

**FINDING ONESIMUS**  
**RECOVERING THE STORY OF A FIRST-CENTURY FUGITIVE SLAVE**

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by

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August 2015

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an investigation into the experience of a first-century fugitive slave named Onesimus, who is known to us primarily through Paul's letter to Philemon (Phlm) in the New Testament. Within this broader purpose, this project challenges a popular historical theory for Onesimus' flight, the so-called *Amicus Domini* theory. This is the theory that Onesimus fled his master Philemon with the premeditated intention of seeking out the Apostle Paul as a peacemaker in a conflict Onesimus was having with Philemon. The *Amicus Domini* theory is accepted by many scholars, though rarely discussed in detail or examined critically.

The goal of this project is to offer a more probable historical reconstruction of Onesimus' flight – one that takes better stock of the available evidence (historical, textual, archaeological, legal, and rhetorical). This project is rooted in the sub-discipline of the Historical Critical method, though rhetorical analysis is applied as well.

This study offers a translation and commentary of Phlm, as well as an examination of Paul's rhetoric in the letter. Other sources that specifically mention Onesimus are also investigated, e.g. Colossians, ancient Christian commentators, and the subscriptions in the manuscripts. The project also examines slavery in the Ancient Mediterranean world with a view toward understanding what most slaves experienced,

and especially fugitive slaves. Roman law of slavery is also discussed, as well as the estimated travel times and cost of Onesimus' journey (whether from Colossae to Rome, Caesarea Maritima, or Ephesus).

There are many factors that are problematic for the *Amicus Domini* theory, e.g. the duration of Onesimus' journey, the financial cost to Philemon, and the fact that the documents typically used to support the *Amicus Domini* theory (Pliny's letters to Sabinianus and the writings of Roman jurists) do not comport with the data in Phlm. This dissertation offers a modified theory for Onesimus' predicament: *Amicus Domini Ex Post Facto*. Onesimus did not leave Philemon intending to seek out Paul and reconcile with Philemon, but he eventually decided to seek help long after the fact. This historical reconstruction makes better sense of the evidence, and provides a clearer view of what Onesimus faced during his flight.

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## INTRODUCTION

The subject of slavery in the ancient world is a monstrous one. It is monstrous in the sense that it is a seriously disturbing subject, and also because it is an enormous subject. There is no way to fully comprehend the horrors of ancient slavery, and it is impossible to fully describe such a longstanding and varied institution. This project will instead be concerned with one slave, Onesimus, and his own experience within the difficult life that most slaves of his day faced.

Onesimus has for the most part been forgotten to history, despite having a canonical text devoted to his situation – Paul’s letter to Philemon (Phlm). Throughout history, Paul’s letter has received little attention compared to the rest of Scripture. The conversations that do happen about the letter have generally focused on the writer (Paul), the recipient (Philemon), and what the contents say about Christian community or Pauline theology. Relatively little attention has been paid to the individual who had the most at stake in this letter, Onesimus. That name, which means “useful”, was certainly not given to him by his parents. It was his slave name. It is, however, the only name we have for him. Thus, the story of one of the most ignored figures in the history of Christianity is found within one of the most overlooked documents in the Bible.

This dissertation is an investigation into the experience of a particular fugitive slave in the first-century Roman imperial context. He is the starting point and the primary focus of this project. Paul's letter to Philemon will be regarded, therefore, as the most important source of information about Onesimus.

In attempting to reconstruct the part of Onesimus' story that unfolded in Phlm, commentators have arrived at several possibilities. The traditional and most common interpretation is that Onesimus was in fact a runaway slave (i.e. a *fugitivus*, φυγάς, or δραπέτης). This view is generally accepted, but many commentators either assume that Onesimus simply found Paul by chance (which would be highly improbable), or they do not pursue the issue beyond cursory speculations.

John Knox famously proposed the alternative that Onesimus was deliberately sent to Paul from Philemon in order to provide him assistance in his imprisonment, and that Paul's letter was simply a request for continued service. This theory has been generally rejected, because it does not square with some of the data in Phlm which indicates a serious offense on Onesimus' part.

Allen Callahan's proposal is that Onesimus was actually the biological brother of Philemon, and that Paul's letter was written to repair a broken relationship between two siblings in the Christian community. Callahan's theory has likewise failed to garner substantial support.

The historical theory that has gained the most traction recently is the so-called *Amicus Domini* theory. This is based on the ancient practice of slaves running away from their masters with the prior demonstrable intention of finding a friend of the

master (an *Amicus Domini*) that could mediate a dispute. According to this theory, Onesimus ran away from Philemon with the prior aim of finding Paul as an arbiter in some conflict he was having with his master. In other words, Onesimus was interested in reconciliation with Philemon all along. Under such circumstances, Roman law would probably not consider Onesimus to be a fugitive. The *Amicus Domini* theory as it is typically applied to Onesimus' situation is based on the comments of several Roman jurists, and especially two of Pliny the Younger's letters. While many interpreters view Pliny's letters as comparable to Phlm, they are nothing more than convenient, superficially analogous texts. The similarities are tenuous at best.

One curious aspect of the *Amicus Domini* theory is the fact that it is rarely discussed in detail and vaguely defined. When presented by scholars, it is often substantiated by a mere footnote referencing Pliny, one or two Roman jurists, or Peter Lampe (the scholar who first proposed *Amicus Domini* as the historical backdrop of Phlm.)<sup>1</sup> Simply mentioning these sources has become the de facto evidence for the view – as if their merit and relevance is universally known and agreed upon. Thus, *Amicus Domini* is widely accepted, yet almost never scrutinized. As will become clear in this project, however, *Amicus Domini* falls apart under historical scrutiny.

In this dissertation, I will challenge the present consensus around *Amicus Domini*, and offer a more probable historical reconstruction of what happened with Onesimus and his flight. Simply put, it is more likely that Onesimus left Philemon's

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lampe, "Keine 'Sklavenflucht' Des Onesimus," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1985).

house *without* the intention of finding Paul; but based on the conditions of life as a fugitive slave, he decided to take the great risk of plugging into the Christian network to find the Apostle and secure a permanent solution to his predicament. In other words, Onesimus did not originally plan to seek out Paul, but he also did not just fortuitously happen upon him. He intentionally sought out Paul long after the fact. I have labeled this modified theory *Amicus Domini Ex Post Facto*.

This reconstruction makes the best sense of the contents of Paul's letter, the other ancient sources that specifically mention Onesimus, the daily experience of slaves during the early Roman Empire, the Roman laws regarding slaves and fugitives, and the significant cost and duration of Onesimus' round-trip flight. The scenario proposed in this project would not have qualified as a traditional *Amicus Domini* scenario, which would exempt Onesimus from legal sanctions.

## **Methodology**

Within the broader field of biblical studies, this project will be rooted mainly in the sub-discipline of the Historical Critical method. I will primarily utilize ancient texts to investigate the life of Onesimus and the circumstances of his flight, though some relevant archaeological evidence will also be examined.

While some consider the Historical Critical method to be somewhat out of fashion these days, it represents a vitally important skill set within biblical studies, i.e. the capability of dealing with ancient texts, languages, archaeology etc. Joseph Fitzmyer, in his collection of essays entitled *The Interpretation of Scripture: A Defense of the Historical-Critical Method*, outlines the origins of the method, as well

as its key concerns and presuppositions. Fitzmyer traces the method through (1) its beginnings in Alexandrian classical philology (which did extensive critical work on the Homeric writings) (2) the work of early-Christian scholars such as Origen and Eusebius (with their monumental works, the Hexapla, and the Chronicon, respectively), (3) the influence of the Renaissance that emphasized the original sources and languages, (4) the orientation of the Reformers that valued the biblical text over church traditions, and (5) 19<sup>th</sup> century German historicism.<sup>2</sup>

While it is certainly impossible to achieve a truly empirical understanding of ancient history, the Historical Critical method can illuminate much about the ancient world and the lives of those who inhabited it. On the usefulness and limitations of the Historical Critical method, Donald Hagner sagely comments that the scholar must

“...acknowledge that in the realm of historical knowledge, we are not dealing with matters that can be proven (or disproven, for that matter!), but with probability. Historical knowledge remains dependent on inferences from the evidence. Good historical criticism is what makes best sense, i.e., the most coherent explanation of the evidence.”<sup>3</sup>

Just as archaeologists draw conclusions from a relatively small sampling of evidence taken from different locations and strata, any historical investigation is limited by the evidence that is available. Thus, the historian must attempt to find the best, most probable explanation of the available evidence while always acknowledging that there

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Interpretation of Scripture : In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 61-62.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Hagner, "Ten Guidelines for Evangelical Scholarship," No pages. Cited 22 August 2014. Online: <http://blog.bakeracademic.com/don-hagners-ten-guidelines-for-evangelical-scholarship/>.

is much about the ancient world that we do not know. Simply put, our data is incomplete, so we must be careful not to overstate the certainty of our conclusions.

It is with that ethos in mind that this dissertation will proceed. I will attempt to find the most *probable* historical explanation of Onesimus' flight – the one that makes the best sense and takes the best stock of all the available evidence. For such a project, the Historical Critical method is certainly the most appropriate. Additionally, much of the recent work on Phlm has been done within other sub-disciplines of biblical studies, e.g. Postcolonial studies and Reader-Response criticism.<sup>4</sup> There is a relative paucity of substantive Historical-Critical work related to Phlm, and especially with regard to Onesimus himself. There is indeed room in the field for someone to do a detailed Historical-Critical study on the figure of Onesimus.

In addition to the Historical-Critical approach, this project will apply rhetorical analysis to Phlm. Much of the historical data that can be recovered from that text is seen through the lens of Paul's masterful rhetoric. Paul went to great lengths to persuade Philemon to respond in a certain way, and the incredibly diplomatic manner in which he approached the Onesimus episode sheds light on how serious the situation was. I will consider the classic work of Norman Petersen, who famously analyzed the rhetorical function of the sequence of events in Phlm. I will also survey other rhetorical theories put forth by such scholars as Peter Lampe, Chris Frilingos, Lloyd Lewis, John Nordling, and Andrew Wilson.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. D. Francois Tomie, *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (New York: De Gruyter, 2010).

My argument in this dissertation will be incremental, as will become clear. No single chapter or piece of evidence will decisively undermine the popular *Amicus Domini* theory. Each chapter in this project will establish several pieces of evidence related to Onesimus and the situation of ancient fugitive slaves. These pieces of evidence are relatively innocuous on their own. When taken together at the end of this project, however, their cumulative force will make it clear that the *Amicus Domini* interpretation of Onesimus' circumstances is utterly lacking in its explanatory power.

Each chapter will conclude with a survey of the evidence established in that chapter, presented in such a way that deliberately communicates how confident I am in each piece of evidence. For example, if I state something plainly, like “Onesimus would have had no rights as a slave”, then you can assume that I have a very high degree of confidence in that individual conclusion – better than 90%. A statement like that communicates that I am very confident in that conclusion because I am not qualifying the statement in any way. If, however, I use qualifiers like *most likely* or *probably*, then I think the conclusion is quite likely, perhaps better than 75%. If I use the modifiers *possibly*, *may have* or *might have*, then I am claiming that it is a real possibility but not necessarily probable. For instance, if I were to say something like “Onesimus might have worked on a farm”, then I am claiming that it would not be surprising if Onesimus worked on a farm, but it does not necessarily mean that he did. These conclusions will be synthesized in the final chapter of the project in order to challenge *Amicus Domini* and replace it with a more plausible historical theory.

In chapter one I will provide a detailed study of Phlm, the most important source we have on the life and flight of Onesimus. This study will include an annotated translation, as well as a commentary including grammatical, contextual, and textual analysis. I will focus in this chapter on basic conclusions that can be obtained through a close grammatical and contextual reading of the text.

Chapter two will continue the focus on Phlm, examining the many rhetorical theories that scholars have applied to the letter. This will allow us to learn even more about Onesimus by stepping beyond the relatively bare grammatical and textual insights from the first chapter. The rhetorical analyses will focus on *how* and *why* Paul said what he did, and what historical insight can be learned from his rhetorical strategy. I will then briefly survey the various historical theories that have been proposed for the background of Phlm, theories that variously synthesize the grammatical, textual, contextual, and rhetorical insights surveyed thus far in the project. Thus, the first two chapters of this project are focused on gleaning as much historical data about Onesimus as possible from Phlm, whether from grammatical, contextual, rhetorical, or historical insights.

Chapter three leaves Phlm behind, and turns our attention to other ancient sources that mention Onesimus specifically. This will begin with Colossians, and a brief discussion of its authorship and connection to Phlm. I will also consider what other early-Christian commentators had to say about Onesimus and Phlm. In one of the more unique contributions of this project, I survey the subscriptions to the



manuscripts of the so-called “Prison Letters”, which I argue provide relevant data for understanding the story of Onesimus.

In chapter four, I leave behind the sources that mention Onesimus specifically, and turn to a more general picture of ancient slavery and the common experience of slaves within that system. There are many typical experiences that most slaves of the ancient world faced, and Onesimus was no exception. I will also briefly survey the Greco-Roman philosophy of slavery, and explore the sources of new slaves during the Roman Empire. Types of slaves, as well as their daily lives will also be surveyed. This chapter will contribute many basic insights about life as a slave in the first-century Mediterranean context, and thus will offer a contribution that goes beyond Onesimus’ personal experience.

In chapter five I will examine slaves and slavery through the lens of Roman law. I will also look at the phenomenon of fugitive slaves, and how Roman law spoke into that widespread reality. The chapter will also explore the legal and textual basis for the *Amicus Domini* theory as it is routinely applied to Phlm.

Chapter six will deal with travel and communication in the Roman Empire, with a view toward understanding the probable experience, cost, and duration of Onesimus’ flight. As a part of that investigation, I will consider the location of Philemon’s house, as well as the location of Paul’s imprisonment – the possible beginning and ending points of Onesimus’ flight.

The conclusion will synthesize the insights gained from the foregoing chapters, and offer an exposition of the *Amicus Domini Ex Post Facto* theory as it applies to the

Onesimus episode. This project will leave the reader with a more probable reconstruction of what happened in this incident between Onesimus, Paul and Philemon.

Onesimus' story needs to be told, and a probable historical reconstruction of his circumstances is what needs to be achieved in order to accomplish that. There were thousands of slaves in the world of first-century Christianity, and Onesimus is the most famous of them. He had a Pauline letter devoted to his personal struggle, and yet has remained largely invisible to history. This project allows me not only to offer a plausible historical account of Onesimus' story; it will also illuminate many aspects of what it was like to be a slave in the first-century Roman Empire.

## **CHAPTER ONE: ONESIMUS IN PAUL’S LETTER TO PHILEMON (Part One)**

Onesimus is only known to us by a few ancient sources. The earliest and most significant of which is Paul’s letter to Philemon in the New Testament (Phlm). At 335 words, it is by far the shortest letter of the apostle’s that has survived. While it may be considered by some to be the least significant of Paul’s letters, it is the most significant ancient source that we have on Onesimus. His situation was the catalyst for Paul’s letter, and the main subject of it. For that reason, I will spend more time on this source than any other.

