing that all “readings” are ideological. For too long, privileged theological readings of the Bible have masked the ideological interests well hidden behind its critical methods of interpretation (for example, regarding gender, race, sex, ethnicity, religious privilege, and so on). But as Louis Althusser warns, “As such there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of.”¹⁶ Hence, my own reading perspective locates me as a married-with-children African American male in my mid-forties,

academically/theologically trained both in New Testament and Christian origins (historical-critical methodology) and religious studies (comparative methodology); but also as a product of the African American religious tradition—the Baptist tradition in particular—with the allied social-political tradition of struggle against racism and for equality and justice. I have remained an active participant in my religious tradition as an ordained minister (having served several churches in various ministerial and pastoral capacities and currently serving as a pastor of a Baptist congregation). I have also been teaching simultaneously in university and seminary/theological school settings. Thus my reading perspective, conditioned by my ethnic, sociopolitical, academic, and religious locations, opts for a liberative reading of Scripture.

My investigation of the interpretation history of Philemon does not pretend to be exhaustive. There may be works that some readers consider seminal or essential that may not appear in the pages of this chapter. In this regard, I must acknowledge the constraints (especially) of time and the normal limitations of space, which mitigates any hopes I may have had originally of providing a “comprehensive” overview of the field of studies on Philemon. With these constraints acknowledged and kept in mind, I will proceed in the following manner:

1. I will divide the examination of the reading traditions into three broad overviews—from the early church to the Reformation (beginnings to sixteenth century), from the period after the Reformation to the 1990s (modern era), and newer readings from the margins (1990s to the present).
2. That broad overview will be further subdivided according to reception history, supposed occasion of the letter, and my own “reading assessment” of the particular period under consideration.

This organizational procedure and structure in my opinion helps to facilitate the location of the most important factors in determining the various reading perspectives in the interpretive traditions, which I have discovered lie primarily in discussions of the *occasion of the letter* and in the *interpretation of Philemon 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” (NRSV). Upon these two factors also I hope to explore new options for reading Paul’s letter to Philemon: options that take Paul’s appeal to receive Onesimus as more than a slave, “as a beloved brother,” to the heart of interpretation *and* praxis.

Reading Philemon from the Early Church to the Reformation (Sixteenth Century)

Reception History

It has been assumed that from the beginning, many readers in the early church recognized Paul’s letter to Philemon as written by the apostle himself. However, there is no evidence for Philemon in the writings of Apostolic Fathers or in the earliest stage of the

development toward a New Testament canon. Toward the end of the second century it was included in Marcion's canon (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 5.21) and was also listed in the Muratorian Canon. However, in parts of the Syrian church, the letter to Philemon was ignored as un-Pauline, or rejected. For example, the Syrian church rejected it as spurious, preferring a more theologically significant and useful Third Corinthians.¹⁷ Although Philemon was included in some early canon lists, there was little to no comment on it because no one apparently found any occasion to mention it. The letter was thought to have no doctrinal content that might have led to its being quoted, no contribution to the development of Paul's theology, or of Christian theology in general. As a matter of fact, "Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentary . . . mentions that [Philemon] was 'vigorously attacked' in the fourth century, because the subject matter was considered trivial and unworthy of an inspired book." Therefore Theodore offered a lengthy essay on the utility of the epistle for the church.¹⁸ Both Chrysostom and Jerome admit of certain misgivings within certain segments of the church regarding Philemon's authenticity and usefulness for the church.¹⁹ Chrysostom states that "some say that this epistle is superfluous and to be laid aside." To this kind of sentiment Jerome seemingly also responds: "In this way, these and others determine that the epistle which was written to Philemon was not Paul's, or, if it was Paul's, that it has nothing that could edify us."²⁰

The Occasion of the Letter

The traditional interpretation history of Philemon asserts with confidence that the "normative reading" of Philemon rests on a solid tradition. That reading, received from the early church, assumes in sum that the occasion of the letter is that Paul pleads the case of a runaway (fugitive) slave, whom he is returning to his master. There are occasional qualifications: Ben Witherington, for example, asserts, "It is not absolutely certain that Onesimus was a runaway slave, although all the ancient commentators who wrote while slavery was still an institution in the region thought so."²¹ While this statement admits the general consensus of ancient commentators on the occasion for Philemon, the origins of such a reading have not been sufficiently explored. According to Allen D. Callahan, who has recently explored this question, the origins of the "normative reading" of Philemon can be found in the interpretive and sermonic musings of John Chrysostom.²²

In Callahan's examination and estimation, Chrysostom took up this epistle to address a particular issue within the Christian community of his day and attempted to argue for its importance in the face of prior dissatisfaction with the epistle already expressed in the tradition. Callahan suggests that in the preface of Chrysostom's first homily on Philemon, he developed a "hypothesis" on which the subsequent normative tradition's reconstruction of the occasion and life-situation of the letter would be built. Callahan takes note of how Chrysostom begins stating his case: "First it is necessary to state the argument of the epistle, then also the matters that are questioned respecting it. What is the argument?" Chrysostom then proposes, according to Callahan, that Onesimus is a fugitive slave on whose behalf Paul writes to Philemon. Chrysostom's

proposition is introduced with the words, "Therefore it seems to me . . ." It is the diction of Chrysostom's argument, Callahan infers, that "indicates that he is offering the rationale for an opinion. Nothing in his words suggests that Chrysostom is drawing on an interpretation either current or traditional. Precisely the contrary: in his *hypothesis* Chrysostom is offering a novel interpretation and is thus constrained to argue for its validity."²³

Callahan argues furthermore that Chrysostom must be seen as attempting to challenge the negative assessment of Philemon by also offering an exegesis of the epistle that treats slavery, an issue of great importance in his own time. Chrysostom apparently felt that some in the Christian community were too radical in their opinion regarding slavery. In his *argumentum* for the validity of Philemon, he sought to show that Christianity upholds law and order but that it was currently suffering from slander because of these radicals: "But now many are reduced to the necessity of blasphemy, and of saying Christianity has been introduced into life for the subversion of everything, masters having their servants taken from them, and it is a matter of violence." Chrysostom thus introduced a novel interpretation of Philemon (the fugitive-slave hypothesis) that would not only address the issues in his own life-situation (especially slavery) but also recoup the usefulness of Philemon for the church by epitomizing Paul as an example of one who exhibited for Christians how to intervene on behalf of one who is a refugee, a highwayman, and a thief,²⁴ and even a slave. Chrysostom's reading of the epistle became normative for the church and generated a reading of Philemon that could be used for moral and hortatory lessons for faithful and law-abiding Christians.

It can be seen, then, that in responding to certain Christian groups that had little appreciation for Philemon, Chrysostom and other ancient interpreters explained the significance of Philemon as providing lessons for Christian living. On the one hand, they expounded the letter's value for showing the depths of Paul's humility and caring as an example to all Christians; and on the other, they emphasized Philemon's usefulness for showing how believers from different social levels are to relate to one another. These early interpreters, moreover, established a pattern or interpretive tradition of employing Philemon as a text for moral lessons that began with Chrysostom, Theodore, and Jerome and would continue through the Reformation. Marion Soards has noted that "the interpretation of Philemon was done on almost exclusively *moral* or *hagiographically moral* lines."²⁵ The anonymous interpreter "Ambrosiaster" saw Paul's humility as the key to the letter, showing how Paul's intervention between Onesimus and Philemon was free from either disdain or arrogance. Sometime later, Thomas Aquinas asserted that Philemon exemplified how earthly masters and slaves are to relate to one another. Martin Luther viewed Philemon as the epitome of Christian love: "What Christ has done for us with reference to God the Father, thus St. Paul also did for Onesimus with reference to Philemon . . . [and] we are all [Christ's] Onesimi, if we believe it." John Calvin drew more emphatic sociopolitical lessons from Philemon. Calvin observed that although Paul desired to have Onesimus remain with him (Philem. 13), he returned the slave to his master. Calvin's interpretation of the letter expressed that the gospel does not overturn the established order. Soards concludes: "Thus, we see in the interpretation of Philemon up to and through the Reformation a

nearly unadulterated tendency to draw lessons for Christian living from the letter. This line of interpretation was the rule.²⁶

Reading Assessment

The assessment of the meaning and message of Philemon in the early church has left its imprint on subsequent interpretation history. While the letter was recognized by some to be of Pauline origin, by the fourth century there was a strong bias against Philemon. The readers of this epistle were unsympathetic particularly with the subject matter: few cared about the fate of a single insignificant slave, long since dead and gone. What did such content matter to those for whom the battle over doctrine, theological heresy, and the creeds was violently raging? Moreover, Philemon seemed to provide little instruction in the matters of ecclesiastical discipline. Therefore when no practical use could be found for it, it was denied that Paul had even written it. Although Marcion included the epistle among his collection, he did not otherwise even bother with it. It can be inferred that for others in the tradition, even if Paul did write Philemon, it must not have been written when he was under the inspiration of the Spirit because its contents were altogether so unedifying. It could even be inferred, as Wilson observes, “from the replies of Jerome, of Chrysostom, and of Theodore of Mopsuestia, that they felt themselves to be stemming a fierce current of prejudice which had set in this direction.”²⁷ The varied opinions regarding this epistle at the early stages of its interpretive history eventually coalesced around a common interpretive lens.

John Chrysostom found a purpose for Philemon in addressing the situation of converted slaves. He argued that when a slave is converted and faithfully continues his life as a slave, even unbelievers are able to see that slaves can become believers without questioning the present norms of the society. In the same way, Theodore of Mopsuestia argued that God established different social roles and estates and every individual should stay in his or her proper role.²⁸ This line of reasoning continued into the Reformation. Martin Luther, in his 1527 *Lecture on Philemon*, viewed Onesimus as an example of a person who was misled by the idea of freedom. He argued that Paul respected the established legal rights of property and did not seek to abolish slavery. Calvin, too, affirmed respect for the prevailing order and also emphasized Paul’s request to receive Onesimus back into his service.²⁹

In this regard, the early interpretation history can be viewed as dominated by what might be termed an antienthusiastic attitude. This view represented the opinion of those who advocated for the importance of the epistle for the church. On this view, Philemon shows that Christians should not seek to overturn the existing structures and ordering of society. Even if a slave becomes a Christian, that slave is obligated to willingly return to his *legal position* after his conversion. As early as about 110, Ignatius of Antioch held that although Christians should not despise slaves as members of the church, converted slaves should not demand that the church purchase their freedom. In his opinion this would be harmful (*To Polycarp* 4.3).³⁰