The primary question that I will be asking of the text is *What does this tell us about Onesimus?* In examining Phlm, I am not seeking to understand Paul’s theology or ecclesiology. I am also not concerned with fully describing early-Christian house churches and their diverse social makeup. While those subjects will be touched upon, they will only be covered peripherally. The focus of this chapter (and this entire project), is the individual named Onesimus. There is a partial portrait of the man available, and it is discovered in the text, grammar, and rhetoric of Phlm.

### **Introduction to Phlm**

Phlm has historically been considered one of Paul’s authentic letters. This is a view that reaches back into antiquity, and is widely upheld today. The modern

scholarly community is essentially unanimous on the Pauline authorship of Phlm. For example, Dunn writes, “In the history of Christianity, there have been no serious considerations brought against the letter’s assertion that it was written by Paul.”<sup>5</sup> Isobel Combes agrees, writing that “its authenticity has been seldom challenged.”<sup>6</sup> On the few challenges to the Pauline authorship of Phlm, Fitzmyer writes, “Because the Letter to Philemon seemed to lack any doctrinal content, it was at times neglected in the ancient church; and some even judged that it was not written by Paul, especially in parts of the church in Syria up to the fifth century.”<sup>7</sup> Despite these few exceptional cases, there was little to no controversy over the Pauline authorship of Phlm in the ancient world.<sup>8</sup>

The title of Phlm has been remarkably consistent in the manuscript tradition, being designated by its recipient: *To Philemon*. It was common for Paul’s letters to be identified by their recipient, which was typically written as a superscript title above the letter in the manuscripts. Fitzmyer comments on the consistency of Phlm’s title in the manuscript tradition, writing that Phlm has “always been known in all Greek

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<sup>5</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 299.

<sup>6</sup> Isobel A. H. Combes, "Philemon," in *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary* (ed. Evans; Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2004), 689.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon* (ed. Freedman; New Haven: Yale University, 2000), 8.

<sup>8</sup> On its reputation today, Fitzmyer concludes, “Today the authenticity of the Letter to Philemon is almost universally admitted, and there is no serious reason to question it. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine why a pseudepigrapher of later date would want to concoct such a letter and pass it off as written by Paul of Tarsus.” Ibid.

manuscripts of it as *Pros Philēmona*, “To Philemon.”<sup>9</sup> This is a title that was picked up when the letter began to be translated into other languages, for example *Ad Philemonem* in the Latin Vulgate.<sup>10</sup>

Most scholars of the Pauline literature agree that his letters were collected in some form for the first time towards the end of the first century. They were bound together (probably in codices), and circulated among the early-Christian communities around the Roman Empire. On this early edition of the Pauline Corpus, Harry Gamble writes, “...this ‘original’ collection served as the basis and model for such further developments and led eventually to the ‘standard’ corpus which offers thirteen letters in the so-called canonical order: Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.”<sup>11</sup> Lucetta Mowry argues that this original corpus was made up of just ten documents, and she lists them in what was their probable order: Ephesians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the order of the documents, there is general agreement that Paul’s letter to Philemon was among the earliest letters of Paul that were collected and circulated. Phlm was there from the beginning.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Harry Gamble, "The Redaction of the Pauline Letters and the Formation of the Pauline Corpus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94, no. 3 (1975): 405.

<sup>12</sup> Lucetta Mowry, "The Early Circulation of Paul's Letters," 63, no. 2 (1944): 84. According to Mowry, the earliest evidence of the existence of this early Pauline collection is found in Tertullian's *Adversus Marcionem* V, and *Epiphanius Panarion*, Haer. 42.

As far as the textual tradition, Phlm is present in two ancient papyri: P<sup>61</sup> and P<sup>87</sup>. The earlier of the two is P<sup>87</sup>, which is a fragmentary 3<sup>rd</sup> century text containing portions of verses 13-15 and 24-25.<sup>13</sup> P<sup>61</sup>, which was copied in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, was probably based on a significantly older exemplar.<sup>14</sup> It contains verses 4-7 of Phlm. One might also expect to find it in the Chester Beatty Papyrus (P<sup>46</sup>), but as Pamela Eisenbaum notes, "...the absence of the Pastoral Epistles as well as Philemon indicates that the ancient editor of the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyrus II deliberately chose not to include letters addressed to individuals, but rather only those addressed to communities."<sup>15</sup>

Many of the important uncial codices contain significant portions of Phlm, including Codex Sinaiticus (S)<sup>16</sup>, Codex Alexandrinus (A)<sup>17</sup>, Codex Ephraimi Rescriptus (C)<sup>18</sup>, and Codex Claromontanus (D).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts. Accessed Online at [http://www.csntm.org/Manuscript/View/GA\\_P87](http://www.csntm.org/Manuscript/View/GA_P87)

<sup>14</sup> Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon* (ed. Freedman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2000), 104. Barth and Blanke incorrectly note that P<sup>61</sup> is the only ancient papyrus containing text from Phlm.

<sup>15</sup> Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 18.

<sup>16</sup> Phlm 1:1-25

<sup>17</sup> Phlm 1:1-25

<sup>18</sup> Phlm 1:3-25

<sup>19</sup> Phlm 1:1-25

Phlm appeared in Marcion's canonical list, as well as in the Muratorian Canon and the anti-Marcionite prologues.<sup>20</sup> It also appeared in Athanasius' famous festal letter of 367 CE, in which he listed the accepted books of the New Testament. Phlm was also officially deemed part of the New Testament canon at the various early-Christian councils, e.g. Egypt (367), Rome (382), Carthage (395) and Hippo (397).<sup>21</sup> Relatively few early-Christian commentators mentioned Phlm because its contents were so idiosyncratic. On this reality, Demetrius Williams comments, "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."<sup>22</sup> Early-Christian writers who did write commentaries on Phlm include John Chrysostom (4<sup>th</sup> century), Jerome (4<sup>th</sup> century), and Theodore of Mopsuestia (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century). Barth and Blanke note, however, that "Clement of Rome, Irenaeus, Cyprian, Hilary, Augustine, and especially Ambrose quote from the epistle."<sup>23</sup>

Compared to the origin and authorship of many ancient texts, Phlm lacks controversy. Ancient and modern interpreters have had little trouble identifying the letter as Pauline, which explains its broad inclusion among ancient manuscripts and canon lists. That being the case, this project will proceed under the assumption that

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<sup>20</sup> Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Demetrius K. Williams, "No Longer as a Slave," in *Onesimus, Our Brother : Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 16.

<sup>23</sup> Markus and Helmut Blanke Barth, *The Letter to Philemon*, 105.

Phlm was written by Paul, and has been included in the New Testament canon since a very early date.

I will now proceed with a translation of Phlm, followed by a brief commentary in which relevant insights related to Onesimus will be highlighted.

### **Translation<sup>24</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow worker, <sup>2</sup> and to Apphia our sister, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church at your house. <sup>3</sup> Grace to you (all) and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> I am giving thanks to God always, making mention of you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> hearing of your love and faith, which you are having toward the Lord Jesus and for all the holy ones. <sup>6</sup> (and I pray) that your fellowship in the faith might become effective in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you (all) for Christ. <sup>7</sup> For I have had much joy and encouragement on the basis of your love, because the hearts of the holy ones have been refreshed through you, brother. <sup>8</sup> Having much boldness in Christ, therefore, to command you to do what is proper, <sup>9</sup> I am appealing to you, rather, on account of love (being such as Paul, an old man now, and also a prisoner of Christ Jesus). <sup>10</sup> I am appealing to you concerning my child, whom I bore in chains, Onesimus, <sup>11</sup> who was at one time useless to you, but now is really useful to you and to me, <sup>12</sup> whom I have sent to you, him, this one who is my heart, <sup>13</sup> whom I was wanting to keep beside me, in order that he might serve me on behalf of you in (my)

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<sup>24</sup> This translation aims to be as literal as possible, especially with regard to Greek verbal aspect and personal pronouns.



chains for the Gospel,<sup>14</sup> but apart from your consent I wished to do nothing, in order that your good might not be according to compulsion, but according to willingness.<sup>15</sup> For perhaps on account of this he has been separated for a time, in order that you might be receiving him in full forever,<sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you both in the flesh and the Lord.<sup>17</sup> If, therefore, you are regarding me as a partner, receive him as me.<sup>18</sup> And if he wronged you in some way or is owing you, put this on my account.<sup>19</sup> I, Paul, wrote in my hand – I will pay it back (not to mention that you are also owing yourself to me).<sup>20</sup> Yes, brother, I wish to benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ!<sup>21</sup> Having confidence in your obedience, I wrote to you, knowing that you will also do more than I am saying,<sup>22</sup> and at the same time, prepare also for me a guest room, for I am hoping that on account of your prayers, I will be graciously given to you (all).<sup>23</sup> Epaphras greets you, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus,<sup>24</sup> as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke – my fellow workers.<sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

### **Commentary on Phlm**

This section will provide the text and translation of each verse, and then commentary on that verse. Text-critical matters will be covered in the footnotes, as well as most of the grammatical commentary. Any grammatical matter that is significant for the interpretation of the letter will be highlighted in the main body of this section. Certain rhetorical insights will be touched on, but the fuller discussion of Paul's rhetoric will be presented in the following chapter. While every verse in Phlm

does not relate directly to Onesimus, a detailed look at the entire letter is necessary to enable the rhetorical and historical analyses that will come later in this project.

### **Phlm 1**<sup>25</sup>

Παῦλος<sup>26</sup> δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφὸς Φιλῆμονι τῷ ἀγαπητῷ<sup>27</sup> καὶ συνεργῷ ἡμῶν

### **Translation**

Paul, a prisoner<sup>28</sup> of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon, our beloved and fellow worker.

### **Commentary**

Paul opens his brief letter by explicitly identifying himself as a prisoner. This is a distinguishing feature that sets this epistle apart from many other Pauline letters.<sup>29</sup>

Paul does not play the apostle card here, but rather identifies himself as a man in

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<sup>25</sup> Greek text of Phlm, and all text-critical data taken from the NA<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> D\* includes the title ἀπόστολος, presumably to raise Paul's status from a simple prisoner, which is ironic because his prisoner status is an important element in his rhetorical strategy. This alteration is consistent with the tendency seen in other codices (Bezae, for example) in which the titles of key figures are elevated (for example, the numerous instances of adding κύριος or χριστός to Jesus' name).

<sup>27</sup> D\* adds ἀδελφῷ here, which most early witnesses lack.

<sup>28</sup> Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1974), 652.

<sup>29</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 310. Judith Ryan adds that "Nowhere in this letter does he refer to himself as an apostle" (Judith Ryan, "Philemon," in *Philippians and Philemon* (ed. Harrington; vol. 10 of *Sacra Pagina Series*; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005), 239.).

custody.<sup>30</sup> As a result, he presents himself as an incarcerated man writing a sincere letter to them. This picture will serve an important rhetorical function throughout the letter, but as Todd Still notes, “...his depiction of himself is not merely rhetorical.”<sup>31</sup> Paul is actually in prison.

Barth and Blanke insightfully add that Paul’s “situation and legal position of a prisoner are close to those of a slave.”<sup>32</sup> This means that the letter starts out on a note of empathy with the subject of the communicate – Onesimus.

Paul also mentions that Timothy is with him, whom he calls *our brother*. This implies that the readers know who Timothy is, and have some level of affection for him. F. F. Bruce adds that “Timothy is associated with Paul in the initial salutation, instead of being included among other friends...because he was Paul’s permanent partner in his ministry.”<sup>33</sup> The readers of this letter, therefore, would have had Paul and Timothy in view as the senders.

Next, Paul identifies the recipients. The first listed individual is Philemon, who is the primary audience of the letter. He is called *beloved* and a *fellow worker*. Paul is showing his respect and affection for Philemon at the outset of the letter.

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<sup>30</sup> This was an unusual thing for Paul to do, considering how important it was to him in other letters to establish and assert his apostolicity. Callahan comments, “For the Corinthians and the Galatians, apostolicity was Paul’s trump card...” (Allen D. Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 23). In several of Paul’s letters he immediately identifies himself as an apostle (e.g. Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1).

<sup>31</sup> Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2011), 165.

<sup>32</sup> Markus and Helmut Blanke Barth, *The Letter to Philemon*, 244.

<sup>33</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984), 205.

## Phlm 2

καὶ Ἀπφίᾳ τῇ ἀδελφῇ<sup>34</sup> καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν καὶ τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ

## Translation

and to Apphia our sister, and Archippus our fellow soldier<sup>35</sup>, and to the church at your house.

## Commentary

The other recipients of the letter are mentioned after Philemon. Apphia is often thought to be Philemon's wife, and it is possible that Archippus is their son.<sup>36</sup> This is the view of F.F. Bruce, who writes that "Apphia and Archippus... were presumably members of Philemon's household, probably his wife and son."<sup>37</sup> These are conjectures, but there is ancient evidence to support the theory that they were a

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<sup>34</sup> τῇ ἀγάπῃ is added in D<sup>2</sup> Ψ sy<sup>p</sup> and sa<sup>mss</sup>. The use of τῇ ἀδελφῇ alone is supported by Ⲛ A D\* 33 and 1739. Metzger argues that τῇ ἀγάπῃ was probably "introduced in conformity with the preceding ἀγαπητῶν." (Bruce Manning Metzger and United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament; a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (New York, United Bible Societies, 1971), 588.).

<sup>35</sup> Frederick W. Danker, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 979; Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 652.

<sup>36</sup> Pelagius also believed that Apphia was related to Philemon, writing "Apphia is believed to be either Philemon's sister or spouse." *PETE* 536 (Peter Gorday and Thomas C. Oden, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (9; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 311.).

<sup>37</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 206. Dunn agrees, writing that "this makes good sense." (James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 311).

family.<sup>38</sup> Bieberstein, however, rightly points out that “Paul does not relate Apphia or Archippus to Philemon by means of any terms designating family or dependence; he employs autonomous terms for them.”<sup>39</sup> Whatever their relationship to Philemon, Paul shows his warmth and respect for both Apphia and Archippus, calling them *our sister* and *our fellow soldier*, respectively.

The final recipients of the letter are the members of the church that meets in Philemon’s house. The possessive pronoun σου is singular, so Paul clearly views the house as Philemon’s, which is a typical viewpoint of the day. Had the pronoun been plural, that might be more evidence that Apphia and Archippus were indeed related to Philemon. Barth and Blanke describe Philemon as a “successful middle-class citizen, owner of a house large enough to host a house church and to have, in addition, at least one guest room available for a visitor.”<sup>40</sup>

What is most significant about this verse is that Paul is writing his letter with the intention that it be read to the entire church meeting in Philemon’s house. Fitzmyer comments that “The letter was not intended to be read silently by those addressed, but to be read aloud to an assembled group of Christians.”<sup>41</sup> Caballeros adds that “El documento que ahora nos ocupa es una carta personal, que responde a una situación

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<sup>38</sup> This is the estimation of Theodore of Mopsuestia. On Archippus, he writes, “He is speaking of the son of Philemon and Apphia (filium indicat Philemonis quoque et Affiae). Cf. Theodore, *The Commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul* (Trans. Rowan A. Greer; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 787.

<sup>39</sup> Sabine Bieberstein, "Disrupting the Normal Reality of Slavery: A Feminist Reading of the Letter to Philemon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 23, no. 79 (2001): 111.

<sup>40</sup> Markus and Helmut Blanke Barth, *The Letter to Philemon*, 137.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, 81.

histórica única, muy concreta, pero que se encuentra dentro de una carta dirigida por una comunidad a otra comunidad.”<sup>42</sup>

This is significant because it plays into the broader rhetorical strategy that Paul is using in the letter. The rhetoric of Phlm will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, but suffice it to say that Paul’s inclusion of the church in Philemon’s home as recipients of the letter serves to put pressure on Philemon to respond favorably to the letter.

### **Phlm 3**

χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

### **Translation**

Grace to you (all)<sup>43</sup> and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Commentary**

This is a typical greeting from Paul,<sup>44</sup> and it is directed toward the whole church that meets in Philemon’s house (as indicated by the second-person plural pronoun ὑμῖν). This verse marks the ending of Paul’s greeting in the letter. In summary, Fitzmyer writes

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<sup>42</sup> Juan Luis Caballero, "Retórica Y Teología: La Carta a Filemón," *Scripta Theologica* 37, no. 2 (2005): 473. "The document which now occupies us is a personal letter, which responds to a unique historical situation, very particular, but which is within a letter directed from one community to another community." (my translation)

<sup>43</sup> I will use the designation "you (all)" to signify Paul’s use of the second person plural. As a Texan, I would feel more than comfortable using "y’all", but however useful it is, "y’all" does not have the requisite academic tone.

<sup>44</sup> Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; Phlm 1:3

“The prescript thus gives the reader a view of early Christian house-churches. The head of the house is recognized as the leader of such a church or congregation. Philemon, however is not to be thought of as an absolute monarch, who may disregard what others might think. So the relation of the slave Onesimus to him becomes the concern of the church as well.”<sup>45</sup>

Thus, Paul has not only explicitly mentioned the church that meets in Philemon’s house, he is now *directly* addressing them in his greeting. This would serve to bring them in as listeners and witnesses even more than when they were mentioned in the previous verse.

#### **Phlm 4**

Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου πάντοτε μνείαν σου ποιοῦμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου

#### **Translation**

I am giving thanks<sup>46</sup> to my God always, making mention<sup>47</sup> of you in my prayers,

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<sup>45</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, 82.

<sup>46</sup> The present active indicative verb Εὐχαριστῶ has an ongoing or continual aspect to it, hence the translation “I am giving thanks.”

<sup>47</sup> According to BDAG, the pairing of μνεία with ποιέω amounts to “making mention of” (BDAG 655). While the word μνεία conveys the idea of remembrance (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 652) it is “recalling without the implication of having forgotten” (J. P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains* (2vols.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 29.7.).

## Commentary

Here, Paul begins his prayer and encouragement section, speaking now with his own singular voice apart from Timothy the co-sender.<sup>48</sup> This is the part of his message that is specifically for Philemon. This fact is made clear by the second-person pronoun σου. If Paul had been standing in front of the congregation, he would now be looking directly at Philemon with everyone else watching.

Paul uses a present tense verb (Εὐχαριστῶ) and a present tense participle (ποιούμενος) to indicate the present and ongoing nature of his prayers for Philemon. Their relationship is not something that had lapsed or needed to be re-established. Paul's rhetoric stresses his close, continuing relationship with Philemon.

## Phlm 5

ἀκούων σου τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν<sup>49</sup>, ἣν ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν  
καὶ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους

## Translation

hearing<sup>50</sup> of your love and faith, which you are having<sup>51</sup> toward the Lord Jesus and for all the holy ones.

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<sup>48</sup> Markus and Helmut Blanke Barth, *The Letter to Philemon*, 268.

<sup>49</sup> Some witnesses transpose ἀγάπην and πίστιν (P<sup>61</sup>, D, 323, 365, 629, 945, 1739).

<sup>50</sup> The present participle has an ongoing/continuous aspect to it. Paul keeps hearing about Philemon's love and faith. Wallace adds that ἀκούω takes its object in the accusative when "referring to a non-literal hearing, but understanding." (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics : An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 133.). Fitzmyer agrees, writing, "...the present participle may have an ongoing or iterative sense." (Joseph A. Fitzmyer,



## Commentary

Paul is now giving the justification for the respect he has for Philemon. In the initial greeting of the letter, Paul called Philemon *beloved* and a *fellow worker*. Verse 5 gives the reasons why: Philemon's own exemplary love and faith, which are directed heavenward toward Christ, and outward toward the other Christians in his community.

## Phlm 6

ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου ἐνεργῆς γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν ὑμῖν <sup>52</sup> εἰς Χριστόν.

## Translation

(I pray) that your fellowship in the faith<sup>53</sup> might become effective in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you (all) for Christ.

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*The Letter to Philemon, 95.)*

<sup>51</sup> The present tense and ongoing aspect emphasizes that Philemon continually shows love and faith toward the Jesus and the broader Christian community.

<sup>52</sup> ὑμῖν is supported by  $\mathfrak{P}^{61}$ ,  $\aleph$ , F, G, P, 33, 1739, ar, sy, and co. The NA<sup>27</sup> committee chose ἡμῖν, which is supported by A, C, D,  $\Psi$ , and Ambst. According to Metzger, “the committee preferred ἡμῖν, but ἐν ὑμῖν is better attested.” (Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 588).

<sup>53</sup> Moule rightly observes that this is “notoriously the most obscure verse in the letter...” (C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon; an Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge Eng.: University Press, 1958), 141.). How does one interpret the genitive case of τῆς πίστεώς? It is a question of objective genitive (fellowship of Philemon's faith) versus subjective genitive (Philemon's fellowship in the faith). Dunn argues it is the latter (James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 313). BDAG offers this translation: “That your participation in the faith may be made known through your deeds...” (BDAG, 553). Zerwick offers both alternatives: Subjective genitive “fellowship inspired by your faith”, and objective genitive “sharing in your faith” (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 652). The

## Commentary

This verse is famously difficult both to translate and interpret. Paul had just discussed his prayers in the past for Philemon. With verse 6, Paul is now describing his future prayer for Philemon.

It seems that Paul is saying that Philemon's participation in the Christian faith (and community) should in some way affect his view of the world. His view should be oriented around an awareness of the good things that Christ is doing in the Christian community (indicated by the plural second-person pronoun ὑμῖν).

While this verse is very interesting from a theological and ecclesiastical perspective, it is not particularly relevant to our question of Onesimus and his dilemma. That being the case, I will not spend any more time here trying to solve exactly what it means. Todd Still nicely summarizes the challenge of this verse, writing “Verse 6 is one of the most difficult verses to interpret in Philemon. While it is clear that the focus falls upon Philemon's faith, much ambiguity remains, as even a cursory comparison of English translations reveals.”<sup>54</sup>

## Phlm 7

χαρὰν γὰρ πολλὴν ἔσχον καὶ παράκλησιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου, ὅτι τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἁγίων ἀναπέπαιται διὰ σοῦ, ἀδελφέ.

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possible translations for this verse are nearly as numerous as the interpreters themselves.

<sup>54</sup> Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon*, 168.

## Translation

For I have had<sup>55</sup> much joy and encouragement on the basis of your love, because the hearts<sup>56</sup> of the holy ones have been refreshed<sup>57</sup> through you<sup>58</sup>, brother.

## Commentary

In this final verse of the prayer and encouragement section, Paul reinforces his personal affection for Philemon. He has had, over time, joy and encouragement because of Philemon's love. He has seen Philemon's leadership in the Christian community, and the way that he has built up and encouraged the other Christians. His use of the vocative ἀδελφε makes it even more direct and personal.

In the phrase, *the hearts of the holy ones have been refreshed through you*, Paul uses terminology that further illustrates his closeness to Philemon. Paul chose the term σπλάγχνα (a plural word often translated as “heart”) instead of the more expected word καρδία . On this choice, Jeffrey Weima comments that “Instead of the much more common term καρδία...the apostle uses the rarer word σπλάγχνα ...which literally refers to human entrails where it was believed that the deepest

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<sup>55</sup> This is the “epistolary aorist” Cf. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 143.

<sup>56</sup> σπλάγχνα is a graphic word that literally means “bowels”, but figuratively has to do with the seat of emotions (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 652). Louw and Nida similarly define the term as the “inner parts of the body” (Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domain*, 8.58).

<sup>57</sup> The verb ἀναπαύω means “to cause someone to become physically refreshed as the result of resting from work.” (Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domain*, 23.84).

<sup>58</sup> Wallace calls this prepositional construction “intermediate agent” (Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 433-434).

feelings were located...a more emotive term than the common καρδία.”<sup>59</sup> Paul used a very evocative and graphic term to convey the depth of his affection for Philemon, as well as his deep gratitude for the way he has cared for the community of Christians that meets in his home.

### **Phlm 8**

Διὸ πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν ἔχων ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνήκον

### **Translation**

Having much boldness in Christ, therefore, to command you to do what is proper<sup>60</sup>

### **Commentary**

In verse 8 Paul begins his appeal to Philemon, which is a masterpiece of diplomacy. It is a rhetorical crescendo that will build throughout the rest of the letter, and will be discussed more fully in the following chapter. In general terms, this crescendo implies that Onesimus had committed a serious offense against Philemon – the consequences of which Paul is attempting to alleviate.

Paul starts out by saying that he could absolutely command Philemon to do what is proper. He has that apostolic authority, yet he is choosing not to exercise it. Paul telegraphed this stance by refusing to call himself an apostle in the greeting of the

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<sup>59</sup> Jeffrey A.D. Weima, "Paul's Persuasive Prose: An Epistolary Analysis of the Letter to Philemon," in *Philemon in Perspective* (ed. Tolmie; vol. 169 of *Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*; New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 44.

<sup>60</sup> The substantival participle τὸ ἀνήκον has the sense of “what is proper” (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 652), or “to be fitting or right” (Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domain*, 25.158). BDAG concurs, translating τὸ ἀνήκον as “the right thing.” (BDAG, 79).

letter, and here is another illustration of that posture. F.F. Bruce writes that “Paul could, of course, have exercised his authority as an apostle...but that is not how one friend approaches another. Yet he cannot forbear to point out that, if he had been minded to exercise his authority, he had full liberty to do so.”<sup>61</sup> Dunn adds a theological component to Paul’s appeal, arguing that “Paul was appealing to Philemon’s duty ‘en Christo’, his obligations and responsibilities having been transformed by his becoming Christian.”<sup>62</sup>

When Philemon originally read (or heard) this letter, he probably sensed a real change in tone when he came to verse 8. Everything before this was flattery and small talk, and now Paul is referencing his prerogative as an apostle to command Philemon to do something.

### **Phlm 9**

διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ, τοιοῦτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ

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<sup>61</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 211. Chrysostom picked up on the same restrained approach, writing “Observe how cautious [Paul] is, lest any of the things which were spoken even from exceeding love should so strike the hearer as to hurt him. For this reason before he says, “to enjoin thee,” since it was offensive, although, as spoken out of love, it was more proper to soothe him, yet nevertheless from an excess of delicacy, he as it were corrects it by saying, “Having confidence,” by which he implies that Philemon was a great man” (*NPNF* 1 13:550. Peter Gorday and Thomas C. Oden, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 313). Ambrosiaster expresses a similar sentiment, writing that Paul “does not exert his apostolic authority in order to issue orders, but respects Philemon as a faithful Christian and of the same age, one who is bound to Christ as he is.” *CSEL* 81 3:338-39 (ibid.).

<sup>62</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 325.

**Translation:** I am appealing<sup>63</sup> to you, rather, on account of love (being such as Paul, an old man<sup>64</sup> now, and also a prisoner of Christ Jesus).

**Commentary:**

Paul now gives the basis of his appeal – love. He has already commented on Philemon’s unparalleled reputation for love, and Paul is now attempting to build his appeal on that reputation (which Philemon would undoubtedly wish to preserve).

Paul also identifies himself as an “old man”, which would simultaneously evoke feelings of respect and sympathy.<sup>65</sup> Bruce puts it this way: “If Paul did refer to himself as an old man (which, around the age of sixty, he was indeed entitled to do), then his appeal would appear to be based on pity as well as love.”<sup>66</sup> Todd Still gives two options: Paul “may be tugging at Philemon’s heartstrings...or on the other hand,

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<sup>63</sup> Present tense of παρακαλῶ signifies an ongoing appeal, something with consequences beyond the present time.

<sup>64</sup> The translation of πρεσβύτερος as “old man” is the plain meaning of the text that is clearly established in the manuscript tradition (cf. BDAG 863). It also makes sense since it is followed by the temporal modifier νυν. There has been considerable discussion, however, as to whether this term should be translated as “ambassador”, since the Greek word for ambassador is very similar (πρεσβευτής). Metzger comments, “Although the manuscripts support πρεσβύτερος (“an old man”), many commentators follow the conjecture of Bentley and others that πρεσβευτής (“an ambassador”) should be read.” (Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 589). Allen Callahan contends that while “The manuscript tradition supports the reading πρεσβύτερος, ...Paul’s rhetorical tone is precisely that of an ambassador (Allen D. Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus*, 31.). Moule argues that “even if the MS evidence indicates the ‘old man’ spelling, it is a negligible difference, for the two are by this time virtually interchangeable.” (Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 144).

<sup>65</sup> Fitzmyer adds some helpful insights into the stages of life in the ancient world. He writes, “The physician Hippocrates...in *Peri Hebdomadon*, quoted by Philo (*De opificio mundi* 36.1-5), lists the seven stages of human life as *paidion, pais, meriakion, neaniskos, aner, presbytes, geron*, ‘little boy, boy, lad, young man, man, elderly man, old man.’” Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, 105.

<sup>66</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 212.

Paul might have mentioned his old age to engender the respect and privilege typically accorded to the elderly in antiquity.”<sup>67</sup>

Whatever the case, it is clear that Paul’s mention of his age and status as a prisoner is designed to soften up Philemon to his appeal. These identifications – *old man* and *prisoner* – stand in stark contrast to Paul’s sometimes strident identification of himself as an apostle.<sup>68</sup>

### Phlm 10

παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς<sup>69</sup>, Ὀνήσιμον

### Translation

I am appealing to you concerning my<sup>70</sup> child, whom<sup>71</sup> I bore in chains, Onesimus

### Commentary

At this point, Philemon might still be wondering what this appeal is all about. He knows there is an appeal, but the nature of that appeal has yet to be made plain.

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<sup>67</sup> Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon*, 112.

<sup>68</sup> 1 Cor. 9:1; 2 Cor. 11:5; Gal. 1:1; 1 Tim. 2:7

<sup>69</sup> A few MSS add μου after δεσμοῖς (Ⲙ<sup>2</sup>, C, D, ψ, 1739)

<sup>70</sup> Paul uses the emphatic form ἐμοῦ. Cf. William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 93.