The investigation of the reading of Philemon in the early church up to the Reformers indicates that the historical and theological interests of these interpreters primarily

relates to the difficult and complex issue of slavery. It is clear from the tradition that Philemon inevitably raises larger questions about slavery and the New Testament views of its significance with respect to Christian theology and practice. The history of interpretation reveals tendencies toward opposite extremes. Beginning in the early church with Chrysostom and continuing with Luther during the Reformation, there is a conservative tendency that stresses the degree to which Paul upholds the status quo. Paul did not explicitly ask Philemon to manumit Onesimus. Instead he followed the rule of the law in sending the fugitive slave back to his master.³¹ Although Paul declared that in Christ "there is no longer slave or free" (Gal. 3:28), he also advises slaves not to be concerned about their condition (but to make use of it: 1 Cor. 7:21-22).³² What these statements mean in concrete life has been open to debate and various interpretations. Does Paul in fact advocate the abolition of slavery, or should Christian slaves focus on their inner freedom "in Christ" in terms of thoughts, feelings, and convictions? However, the Paul of the uncontested Paulines (Rom., 1 and 2 Cor., Gal., 1 Thess., Phil., and Philem.) does not discuss the duties of Christian masters with regard to their Christian or non-Christian slaves (unless one considers Philemon to be an example of such counsel).³³

There appears to be a guiding assumption among the early readers of Philemon regarding slavery. The institution of slavery in the Greco-Roman world could have various manifestations; the life conditions and careers of the enslaved varied enormously. On the one hand, work in the mines and on galleys was miserable and could lead to slow death, while the life of a house slave in a city could be relatively comfortable. In assuming useful occupations as teachers or otherwise specialized workers, slaves could have a much better living condition than poor free persons. Nevertheless, "as a rule . . . slaves certainly wanted to be free."³⁴

It is clear, however, that early church leaders used Philemon as an instrument for fighting certain monastic and "enthusiastic movements" that rejected slavery. For example, there existed in second-century Rome a Gnostic sect, the Carpocratians, who rejected slavery, marriage, private property, and fasting. In addition, a Donatist group upset the established church in North Africa by calling for the release of all slaves and was considered a threat to law and order. To such rumblings over slavery Chrysostom reacted, claiming that some groups felt that "Christendom has brought into life the overwhelming of all things." And likewise Theodore remarked that several of his contemporaries "upset all things of the present life" because "they no longer distinguish between slave and master, rich and poor, those subjected to rulers and those ruling over others."³⁵

Conclusion

Reading the interpretation history during the period under investigation shows that it is possible to view Philemon from a conservative as well as an emancipatory perspective: there has been little else in between. However, the available literary sources do not indicate that all opposition to Philemon had its roots in a confused enthusiasm or that the endorsement of the letter was motivated essentially by an antienthusiastic attitude.³⁶ To be

sure, the conservative perspective has traditionally been more influential than the emancipatory. This same tendency is evident even today, and traditional biblical scholarship tends toward it, “especially because the emancipatory view runs the risk of being anachronistically conditioned by the modern dislike of slavery.”³⁷ In terms of “reading perspectives and positions,” both perspectives can gain important support from the text of Philemon. The anxiety the letter provoked among ancient readers was apparently occasioned by (1) the need to maintain the social order and (2) the need to interpret the apparent affirmation of equality in Galatians 3:28 and further expressed in Philemon verse 16—which could be read as advocating the release of slaves and their achieving equality.³⁸

Reading Philemon in the Modern Era (Post-Reformation to 1990s)

Reception History

While the ancient church debated the Pauline authorship of Philemon, modern critical scholarship found only one opponent of Pauline authorship—Ferdinand Christian Baur and his students rejected it as a Christian novella. According to Eduard Lohse, for the Tübingen school (founded by Baur), “the purpose of [Philemon], it was assumed, was to illustrate in a novelistic fashion how the Christian communities in the post-Pauline period handled the question of slavery.”³⁹ Other than this challenge (and that of enslaved African Americans), no other modern interpreter doubted Pauline authorship.

While the early church debated the purpose and worth of Philemon, determining the overall purpose of Philemon has been a basic step of interpretation for modern approaches.⁴⁰ One leading assumption of traditional interpretations is that Philemon is a practical letter of recommendation or of mediation for Onesimus, which is intended to persuade Philemon to either release him or to understand their relationship differently now that both are “brothers in the Lord.”⁴¹ Paul, then, can be viewed as using his example of voluntary action and renunciation of rights as a model that Philemon is to follow. Theologically, then, the purpose of Philemon is the teaching of freedom, love, and gratitude.⁴² Moreover, although the letter deals with a private matter, it is argued, the handling of human property, Paul makes the issue public. His intentions to do so can be seen both in the opening (vv. 1-3, addressing “the community that meets at Philemon’s house”) and the final greetings (vv. 23-24). Paul’s strategy is to use the larger community of believers to judge whether or not Philemon follows the apostle’s advice.⁴³

The Occasion of the Letter

Determining the occasion of Philemon has generated several proposals. There are several factors that make the reconstruction of the situation behind the letter so difficult. On the one hand, Paul does not refer explicitly to the background issues either known

to himself or to his addressee. On the other hand, Paul's considerable diplomacy and tact in addressing Philemon makes it difficult to really know what he is requesting of Philemon. Hence, it is important to state what is "obvious" in the text before we can more acutely address what is conjecture. Accordingly, R. Wilson reminds readers:

On the surface, the letter to Philemon must appear very simple and straightforward, presenting no real problems. . . . However, when we begin to ask questions and try to find the answers, the limitations of our knowledge soon become apparent. There are in fact many questions for which we have no real answers, because the necessary evidence is not at our disposal. In the circumstances we are often reduced to speculation and conjecture, and must weigh the possible alternatives against one another to select the most plausible. Speculation in itself is legitimate enough, and without some measure of conjecture it would be difficult in the extreme to fill the gaps in our knowledge. As already noted, however, we must constantly bear in mind what is conjecture, and what is solid fact for which we have evidence. In particular we must beware of the danger of piling conjecture upon conjecture to build and elaborate construction which is in fact devoid of any real foundation.⁴⁴

What is clear from the letter is that Paul is a prisoner (vv. 1, 9, 13) and he is "appealing" to Philemon regarding Onesimus (v. 10). Paul indicates that Onesimus was "converted" through his ministry while he was a prisoner (Paul for sure; but whether Onesimus also was a prisoner is not known), and now Onesimus has become dear and useful to him (v. 10, 11, 12, 13, 16—does this "usefulness" refer to caring for Paul's needs or assisting him in ministry?). Now the difficult issues regarding Onesimus's status and Paul's appeal to Philemon emerge: Is Paul "sending Onesimus back" to Philemon (a fugitive being returned to his master) or he is "referring the case of Onesimus" to Philemon (v. 12—the verb *anapempein* could mean either) because Onesimus has been "separated from" Philemon (v. 15) and now Philemon can "have him back forever" (v. 15)? Moreover, determining the status of Onesimus and his relationship to Philemon hinges upon how verses 15-16 are read, because Paul urges Philemon to receive, treat, and consider Onesimus "no longer as a slave but more than a slave," as a "beloved brother." Paul also urges Philemon to "welcome him" (Onesimus) as he would the apostle himself (v. 17). Finally, Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon will do "even more than I ask" (v. 21). What is Paul ultimately requesting?⁴⁵

It is clear that although we have some facts, other details remain obscure, most prominent of which are: (1) What is the exact social relationship between Philemon and Onesimus? (2) What is it that Paul is requesting of Philemon? And (3) how is Paul's language in verses 15-16 to be understood, since verse 16 is the only place where the term "slave" is used? Despite some of these cautions, several scholars have advanced some form of a fugitive-slave hypothesis to explain the occasion of Philemon. This again is known as the traditional or normative view: "The apostle pleads on behalf of a runaway slave."⁴⁶ Douglas Moo prefers a modified version of the "runaway" hypothesis because he feels that it fits best the data in the letter, "although [he] cannot be sure about it."⁴⁷ Lohse feels certain that Paul writes to Philemon to intercede for his slave Onesimus, although it is unclear from the letter what caused Onesimus to flee. Lohse conjectures, based upon his reading of the letter, that perhaps Onesimus

had heard Paul's name mentioned in the house of his Christian master and had hastened to him for help in his perplexity. Paul then converted him (v. 10), had great affection for him, and benefited from his service (v. 13). Nevertheless, Paul could not retain him and therefore sent Onesimus back with the letter in hand, so that Philemon could receive him back as "a beloved brother" (v. 16) and as Paul himself (v. 17). Paul could not and did not command Philemon to set Onesimus free. Instead he put the matter into Philemon's hands: "Paul's sole injunction to him is the commandment of love as the norm for his conduct."⁴⁸ Even as recently as Dunn's commentary, the traditional occasion for the letter remains intact—"It is clear that the letter's primary object is to intercede with Philemon on behalf of Philemon's slave Onesimus (see v. 16), himself from Colossae (according to Col. 4:9)."⁴⁹ That Paul sends Onesimus back to his master indicates that Onesimus continues his life as a slave of Philemon. The traditional interpretation seems rather secure; but Robert Wilson states, "Thus far all is clear enough, but this [the traditional interpretation] is not the only possible reconstruction of the situation, and there are numerous questions to which we have no real answer."⁵⁰

It has thus been recognized that the traditional interpretation is not without its problems. Indeed, if Onesimus was a *fugitivus*, that would entail serious consequences for both Paul and Onesimus if he did not return to Philemon. The letter to Philemon never expressly says either that Onesimus is a slave or that he is a runaway. Moreover, it has not been adequately explained how Paul and Onesimus happened to encounter each other. Other questions remain, such as: How does Paul have the freedom and authority to send back a runaway slave to this owner when this would really be a matter for the authorities?

One of the first interpreters to offer a sustained challenge to the fugitive-slave hypothesis was Peter Lampe. Lampe examined existing Roman legal codes on slavery as a basis to offer the conjecture that Onesimus had knowingly fled from the house of Philemon because of conflict between them. But he fled to a friendly third party, Paul, whom he sought out to intercede for him with Philemon. Lampe determined that in the legal discussions of such a case, a slave is not to be considered a *fugitivus* or runaway, subject to legal penalties. Such a scenario can be surmised to lie behind the epistle to Philemon wherein Paul has carefully crafted his letter to serve the exact function for which Onesimus came to him: to intercede for him with his owner Philemon. Lampe's reconstruction has been seriously questioned in its assumption that the opinions of legal theorists had much to do with actual practice.⁵¹

Although Carolyn Osiek questions the runaway, or fugitive-slave hypothesis, she makes a plausible suggestion in proposing that Onesimus may have been captured by the authorities (hence his encounter with Paul in prison?) and is being returned forcibly to Philemon. But upon his return he will have Paul's letter to mitigate the situation.⁵² J. H. Houlden is even more emphatic in his rejection of the fugitive-slave hypothesis: "That he is a runaway slave and that this is why Paul is so delicate and charming in this letter aimed at assuaging his master's wrath is a *legend without foundation*. We just do not know how he came to be with Paul; probably he had been lent to Paul to be of service to him over a difficult period. And the reason for Paul's delicacy is simply that he wishes to retain his services for longer."⁵³

The letter, nevertheless, is Paul's way of dealing with a somewhat delicate situation, the details of which remain obscure for later readers. But, of course, much could be left unsaid between Paul and Philemon because the details would have been well known to both of them. The problem for later readers is that without more of these well-known details, it remains impossible to reach a *completely satisfactory* reconstruction of the background of the letter and the situation with which Paul is trying to deal. Paul's flow of thought in Philemon is clear on some levels and ambiguous on others. "The epistle is written in a personal and polite fashion that often avoids concrete and univocal statements. . . . Paul wants to leave the matter for Philemon to decide, but his open-ended formulations do not make clear what the apostle recommends be done."⁵⁴ The ambiguous nature of Paul's rhetoric has left the possibility open for further reconstructions of the situation behind Philemon.