<sup>71</sup> The relative pronoun ὃν is masculine, even though the antecedent (τέκνον) is neuter. This is due to natural gender (Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 337). On the disagreement between pronoun and antecedent, Moule comments that “perhaps it draws the name into close relation with ἐγέννησα: ‘Whom I have begotten as Onesimus.’ This may be no more than a punning reference to the slave’s name (profitable), as though to say that, at his conversion, he became true to that name for the first time (Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 145). Moule’s interpretation is certainly possible, but it makes more sense that it is simply a case of natural gender as Wallace argued.

Paul then mentions the name of Onesimus for the first time.<sup>72</sup> It is probable that Philemon had no idea that he would ever hear from Onesimus again. There may have even been an audible gasp in the room for any original hearers of the letter. According to Callahan, Paul has “strategically avoided Onesimus’ name up to this point in the letter...suggesting that the mere mention of his name to Philemon might prove provocative.”<sup>73</sup>

Onesimus was not simply mentioned, however. He was mentioned as Paul’s child, born in chains. Paul uses the emphatic possessive pronoun ἐμοῦ, which would have sounded something like “I am appealing to you concerning *my* child...” Paul typically uses this child language when referring to his converts.<sup>74</sup> Thus, it appears that Onesimus was not a Christian before encountering Paul. Philemon is hearing about his missing slave for the first time in this verse, and he is hearing Onesimus described with terms that imply Paul’s affection and protection. Paul also referred to his incarceration again by mentioning the chains, which would undoubtedly elicit another pang of sympathy in the readers.

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<sup>72</sup> According to Arzt-Grabner, Onesimus “is a typical slave name...amply documented in the documentary papyri from Egypt, and also among the slave names of Rome.” (Peter Arzt-Grabner, “How to Deal with Onesimus? Paul’s Solution within the Frame of Ancient Legal and Documentary Sources,” in *Philemon in Perspective* (ed. Tolmie; vol. 169 of *Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*; New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 120). Fitzmyer adds that Onesimus was typical of contemporary slave names, e.g. Karpos (fruitful), Chresimos (useful), Chrestos (good, profitable), Onesiphoros (bringing profit), Symphoros (suitable, profitable). (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, 107).

<sup>73</sup> Allen D. Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus*, 35.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1; Titus 1:4. Bruce writes that “Paul was accustomed to speak of his converts as his children.” F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 213.



Edward Keazirian insightfully comments on the role that Paul is beginning to play now that he has mentioned Onesimus' name. He writes that Paul “does not merely facilitate a negotiation between the two parties as an uninvolved third party might do. Rather, Paul advocates strongly in favor of Onesimus, and thus he serves in two roles: mediator and advocate.”<sup>75</sup>

### Phlm 11

τόν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ [καὶ]<sup>76</sup> σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον

### Translation

who was at one time<sup>77</sup> useless to you, but now is really useful<sup>78</sup> to you and to me<sup>79</sup>

### Commentary

In this verse, Paul uses a pun to explain the state of affairs. Onesimus used to be useless (ἄχρηστος) to Philemon. Though Paul has yet to use the word “slave”, this implies that Onesimus worked for Philemon in some capacity in the past. Now, Onesimus is truly useful to Paul (εὐχρηστος). The name Onesimus (Ὀνήσιμος) actually means *useful*, which is a synonym of one of the words that Paul is using for

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<sup>75</sup> Edward M. Keazirian, "Peace and Peacemaking in Paul against the Backdrop of Greco-Roman Concepts of Peace", 184.

<sup>76</sup> The καὶ is omitted in **8**<sup>2</sup>, A, C, D, 1739, sy<sup>H</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Zerwick translates ποτέ as “at one time” (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 652).

<sup>78</sup> εὐχρηστος is best rendered as “really useful”, according to Zerwick, “implying ‘not only in name’ – Onesimus meaning ‘useful.’” (Ibid).

<sup>79</sup> Once again, Paul uses the emphatic form ἐμοὶ

his pun (εὐχρηστος). Bruce summarizes Paul’s pun, writing that Paul “plays on the meaning of the name, using a synonym and an antonym from another root.”<sup>80</sup>

It is a very clever way to make the point that Onesimus’ value lies in his future potential, not in his past use. Paul again uses an emphatic pronoun (ἐμοί) to highlight how valuable Onesimus has been to him. On the creative use of εὐχρηστος and ἄχρηστος, Dunn wryly comments that “if the experience of those whose names allow such puns today is anything to go by, Onesimus must have been heartily sick of it by this time.”<sup>81</sup>

## Phlm 12

ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν, τοῦτ’ ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα

## Translation

whom I have sent<sup>82</sup> to you, him, this one who is my<sup>83</sup> heart<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984), 213.

<sup>81</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 329.

<sup>82</sup> ἀνέπεμψά is an epistolary aorist (Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 563).

<sup>83</sup> Another emphatic personal pronoun (ἐμὰ)

<sup>84</sup> Paul’s second use of the evocative term σπλάγχνα

## Commentary

In this verse, Paul indicates that he has sent Onesimus back to Philemon, most likely along with the letter itself.<sup>85</sup> Paul also reemphasizes how personally valuable Onesimus is to him. He again uses the graphic term *σπλάγχνα* to show how deeply close he feels to Onesimus, which is the same terminology he used to describe his affection for Philemon in verse 7. Paul also uses the emphatic personal pronoun *ἐμὰ* to further drive the point home that Onesimus is personally important to him.<sup>86</sup>

## Phlm 13

Ὅν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῆ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου

## Translation

whom I was wanting<sup>87</sup> to keep beside me<sup>88</sup>, in order that he might serve me on behalf of you in (my) chains for the Gospel

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<sup>85</sup> This seems to be indicated by Colossians 4:7-9, which will be discussed in chapter three.

<sup>86</sup> Bruce emphasizes this point, writing that “Paul’s language emphasizes how strong was the bond of mutual affection which now bound Onesimus and himself to each other.” F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 214.

<sup>87</sup> The continuous aspect of the imperfect form of *βούλομαι* indicates an action that occurred in the past over a period of time. There is a sense of duration to the past action.

<sup>88</sup> Paul has layered up a number of emphatic personal pronouns in the last several verses, and *ἑμαυτὸν* is yet another example.

## Commentary

Now that Paul has explained how deeply he feels for Onesimus, he begins to describe for Philemon exactly what he would like to see happen. Paul had been wanting to keep Onesimus beside him. The imperfect tense of βούλομαι indicates an action that occurred in the past *over a period of time*. This is a very important grammatical insight, because it shows that Onesimus had been with Paul for some time. This was established (in part) back in verse 10 when he referred to Onesimus as his child in the faith. This implies a certain amount of time together before conversion. The imperfect verb ἐβουλόμην in this verse further establishes the point. Paul had been wanting over a period of time to keep Onesimus with him, but decided eventually to send him back to Philemon. This temporal insight will play an important part in my discussion of *Amicus Domini* later on in this project.

Dunn supports this interpretation of the verb, writing “The imperfect tense (I was wanting) implies a period during which Paul weighed the consequences of his action and during which the value of Onesimus’ presence was a considerable factor in his deliberation.”<sup>89</sup> Barth and Blanke concur, offering a lengthy paraphrase of verse 13: “Although I knew that I would break existing laws, hurt Philemon’s property rights, and/or risk any moment the intervention of official and private slave hunters,

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<sup>89</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 330.

yet for a long time I have fostered the idea, and even now I am trying and hoping to retain Onesimus at my side.”<sup>90</sup>

The reason that Paul had wanted to keep Onesimus was so that he could serve with him in the ministry on Philemon’s behalf. That is the extent of Paul’s request. Many modern readers of Philemon have wished that Paul would have gone further and sought the total manumission of Onesimus. It may be the case that Phlm led to Onesimus’ eventual emancipation, but the evidence in the letter makes no explicit request for permanent freedom. I will proceed, therefore, under the assumption that Paul was not requesting permanent freedom for Onesimus, but rather a term of service on Philemon’s behalf as stated in the letter. The question of whether or not Paul *should* or *could* have asked for Onesimus’ permanent freedom at that juncture in history is an important question, but one that I will leave to other interpreters.

#### **Phlm 14**

χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθόν σου ᾖ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον.

#### **Translation**

but apart from your consent<sup>91</sup> I wished to do nothing, in order that your good might not be according to compulsion, but according to willingness.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Markus and Helmut Blanke Barth, *The Letter to Philemon*, 365.

<sup>91</sup> γνώμη has to do with one’s opinion or consent (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 653). Louw and Nida define it as one’s “purpose or intention” (Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domain*, 30.67). One could also

## Commentary

For the sake of his personal friendship with Philemon, as well as the unity of the broader Christian community, Paul needed to send Onesimus back. Despite his desire, over time, to keep him at his side, Paul was compelled to write this letter and send Onesimus back to Philemon. Roman law required him to do so<sup>93</sup>, and he clearly desired Philemon's consent to continue benefiting from Onesimus' valuable contributions to the ministry.

Fitzmyer points out, however, the subtle reference to his apostolic authority in this verse. He writes, "Paul rhetorically hints at the authority that he could have used in Onesimus' case."<sup>94</sup> Paul's desire for Philemon's response to be a willing one implies that he possessed the spiritual authority to compel Philemon to submit on this matter.

This verse establishes an important fact about Onesimus and his situation: he needed Philemon's permission to be away. This insight began to be established in the previous verse when Paul suggested that Onesimus stay to serve on Philemon's behalf. But this verse makes it clear that Philemon's consent (γνώμη) was necessary when it

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translate χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης as "without your input" (BDAG 203).

<sup>92</sup> The word ἑκούσιον is defined as "willing" (Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domain*. 25.6) or "voluntary" (BDAG 307). The construction κατὰ ἑκούσιον is best rendered "according to willingness."

<sup>93</sup> This will be discussed in chapter five.

<sup>94</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, 111.

came to the subject of whether or not Onesimus remained with Paul. Though Paul has not yet used the word *slave*, it is becoming clear that Onesimus is not exactly free.

### Phlm 15

Τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὥραν, ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχῃς

### Translation

For perhaps on account of this he has been separated<sup>95</sup> for a time<sup>96</sup>, in order that you might be receiving him in full<sup>97</sup> forever.

### Commentary

In this verse, Paul strikes a contemplative note, seemingly musing about why Onesimus was separated from Philemon in the first place. He suggests that some sort of reconciliation might happen between Onesimus and Philemon, and that maybe that resolution is worth the separation that has occurred. Paul mentions Onesimus' separation from Philemon *for a time*. That implies a time that would have an end – a finite time of separation. Contrasted with a temporary separation, Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back *in full, forever*. What does it mean to have him back in full? Paul will answer that in the next verse.

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<sup>95</sup> The verb χωρίζω means “to separate by departing from someone” (BDAG 1095).

<sup>96</sup> The construction πρὸς ὥραν means literally “for an hour”, or “for a time” (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 653). As will be shown later, Paul uses this phrase to rhetorically minimize the amount of time that Onesimus has been apart from Philemon.

<sup>97</sup> BDAG defines ἀπέχω as “to be paid in full” (BDAG 102). Zerwick similarly defines it as receiving “as payment in full” (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 653).

F.F. Bruce draws attention to Paul’s use of the passive verb ἐχωρίσθη. The passive voice allows Paul to refer “to the separation as though it were God’s act, brought about, or at least overruled, by him for the lasting benefit of Philemon and Onesimus alike...”<sup>98</sup> In other words, Paul makes the separation seem like it was something that happened *to* Onesimus, rather than something he proactively initiated. Paul is injecting a hint of divine providence into the whole situation through the passive voice of ἐχωρίσθη.

Paul’s tactic in the next couple of verses raises the stakes, and he needed to be quite diplomatic in this verse to prepare for what is coming next. Chrysostom took note of Paul’s subtlety in this verse, writing “Paul wisely said ‘perhaps’, that the master may yield to his request...”<sup>99</sup>

### **Phlm 16**

οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλ’ ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, πόσω δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ

### **Translation**

no longer as<sup>100</sup> a slave, but<sup>101</sup> above a slave, a beloved brother, especially<sup>102</sup> to me<sup>103</sup>, but how much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord.

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<sup>98</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 216.

<sup>99</sup> *NPNF* 1 13:552 (Peter Gorday and Thomas C. Oden, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 315.).

<sup>100</sup> Paul’s use of the particle ὡς is one of the reasons that Callahan believes that Onesimus was not really a slave. Cf. Allen D. Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus*, 45.



## Commentary

This is the first time that Paul uses the word *slave* (δοῦλος) in the letter. Paul does not want Philemon to receive Onesimus back the way he was when he left his home. He wants him to receive him back as something much higher than a slave – a *beloved brother*. These are two words that Paul has already applied to Philemon in this letter, so he is asking a lot of Philemon, who is probably fairly incensed by the whole scenario at this point. This is what it means for Philemon to receive Onesimus “in full forever” as Paul stated in the previous verse. Philemon might be losing a slave (which was an incredibly expensive commodity in those days), but he is gaining something far more valuable in return – a brother in the Christian faith. It is a relationship worth more than money, and a vivid illustration of how the Christian message built bridges across wide social gulfs. Paul wants Philemon to be able to experience the unifying force of the Christian community, and he is casting this situation with Onesimus as his personal opportunity to do just that.

Paul wants Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother *in the flesh* (i.e. on a human level), and *in The Lord* (i.e. on a spiritual level as a part of Christ’s Church).

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<sup>101</sup> The use of ἀλλ’ here denotes a stronger contrast than the more generic δὲ

<sup>102</sup> The word μάλιστα is a strong word. It is the superlative form of μᾶλλον (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 653), and means “a very high point on a scale of extent – very much, especially, particularly, exceptionally (Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domain*, 78.7). Moule comments that μάλιστα “must necessarily be used here in an elative sense – ‘exceedingly’, ‘immensely’ – because the following πῶς δὲ μᾶλλον precludes its being literally superlative. (Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 148).

<sup>103</sup> Paul uses another emphatic form here, which makes sense alongside other emphatic words like ἀλλ’ and μάλιστα.

The phrase *in the flesh* has led Callahan and others to surmise that Philemon and Onesimus were biological brothers. This theory has not gained any significant support.<sup>104</sup> Most commentators see the phrase *in the flesh* as roughly analogous to “in your earthly relationship.”<sup>105</sup>

### Phlm 17

εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ

### Translation

If, therefore, you are regarding<sup>106</sup> me as a partner, receive<sup>107</sup> him as me.<sup>108</sup>

### Commentary

After asking a lot of Philemon, Paul draws a line in the sand. He forces Philemon to think about just how much he truly sees himself as a co-worker of Paul. Paul has skillfully put off a command until this verse – his instruction to receive Onesimus is the very first imperative verb used in this letter (προσλαβοῦ). Paul’s abilities as a diplomat are highlighted in this verse and the previous one: he impressively avoided mentioning the word “slave” until verse 16, and has avoided

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<sup>104</sup> This will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

<sup>105</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 218. Cf. Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon*, 113; C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon; an Introduction and Commentary*, 148.

<sup>106</sup> ἔχω can mean to “regard as something”, as it does here. (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 653).

<sup>107</sup> This is the first imperative verb of the letter.