One of the first scholars to challenge the traditional interpretation of Philemon on several levels, including the fugitive-slave hypothesis, was John Knox. In a number of publications, Knox developed a very thought-provoking hypothesis. He argued that the intended recipient of Paul's letter was actually not Philemon but Archippus. He suggested that there is nothing in Philemon to assure us that Philemon was the actual owner. It thus seemed to Knox in his reading of the letter that it was Archippus who was the actual master of Onesimus.⁵⁵ Knox conjectured further that Philemon was overseer of the Lycus Valley churches and lived at Colossae. Philemon, then, as a leader and a distinguished member in Colossae, was to receive the letter first, and then to exert authority on Archippus in Laodicea, where both Tychicus and Onesimus resided (Col. 4:9). Paul wanted Onesimus pardoned and released from slavery to work as an evangelist. And so he sent him back to Archippus with this cover letter that is now called Philemon. Both Philemon and Colossians are to be read at Colossae (cf. Col. 4:16-17). According to Knox, the letter to Philemon is in fact the "letter from Laodicea" (Col. 4:16), and the ministry that Archippus is to fulfill is the service that Paul requests regarding Onesimus (that is, to send Onesimus back to assist Paul in the work of the gospel, Col. 4:17: "fulfill his ministry" meant to release Onesimus from servile duties). Colossians and Philemon were written in close proximity in time and to two locales in close proximity geographically.

Several interpreters who admit to the creativity of Knox's theory, which did more to argue for the authenticity of Colossians than to influence readers away from the traditional hypothesis, have generally followed C. F. D. Moule's suggestion, that if one cannot accept Knox's view, "we must revert to some form of the more conventional view. . . . As ordinarily reconstructed, the circumstances were that Philemon's slave, Onesimus, had run away, apparently with stolen money (Philem. 18). He had somehow met St. Paul in prison and had, apparently, been brought by him to accept Christianity, or to return to it after a lapse. Now he is sent back to his master with this letter from the apostle, which was carried, it seems, by Tychicus (Col. 7)."⁵⁶

Despite Moule's suggestion, Sara C. Winter has in several works attempted to advance a reconstruction of Philemon that is partially influenced by Knox.⁵⁷ Winter differs from the traditional interpretation on several points. First, she argues that the letter to Philemon is not a personal letter at all because of the large number of legal and commercial terms typical of public documents. For this reason, the letter is intended for

the “whole church” and not just Philemon, Archippus, or Apphia—the three named in the prescript (v. 1). Second, like Knox, she argues that Onesimus is probably the slave of Archippus, not of Philemon, and that Onesimus did not run away but rather was sent by Archippus to Paul on behalf of the church at Colossae. Onesimus was sent by his slaveowner to Paul and his companions in prison as a form of assistance, just as the Philippians had sent Epaphroditus (Phil. 2). She argues that Paul wrote the letter asking not for forgiveness of a runaway slave but for Onesimus himself, for a “gift of” Onesimus. In this regard, she again sides with Knox in challenging the fugitive-slave hypothesis. She argues further that Paul did not send Onesimus to his master with the letter (contra Knox) but sent the letter only and that Paul asked that Onesimus be manumitted to work with Paul as a freedman (v. 13: “to serve me in the bond of the gospel”). She therefore challenges the fugitive-slave hypothesis with the *sent-slave hypothesis*. Third, Paul’s request is that Onesimus be released from obligations in Colossae for work with Paul in Christian ministry. Paul writes to get Onesimus released from work in Colossae in order to stay in ministry with Paul. Onesimus is not the bearer of the letter back to Colossae. Finally, Paul clearly expects that Onesimus will be manumitted for this new work. “Paul makes clear that Onesimus is no longer to be considered a slave within the Christian community, and separately suggests Onesimus is to be received no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother, indeed as Paul himself (vv. 16-17).”⁵⁸ There have been adherents of the traditional view who have also thought Paul is asking for Onesimus’s manumission. Nevertheless, many interpreters have not fully embraced Winter’s development of Knox’s hypothesis.

Finally, Wolfgang Schenk has offered yet another reconstruction that departs from the traditional hypothesis. Schenk argues that Apphia, Archippus, and others had become Christians, but Philemon had been an oppressor before his “conversion,” and Archippus in particular had suffered at his hands. However, when Philemon became a Christian, he placed his house at the disposal of the Christians in Colossae (cf. v. 2). This act of generosity “refreshed the hearts of the saints” (v. 7). Philemon then sent Onesimus, his non-Christian slave, to Paul with the news of this special sponsorship. While Onesimus was in Paul’s company, Paul converted him to Christianity. Schenk argues further that since slavery was not of such fundamental significance in the ancient world as is often thought, particularly in the East (Rome with its *latifundia* was another matter, and even there slavery was in decline in the imperial period), the only Hellenistic kingdom in which slave ownership played a large role was Pergamum. Pergamum therefore is more likely the home of Philemon than Colossae. The letter is a request for Philemon to release Onesimus for the service of the gospel.⁵⁹

Verse 16—“No Longer as a Slave, but as a Beloved Brother”

Many readings that seek to uncover the “intention” of Paul and the meaning of his request of Philemon with respect to Onesimus hinge upon the interpretation of verse 16, in which Paul urges the recipient to receive Onesimus back, “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (NRSV). Ben Witherington has stated that the

emphasis has been placed here because Philemon 16 "is the only place in the New Testament where a slave is directly called a brother, and this fact must be allowed to have its full force."⁶⁰ Saarinen notes also that verses 16-17 contain the central message of Philemon—a message of love and equal treatment rooted in the attitude of voluntary gratitude.⁶¹ Other interpreters have remarked regarding v. 16 that "this verse brings Paul's plea to a climax"⁶² and that "Paul's statement of verse 16 is the Magna Charta of true emancipation and human dignity even if it is true that the word 'emancipation' seems to be trembling on his lips, and yet he does not once utter it."⁶³ For these reasons, Philemon 16 has been recognized as a hinge text for many interpretations of the historical situation reflected through the text as well as for the theological-ethical question of Paul's dealing with slavery. This verse identifies Onesimus *literally/figuratively* as a slave and *literally/figuratively* as a brother. What complicates the meaning of the passage is Paul's parenthetical comment to Philemon: "how much more to you." That Paul has the same relationship to Onesimus—he is a beloved brother to Paul too—is clear. But why the additional emphasis on *brother*?

The New Testament attests to the fact that it was common for Pauline Christians to call each other "brother" and "sister": "'Brother' came to be equivalent to 'a Christian' (see 1 Cor. 5:11). [Paul's] desire is that they may be reconciled, and in Christ enter into a new relationship."⁶⁴ The question is: Would slaves and slave owners use these titles for each other and perceive one another in that way? Perhaps this is the ethical, social, and cultural stretch to which Philemon was being called? In Paul's view, Onesimus has recently been baptized, so his relationship with Philemon already has necessarily changed. Philemon is urged to view his relationship with Onesimus in a new way.⁶⁵ Now in verse 16, Paul speaks of the way that Philemon should have Onesimus back: "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother." This new relationship is based upon the spiritual reality that Philemon and Onesimus are now *related* to one another as "brothers in Christ."⁶⁶ Therefore, Onesimus should be considered much more than a slave to his master. This brotherhood will now characterize his relationship to his Christian master. "Assuming that Onesimus was a slave recently baptized by Paul under whatever circumstance, this situation raises for Paul, Philemon, and the rest of the Christian tradition the serious question: How do baptism and membership in the church change relationships?"⁶⁷ What does this really entail?

For some readers of Philemon, the new relationship that Paul describes as "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" relativizes the historic fact of slavery for the Christian assemblies. Verse 16 is the first and only place in the letter where Paul calls Onesimus a *slave*, though some have argued that Paul may have already prepared the way for the mention of it by expressing the hope that Onesimus might have "served" him on Philemon's behalf (v. 13—but note that Paul uses *diakonein*, not *douleuein*, from which the noun *doulos* ["slave"] comes). "In that way Paul has put a new face on slavery by regarding the human condition as unimportant in contrast with a person's desire to fulfill his Christian vocation. This is his teaching in 1 Cor 7:21-4; and repeated in the 'rules of the household,' especially Colossians 3:22—4:1."⁶⁸ Some have suggested that while Paul does not deny that Onesimus is still a slave, he is no longer to be treated as one. The subtle change comes again with the term "brother," which makes all the difference in the assemblies of Christ and which Paul takes even further:

Onesimus is a “beloved brother.” This new and eternal relationship with Onesimus transcends everything that has happened between them up to now. Philemon’s ownership of Onesimus fades into the background because now that Onesimus has become a believer, his status as “beloved brother” far overshadows his status as slave: they are related in the Lord, which entails a new and deeper relationship.⁶⁹ Paul may even be inferring that their relationship will no longer be determined by the *legal relationship* of master and slave but by their *spiritual relationship* as brothers in Christ. Many interpreters have noted this possibility in Paul’s statement that Onesimus is a brother “both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

“In the Flesh and in the Lord”

Several readers and interpreters of verse 16 have noted Paul’s additional qualification of Philemon and Onesimus’s relationship—“both in the flesh and in the Lord.” Why was such a further clarification necessary? Some nineteenth-century US abolitionist exegetes, arguing against proslavery exegesis, suggested that the phrase indicated that Onesimus and Philemon were “natural brothers,” Onesimus being the younger brother to Philemon.⁷⁰ However, such a view has been rejected in traditional exegesis, so some other kind of new relationship between the two wrought by virtue of Onesimus’s baptism has been sought. Moo has suggested that by adding “in the flesh,” “Paul brings forcibly to Philemon’s attention the implications of Onesimus’s new status for their existing worldly relationship. . . . There is something finally inconsistent about this dual relationship.”⁷¹ Two questions must be asked in this regard: (1) What do “in the flesh” (*en sarki*) and “in the Lord” (*en kyriō*) mean? (2) How is this dual relationship to be understood? One way to explore this question is to survey several proposals that have been offered.

Lightfoot sees the phrase “both in the flesh and in the Lord” as referring to the two spheres of life: “in the affairs of this world and in the affairs of the higher life.”⁷² Wilson notes that “in the flesh and in the Lord” appears only here in Paul. It succinctly describes the nature of the new relationship. Onesimus is to be a beloved brother both as a man (“in the flesh”) and as a Christian (“in the Lord”).⁷³ Similarly for Moule, “both on an ordinary, human level—as a man—and on a specifically Christian level.”⁷⁴ Carson states that “Paul has him on the level of Christian fellowship, while Philemon has him on both the human level (*in the flesh*) as a transformed servant, and on the spiritual level (*in the Lord*) as a *brother beloved*.”⁷⁵ Dunn has similar views as the others but is more forthright in his understanding that Onesimus’s social status is not altered: “The fact that both are (now) Christians does not change the fact of their disparate social status; but clearly the relationship ‘in the Lord’ should be more important . . . both are now Christians; ‘in the flesh’ = ‘the world of human relationships’: hence it refers to the relationship of slave and master. However, relationships in Christ transcended even if they did not abolish distinctions of race, status and gender.”⁷⁶ For Osiek, “in the flesh” refers to what they both are humanly and historically, but in the phrase “in the Lord,” for whom “there is no longer slave or free” (Gal 3:28), the possibility of manumission is offered. Yet, “while to the modern reader it seems inconceivable that Onesimus

could continue as a slave, we know that slavery was tolerated by Christians for centuries more.⁷⁷ However, Paul has been read as offering a subtle request for Onesimus's release or manumission, if one reads his rhetoric closely.

Manumission?

On the question of manumission, Chris de Vos notes that this has been viewed as the most difficult interpretive question in determining what Paul is asking Philemon to do. But he suggests that the question, "what difference would manumission have actually made?" is even more essential.⁷⁸ Barclay notes, nevertheless, that Paul's basic appeal to Philemon with respect to Onesimus is encapsulated here in verse 16, and its implications must be explored.⁷⁹ Since Onesimus has undergone such a major change in his identity, one hastens to consider what is to happen next. To this question Moo asserts:

It is particularly significant that Paul asks Philemon to treat Onesimus as a dear brother not only "in the Lord" but also "in the flesh." . . . This last phrase is, in a sense superfluous. For Paul would not entertain the idea that there is any sphere of existence for the believer that lies outside the all-encompassing "in the Lord." The idea of two equal and competing spheres of existence—what believers are "in the Lord" and what they are "in the flesh"—is foreign to the New Testament understanding of the Lordship of Christ. The believer's existence "in the Lord" affects all his or her relationships, whether "sacred" or secular. And the fact that Paul nowhere else contrasts "flesh" with the Lord points to the unusual nature of the contrast here.⁸⁰

Paul helps Philemon to see the contrasts more clearly and makes his obedience more socially acceptable by providing a series of new names for defining who Onesimus now is: "my child"; "once useless, now useful to us both"; "my own heart"; "beloved brother . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord"; "a stand-in" for Paul himself (vv. 10-11, 16-17, author's translation). The renaming of their relationship makes possible different response to Onesimus from what might be acceptable on the basis of common social practice. Unfortunately, the renaming of Onesimus did not compel Paul or his later interpreters to conclude that Christians should seek whenever possible to liberate other Christians who were slaves. Philemon is not asked outright to free Onesimus; instead he is urged to confirm his own reputation for love and generosity. Paul's subtle use of naming demonstrates the possibility for fostering new possibilities for changing deeply ingrained patterns of domination in a world where it is difficult to see "the other" as a "beloved sister or brother." Thus Paul sought "to reconfigure the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus in terms of their shared faith and the 'fellowship' that faith creates (v. 6)."⁸¹

On a slightly different note, Lohse offers a more conservative view of the status change of Onesimus. He proposes that, "although Onesimus 'in the flesh' is, as a slave, the property of his master, this earthly relationship is now surpassed by the union 'in the Lord.' Nevertheless, in the last analysis it is of no significance to the Christian whether he is slave or free. The only thing that matters is this: to have accepted God's call and to follow him (1 Cor. 7:21-24)." In Lohse's view, the slave master also must be obedient to

this call, for he is also subject to the Lord. In this way, while the relationship between master and slave undergoes a fundamental change, their earthly statuses may remain the same. Although granting Onesimus his freedom would seem a logical development from Paul's rhetoric, Paul leaves the final decision to Philemon to proceed as he will.⁸²

Moo proffers the possibility that Paul may indeed hint at a change both in Onesimus's worldly status as well as in his spiritual status with the phrase "both in the flesh and in the Lord." It certainly remains possible for Philemon to treat Onesimus as a "beloved brother" while continuing his status as Onesimus's master. The "household codes," he notes, attest to this reality, not calling on Christian masters to emancipate their slaves but to treat them well (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1; cf. 1 Tim. 6:2):

Nevertheless . . . we still wonder whether a continuation of the existing master-slave relationship is compatible with Philemon's treating Onesimus as a "dear *brother*" "in the flesh." The contrast that Paul presents here, between Philemon's relationship to Onesimus "in the Lord" and "in the flesh" is striking. Nowhere else does Paul contrast "the Lord" and the "flesh." Moreover, "in the Lord" covers all possible elements of the Christian existence. Paul must, then, intend some particular emphasis by adding "in the flesh" here. Paul can be read here as hinting at an appeal for Onesimus's manumission. Treating Onesimus as "more than a slave" will perhaps mean, in the end, not treating him as a slave at all.⁸³

Martin asserts in this regard that Onesimus's new standing in Christ brings him into a new society in which all men are brothers; yet he will be a slave in the flesh (as a man), but he will gain new dignity as Philemon's equal in the Lord. Martin also offers the possibility that Onesimus's manumission and freedom might be implied in this assertion. "Paul," Martin asserts, "says no more here [v. 16] than to give a call to receive Onesimus back without punishment; at verse 21 he will put in a veiled plea for his release from slavery, as part of Philemon's anticipated 'obedience' to the divine will. Manumission in the contemporary world was followed by an acceptance of the former slave as the master's equal."⁸⁴ For Koenig, the phrase "both in the flesh and in the Lord" calls for "a greater socioeconomic equity between Philemon and Onesimus. Their life together can no longer be just a matter of 'spiritual' equality before God because the new creation in Christ breaks through into the earthly arena of private property. Nevertheless, brothers Philemon and Onesimus themselves are left to determine what shape this reordering will take."⁸⁵

For Witherington, it appears that "Paul is suggesting a social arrangement in which Philemon would become not merely Onesimus's patron, as was often the case with freed slaves, but welcome him back as a different sort of member of his larger familia, as a long-lost brother or partner in business in the same way that Paul is already a partner with Philemon." Hence Onesimus's social location in Philemon's house would be "no longer as a slave," but a "brother," treated both as "if he were a flesh and blood brother" as well as "a spiritual brother in Christ." Witherington states further that if Onesimus does not become at least a freedman, he cannot legally or socially be regarded as Philemon's brother. Manumission, then, is the only way this new relationship can be realized. Thus in terms of Paul's rhetorical strategy in this letter, his way of concluding the main argument "can only be called stunning."⁸⁶

In the same vein, Saarinen supposes that Paul is implying manumission as the practical outcome of the new relationship between Onesimus and Philemon. Paul explicates the nature of the new relationship between the slave and his master: Onesimus should no longer be treated as slave but as "beloved brother." Paul has set up the nature of this request by calling Philemon his "brother" (vv. 7, 20); therefore, now that Onesimus has been baptized,⁸⁷ Philemon should likewise *treat* Onesimus as a brother. "Given the overall atmosphere of Philemon, which stresses the voluntary character of relationships among Christians and underlies the idea of acting out of love, it is natural to interpret verse 16 in its literal and plain meaning. Philemon is to be treated 'no longer as a slave,' that is, he needs to be manumitted and eventually set free."⁸⁸

Sara Winter represents the reading of some interpreters who view Paul as requesting manumission, but she goes further by suggesting that in Philemon Paul is also rejecting slavery. She argues,

Two passages in Philemon, vv. 15-16 and 17-20, reveal why Paul rejects slavery for Onesimus. In vv. 15-16, Paul employs theological language, in contrast to his usage in the rest of the letter of the language of law and commerce. Pairs of oppositions in vv. 15-16 signal a shift to eschatological language, that is, language concerning things of the end-time: "for a moment" and "for eternity"; "he has been separated" and "you receive in full"; "no longer as a slave" and "as a brother."

Winter examines further the implications of Paul's shifts in language. For her, when Paul says in verse 15 that Philemon will "receive in full" (*apechein*), this carries the legal sense of "receive [a payment] in full and give a receipt for it." But when this is combined in the following phrase as "receive in full . . . for eternity," Paul means that Philemon is to receive Onesimus eternally in Christ.⁸⁹ This indicates for her that in Christ the slave owner will fully own Onesimus as brother because Paul states that Philemon is to receive him "no longer as a slave but more than a slave/beyond a slave" (*hyper doulon*, sometimes translated "above a slave"). The phrase emphatically means for Winter that slave and brother (Christian) are incompatible. Even more noteworthy is that

Paul was not "free" when he wrote Philemon, neither was he when he wrote Philippians but he did not choose to designate himself a "slave" when he wrote Philemon. Instead, he chose to use the designation "prisoner." Affirming the concept of "slave," even metaphorically, would have blunted the force of Paul's antithesis between slave and brother in v. 16. For Paul, slave and brother are incompatible. Onesimus is not to be a slave even in the "lord" (v. 16). He is not a "slave of Christ."