<sup>108</sup> Another emphatic form (ἐμέ)

using imperatives until verse 17. Chrysostom commented on this fact, writing “We see that Paul only introduces the heart of the matter after praising Philemon and with much preparation.”<sup>109</sup>

Paul follows it up with an emphatic pronoun (ἐμε), stressing that Philemon should not only receive Onesimus back, but receive him as if it were Paul himself walking through the door. As Joseph Fitzmyer put it, “Onesimus is to be welcomed as the virtual presence of Paul himself.”<sup>110</sup>

The inclusion of the whole church that meets in Philemon’s home as recipients of the letter has created an accountability system for Paul with regard to this request – they all heard that Philemon is being asked to receive Onesimus back as if he were the apostle, and they will all be there to observe how he does in fact receive him.

## Phlm 18

εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα

## Translation

and if he wronged<sup>111</sup> you in some way or is owing<sup>112</sup> you, put this on my<sup>113</sup> account.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> NPNF 1 13:554 (Peter Gorday and Thomas C. Oden, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 316).

<sup>110</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, 116.

<sup>111</sup> The aorist tense has a punctiliar quality, implying that there was a specific moment in the past in which Onesimus wronged Philemon.

<sup>112</sup> The present tense of ὀφείλει contrasts with the aorist tense of ἠδίκησέν. This paints the picture of a past wrong, with continued injury in the present as a result of that wrong.

<sup>113</sup> Paul adds another emphatic personal pronoun.

## Commentary

With this verse, Paul attempts to remove any practical obstacle to Philemon saying yes, and he does so very delicately. By beginning the verse with the rhetorical construction εἰ δέ τι, Paul has made the mention of financial injury to Philemon appear as a casual afterthought – as if it just occurred to him that Philemon might have a monetary grievance. Paul would have certainly known that there were a variety of financial injuries associated with fugitive slaves, so this was a rhetorical move. His mention of it in this manner is designed to play it down and offer a solution to Philemon.

Paul does this by speaking the language of business – something with which Philemon was probably very familiar. Barth and Blanke note that “Verses 17-19 contain a multiplicity of juridical and financial technical terms from ancient commercial language. Some of these are *adikein* (to “wrong” someone), *opheilein* (to “owe” someone something), *ellogein* (to charge to someone’s account).”<sup>115</sup> The aorist tense of ἠδίκησέν implies that there was a singular offense in the past, which might have resulted in an ongoing debt (conveyed by the present tense and continual aspect of ὀφείλει).

Paul attempts to resolve the financial injury through his second imperative of the letter, ἐλλόγα. He is commanding Philemon to charge the debt to his account. Paul

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<sup>114</sup> The verb ἐλλογέω means to “put down to one’s account.” (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 653). This is the second imperative verb in the letter.

<sup>115</sup> Markus and Helmut Blanke Barth, *The Letter to Philemon*, 473.

uses another emphatic personal pronoun to highlight that it is *his* account that should be billed. This whole verse serves to take Philemon's focus off of Onesimus, and place it squarely on Paul.

### Phlm 19

ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω· ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις<sup>116</sup>

### Translation

I, Paul, wrote in my<sup>117</sup> hand – I will pay<sup>118</sup> it back (not to mention that you are also owing<sup>119</sup> yourself to me).<sup>120</sup>

### Commentary

In a fairly dramatic move, Paul emphasizes that he has written the letter in his own handwriting.<sup>121</sup> That is how seriously he takes this matter. He mentions this in order to bolster his desire in the previous verse that the debt should be charged to him.

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<sup>116</sup> προσοφείλω is a hapax legomenon not only for Paul, but for the entire Bible. D\* includes the phrase ἐν κυρίῳ after προσοφείλεις.

<sup>117</sup> Another emphatic personal pronoun

<sup>118</sup> The construction ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω is also emphatic because of the unnecessary addition of ἐγὼ before the verb.

<sup>119</sup> Zerwick defines the hapax legomenon as to “owe besides” (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 653). The word does not even appear in BDAG. The present tense of this verb denotes an ongoing debt that Philemon owes to Paul.

<sup>120</sup> Barth and Blanke also point out that the entirety of verse 19 is couched in financial/commercial language (Markus and Helmut Blanke Barth, *The Letter to Philemon*, 473).

<sup>121</sup> In Galatians 6:11, Paul uses the same tactic of writing the letter with his own hand. It seems to be a strategy to make the letter seem more personal and urgent.

The letter has now taken the form of an IOU when it comes to the financial damages. Bruce rightly notes that “Onesimus was in no position to make, or even to guarantee, restitution.”<sup>122</sup> Slaves like Onesimus had little access to money, and were legally considered thieves of themselves and the value of their ongoing services when they ran from their masters. His absence was extremely costly to Philemon.<sup>123</sup>

Just in case there was any objection on Philemon’s part, Paul deftly mentions that Philemon owes himself to Paul.<sup>124</sup> This is most likely a reference to the fact that Philemon came to know Christ through Paul’s influence. Paul is trying to make Philemon see that what he owes Paul is far more valuable than anything that Onesimus might owe him. Philemon is getting a much better deal by complying with Paul’s entreaty.

## Phlm 20

ναὶ ἀδελφέ, ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ· ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.

## Translation

Yes, brother, I wish to benefit<sup>125</sup> from you in the Lord. Refresh<sup>126</sup> my heart in Christ!

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<sup>122</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 220.

<sup>123</sup> This will be discussed more fully in chapter six.

<sup>124</sup> Paul uses a “paradoxical tact” here: mentioning the debt after saying that he isn’t going to mention it. (Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 422.)

<sup>125</sup> The optative mood of ὀναίμην implies a wish or a prayer on Paul’s part. On the optative mood, Wallace writes, “The optative mood had dropped out of use and was replaced with the subjunctive in Koine.” He calls this use of the optative the Voluntary Optative, which is an “obtainable

## Commentary

With the reintroduction of the vocative ἀδελφέ, Paul brings his personal friendship with Philemon back into view.<sup>127</sup> He has perhaps been a little heavy-handed in the last few verses, and he wants to dial back the rhetoric. He adds a little bit of humor as well, by using another pun on Onesimus' name (the optative ὀναίμην). He adds the third imperative of the letter (ἀνάπαυσόν), though its placement in this personal verse softens its blow as a direct command. Dunn sums it up this way: "Paul seems to be conscious of just how heavily he has leaned on Philemon and of the danger of some overload in the legal language used. So he makes a deliberate effort to 'lighten up' with his final plea."<sup>128</sup>

In asking Philemon to "refresh" his heart in Christ, Paul is not asking Philemon to do anything unusual. In verse 7, Paul explained that he had found much joy and encouragement in the ways that Philemon had "refreshed" the hearts of those in the Christian community. In other words, Philemon was known as a person who built up other Christians, who made them feel spiritually renewed. Paul is now asking that

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wish, an appeal to the will." (Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 481.) It is also most likely a pun on Onesimus' name, since it sounds like his name and has a similar meaning (benefit).

<sup>126</sup> ἀνάπαυσόν is the third imperative verb in the letter

<sup>127</sup> According to Barth and Blanke, the first word of this verse (the interjection ναί), "has a strong reinforcing function. This is how it is used in oaths, as well." Cf. Markus and Helmut Blanke Barth, *The Letter to Philemon*, 485.

<sup>128</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 337.

Philemon would treat him in the same way through his response to the Onesimus situation.

### **Phlm 21**

Πεποιθὼς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι, εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις

### **Translation**

Having confidence in your<sup>129</sup> obedience, I wrote to you, knowing that you will also do more than I am saying.

### **Commentary**

Paul has asked something significant in this letter, and by saying that he is confident in Philemon's obedience, he is preemptively dismantling any possible rebuttal to the letter. The very mention of the word "obedience" (ὑπακοη) is another oblique reference to Paul's authority over Philemon. Paul has set up an expectation for his readers that not only will Philemon capitulate, he will surprise everyone with the generosity of his response.

With this verse, Paul's individualized message to Philemon draws to a close. The second-person pronouns σου and σοι are the final ones before Paul once again addresses the rest of the recipients as a group.

### **Phlm 22**

ἅμα δὲ καὶ ἐτοίμαζέ μοι ξενίαν· ἐλπίζω γὰρ ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν  
χαρισθήσομαι ὑμῖν.

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<sup>129</sup> This verse is the final appeal to Philemon specifically.



## Translation

and at the same time, prepare<sup>130</sup> also for me a guest room<sup>131</sup>, for I am hoping that on account of your<sup>132</sup> prayers, I will be graciously given<sup>133</sup> to you (all).

## Commentary

Paul's final imperative (ἐτοίμαζέ) has to do with his planned visit to Philemon's home. There is a rhetorical agenda in this statement, putting some pressure on Philemon to respond positively since he will see Paul in the flesh at some point in the not too distant future. Paul wants Philemon to know that just because he may be out of sight, he is not out of mind. Paul's use of the second-person pronouns ὑμῶν and ὑμῖν show that he is once again addressing the whole group at this point.

## Phlm 23

Ἀσπάζεται σε Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ

## Translation

Epaphras greets you<sup>134</sup>, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>130</sup> ἐτοίμαζέ is the final imperative in the letter.

<sup>131</sup> Zerwick defines ξενίαν as a "guest room" (Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 653).

<sup>132</sup> With the reintroduction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural, Paul now turns his attention back to the whole church at Philemon's house.

<sup>133</sup> χαρίζομαι means to "give graciously" (BDAG 1078)

<sup>134</sup> Paul switches back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular here, implying that Philemon knows Epaphras personally.

## Commentary

Now that the appeal itself has officially concluded, Paul moves on to his customary greetings. He mentions Epaphras as greeting Philemon specifically (as indicated by the second-person singular pronoun σε). This may indicate that Epaphras played a role in Philemon's conversion, or a continued leadership role in the Lycus Valley. He is apparently a prisoner alongside Paul, which would elicit further pity on the part of the readers.

## Phlm 24

Μάρκος, Ἀρίσταρχος, Δημᾶς, Λουκᾶς, οἱ συνεργοί μου

## Translation

as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke – my fellow workers.

## Commentary

Other people in Paul's circle include Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke – four individuals also mentioned in Colossians (which will be discussed in greater detail later in this project).

While these individuals are mentioned to serve the purpose of greetings and long-distance community, they also serve another rhetorical function. Here, according to Still, "Paul widens the circle of people who are knowledgeable of and hopeful concerning Onesimus' impending return."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon*, 181.

## Phlm 25

Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου<sup>136</sup> Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν<sup>137</sup>

### Translation

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

### Commentary

Paul concludes his brief letter with a typical blessing that is directed to the whole congregation (indicated by the second-person plural ὑμῶν at the end).<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> The possessive pronoun ἡμῶν is present in some witnesses (A, C, D, ψ, sy<sup>p</sup> co). The text is supported by **ℵ**, P 33, 81, 104, 365, 1505, 1739, 1881, pc b vg<sup>mss</sup> sy<sup>h</sup>.

<sup>137</sup> Some mss include a final ἀμήν after the last verse (**ℵ**, C, D, ψ, 0278, **π**, lat, sy<sup>p</sup> co; Ambst). The text is supported by **ϕ**<sup>87</sup>, A D\* 048<sup>vid</sup>, 6, 33, 81, 1739, 1881 pc vg<sup>mss</sup> sa bo<sup>mss</sup>.

<sup>138</sup> Other final greetings that are identical (or nearly) to this one: Gal 6:18; Phil 4:23; 2 Tim 4:22; Phlm 1:25

## Conclusions

Based on the foregoing translation and commentary of Phlm, the following can be reasonably assumed about Onesimus:

1. He became a Christian through Paul's influence. (1:10)
2. He worked for Philemon in the past. (1:11)
3. He is being sent back to Philemon. (1:12)
4. He is personally important to Paul. (1:10,12-13, 16)
5. He has been away from Philemon for some time. (1:10, 13, 15)
6. He has worked for Paul and made a positive contribution to his ministry. (1:11, 13)
7. He needs Philemon's consent to be away from him. (1:13, 14, 17)
8. He is a slave. (1:16)
9. He has committed a serious offense against Philemon, probably financial in nature, and is currently indebted to him. (1:18-19)

While this chapter has occasionally touched on a number of historical and rhetorical elements of Phlm, the following chapter will more thoroughly explore those aspects of the letter and their implications for our knowledge of Onesimus.

## **CHAPTER TWO: ONESIMUS IN PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON (Part Two)**

### **Rhetorical Theories**

The commentary in the last chapter dealt primarily with matters of grammar and other relatively straightforward insights. While there were some brief comments related to Paul's rhetoric, they are on their own quite superficial compared to the cumulative rhetorical force of the letter. The circumstances of Onesimus' situation can only be fully appreciated when one understands the diplomatic (and to some extent, coercive) lengths that Paul went to in order to ensure Philemon's acquiescence. It is necessary, therefore, to examine Paul's rhetoric and survey some of the rhetorical theories that scholars have applied to this letter.

In the previous chapter, I highlighted some of the more obvious rhetorical strategies that Paul employed. First of all, he cast himself as a prisoner and an old man, rather than emphasize his apostolic status (1:8, 9, 14, 23, 21). This was probably designed to elicit pity and respect on the part of the readers. Paul also created a wide circle of listeners for this letter which would create an environment of accountability for Philemon. Paul included Timothy as a sender, and mentioned other people who wish Philemon well (1:23-24). He also addressed the letter to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church that meets in Philemon's home. Thus, the audience

included multiple people on both the sending and receiving end of this letter.

Philemon would have had the sense that this personal communique from Paul to him was being read aloud by two groups of people. It was a personal letter to Philemon, but it was also a public one.

Paul also postponed mentioning Onesimus' name until deep in the letter (1:10), and refrained from using the term *slave* until verse 16. Combined with his praise of Philemon at the beginning of the letter, this was probably intended to put Philemon in the most amenable mood possible. Paul also casually mentioned the financial debt owed to Philemon in a way that would downplay its importance, and offered to pay that debt himself (while simultaneously suggesting that Philemon owes him a debt of his own). This was designed to mitigate Philemon's anger over whatever financial injury Onesimus had caused him. Paul also used a designation for Onesimus in the letter that he also used for Philemon: *beloved brother*. This would serve to level the playing field between the slave and master. Paul also mentioned an upcoming trip to see Philemon, which would add pressure and additional accountability.

These are just a handful of rhetorical insights that were evident in the process of translating Phlm. What is not obvious is how systematic and intentional Paul's rhetoric is. Scholars differ on the exact nature of Paul's rhetorical strategy, but all agree that Paul was very tactical in the way that he communicated with Philemon in the letter, and that he intended to elicit a very particular response. Judith Ryan rightly comments, "Despite its brevity, this masterpiece of persuasion makes full use of

ancient rhetoric...”<sup>139</sup> I will now highlight some of the scholarly views of Paul’s rhetoric in Phlm.

Todd Still nicely summarizes some of the commonly observed rhetorical devices in the letter, writing that Paul

“...affirms Philemon, delays mention of Onesimus’ name; produces wordplays on Onesimus’ name; links response to Onesimus as a response to himself; reminds Philemon of his indebtedness to him; asks Philemon to refresh his heart; and requests that Philemon prepare a guest room for his hoped-for visit.”<sup>140</sup>

These are just some of the rhetorical tactics that Paul employed.<sup>141</sup>

Norman Petersen, in his classic work *Rediscovering Paul*, offers an incredible array of rhetorical insights for this letter. His approach is to reconstruct a story out of the letter, and analyze the way that Paul presents the actions in the story in an effort to uncover his rhetorical strategies. In explaining his method, Petersen writes, “We identified the actions referred to or implied in the letter and then represented them in chronological sequence.”<sup>142</sup> Petersen calls this chronological sequence the “referential

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<sup>139</sup> Judith Ryan, "Philemon," in *Philippians and Philemon* (ed. Harrington; vol. 10 of *Sacra Pagina Series*; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005), 192.

<sup>140</sup> Todd D. Still and David G. Horrell, "Organizational Structures and Relational Struggles among the Saints: The Establishment and Exercise of Authority within the Pauline Assemblies," in *After the First Urban Christians : The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Fiveyears Later* (eds. Still and Horrell; New York: Continuum, 2009), 94.

<sup>141</sup> In Matthew Johnson’s view, “There is something hysterical in the rhetorical lengths that Paul goes to in an attempt to secure a certain status for Onesimus.” By this, Johnson means that Paul’s letter is so obviously saturated with persuasion tactics. Matthew V. Johnson, "Onesimus Speaks: Dignosing the Hys/Terror of the Text," in *Onesimus, Our Brother : Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 96.

<sup>142</sup> Norman R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 46-47.

sequence.” Petersen then compares the referential sequence of events in the letter to the poetic sequence of events (i.e. the way that Paul presented them). He takes note of what Paul moved out of order and uncovers the rhetorical function of these changes. Petersen’s reconstruction of the story behind the letter (his referential sequence) is organized like this:

1. Philemon incurs a debt to Paul.
2. Paul is imprisoned.
3. Onesimus runs away and incurs a debt to Philemon.
4. Onesimus is converted by an imprisoned Paul.
5. Paul hears of Philemon’s love and faith.
6. Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon.
7. Paul sends a letter of appeal to Philemon and offers to repay Onesimus’ debt.
8. Onesimus and the letter arrive.
9. Philemon responds to Paul’s appeal.
10. Paul’s anticipated visit to Philemon<sup>143</sup>

This is the story that Petersen believes is behind the letter, though not the way that Paul presents it in the text of Phlm itself. Petersen notes that Paul makes three strategic changes in order to persuade Philemon to respond favorably.

First of all, Paul moves the discussion of Philemon’s love and faith up from #5 in the referential sequence to #1 in the poetic sequence. The effect of that move is to

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 70



begin the letter by building up Philemon. Paul is leading with positive information in order to put Philemon in the best mood possible before he makes his request.

Secondly, Paul has moved the mention of Onesimus' flight down from #3 in the referential sequence to #5 in the poetic sequence. According to Petersen, "By locating action three where he has, Paul has deferred negative information about Onesimus until he has presented the positive information that Onesimus has been converted (action four) and then sent back to Philemon (action six)."<sup>144</sup>

Lastly, Paul has moved the incursion of debt all the way down from #1 in the referential sequence to #7 in the poetic sequence.

In all three cases, "positive information about the actors has been made to precede negative information about them." This is an astute insight on Petersen's part, and it is clear by these moves that Paul is making a serious rhetorical effort to simultaneously flatter Philemon and apologize for a serious offense on Onesimus' part.

Petersen also effectively demonstrates Paul's reshaping of roles in the letter. He comments that according to worldly standards, Philemon plays the roles of master, lord, and debtee. Onesimus, conversely, is the slave and debtor.<sup>145</sup> Petersen argues that Paul establishes a new set of metaphorical or spiritual roles. In that structure, Philemon is metaphorically Paul's brother, debtor, fellow-worker, and partner.

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 72

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 93

Onesimus, in Paul's reckoning, is a child to him and a brother to Philemon.<sup>146</sup> In short, Philemon is now the debtor, and both Philemon and Onesimus are brothers. These metaphorical roles are a radical departure from the master/slave roles they play in the real world, and it is a move designed to compel Philemon to respond favorably to Paul's request. In this case, as with the rearranging of the story elements, Petersen has demonstrated that Paul employed a tactic of accentuating the positive in order to get Philemon to capitulate.

While Petersen does an effective job of analyzing the rhetoric of the letter, he focuses on Paul and Philemon to the detriment of Onesimus. For example, he writes, "...Onesimus' story line is not the one to follow; his story is a story within a story."<sup>147</sup> In Petersen's view, the referential sequence begins and ends with Paul and Philemon, therefore the real story is about them and their relationship. In this regard, Petersen misses the real point of the letter – what it means for the powerless slave Onesimus.

If we were to strip away the greeting and farewell portions of the letter (1:1-3, 22-25), as well as the purely rhetorical discussion about Philemon's value to Paul (1:4-7), the majority of the letter has to do with Paul's appeal on behalf of Onesimus (1:8-21). That being the case, it is clear that Onesimus and his situation was the impetus for Paul writing the letter in the first place. Paul would not write to Philemon just to greet him, praise him, and then say goodbye. This is not to say that Paul's relationship with Philemon is unimportant, it is simply to suggest that Onesimus was the primary reason

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 65

that Paul wrote the letter, and the majority of the dispatch is about Onesimus' situation. Considering the fact that Onesimus' life was at stake with this letter, Petersen's claim that Onesimus' story is secondary within Phlm is misguided.

Many interpreters, including Frank Forrester Church and Judith Ryan, have argued that Paul's letter represents the three classical elements of deliberative rhetoric: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.<sup>148</sup> The object of deliberative rhetoric, according to Church, is "to exhort or dissuade", which is certainly applicable in the case of Paul's letter to Philemon.<sup>149</sup> According to Judith Ryan,

"Ethos (character) is found in the thanksgiving section with an expression of Paul's gratitude for Philemon's love and generous character...Pathos (emotion) is the cornerstone of the appeal (v. 9) that seeks to elicit fraternal, and loving relations between Philemon and Onesimus...Logos (reason) stands behind Paul's appeal to love...but perhaps Paul's logical rhetoric is used to greatest effect where he downplays Onesimus' temporary absence as he effectively places the entire appeal within the context of God's providential plan."<sup>150</sup>

While Paul's letter to Philemon is unique in many ways, it seems clear that the classic elements of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* are woven throughout the letter. In addition to Judith Ryan's examples, I would argue that the *ethos* is found in Paul's unwillingness to identify himself as an apostle. Paul's emphasis on the fact that he is an aging prisoner would highlight an aspect of his own character (humility), and elicit a sympathetic response because of Philemon's character. The familial language that

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<sup>148</sup> Frank Forrester Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *Harvard Theological Review* 71, no. 1-2 (1978): 19c.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Judith Ryan, "Philemon," in *Philippians and Philemon*, 192-193.

Paul uses for both Philemon and Onesimus (*beloved brother*), as well as his liberal use of emotional language like *σπλάγχνα* are clear examples of *pathos*. I would also add that *logos* is present in Paul's desire to see Philemon fully experience Christian community with Onesimus as a brother, as well as his claim that Onesimus would be serving him on behalf of Philemon. These are two outcomes that Paul feels Philemon should logically desire as a Christ follower.

Peter Lampe sees another rhetorical strategy at work in the letter: emotionalizing. Lampe argues that "By using the word τὰ σπλάγχνα three times in Phlm...Paul directly refers to his and other Christians' innermost feelings."<sup>151</sup> Lampe goes on to explain that the letter is full of "conflicting emotions that Paul can exploit..."<sup>152</sup> Lampe lists a number of emotions that Paul can leverage to his rhetorical advantage:

1. Philemon's anger
2. Onesimus' fear of Philemon
3. Onesimus' trust in Paul
4. Paul's love for Philemon
5. Pity for Paul the prisoner
6. Respect for Paul the apostle
7. Philemon's indebtedness or thankfulness toward Paul

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<sup>151</sup> Peter Lampe, "Affects and Emotions in the Rhetoric of Paul's Letter to Philemon: A Rhetorical-Psychological Interpretation," in *Philemon in Perspective* (ed. Tolmie; vol. 169 of *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*; New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 62.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

8. Philemon's honor and shame
9. Curiosity of the house church about the situation<sup>153</sup>

If, as Lampe argues, “all of the above mentioned feelings are ‘in the air’”, how does that affect Paul’s argumentation in the letter?<sup>154</sup> Lampe contends that Paul’s “main rhetorical task is to calm Philemon’s reactive aggression toward Onesimus and to prevent him from seeking revenge for his pagan slave’s misbehavior.”<sup>155</sup> Lampe is certainly correct in noticing all of the emotional dynamics in the letter. They become amplified with the knowledge that so many people are witnesses to this letter and its contents. Paul’s rhetorical strategies would not have only affected Philemon, they would have moved his listeners who would in turn place their own pressure on Philemon.

Chris Frilingos offers yet another rhetorical theory related to Philemon’s family. As the head of the family in his household, Philemon is the *paterfamilias*. He exercises complete control over his *domus*, and all who depend on him (family, servants and slaves). Frilingos argues that in Paul’s letter to Philemon, he is constructing a “rhetorical *domus*” that “drastically contradicts and challenges the set of relations within Philemon’s actual household.”<sup>156</sup> In this new rhetorical *domus*, “Paul replaces Philemon as the *paterfamilias*”, and “the apostle’s parent-child relationship

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 62-66

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 66

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Chris Frilingos, "For My Child, Onesimus": Paul and Domestic Power in Philemon," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 1 (2000): 101.

with Onesimus” trumps his slave-master relationship with Philemon. The net effect is that Paul “possesses a greater right to the slave than does the slaveholder.” According to Frilingos, “The letter, then, is concerned less with Onesimus’ situation than with Paul’s own status.”<sup>157</sup>

While it is a perspicacious insight that Paul is creating a rhetorical *domus*, it by no means supersedes the fact that the letter is primarily concerned with Onesimus and his situation (as discussed above). Thus, any redefinition of family authority in Philemon’s household is a byproduct of Onesimus’ circumstances.

Along with Frilingos, Lloyd Lewis notes the family language used throughout Paul’s letter to Philemon, arguing that Paul was constructing a “family of God.”<sup>158</sup> Lewis points out that Paul used the word ἀδελφός four times in the letter. He also used ἀδελφὴ and τέκνον, as well as γεννάω to indicate spiritual birth. Lewis argues that “Paul was well aware of the importance of the family as a structure within Greco-Roman society, and he was aware of how that model could be used to show order in the Christian church.”<sup>159</sup>

John Nordling sees a rhetoric of euphemism at work in Paul’s letter to Philemon. While some interpreters doubt that Onesimus was a fugitive, Nordling disagrees. He defends the fugitive slave hypothesis and actually sees Paul’s rhetoric as supporting that supposition. In fact, Nordling argues that the absence of a mention of

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Lloyd Alexander Lewis, "As a Beloved Brother': The Function of Family Language in the Letters of Paul (Philemon, Slavery, Kinship, Corinthians)" (PhD Diss, Yale University, 1985) 196.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

Onesimus' flight is too conspicuous to be a coincidence. It must be a deliberate omission on Paul's part. The absence of a mention of Onesimus being a fugitive is not evidence that he was not a fugitive. It is, rather, evidence of Paul's rhetorical strategy. Nordling writes, "Paul's agenda required him not to remind Onesimus' owner of his slave's past infidelities."<sup>160</sup> Nordling rightly concludes that "The runaway slave hypothesis seems quite plausible if Paul can be permitted to have described Onesimus' past crimes against his master in an oblique and euphemistic manner."<sup>161</sup> There are certainly euphemistic elements in Paul's rhetoric, including his deliberately passing references to Onesimus' absence (1:15) and his financial debt to Philemon (1:18) – two potentially incendiary topics.

The final rhetorical theory that I will highlight is Andrew Wilson's "politeness" theory.<sup>162</sup> Wilson argues that

"The techniques of modern linguistic pragmatics – in particular those aspects which are normally subsumed under the heading of 'politeness' – may be of help in elucidating the writer-reader relationships and kinds of persuasive activity which exist in the letters and in other ancient literature."<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus : A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* no. 41 (1991): 99.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 107

<sup>162</sup> Andrew Wilson, "The Pragmatics of Politeness and Pauline Epistolography : A Case Study of the Letter to Philemon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* no. 48 (1992).

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 107

Wilson uses Paul's letter to Philemon as a case study. According to Wilson, there are six politeness principles:<sup>164</sup>

1. The Tact Maxim: minimize cost to other; maximize benefit to other.
2. The Generosity Maxim: minimize benefit to self; maximize cost to self.
3. The Approbation Maxim: minimize dispraise of other; maximize praise of other.
4. The Modesty Maxim: minimize praise of self; maximize dispraise of self.
5. The Agreement Maxim: minimize disagreement between self and other; maximize agreement between self and other.
6. The Sympathy Maxim: minimize antipathy between self and other; maximize sympathy between self and other.

Wilson argues that the Modesty Maxim makes its appearance in the salutation of the letter, with Paul's refusal to call himself an apostle. His choice of the prisoner label is obviously a modest one.<sup>165</sup> Paul then applies the Agreement Maxim, expressing his "solidarity with Philemon" in labeling him his "fellow worker."<sup>166</sup>

The thanksgiving section for Philemon (vv. 4-5) certainly qualifies under the Approbation Maxim<sup>167</sup>, and Paul's offer to pay Onesimus' debt is an example of the

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 111

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 112

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 113

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 114



Generosity Maxim.<sup>168</sup> I would add that the Tact Maxim is also at work in many ways throughout the letter.<sup>169</sup> Not every letter contains all of the maxims, but Paul's brief letter contains many of them.

What is compelling about these rhetorical theories is that in spite of their clear differences, they all make good sense in light of Paul's letter. Paul definitely presented the material in the most strategic order possible in order to accentuate the positive (Petersen), he manifested all three rhetorical conventions of his day (*ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*, cf. Church and Ryan), he played on the emotions of the readers (Lampe), he used family language to create a rhetorical *domus* (Frilingos and Lewis), he employed euphemism throughout the appeal (Nordling), and he employed a rhetoric of politeness throughout (Wilson). Paul wasted zero space in his letter; he packed every phrase full of rhetoric in order to accomplish his goal of Philemon's capitulation. The fact that Paul so skillfully employed these tactics proves that he is indeed trying to dissuade Philemon from certain actions, which strongly suggests that Onesimus' actions were quite serious and necessitated such intervention.

Having surveyed Paul's rhetorical approach to Phlm, I will now turn to the various historical theories that scholars have put forward to explain the circumstances of the letter. These theories variously synthesize the grammatical, literary, contextual, and rhetorical insights highlighted above in an attempt to explain what happened with

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 116

<sup>169</sup> 1:11, 15-16, 18-19

Onesimus. These are alternatives to *Amicus Domini*, though I will briefly introduce that theory as well at the end of this chapter.