Paul's deft use of language underscores the realization that through baptism Onesimus has undergone a shift in his very being. Thus Paul writes that Onesimus has been parted from the slave owner in this life (for a moment) but the slave owner now truly "possesses" Onesimus because he has him eternally as a brother and *not as a slave*. "Paul makes slave and brother mutually exclusive."⁹⁰

In addition to her reading above, Winter sees a connection between verses 15-16 and 17-20. In short, viewed together they indicate that Paul does not defer to a slave

owner's "rights." For example, on the one hand, verses 15-16 show how Paul did not recognize the authority of a Christian slave master over a Christian slave because "among the baptized, slavery is not merely wrong; it is invalid." Philemon 17-20, on the other, shows that "Paul replaced the relationship between 'owner' and 'owned' recognized in the Roman legal system with a relationship of indebtedness through parenthood in baptism." This is further exemplified in Paul's offer to pay Onesimus's debts. Paul portrays in this passage his own relationship with the slave owner, Philemon, in economic terms: "You owe to me your very self." In a subtle way Paul indicates that Onesimus's baptism invalidated the ownership of another person as it was institutionalized in the slave system. In terms of Philemon's baptism, it was Paul who baptized him too (the slave owner) and thereby "gave birth" to him. In no uncertain terms, then, Paul states that he "owns" Philemon, in that Philemon owes Paul his very life (in Christ; v. 20). Thus for Winter, it is possible to see how the two passages mutually support one another.⁹¹ De Vos's conclusion is similar to that of Winter: "Therefore in expecting a fundamental change in perception and relationship, Paul was actually asking for something far more radical than manumission. What he expected effectively undermined the collectivist, authoritarian and patriarchal values of Graeco-Roman society."⁹²

Reading Assessment

It was noted that in the early church the value of Philemon was minimized initially because it was thought to lack adequate practical value for the emerging church as it faced various social, theological, ethical, and ecclesial challenges. Philemon did eventually find practical use in the early church somewhat later. However, with the rise of modernity and the social, cultural, economic, and political developments in the West, there has been no disposition to underrate its value. To be sure, although this short letter continued to be neglected in most studies of Pauline theology, Philemon has exerted enormous practical impact in modern times. As a matter of fact, "It has exercised an influence inconsistent with the importance biblical scholars have accorded it."⁹³ The importance accorded Philemon has been accessed primarily through the prism of slavery both in the ancient and in the modern world. Philemon has been used not only to validate unequal social arrangements in the ancient and early modern world, but also in New Testament scholarship it has been explored overwhelmingly as a test case for early Christian views on slavery (and thus compared with 1 Cor. 7:20 ff and other statements within the household codes).⁹⁴ On this note, Dunn states: "Philemon provides insight both into the social realities of ancient society, in this case the relations between master and slave, which is surpassed only by 1 Corinthians, and into the way in which influence was brought to bear within the earliest churches between parties of differing social status."⁹⁵ Other interpreters differ on this point. We read it less for its side-lights on slavery in the Roman Empire than for its revelation of the mind and heart of Paul.⁹⁶ For Lohse, "Philemon is neither the disguise of a general idea nor the promulgation of a generally valid rule about the question of slavery. It is the intercession of the Apostle in a concrete situation in which 'love' (*agapē*) must be promoted by decision and deed." And likewise for Moo, "As important as it

is, however, slavery is not what Philemon is ultimately 'about' . . . the central theme of Philemon is *koinōnia*, 'fellowship.'⁹⁷

Nevertheless, the general consensus is that Philemon throws remarkable light on Christian attitudes in regard to the institution of slavery in the ancient world.⁹⁸ It is also considered to complement and enlarge the opinion of what is found in the household codes (*Haustafeln*) in the other New Testament epistles (Col. 3:22—4:1; Eph. 6:5-9; cf. 2 Cor. 7:21-23; 1 Tim. 6:1f.; Tit. 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 2:18-21). Unlike in these traditional teaching patterns, Paul seems to input a significant moral overtone reminding the communities that slaves are "serving Christ" also and that the slave owner has a "master in heaven," who deals impartially with all—slave and free. This reality has been seen as vividly portrayed in Philemon, a reality that initially had the effect of relativizing slavery and later eventually making it irrelevant (1 Cor. 7:20-24).⁹⁹ The question remains, however: irrelevant for whom? Who benefits from such "irrelevance"? Should Paul's view or that of the early churches on the issue of slavery continue to be relevant for contemporary discussions and opinions on slavery? So far as this question and the related questions are concerned, several contemporary interpreters feel compelled to remind modern readers of several considerations regarding Paul, Christianity, and ancient slavery.¹⁰⁰

The first thing the contemporary reader is asked to consider is that in the ancient world slavery was accepted as an integral part of society and its economic working. In this regard, as far as Paul's attitude toward slavery in general and its relevance to today is concerned, contemporary readers need simply to be reminded of what the New Testament expresses in passages such as Col. 3:11, 22, and 4:1: slavery is a part of existing social structures, and it must somehow be worked into Christian ethics and practice.¹⁰¹ For some, this is the kind of scenario portrayed in Philemon, a scenario that reflects the prevailing economic background of the Roman Empire. Since slavery was a long-established institution even by New Testament times, almost all people accepted it as a normal feature of the social and economic structure.¹⁰² Wilson considers this lack of insight regarding ancient slavery as integral to the ancient economy and social structure one of the faults of the modern attitude. This modern attitude, because of the distaste for slavery in the modern world on account of the transatlantic slave trade, produces a failure to appreciate the facts of history. One of the most important facts, Wilson acknowledges, is that the New Testament nowhere condemns slavery, and given the social and political realities of the day, it is unlikely that any condemnation would have had much effect. However, it is proposed that the New Testament established principles that would eventually lead to the abolition of the institution (principles exhibited in Gal. 3:28; cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11). It is also supposed that Ephesians (6:5-9), Colossians (3:22—4:1), as well as Philemon seek to inculcate a new attitude among both slaves and masters—a spirit of Christian charity, since all are servants of the same Lord. This spirit grew with the expansion of the church, eventually leading to a mitigation of slavery in the later Roman Empire, and to its virtual disappearance in the Western world by the time of the Renaissance. The North Atlantic slave trade was a new development under completely different circumstances, which cannot in any way be condoned. Except for captives taken in wartime, there was no wholesale transportation of slaves in the ancient world or a practice of lifelong servitude for themselves and their descendants. Therefore contemporary readers are advised not to transpose

their legitimate condemnation of the American slave trade back into the ancient world, where the conditions that brought people into slavery were very different.¹⁰³

The second thing readers are asked to consider is the fact that it was essentially impossible to conceive of an effective political protest against slavery in the ancient world. “If, then, the New Testament writers did not attack the essential element of slavery, what did they say which revolutionized the thinking of the Christian on the subject?” According to Carson, they counseled the master to treat his slave responsibly.¹⁰⁴ Far from obvious in the Roman world, a master had no legal obligation to a slave in his household, considered living chattel. For Christianity, however, a master’s benevolent treatment of a slave and his continuing positive patronage after the slave’s manumission was the most effective improvement of a slave’s lot. This situation offered the best hope of amelioration in the absence of modern democracy, which is the lens through which many contemporary readers view slavery. In terms of Philemon, as mentioned above, many readers see the most important counsel that Paul gives in verse 16: “no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord.” In this reading, such instruction put into practice those principles that would ultimately transform and enrich social relationships, regardless of their continuing outward form, “and if sustained over time was bound to undermine and diminish any radical inequality between the partners.”¹⁰⁵ In addition to this, Paul and other early Christian writers admonished slaves to regard themselves as persons. They also exhorted them as responsible moral beings: something that had not been done in the past. In this way, Paul and other early Christians taught slaves a new self-respect—a slave is also a child of God, and slaves were made conscious of their responsibility before God.¹⁰⁶ All this could be accomplished, it is argued further, because the New Testament does not endorse the institution of slavery; nor does it encourage Christians to buy or own slaves. That some Christians owned slaves was a reality, but they were urged to exercise in all their relationships Christian principles and values. For this reason, Christianity did not find it necessary to overturn the social, political, or judicial orders of the day. As noted above by many interpreters, Paul does not utter an overt word in Philemon about the liberation of Onesimus, but he apparently hopes that the Christian faith has the potential to eliminate the barriers created by status.¹⁰⁷ For this reason, according to Lightfoot (who represented elite Enlightenment ideals of emergent modernity), rebellion was not an option: such ideas were altogether alien to the spirit of the gospel. He comments furthermore that

“The New Testament,” it has been truly said, “is not concerned with any political or social institutions; for political and social institutions belong to particular nations and particular phases of society.” “Nothing marks the divine character of the Gospel more than its perfect freedom from any appeal to the spirit of political revolution.” It belongs to all time: and therefore, instead of attacking special abuses, it lays down universal principles which shall undermine the evil.¹⁰⁸

Hence for such readers of Paul and other early Christian writers, the gospel never directly attacks the institution of slavery and it never demanded the freedom of slaves as an absolute duty for believers. Lightfoot, again representing this influential modernist reading, says in an oft-repeated statement, “It is a remarkable fact that St. Paul in

this epistle stops short of any positive injunction. The word 'emancipation' seems to be trembling on his lips, and yet he does not once utter it. . . . In fact he tells him to do very much more than emancipate his slave, but this one thing he does not directly enjoy." For him and others, Paul's treatment of this individual case is a pertinent example of the Christian attitude toward slavery in general.

The third (and final) consideration is that while the *treatment* of slaves was morally called into question, the institution of slavery itself was not. This calls forth again the issue of the modern Enlightenment revulsion against the slave trade in Europe and North America, which made slavery itself morally repulsive. It was the institution of slavery that caused and perpetuated the inhumane treatment of slaves in both the modern and the ancient contexts. While the brutal realities of the transatlantic slave trade have been fully acknowledged and documented, several treatments of ancient slavery have sought to make a sharp distinction between slavery in the ancient and modern worlds. Yet other studies describe the treatment of slaves in the ancient world overall as callous: "Generally, the condition of the average slave was wretched beyond words."¹⁰⁹ It would seem all the more surprising then that there was no overt condemnation of slavery in the New Testament. To this point Carson states: "It is true . . . that it had something to say on the subject which meant a radical transformation of the attitude to be adopted to it; but we never find any statement that slavery is intrinsically wrong. It is not enough to say in reply that slavery was so much a part of the social fabric that to attack it would have been revolutionary doctrine, which would have called forth the opposition of the authorities. . . . After all idolatry was also part of the social cement of life in the Roman Empire, yet they attacked it unsparingly; and indeed it was this very attack which was the reason for much of the hostility which they incurred."¹¹⁰

To be sure, this "silence" of the New Testament writers and later Christian writers in particular on the moral question and challenge against the institution of slavery provided the seedbed for supporting its social and economic resurgence in the early modern period in Europe and the Americas. Protestant denominations in America used Philemon and other passages in the Bible to debate the church's position in slaveholding. Philemon in particular was considered a ready resource in particular for the American Protestant church's response to the Fugitive Slave law of 1850, because *they read the letter as a depiction of their own historical and judicial situation*: Paul was returning a fugitive/runaway slave to a Christian slave master. In their reading of Philemon, they generally took it for granted that fleeing slavery was inappropriate and unchristian. The literature of the period described Onesimus as a "runaway" slave, however, not a fugitive. The moral applied to the story in many interpretations implied or stated that after Onesimus was baptized, he learned to face his responsibilities, which meant in this reading, he *willingly* returned to slavery. Interpreted in this manner, Philemon supported the status quo and was used as a political weapon against the enslaved, which had tragic consequences.¹¹¹

One of the consequences of this stereotypical reading that subtly reinforced the fugitive-slave interpretation was the perception on the part of interpreters that Philemon was addressed to an *individual* (slaveholder) of a household. "Associating Philemon with the modern concept of household is erroneous and misleading. The Hellenistic household functioned as an economic unit and in no way constituted a private refuge of the wage-earner as nineteenth-century writers envisioned it." Further, as Winter

rightfully perceives, “Paul writes to an individual who belonged to a house-church, not to a household. Although Philemon concerns relationships between individuals, Paul never treats the relationships as ‘private’ in the modern sense; he employs the language of public discourse in his letter. He writes expecting that a change in a relationship between individuals will carry through to a change in the legal status of one of the individuals.”¹¹²

Another consequence of this reading and its interpretive trajectory was the stereotyping of householders (slave owners) and slaves. Commentators freely described Philemon as obviously well-to-do, gracious, and loving because he had placed his house at the disposal of the Christian community for its meetings (v. 2). He also had given concrete expression to his love for the saints (vv. 5, 7).¹¹³ Furthermore, as typical of slaves, Onesimus, his slave, had run away (15), apparently following a theft (18). The fugitive encountered the imprisoned Paul for reasons unknown/unclear and was baptized.