### **Historical Theories**

The traditional historical theory behind Phlm concerns a runaway slave. That slave was named Onesimus, who was a slave in the household of Philemon, who resided at Colossae. After some sort of falling out or offense, Onesimus decided to flee and took with him some money or other resources to finance his flight. At some point he encountered the imprisoned Apostle Paul, who had a level of spiritual influence over his master Philemon (who himself was a Christian leader and hosted a church in his home). Through Paul's influence, Onesimus became a Christian. Paul then wrote Phlm in order to repair the broken relationship between slave and master, and to request that Onesimus stay and help him in his imprisonment. Paul also wanted Philemon to view Onesimus differently, as John Nordling comments, "Paul, who had been the grateful recipient of Onesimus' past services, now requests Philemon not only to forgive his formerly disobedient slave, but to accept him as a brother in the Lord."<sup>170</sup>

While this project will largely affirm this traditional fugitive slave theory, there is much more to be discovered about the life and flight of Onesimus. In my description above, I deliberately chose the phrase "at some point he encountered the Apostle Paul", because this is exactly the type of generic statement that scholars tend to use in

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<sup>170</sup> John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus : A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," 97.

discussing the occasion of this letter. For example, in discussing the background of Phlm, John Nordling writes this emblematic statement: “Onesimus either voluntarily or accidentally fell in with the Apostle Paul, who converted him to Christianity.”<sup>171</sup> There is little attempt to explain what was most historically *probable* about how Onesimus came into contact with Paul. There is virtually no effort to understand what the conditions of his flight would have been, or what the most probable scenario would have been for a fugitive slave like Onesimus to leave Colossae and end up in the same room as Paul. The discussion tends to be primarily focused on the interaction between Paul and Philemon, and what can be learned about Paul’s theology or ecclesiology.

This fugitive slave hypothesis has been a popular theory about Phlm throughout history, and it still is today. Fitzmyer writes that “...most older commentators from the time of John Chrysostom have explained Phlm as a case relating to a runaway slave.”<sup>172</sup> There are several other theories, however, and most of them (including *Amicus Domini*) deny that Onesimus was a fugitive in the first place.

One of the most influential historical theories related to Phlm was first proposed by John Knox, in his classic 1935 work, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul*. In that book, Knox argued that Onesimus was not in fact, a fugitive.<sup>173</sup> He notes the absence of any language that explicitly identifies Onesimus as a fugitive (we might

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, 17.

<sup>173</sup> Sara Winter is another notable interpreter who espouses this theory. Cf. Sara C. Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," *New Testament Studies* 33(1987).

expect δραπετης or φυγάς, neither of which appear in the letter). Knox also believed that the inappropriate focus on Onesimus has led most interpreters to miss what Paul is really asking. He writes, “So completely satisfying is the letter when regarded as a generous appeal for another that one may not see that Paul is asking – and very earnestly asking – something for himself.”<sup>174</sup>

Knox’s point is that the letter is primarily about Paul making a diplomatic request to keep Onesimus longer than Philemon had originally allowed him to stay. The idea is that Philemon and his church deliberately sent Onesimus to help Paul, and that the apostle is now asking for an extension on that help. Albert Harrill supports this contention, suggesting that “Perhaps Onesimus served in a function on behalf of Philemon’s congregation similar to that of Epaphroditus on behalf of the congregation at Philippi.”<sup>175</sup>

The problem with Knox’s theory is that the establishment of the fugitive concept is not dependent on the specific use of terms such as δραπετης or φυγάς. As Nordling insightfully pointed out in his discussion of Paul’s rhetoric, it appears that the apostle was bending over backwards *not* to mention inflammatory words like

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<sup>174</sup> John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 7.

<sup>175</sup> J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 11-12. Under these circumstances, Harrill thinks of Onesimus as an “apprenticed slave.” R.E. Glaze has a similar view, thinking of Onesimus as an “emissary” to Paul on behalf of the Colossian church (R. E. Glaze, Jr., “Onesimus : Runaway or Emissary?”, *Theological Educator* no. 54 (1996): 10.).

δραπέτης or φυγάς.<sup>176</sup> Knox's theory also does not take seriously enough the financial injury to Philemon that Paul so tactfully mentions in verse 18. That does not comport with the idea that Onesimus had been sent to help Paul.

Another well-known alternative theory was put forward by Allen D. Callahan, in his well-known book *The Embassy of Onesimus*.<sup>177</sup> Callahan also noticed that Paul never explicitly mentions the words "fugitive" or "runaway" in his letter, which led him to seek an alternative historical explanation for what is going on in Phlm. He believes the view that Paul is appealing to Philemon "on behalf of a fugitive slave can be traced back to the imaginative and ingenious hypothesis of John Chrysostom."<sup>178</sup>

In Callahan's words, he tells "another story: a story of the estrangement of two Christian brothers, Onesimus and Philemon."<sup>179</sup> Much of his theory rests on the content of verse 16. First of all, Callahan interprets Paul's phrase *as a slave* (ὡς δοῦλον) in verse 16 as a simile. He writes, "Onesimus' servile status is a thought or assertion on Philemon's part and not a point of fact."<sup>180</sup> In other words, Philemon has a very low view of his brother Onesimus, born out of some conflict, and Paul is seeking to rehabilitate Onesimus' image in his brother's eyes. This interpretation of

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<sup>176</sup> John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus : A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon", 107.

<sup>177</sup> Allen D. Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). Callahan also discussed the matter in an earlier article. Cf. Allen Dwight Callahan, "Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum," *The Harvard Theological Review* 86, no. 4 (1993).

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, ix

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 45

ὡς is problematic, because when Paul uses the term ὡς, he generally uses it to express “virtual equivalence, as he does elsewhere (e.g. v. 17 προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ).”<sup>181</sup>

Callahan’s theory is also based on the phrases *beloved brother* (ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν) and *in the flesh and in the Lord* (ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ), both from verse 16. While most interpreters view these phrases as a reference to Philemon’s relationship to Onesimus on both human and spiritual levels, Callahan interprets them more literally: Onesimus is Philemon’s biological brother. This, Callahan argues, is established by the phrase ἐν σαρκὶ. The phrase ἐν κυρίῳ refers to their spiritual connection, and ἐν σαρκὶ to their physical one. This is not a convincing argument, however, because Callahan is insisting that one relationship in the verse is metaphorical (ὡς δοῦλον), and the other is literal (ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν).

In addition to the tenuous grammatical conclusions that Callahan has drawn, the overall literary context shows that this theory is implausible. There are too many rhetorical and metaphorical references to family throughout the letter– not to mention Paul’s use of the word ἀδελφός for Philemon. No one would claim that Paul and Philemon were biologically related because he calls Philemon ἀδελφός, or that Apphia was his sister because he called her ἀδελφή. It seems highly improbable, therefore, that this one family relationship is a literal/biological one (Philemon and Onesimus as brothers), when Paul uses familial language metaphorically throughout the rest of the letter.

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<sup>181</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon* (ed. Freedman; New Haven: Yale University, 2000), 114.

Furthermore, Margaret Mitchell points out that Chrysostom's fugitive slave theory was not so imaginative, as Callahan suggests. She writes, "A broad exegetical tradition understanding Onesimus as Philemon's slave is well attested decades before Chrysostom – at least by the middle of the fourth century. There is also possible evidence for this interpretation already by the third century."<sup>182</sup> Because Callahan's theory rests on the assumption that Chrysostom invented the fugitive slave interpretation of Phlm (and in light of the other grammatical and contextual issues already discussed) his argument is altogether unconvincing.

Another famous alternative to the fugitive slave hypothesis is one proposed by Peter Arzt-Grabner. He contends that while Onesimus was not legally a fugitive (*fugitivus*), he also did not have Philemon's permission to be gone to the extent that he was. Arzt-Grabner argues instead that Onesimus should be considered a "truant slave" (*erro*).<sup>183</sup> He believes that Paul described Onesimus "in terms of the general distinction between *fugitivus* and *erro*...useless in the eyes of his master."<sup>184</sup> In addition to the absence of an explicit reference to Onesimus being a fugitive, Arzt-Grabner bases his argument in large part on the following exegesis of verse 15:

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<sup>182</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, "John Chrysostom on Philemon : A Second Look," *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 1 (1995): 147.

<sup>183</sup> Peter Artzt-Grabner, "How to Deal with Onesimus? Paul's Solution within the Frame of Ancient Legal and Documentary Sources," in *Philemon in Perspective* (ed. Tolmie; vol. 169 of *Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*; New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 134.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

“Paul’s clarification, postulating that maybe Onesimus left his master for just a short time so that Philemon might receive him back forever, may signify that Onesimus himself did not intend to stay away forever, but to return to his master of his own free will.”<sup>185</sup>

What Arzt-Grabner fails to appreciate is the rhetorical function of Paul’s postulation in verse 15. He is strategically *avoiding* a mention of Onesimus’ fugitive status, and couching his statement in the language of possibility and divine providence. Furthermore, Arzt-Grabner’s theory fails to take account of Paul’s reference to the financial damage Onesimus caused Philemon. If Onesimus had not intended to stay away for a long period of time, why would he cause some sort of injury to Philemon on the way out the door? A true *erro* would have left Philemon’s home like he would for any other errand, intending on coming back in a timely manner. Like Knox and Callahan, Arzt-Grabner is reaching too far in an attempt to explain the lack of an explicit reference to a fugitive in the letter.

The final historical theory that I will address is the one that has garnered the most support today, and the one that I am arguing against in this project – the so-called *Amicus Domini* theory. I will not, however, provide a full evaluation of the theory at this point since there is much that remains to be established before I am in a position to evaluate critically its merits and shortcomings. A rudimentary overview is necessary, however, so that the reader will understand how the evidence I will be establishing in the remainder of this project interacts with the theory.

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.



Peter Lampe was the first to propose the so-called *Amicus Domini* theory, which attempts to explain why Onesimus was not explicitly labeled a fugitive in Paul's letter.<sup>186</sup> *Amicus Domini* is the idea that Onesimus left Philemon with the premeditated plan to seek out a "friend of the master" to intercede on his behalf with Philemon. In our case, Paul would be the *Amicus Domini*. There is ancient evidence of this practice, and the key example that most interpreters turn to is Pliny the Younger's letters to Sabinianus.<sup>187</sup>

Lampe's thesis makes good sense of how Onesimus found Paul.<sup>188</sup> He did not serendipitously run into one of Paul's colleagues in a large city; he actively sought the apostle out. That was his mission from the beginning. Paul's letter is then viewed as a friend of the master intervening on behalf of the errant slave, and pleading for clemency. On the significance of Lampe's theory, Demetrius Williams writes,

"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 a conflict between them. But he fled to a friendly third party, Paul...Lampe determined that in the legal discussions of such a case, a slave is not considered a *fugitivus* or runaway..."<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Peter Lampe, "Keine 'Sklavenflucht' Des Onesimus," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1985).

<sup>187</sup> Ep. 9.21. This will be covered in greater detail below.

<sup>188</sup> Lampe writes, "Hätte er untertauchen wollen, wären geeigneterer Schlupfwinkel als die römische Gefängniszelle des Apostels Paulus zu finden gewesen." Peter Lampe, "Keine 'Sklavenflucht' Des Onesimus," 136.

<sup>189</sup> Demetrius K. Williams, "No Longer as a Slave," in *Onesimus, Our Brother : Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 22.

In other words, “Although he had left his master’s house, [Onesimus] intended to return to his master.”<sup>190</sup> That is what makes his flight legal, according to the *Amicus Domini* theory. Onesimus was not a fugitive, because of his prior intent to return. Brian Rapske is the most notable defender of Lampe’s thesis, writing “[The *Amicus Domini* theory], recently put forward by Peter Lampe, furnishes a more adequate explanation of how the slave and the prisoner come to be together.”<sup>191</sup>

Most interpreters have signed on to the *Amicus Domini* theory, because it seems to make sense in the absence of a more plausible theory.<sup>192</sup> Unfortunately, the Lampe thesis does not stand up to scrutiny, and Phlm is only superficially analogous to Pliny’s letters to Sabinianus (which will be demonstrated in chapter five).

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<sup>190</sup> D. Francois Tolmie, "Tendencies in the Research on the Letter to Philemon since 1980," in *Philemon in Perspective* (ed. Tolmie; vol. 169 of *Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*; New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 3.

<sup>191</sup> Brian Rapske, "The Prisoner Paul in the Eyes of Onesimus," *NTS* 37(1991): 188.

<sup>192</sup> There are a few other variations of the *Amicus Domini* theory in the scholarly community, none of which have gained wide support or supplanted the basic understanding of *Amicus Domini* outlined here. E.g., John Byron argues that the letter is “a variation of the Greek letter of mediation.” Cf. John Byron, "Paul, Onesimus and the Epistle to Philemon: Is the Fugitive Slave Hypothesis Accurate?" (PhD Diss., Regent University, 1997) 73. Stanley Stowers views Phlm similarly, writing “Philemon is an intercessory letter on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus. Paul commends Onesimus on the basis of his Christian brotherhood with Philemon, the slave’s master...Philemon contains several phrases and topical and formal features of introductory and intercessory letters.” (Stanley Kent Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 155.).

## Conclusions

Paul's rhetoric in Phlm implies a seriously broken relationship between Philemon and Onesimus – a situation that requires the apostle's urgent diplomatic intervention. Paul styles himself as an old prisoner instead of an authoritative apostle in order to elicit sympathy and respect. He creates a climate of accountability by mentioning other senders and addressing the letter to the entire church that meets in Philemon's home. He leads with positive information about Philemon, and puts off the negative information about Onesimus as long as possible. When Paul finally introduces Onesimus by name, he does so in emotional, familial terms in order to assuage Philemon's anticipated swell of anger preemptively. He uses the same designation *beloved brother* for Onesimus that he used for Philemon. Paul also couches Onesimus' absence in terms of divine providence. He applies euphemism liberally, and reconstructs the social relationship between Philemon and Onesimus in spiritual terms. Paul mentions the financial injury caused by Onesimus in a passing, down-playing manner, while at the same time applying pressure by mentioning Philemon's own debt to him and the fact that he will be visiting soon. Paul's deliberate and consistent application of these rhetorical strategies implies that Onesimus harmed Philemon through his flight and that Philemon will be very angry to hear of his runaway slave.

The historical theories that deny Onesimus was a fugitive do not square with this rhetorical data. If Onesimus were Philemon's brother, or a slave who simply overstayed his leave, Paul would not need to go to such drastic rhetorical lengths to

seek reconciliation, and there would be no reason to label Onesimus a slave. The *Amicus Domini* theory at least acknowledges that there was a major falling out between Onesimus and Philemon, but that is where its explanatory power ends and it parts ways from the rest of the historical data to be presented below.

## CHAPTER THREE: ONESIMUS IN OTHER ANCIENT SOURCES

### Colossians

In our quest to understand the nature of Onesimus' predicament, the next place to look is Paul's letter to the Colossians. This letter contains the only other canonical mention of Onesimus' name outside of Phlm. The question of whether Colossians is Pauline is an important one, because the answer to that question affects the date of its composition, and hence whether we have a document related to and contemporaneous with Phlm. That does not mean that a later dating of Colossians renders its information useless, but a document that is contemporaneous with Phlm and written by the same person would be inherently more valuable than secondary, later sources.

Wayne Meeks appropriately summarizes the dilemma of authorship: "Philemon was also written to Colossae, though without Colossians we would not know that, so we are in the predicament of having to situate a letter almost universally regarded as authentic by information from one most likely pseudonymous."<sup>193</sup> F. F. Bruce adds that a number of scholars "who are unable to accept the whole of

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<sup>193</sup> Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 210.