Besides suggesting that the name “Onesimus” was a common slave name and stating that “there was absolutely nothing to recommend him,” Lightfoot provides further descriptions of this stereotypical reading of slaves: “He was a slave, and what was worse, a Phrygian slave; and he had confirmed the popular estimate of his class and nation by his own conduct. He was a thief and a runaway. His offence did not differ in any way, so far as we know, from the vulgar type of slavish offenses. He seems to have done just what the representative slave in the Roman comedy threatens to do, when he gets in trouble. He has ‘packed up some goods and taken to his heels.’ Rome was the natural cesspool for these offscourings of humanity. In the thronging crowds of the city rabble he would find the society of congenial spirits.” But as the story continues, Onesimus repented but had not made restitution for his actions. He could only do this by returning to Philemon, from whom he had escaped, and in returning he would place himself entirely at the mercy of the master whom he had wronged.¹¹⁴

However, during the same period, abolitionist interpreters sought a reading of Philemon that challenged the proslavery interpretations. Abolitionist interpreters began to emphasize Philemon 16, in which Onesimus is to be considered “no longer as a slave,” to mean emancipation or that Philemon and Onesimus (who was never a slave) were brothers. A few decades later, several interpreters in the scholarly guild—soon after slavery’s end in the United States, however—began to emphasize a more positive reading of Philemon. For example, J. A. Bengal (1887) argued that Paul fully expects Philemon to manumit Onesimus. J. B. Lightfoot (1904), while holding to the traditional reading of Philemon, considered that the church fathers were too timid in their conclusions about Philemon and slavery. For Lightfoot, Philemon and the New Testament as a whole tend toward a peaceful and gradual abolition of slavery. John Knox (1960), as we have seen, claimed furthermore that the real purpose of Philemon is to appeal for the release of Onesimus.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

The modern readings of Philemon that I have sketched can be read as examples of **the** long traditions of attempts either to sustain the status quo or to achieve justice. Both camps flocked to Philemon for inspiration. Yet in Philemon, Paul’s efforts toward

equality do not take the form of direct attack on the institution of slavery and its abuses. Nor does Paul write overtly as one who is trying to challenge the Roman laws of slavery. Sadly, he nowhere comments on the social effects of the gospel. Many argue in this regard that Paul's view of the justice to be achieved *in this case* can be realized best through the character of a "graceful persuasion to justice," and this is perhaps its most descriptive epitaph overall. It is through graceful partnership, which is sustained and constantly renewed by the Lord, that Paul anticipates breakthroughs in social relationships.¹¹⁶

At the other end of this reading spectrum are interpreters who espouse liberation as a preeminent value. They seek to at least deprive Philemon of any "antiliberation" implications.¹¹⁷ For them, Philemon presents dramatic evidence of just how seriously the gospel must be taken; for the gospel is to be a liberation experience. The gospel should be exerted in society to redresses inequalities. In this view, "Philemon is a remarkably relevant epistle for our times. It provides a model against which our own relationships can be measured. As long as there are any areas in any human life that are not free, Paul and Philemon have a lesson to teach. Our task is to ponder these words and make their implications felt in our world."¹¹⁸ Even some evangelical interpreters have taken sight of such emphases, while not necessarily espousing a liberation reading. Witherington, for example, says, "Paul . . . is even boldly asking for the emancipation of a slave. . . . To suggest that receiving Onesimus 'no longer as a slave' has no social implications and that Paul is merely saying what we hear in 1 Corinthians 7 (the Christian slave is actually the Lord's Freedman) is to underestimate totally the force and content of Paul's rhetoric here."¹¹⁹

Such concerns as the ones expressed above are a significant advancement from the opinion held from the early church up to the Reformation, that Paul was likely not requesting manumission for Onesimus!

Newer Readings of Philemon from the Margins (1990s to Present)

Reception History

Carolyn Osiek asserts in her recent commentary on Philemon that this letter "is receiving more attention today than at any other time in the history of biblical interpretation, with the possible exception of the antebellum abolitionist era in the United States."¹²⁰ While exploring the possible reasons for this resurgence of Philemon interpretation is worth one's attention, it is the oft-overlooked response of marginalized "readers" that garners my attention. I could very well examine the reading strategies and concerns of postcolonial or feminist interpretation on Philemon, but on account of the limitations of space, I will examine the marginalized readings in the African American Christian religious tradition. A shared concern of the recent marginalized readings is an ideological approach to examining biblical texts. In this vein, enslaved African Americans also provided a "reading-response" to Paul's epistle to Philemon. Their reading of Philemon was initially aural, and their response was initially oral, so it did not (and apparently

still does not) square with the canons of historical interpretation; hence, such “readings” are muted in normative interpretation histories.¹²¹ Yet in the modern era, theirs had been the primary voice of forceful rejection of the epistle and a palpable discontent with its use and emphatic negative application to their own social-political situation. This point can be most adequately depicted in this now commonly related incident in which Charles Colcock Jones, a white Presbyterian plantation missionary, recalled in his memoirs a sermon he gave before a slave congregation in 1833:

I was preaching to a large congregation on the Epistle of Philemon: and when I insisted upon fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away, one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked anything but satisfied, either with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismissal, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared “that there was no such an Epistle in the Bible”; others, “that they did not care if they ever heard me preach again.” . . . There were some too, who had strong objections against me as a Preacher, because I was a master, and said, “his people have to work as well as we.”¹²²

Several salient observations can be made about Colcock’s reflections: (1) long before the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) was debated inside of and outside of the American court system and enacted as law, Paul’s letter to Philemon (and Paul’s authority as an apostle, viewed by the slaveocracy as complicit with established law) was used to address and to discourage African American flight from slavery, a view that found ready support in the normative reading of Philemon (“I was preaching . . . on the Epistle of Philemon: and when I . . . condemned the practice of running away . . .”); (2) African American slaves responded to such use and application of Philemon (and other “slave texts” like the household codes, for example) with openly expressed dissatisfaction (“one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked anything but satisfied, *either with the preacher or his doctrine*” [emphasis mine]), innately recognizing the complicity of the text and its interpretation with the slaveholding system; and (3) because of such use and application of Philemon, the epistle was rejected (“some solemnly declared ‘that there was no such an Epistle in the Bible’”) and so also was the preacher and his explication of Philemon (“There were some too, who had strong objections against me as a Preacher”), and his complicity with slavery (“because I was a master, and [they] said, ‘his people have to work as well as we’”). The African American interpretive tradition thus found Philemon and its interpretation incompatible with their experience of God and their quests for human dignity and social-political liberation.

This incident, moreover, reveals that enslaved African Americans did not and could not accept as “word of God” any Scripture or interpretation thereof that could be used to uphold their oppression. Enslaved African Americans *were not* convinced that it was God’s will for them to be slaves, no matter what the Bible, their “masters,” or proslavery preachers and exegesis told them. To be sure, “Slaves distinguished the hypocritical religion of their masters from true Christianity and rejected the slaveholder’s gospel of obedience to master and mistress.”¹²³ Because of this, they would eventually set out to form religious organizations where they could actualize freedom, even if only within

the confines of their churches. Yet, the tradition of "rejection," if not a "very cold reception," of this epistle (to be sure, it was a part of the canon) continued in the ecclesiastical traditions of African American churches. My own experience since childhood in the African American Baptist tradition confirms that of Allen Callahan's in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) tradition:¹²⁴ not only did African American slaves question the authorship and theological import of Philemon, but so also did subsequent generations of their progeny who organized and established their own churches. Paul's letter to Philemon was not a part of the "canon" for many African American churches by virtue of its absence and exclusion in sermons, from Sunday school curricula, and from Bible class teaching. In short, it played no essential role in the religious tradition and ecclesiastical life of African American churches most certainly because of the role it had played in supporting the Fugitive Slave Law and, perhaps even more emphatically, the role it played in endorsing slavery in general. Given this negative effective history of Philemon in the African American interpretive and religious tradition, I will examine the question: "How could an African American biblical interpretation in particular (re-)orient us toward Philemon?"

To clarify briefly, African American Biblical interpretation shares a liberationist stance with black theology in opposing racism and oppression in American society—religion, politics, life, and culture. African American interpretation of the Bible seeks to accomplish several goals:¹²⁵ (1) exposing racism in the history of biblical interpretation (for example, examining how the household codes have been used to enjoin slaves to submission or how Paul's epistle to Philemon has been used to support the US slave regime [in particular, the Fugitive Slave Law]); (2) examining and exploring the tradition and history of biblical interpretation in the African American Christian (and non-Christian) communities; and (3) examining and applying the African American "story" and experience as a "strategy for reading" biblical texts. As with other newer approaches to biblical criticism, African American biblical interpretation does not represent a particular method but a reading strategy that seeks to ask certain questions (from an African American optic). In this regard, it should be seen as participating in an ideological approach of reading texts, which is shared by several "marginal" readings of the Bible.

Occasion of the Letter

In determining the occasion of Philemon, even in many of the newer readings from the margins, many interpreters situate the occasion of the letter from within the framework of ancient slavery. Lloyd A. Lewis, one of the early African American interpreters trained in New Testament studies, sought to bring to bear a liberative African American hermeneutic to the interpretation of Philemon in the historic volume of African American biblical interpretation, *Stony the Road We Trod* (1991).¹²⁶ His analysis of Philemon in this volume assumes a fugitive/runaway-slave hypothesis as the background for the letter's occasion. Nevertheless, Lewis draws a link between Paul's impassioned appeal in Philemon and Gal. 3:1—4:7 (3:28 especially, which expresses the language of inclusion in the family of God). He suggests that Paul uses familial language to reconfigure

extensively the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus (for example, *brother* is used four times, vv. 1, 7, 16, 20; *sister*, v. 2; *child*, v. 10; *father*, v. 10). Lewis views Galatians 3:28 as the basis of a liberative hermeneutic for a new reading of Philemon for the African American Christian tradition, for in this baptismal statement Paul (and other early Christians) acknowledged the equality and oneness of believers in Christ. Lewis followed up this treatment of Philemon with another analysis in another first of its kind, *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*.¹²⁷ In this study, Lewis still assumes the background of slavery for interpreting Philemon, but he departs somewhat from viewing the framework of Philemon solely from the fugitive-slave hypothesis. He states in this latter study (2007) that Onesimus “either ran away from his master or was lent out by his master to serve an incarcerated Paul during one of his several times of arrest.”¹²⁸ One wonders if Lewis’s reassessment or softening of the fugitive/runaway-slave reading of Philemon in his latter examination was his response to Randall Bailey’s criticism of African Americans appropriating reading paradigms that are harmful to their own well being. Bailey asserts that individuals or groups read texts with one group or another (oppressed or oppressor). Moreover, African Americans (and marginalized persons and groups in general) have been taught to read in ways that support the ways in which whites (or other “dominant” groups) read them and interpret them, even when those readings are harmful to them. This is particularly apparent and dangerous in a case such as the letter to Philemon, he argues, because “in Philemon, no matter how hard Lewis helps us to see how the rhetoric of the book raises the status of Onesimus to Philemon, if we view this within the [runaway] slave paradigm, as he does, Paul still sends Onesimus back. This is the ancient analogue to the Dred Scott Decision, when the U.S. Supreme Court declared that runaway slaves had to be returned to their masters. Since Philemon is in the bible, we go through all types of mental gyrations to make it palatable, when our experience with a God of liberation would tell us that such is not of God.”¹²⁹ To be sure, Bailey’s observation captures the historical discontent of the African American Christian tradition with the normative interpretation of Philemon.

Perhaps the most radical departure from supposing any background of slavery for the interpretation of Philemon is the proposal of Allen Callahan, provided initially in a *Harvard Theological Review* article (1993), and followed up later in a commentary format in *The Embassy of Onesimus* (1997). As I noted earlier, he proposes that John Chrysostom theorized a background of slavery in an effort to recoup the letter for the church and also to address a mounting issue with Christian slaves in his own time. In this regard, then, Callahan proffers not only that slavery is not an appropriate background for reading Philemon but also that Onesimus is not a slave: he is the blood brother of Philemon! In this case, the letter to Philemon is not Paul’s plea to a master on behalf of a runaway slave but an apostolic intervention between two estranged brothers. Callahan’s proposed “rereading” of Philemon has gained the attention of several interpreters both in traditional biblical criticism and in African American biblical hermeneutics, but not their endorsement. For example, Cain H. Felder, an early leading voice in African American biblical interpretation (and editor of *Stony the Road We Trod*), in his article on the letter to Philemon in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* rejects Callahan’s literal interpretation of “a beloved brother” because it “moves the letter too far

from the more common and ancient understanding of Onesimus as a runaway slave."¹³⁰ In addition, while Lewis includes a reference to Callahan's commentary on Philemon in the "for further reading" section at the close of his latter article, an engagement with the theory itself is absent from his examination. My point here is simply that even readers who share a common reading and interpretive tradition and who seek common goals (a more liberative reading of Philemon in this case) may take different roads to reach the same destination. Important in this respect is Lewis's statement that "what African American readers look for is some vision of how as a church leader Paul understood the gospel's power in the face of this very present social situation [slavery]."¹³¹ Lewis holds the opinion that the letter to Philemon broadly provides an answer to this question. What he and other readers in the African American interpretive tradition are attempting to do is provide a reading of Philemon that can positively recoup the letter for African American churches, readers, and liturgical traditions.

In a recent article, Kirk D. Lyons seeks to address the very issue of providing a case for the homiletic usefulness of Philemon, which would undoubtedly be significant for the African American religious tradition. (I will summarize his position at length in the following paragraphs.) Lyons suggests that any Philemon homiletic would be rooted in an understanding of the *liturgical value* of the book, and he credits Allen Callahan's reassessment of Philemon as a catalyst that has encouraged a shift from the historical readings of Philemon. "Even if one is not totally convinced of where Callahan's thesis takes him and all of its conclusions, the strength of his criticism of the dominant readings is sufficient to dislodge us from research based on such 'inherited' foundations."¹³² Lyons recognizes also that the inherited interpretation that served to support systemic oppression regarded the letter as bearing little or no theological substance. He takes issue with this position as well as with the dominant hermeneutic that has been supportive of maintaining a hegemonic social structure (that is, "hard" demarcations of class). Lyons then proposes a fresh reading of Philemon that is "both conscious of and cautiously void of the traditional assumptions that have been found to permeate the writings on this text." "These assumptions are convenient," he avers, "yet dangerous in that their primacy has led to the subordination of the breadth of possibilities that might otherwise emerge as an alternative Philemon homiletic."¹³³ If Paul's letter to Philemon is not a treatment on a *runaway* slave, what might the letter offer as an initial theological and subsequent liturgical rendering? This signals for him the beginning of a search for an alternative Philemon homiletic, which deals with a class issue, not slavery per se! He recommends, then, a reading of Philemon that redirects the primary focus *from the request of Paul to the addressees, toward Paul's very act of requesting*. He suggests, "It is from a reflexive perspective that a divergent Philemon homiletic manifests [itself], one that recognizes Paul's act of letter writing as praxis." Thus he employs a radical reviewing of Philemon through the lens of an autobiographical narrative. This move posits greater emphasis on Paul's action of requesting rather than the rhetoric of his request, for it is "through an analysis of Paul's action *through* rhetoric that we discover a public theology."¹³⁴

Clarifying Lyons's position further on this point, he argues that the case of Onesimus provided Paul with an opportunity to test his theology against the empirical reality of a concrete situation. This concrete situation presented Paul, Onesimus, and

Philemon within their own social and cultural arena, where the circumstances required a consistent theological evaluation. Rereading Philemon from this nuanced perspective reveals Paul's strategic use of language, which indicates his unwillingness to consecrate the social roles in his cultural environment. Paul determined instead to give priority to sanctifying the familial structure of the church. I will conclude this summary in Lyons's own words:

This was not facilitated without the necessary reflective scrutiny of his [Paul's] role within both structures. Paul, by his actions, refused to allow his audience the comfort of two worlds (religious and social) independent from one another. He illustrated their homology and God's mediation agitating both realms. From this incipient reassessment of Paul's letter to begin to disturb the tranquility of acceptance permeating the landscape of discourse surrounding the Letter to Philemon. Just as Paul's praxis served to fill in the lacuna between theology and social reality, our praxis of adjusting the prism from which we view the biblical texts from our world, and conversely, which we view our world through the biblical texts, bridges the chasm between our theological ponderings and our social praxis.¹³⁵

What emerges from this brief overview of the occasion of Philemon is that in the case of the two newer readings of Callahan and Lyons, they have attempted to redirect our view of the occasion from a framework or background of slavery. For Callahan, the new direction points us toward seeing Philemon as addressing a family situation (with much wider implications than that of a simple domestic dispute) that required apostolic intervention, and for Lyons his suggestion points us toward seeing Paul addressing a serious issue of class demarcations and how Paul brought the gospel to bear on this situation within Philemon's house church. To be sure, as we have examined and explored, determining the occasion has direct bearing on interpretation.

Verse 16—“No Longer as a Slave, but as a Beloved Brother”

As noted earlier, verse 16 is a *crux interpretum* for many readings and interpretations of the rhetorical-historical situation of Philemon as well as for the theological question of Paul's handling of the question of slavery. It is upon this verse that Callahan builds his case for a rereading of Philemon. Such an alternative *argumentum* was proposed in nascent form in abolitionist exegesis of the passage, but Callahan has sought to bear out the full exegetical and possible historical implications of such a proposal. He recognizes that in traditional exegesis of this verse there is a certain unquestioned assumption: Onesimus is identified *literally as a slave* and *figuratively as a brother*. He has in turn reversed this assumption. For him: Onesimus is *literally Philemon's blood brother* and *figuratively* identified as a slave. Like other interpreters of this verse, he is attempting to sort out Paul's rhetoric in this passage because this is the only place where the term “slave” (*doulos*) is used. And, he notes, Onesimus's servile identity rests solely on the exegesis of this word in traditional exegesis of Philemon. But since Paul can use the term “slave” for himself and his coworkers in a figurative sense (cf. Phil. 1:1), might not the possibility obtain here also?

The possibility of this proposal is tested in Callahan's translation of *hōs* ("as"), which he argues can have the meaning of "as though," indicating that "Onesimus's servile status is a thought or assertion on Philemon's part and not a point of fact. As the Latin side of the diglot codex Claromontanus tells us, Onesimus is to be no longer a 'quasi-slave' (*iam non quasi servum*)."¹³⁶ Hence Callahan translates the first phrase of verse 16, "no longer *as though he were* a slave." The second part of the phrase, "but more than a slave, as a beloved brother," suggests, he argues, that the figure of a slave (bereft of family ties) serves as the antitype of a blood relative. So Paul exhorts Philemon to cease his treatment of Onesimus *as if he were a slave*, but to treat him as a beloved brother, which he really and truly is. The final phrase of verse 16 bears the weight of Callahan's reading: "very much so to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord." The driving force of Paul's language here indicates that Philemon and Onesimus are brothers, but now even more so both literally (*en sarki*) and spiritually (*en Kyriō*). They are now at odds with each other, and this must be resolved because they are both brothers "in Christ." Onesimus has become a "child" of and a "brother in the Lord" to Paul,¹³⁷ but Paul emphasizes the dual ties between Onesimus and Philemon when he stresses, "but *how much more* to you both in the flesh and in the Lord." "The problem [then] that Paul engaged in the letter was not that Onesimus was a real slave (for he was not), nor that Onesimus was not a real brother to Philemon (for he was), but that Onesimus was not a beloved brother to Philemon."¹³⁸

Thus for Callahan these observations warrant the proposition of an alternative hypothesis that would account for the epistle's truly main elements: (1) Paul's familial vocabulary used to describe the relationship between the principals,¹³⁹ (2) Paul's deferential (yet paternalistic) approach when addressing Philemon,¹⁴⁰ and (3) Paul's determined concern for the reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus. He notes that in the Greco-Roman culture of the day there could be found similar elements of paternal engagement, manifest concern to reconcile estranged friends, spouses, and brothers, in the biographies of contemporary philosophers.

In this way, Callahan (and the "exegetical suggestions" of abolitionist readings regarding the text that he develops) attempts to offer a plausible historical reading and exegesis of Philemon that does not need to posit a framework of slavery for understanding the letter. In addition, he indicates that traditional exegesis of the passage works under certain *assumptions* about the text also—assumptions that cannot be resolved by exegesis alone but also needs to engage in some manner a theory of historical reconstruction. As for such assumptions in biblical interpretation, Carolyn Osiek remarks regarding Callahan's alternative argument:

Callahan is right to raise the question all over again, for biblical interpretation must always reexamine old assumptions. . . . If what biblical persons say and do becomes normative and limiting of what contemporary readers can think and do, then exegesis cannot function freely. But if we can allow biblical persons to be part of their own world with a quite different worldview than ours, then the situation is different. Slavery was much a part of the ancient world as the Holocaust, nuclear warfare, abortion, and capital punishment are of ours. . . . If Onesimus was a slave, then Paul does take slavery for granted as part of his world (which is not the same thing as approving of it), as did most of his Christian contemporaries and successors for several centuries. He does so, however, with a

certain ambiguity (1 Cor. 7:21) and probably with a bias toward manumission (Philem. 16). . . . It is tragic that biblical texts have been used to justify social injustice of any kind, but such misuse does not invalidate exegetical conclusions or the need to look directly at original social contexts. On the other hand, extreme caution must be exercised against simply accepting a traditional interpretation and rejecting a newer one because it shatters long-held assumptions.¹⁴¹

Osiek's reasoned and balanced assessment of the possible implications of Callahan's rereading of Philemon provides an appropriate segue to the next section.

Reading Assessment

The African American reading and response to Philemon, which was filtered through proslavery preaching and exegesis, had its genesis, I would suggest, in what has now been termed a "hermeneutics of suspicion" with nascent ideological tendencies. Why ideological in particular? Their reading was forced by necessity to see the relationship between rhetoric and power: the use of Philemon (and the Bible in general) to support a ruling-class ideology (as the memoirs of Charles Colcock Jones indicates). As noted above, as a result of African American exposure to Philemon in this vein, a history of "rejection" and "suspicion" was nurtured in their interpretive history (and ecclesial traditions). In this regard, the interpretive history of the African American reading perspective merges significantly and cogently with the reading strategies of other "marginal perspectives" emergent in biblical criticism in the past twenty-five years or so. To some extent, biblical scholars of historically colonized regions and countries, and marginalized groups within the West ("minorities," blacks and women, for example) have become increasingly interested in the ideologies at work and the political agendas served by biblical criticism.¹⁴² Such concerns have given rise to postcolonial studies within biblical criticism, which is intended to free the study of Scripture from Eurocentric interpretive limitations and interests. As such, the choice of a *postcolonial optic* refers to "ideological reflection on the discourse and practice of imperialism and colonialism from the vantage point of a situation where imperialism and colonialism have come . . . to a formal end but remain very much at work in practice."¹⁴³ Postcolonial biblical criticism is more "a mental attitude rather than a method, more a subversive stance toward the dominant knowledge than a school of thought."¹⁴⁴ Postcolonial biblical criticism, then, is interested in discovering how the Bible has been used as a tool for domesticating and "civilizing" the indigenous peoples of conquered countries and against lingering attempts by European scholars to control the reading and use of the Bible after colonialism is formally dissolved. At the same time, it seeks to reverse the devaluation of indigenous cultures that accompanies imperialism and construct an "alternative hermeneutics" that honors the culture, experience, reading, and interpretive strategies of non-Western peoples.¹⁴⁵

Like postcolonial studies, feminist biblical criticism is a kind of ideological criticism, sharing many of the principles of postcolonial criticism (and cultural studies). Similar to postcolonial biblical criticism, it is more a perspective or agenda than a method. It seeks to expose the political nature of biblical texts and interpretation: this

time, in terms of power relations between genders. Feminist criticism is characterized by a great diversity, but there are some common principles, aims, and strategies that inform the work of feminist biblical critics. Basic to the agenda is a rejection of patriarchy, recognizing it as an ideology in which males and their concerns are privileged and empowered, while the opposite holds for women who are assigned ancillary roles. Connected to the social and cultural construction of patriarchy are sexism, classism, racism, devaluation of the physical body, ecological rapine, and binary thinking, to name a few. Second, there is an emphasis on *women's experience* and their connection to texts and stories viewed as a critical principle (that is, their marginalization and presumed "inferiority"). This is a starting point for theological/theoretical reflection, which counters the myth of *objectivity*. Third, biblical texts are approached with a "hermeneutics of suspicion," recognizing that texts are not neutral, objective, "pure" pieces of communication, but productions of real people (males) with real interests and agendas. Feminist critics see the Bible and the history of its interpretation as reflecting the interest and ideologies of the males and females who produced them. Finally, feminist biblical critics seek to recover and reconstruct the lost voices of women in the texts and history that have been "written over" and neglected by male writers.¹⁴⁶

Thus it is possible to see more clearly how postcolonial studies within biblical criticism, feminist biblical criticism, and African American reading strategies share in an ideological approach to examining biblical texts and traditions. These newer approaches recognize and admit that all readings are ideological and that the act of "reading" is a fundamentally ethical act: "Ideological criticism . . . at root has to do with the ethical character of and response to the text and to those lived relations that are represented and reproduced in the act of reading."¹⁴⁷ But traditional biblical criticism as yet is not self-conscious of its own ideology because "traditional interpretations that claim universality, completeness, and supremacy over other interpretations . . . are themselves enactments of domination or, in simple terms, power plays."¹⁴⁸ It has been well noted above that the historical-critical (normative) tradition has offered the conviction that Christianity does not know differences of status or rank, yet the present social order is rarely challenged.¹⁴⁹ One reason for this is that the ideology within the biblical texts as well as the ideology of ancient and contemporary interpreters of the texts alike goes unexamined.

The difference between the two paradigms is apparent in their respective interpretive frameworks.¹⁵⁰ For example, a recent commentary on Philemon by John G. Nordling, which is quite erudite and learned, clearly presents the normative (historical-critical) paradigm: "[We] cannot adapt (distort) the teaching of St. Paul on slavery to suit the demands of certain voices of today, each stridently insisting on being 'heard' at the dawn of the third millennium C.E. No, faith submits to what the Word of God has always said through the passing of the ages and does not gladly suffer the plain meaning of Scripture to be twisted to suit constantly changing societal norms—a particular American 'mentality' for example."¹⁵¹

From this perspective (an admittedly conservative element within the reading paradigm), Scripture's meaning does not change through the centuries. But I would take serious note of the notion of the "plain meaning of Scripture" because in the explosive debate over slavery in the United States, for example, proslavery interpreters sought

to proffer a “plain-sense hermeneutic” when reading Scripture. On the basis of this position, as Albert Harrell avers, “the proslavery spokesmen were holding the more defensible position from the perspective of historical criticism.”¹⁵² Unfortunately, this paradigm has consecrated the status quo instead of speaking prophetically to it. No only this but this reading paradigm has also muted the voices and alternative readings. Another erudite scholar within the normative reading paradigm, Gordon D. Fee, makes the following statement in this regard with respect to the kinds of newer reading discussed above: “All of these interpretations fail to take history seriously as the proper first context for interpretation . . . the first step toward valid interpretation of scripture . . . which means the determination of the originally intended meaning of a text. ‘History as context for interpretation’ does not refer to our own history, but to the original setting(s) of the biblical texts themselves.” He states furthermore, “We insist that the universally applicable meaning of the text is related primarily to its originally intended meaning.”¹⁵³

It is not that the newer readings “fail to take history seriously” but that history is not the only determinant for interpreting Scripture: *experience* is important also—of “the original setting(s) of the biblical texts themselves” and of the flesh-and-blood readers who interpret them! The anxiety for readers within the historical paradigm with a text like Paul’s letter to Philemon is that it provides “an excellent opportunity for a case study about the ways in which a person’s social location can serve as a tacit rationale for reading inappropriate values into the text, distorting the document’s original intent.”¹⁵⁴ Does this mean the inappropriate values, for example, of proslavery readers and defenders of the status quo, or readers who seek the power of the gospel to support justice and equity? I leave the decision up to the reader. Sabine Bieberstein has commented that Philemon is connected with a long history of Christian guilt because along with the household codes it was misused to stabilize systems of domination (especially slavery). She then asks, “Thus how do we handle it today? Philemon should be viewed from the perspective of the gospel of survival not of the victors. . . . Studying Philemon today also means ‘breaking open the continuum of history, changing one’s perspective so that history is no longer related as the story of the rulers, but is told anew as the story of the victims.’”¹⁵⁵ I would say, perhaps, from the perspective of the “victims (of the misuse of Philemon) or of the marginalized not of the victors.” I will conclude with the story of one such victim of the misuse of Philemon who not only survived but also rose above the status forced upon him by society which was supported by its “reading” of Paul’s letter to Philemon.

New Interpretive Possibilities of the Letter to Philemon: “No Longer as a Slave”

The reading strategies of African American and other marginal reading perspectives seek to open the interpretive possibilities of the letter to Philemon. The African American interpretive tradition in particular has apparently been comfortable or perhaps contented with such ambiguity and ambivalence, given the ambiguous “double-edged/messaged” nature of the biblical text on questions of freedom and subjugation.¹⁵⁶ In the more recent theological and exegetical investigations of African Americans trained in

theological and biblical studies, some liberative readings of Philemon have been offered that work within the traditional framework of slavery; others seek frameworks outside of the presumption of Onesimus's slave status. Yet interestingly enough, the African American experience and its interpretive history can converge to eliminate an "either/or" or a binary approach to understanding Philemon. Such a convergence can be seen in the life and experiences of Francis J. Grimké.

Francis James Grimké (November 4, 1852–October 11, 1937) was a Presbyterian minister who was prominent in working for equal rights for African Americans. He was born in Cane Acres, a rice plantation near Charleston, South Carolina, the son of a wealthy white man and Nancy Weston, a black slave. After his father died and property rights on him were excised by his half-brother Montague, who had no intentions of manumitting him, Grimké ran away from home and joined the Confederate Army as an officer's valet. He served there until Emancipation (1865). After the Civil War, his white aunts, Angela and Sarah Moore Grimké, the aunts also of his white half brother, acknowledged their kinship and helped him gain his education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Grimké graduated at the head of his class in 1870 and began to study law, attending Howard University in 1874. At this time, he felt a call to the ministry and enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he graduated in 1878. He married and began his ministry at the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, where he remained until 1928. From his pulpit, he preached and exhorted a national audience to agitate for civil rights "until justice is done." Grimké campaigned against racism in American churches and requested assistance from the Afro-Presbyterian Council to encourage black moral uplift and self-help. He joined with W. E. B. Du Bois at the Carnegie Hall Conference in 1906, which led to the Niagara Movement and the NAACP. He was a spiritual leader with a conviction for justice and passion for his people. Francis J. Grimké lived in Washington, DC until his death in 1937.¹⁵⁷

What is it about Grimké's life and experiences that recommends him to a rereading of Philemon? His experience can inform us of the interpretive possibilities of reading Philemon and also of abandoning binary interpretative perspectives. Marginal readers in the African American reading tradition can see Grimké as an example of one who could be a *literal slave* and a *literal brother* at the same time (see Philem. 16). He can also be seen within the traditional slavery framework of one who, as a slave, fled his brother's household to seek his freedom because of impending inequities on the horizon. Although he and his half brother never reconciled, he did reconcile with his half brother's aunts, who received and supported him, "no longer as a slave" but as a beloved nephew, assisting him in his education and the fulfillment of his ministry: a ministry in which he served faithfully. Such a reading recalls the ancient recognition, but modern historical suspicion, that the slave Onesimus, later called St. Onesimus, became a bishop of Ephesus (Ignatius, *Ephesians*).¹⁵⁸ Such an analogue to a newer reading perspective is not historically suspect because it lies within the experiences of those "who read from the margins."