Colossians as Pauline feel constrained nevertheless to salvage some of it for the apostle – enough, at least, to keep Philemon company.”<sup>194</sup>

In terms of external evidence, the ancient witnesses are uniformly in favor of Pauline authorship. In the second century, Marcion included Colossians in his list of authentically Pauline letters. The Muratorian Canon, often dated between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, also includes Colossians as Pauline. The writer of that document wrote

..since the blessed apostle Paul himself, following the example of his predecessor John, writes by name to only seven churches in the following sequence: To the Corinthians first, to the Ephesians second, to the Philippians third, to the Colossians fourth, to the Galatians fifth, to the Thessalonians sixth, to the Romans seventh.<sup>195</sup>

The Pauline authorship of Colossians was also assumed by 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian writers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. Eusebius of Caesarea also listed it as Pauline in his Ecclesiastical History, as did Athanasius of Alexandria in his Festal letter of 367 C.E.<sup>196</sup> There is further support for its Pauline authorship in the subscriptions to manuscripts of Colossians, but that will be covered further below. Suffice it to say, the external evidence from the first several centuries of Christianity is uniform in its attestation that Colossians was written by Paul.

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<sup>194</sup> F.F. Bruce, "St. Paul in Rome: 2. The Epistle to Philemon," *BJRL* 48(1965-1966): 85.

<sup>195</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament : Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1987), 305-307. This text is often dated to the late second century because of its relation to Pius I of Rome, though some scholars believe it could be as late as the fourth century.

<sup>196</sup> *H.E.* 3.25.1f; *Ep. Fest.*

The arguments against Pauline authorship of Colossians depend on internal evidence, which can be highly subjective. For example, in Bart Ehrman's book, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics*, he argues that Colossians was indeed a forgery. In fact, he calls Colossians "the earliest Christian forgery of any kind."<sup>197</sup> While Ehrman notes the close ties of Colossians to other Pauline letters such as Philemon, he nonetheless comes to the conclusion that this was a deliberate outcome orchestrated by a forger. Relying on the previous work of Bujard, Ehrman compares the style of Colossians to other Pauline letters. He finds that the use of certain grammatical elements such as conjunctions and relative clauses makes Colossians sound like someone else other than Paul.<sup>198</sup> More than that, Ehrman sees a different eschatology at work in Colossians – a more realized eschatology than in the authentic letters. This is the decisive blow against Pauline authorship, in Ehrman's estimation. In summarizing his view, he writes

"Precisely the theological feature of the letter that suggests it was not written by the Paul of the undisputed letters (the realized eschatology) is the feature that figures most prominently in its exposition of the superiority of the Christian faith, the central tenet of the letter. The non-Pauline eschatology is not a subsidiary matter tacked onto a letter dealing with other things; it is the centerpiece of the letter and the key to understanding its polemic. For this author, the believer's resurrection is a past, realized, spiritual event."<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 171.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 175-176

<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 181

Ehrman relies almost exclusively on internal evidence to make his determination, which exposes his presupposition that the early external evidence is of little worth.

The problem with relying so exclusively on internal evidence is that there is simply not enough data in the entire Pauline corpus to say definitively 2,000 years later what Paul would or would not have said, especially about complex and evolving matters like theology or eschatology. Every Pauline letter has some consistencies with other letters, but also some elements that are distinctive. An argument against Pauline authorship that is based almost exclusively on internal factors is not satisfactory. It must also be considered in light of the external evidence, as well as other historical considerations. I would also argue (against Ehrman) that the internal evidence could also be used to *support* the Pauline authorship of Colossians.

For example, a lot of the verbiage found within Colossians is very Pauline. There are many words and phrases in the letter that are found throughout the authentic epistles. There are a few formulaic phrases that appear in Colossians that are present in many acknowledged Pauline letters, including Παῦλος ἀπόστολος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ διὰ θελήματος θεοῦ<sup>200</sup> (*Paul, Apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God*) and χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ<sup>201</sup> (*Grace to you (all) and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*). This consistent phraseology provides a connection between Colossians and

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<sup>200</sup> Col. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1

<sup>201</sup> Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; Phlm 1:3



the rest of the Pauline corpus, but because they are formulaic statements they are not particularly compelling on their own.

What is more persuasive is the phraseology that is less formulaic, which seems to indicate favored vocabulary and habitual speech patterns. Such Pauline phrases in Colossians include Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν<sup>202</sup> (*Christ in you(all)*); Θέλω γὰρ ὑμᾶς + infinitive<sup>203</sup> (*For I want you(all) to ...*); Βλέπετε<sup>204</sup> (*Take care/look out/see to it*); Ἐνδύσασθε<sup>205</sup> (*put on/clothe*); ἐν ἀπλότητι<sup>206</sup> (*with sincerity*); περιπατεῖτε<sup>207</sup> (*figuratively, walk*); Τὰ κατ' ἐμὲ<sup>208</sup> (*the things concerning me, i.e. personal affairs*); τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ<sup>209</sup> (*in my own hand*).

While these examples of Pauline language within Colossians are compelling, they do not constitute proof that Paul wrote Colossians. In concert with the uniform external evidence, however, I believe they tip the scales toward Pauline authorship.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Rom 8:10; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 4:19; Col 1:27

<sup>203</sup> 1 Cor 10:1; 16:7; Col 2:1

<sup>204</sup> 1 Cor 1:26; 8:9; 10:18; 16:10; 2 Cor 10:7; Gal 5:15; Phil 3:2; Col 2:8

<sup>205</sup> Rom 13:12, 14; 1 Cor 15:53f; Gal 3:27; Col 3:10, 12; 1 Thess 5:8

<sup>206</sup> Rom 12:8; 2 Cor 1:12; Col 3:22

<sup>207</sup> 1 Cor 3:3; Gal 5:16; Col 2:6; 4:5; 1 Thess 4:1

<sup>208</sup> Phil 1:12; Col 4:7

<sup>209</sup> 1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; Col 4:18; Phlm 1:19

<sup>210</sup> One other point in favor of the Pauline authorship of Colossians is the fact that many of the early Christian writers who assumed Pauline authorship of Colossians were native Greek speakers. They did not seem to have a problem viewing the language of Colossians as being consistent with the acknowledged Pauline corpus, and they were in a better position to make that determination as ancient Greek speakers.

Some of the best evidence for the Pauline authorship of Colossians is found in its undeniable literary relationship to Philemon – a letter which is universally acknowledged as Pauline. This is unique among the disputed letters of Paul, because none of the others have specific historical links to another universally-acknowledged Pauline letter as does Colossians. For example, a number of individuals mentioned by Paul at the end of Colossians are mentioned in Phlm as well. These people roughly break down into three categories: letter carriers, people with Paul who are sending greetings to the recipients, and people in Colossae to whom Paul sends his greetings.

In Colossians 4:7-9, Onesimus and Tychicus are mentioned as the letter carriers. Six people who are with Paul at the location of his imprisonment are mentioned as sending greetings to the Colossian recipients: Aristarchus (Col. 4:10), Mark (Col. 4:10), Jesus, also called “Justus” (Col. 4:11), Epaphras (Col. 4:12), Luke (Col. 4:14), and Demas (Col. 4:14). Five out of these six are also mentioned in Phlm as sending greetings to the recipients: Aristarchus (Phlm 1:24), Mark (Phlm 1:24), Epaphras (Phlm 1:23), Luke (Phlm 1:24) and Demas (Phlm 1:24). Jesus/Justus is the only one mentioned in Colossians who is not mentioned in Phlm. Paul also greets Archippus at the end of Colossians (Col. 4:17). He is the only named recipient common to both letters (cf. Phlm 1:2).<sup>211</sup>

Thus, there are many names common to both Colossians and Phlm. This strongly suggests that the two letters were written around the same time in Paul’s

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<sup>211</sup> Some early-Christian commentators believed that Archippus had some official role in the church at Colossae, perhaps as a bishop. E.g., Jerome wrote, “I think that Archippus was the bishop of the church at Colossae.” *Comm. Phlm.* 26:642B (Peter Gorday and Thomas C. Oden, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (9; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 311.).

ministry, especially considering how often Paul's circle was changing because of his frequent travels and those of his associates.

Another compelling piece of evidence that supports Colossians' authenticity is the very fact that it was sent to a small town like Colossae in the first place.

Colossians 4:16 reads: *When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.*<sup>212</sup> Why would Paul have prioritized Colossae over the larger and more influential nearby city of Laodicea which functioned as the commercial and urban hub of the Lycus Valley? It is a question that was asked by John Knox, who argued that this peculiar arrangement bolsters the view that Colossians was linked to Phlm. Knox writes,

“Why, I repeat, should a communication designed for Laodicea and the smaller churches in its vicinity including Colossae go first to Colossae? The answer, I believe, is that Onesimus was bound for Colossae. There was every reason why Paul should establish contact with the church to which Onesimus' master belonged – a church he had not visited – and that he should remind it of his authority at a time when he is seeking its aid in a matter of exceptional importance to him... Our point is that just as under ordinary circumstances it would have been improbable that Paul should address a letter to the Laodiceans only through the Colossians, so it would only very improbably have occurred to a later writer to make Paul do so. Every consideration would have pointed to Laodicea. The fact that the letter is actually addressed to Colossae suggests authenticity, particularly as the residence there of Onesimus' master would so adequately explain what would otherwise seem a strange procedure even on the part of Paul himself.”<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> NASB

<sup>213</sup> John Knox, "Philemon and the Authenticity of Colossians," *The Journal of Religion* 18, no. 2 (1938): 151.

Knox's theory makes good sense of the evidence: the mention of Onesimus as a carrier in Colossians explains why that letter was sent to Colossae and not to Laodicea. It is a letter that was contemporaneous with Phlm, which was being sent to the relatively small town of Colossae precisely because of the Onesimus predicament.

In the end, I consider the above internal evidence to be supportive of Pauline authorship. The Pauline phraseology in Colossians, the various historical connections to Phlm, and the address to Colossae instead of Laodicea convince me that it is a document contemporaneous with Phlm and therefore Pauline. I do acknowledge, however, that internal considerations are relatively subjective and can be used to support either view. Nevertheless, when taken with the uniform external evidence from the early centuries of Christianity that attests to Pauline authorship, the scales are tipped decisively in favor of Colossians being written by Paul.

I will proceed under the assumption, therefore, that Paul wrote both Colossians and Phlm, and that the two documents speak to the same historical period relevant to Onesimus' situation. In the words of Knox,

“Philemon alone might conceivably have been invented – although with what possible motive one finds it hard to imagine – but Philemon considered with Colossians could not...together they bring us a living moment in the experience of a Christian community in an ancient Asian city, a moment which no conscious artistry could so convincingly have created.”<sup>214</sup>

Knox's point is that because Phlm is such a short, idiosyncratic letter, it seems highly unlikely that someone would be able to convincingly invent so many

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<sup>214</sup> John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 33.

touchstones with Colossians. It actually makes more sense that both letters were written at the same time, and shared a common destination because of Onesimus' dilemma.

Assuming, therefore, that Colossians was written by Paul at the same time as Phlm, what does Colossians specifically say about Onesimus? The first mention of Onesimus is found in Colossians 4:9. Paul is talking about Tychicus in 4:7-8, and how he will be carrying the letter from Paul to his readers. In 4:9, Paul says that Tychicus will be coming to them “with Onesimus” (σὺν Ὀνησίμῳ), whom Paul calls a “faithful and beloved brother” (τῷ πιστῷ καὶ ἀγαπητῷ ἀδελφῷ). As we saw earlier, this brother language was three times applied to Philemon in Phlm (1:1, 7, 20), and it was used once in the same letter when Paul exhorted Philemon to regard Onesimus as a brother instead of a slave (1:16).

Paul also says in Col. 4:9 that Onesimus is “one of you all” (ὅς ἐστιν ἐξ ὑμῶν), typically interpreted to mean that Onesimus is from the same place as the recipients of the letter. Because of the addressees mentioned in Colossians 1:2, we know that the recipients are in Colossae.<sup>215</sup> Epaphras is described similarly in Col. 4:12 (Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ ἐξ ὑμῶν). Epaphras was the primary evangelist of the Lycus Valley area, and was instrumental in bringing Christianity to Colossae (Col. 1:7).<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> τοῖς ἐν Κολοσσαῖς ἀγίοις καὶ πιστοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ

<sup>216</sup> Trainor calls Epaphras “one of Paul’s forgotten collaborators” (Michael F. Trainor, *Epaphras: Paul’s Educator at Colossae* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2008), 1.). According to Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Paul did not personally evangelize the churches of the Lycus Valley (Colossae, Laodicea, and Hieropolis). Their existence was to the credit of Epaphras of Colossae...” (Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Ephesus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 225.).

This evidence from Colossians establishes the fact that Philemon's house and the beginning of Onesimus' flight is the city of Colossae. According to Colossians, Tychicus and Onesimus will together report to the Colossians what is going on with Paul and his ministry during his imprisonment.

In sum, there are three key facts we learn about Onesimus from Colossians, and they are critical to understanding the circumstances of his flight. First, we learn that Onesimus is from Colossae. That is a fact that is not established in Phlm, so Colossians makes it possible to locate Philemon's home geographically. Second, we learn that Onesimus is familiar with two people at the site of Paul's imprisonment: Paul, and Epaphras. It is unclear how well he knows either of them, but he definitely knows who they are. It is more likely that he knows Epaphras personally since he is described as being from Colossae in Col. 4:12. He was probably Paul's main representative in the area, and it is likely he knew Philemon personally. Third, we learn that Onesimus will be carrying his own letter back to Philemon alongside Tychicus (Colossians 4:7-9).

### **Ancient Commentators**

Margaret Mitchell, in her 1995 article *John Chrysostom on Philemon: A Second Look*, argues against Callahan's view that Chrysostom's commentary on Philemon was the beginning of the traditional fugitive slave interpretation.<sup>217</sup> In doing so, she provides an incredibly helpful overview of some of the early-Christian sources

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<sup>217</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, "John Chrysostom on Philemon : A Second Look," *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 1 (1995).

that both support the traditional interpretation, and pre-date Chrysostom's work. The Marcionite prologues to Paul's epistles may be among the earliest sources that support the fugitive slave hypothesis for the occasion behind Phlm. On the dating of these prologues, Mitchell writes, "The origin and consequent dating of these prologues continue to be debated...Although many scholars consider the prologue to Philemon to be among the second set of prologues added to the original set composed for the seven-letter corpus, even that later edition is usually dated to the mid-third century."<sup>218</sup> The prologue to Phlm reads "He composed a friendly letter to Philemon on behalf of his slave Onesimus."<sup>219</sup>

The so-called Apostolic Constitutions have a 3<sup>rd</sup> century origin, but were compiled most-likely in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>220</sup> In that text, Onesimus is listed as a slave that was worthy of church leadership: "but if ever a household slave might appear worthy of ordination to one of the higher orders, such as our Onesimus plainly appeared to be."<sup>221</sup> The interesting thing about this text is that Onesimus is not described with the generic term for a slave (δοῦλος). He is instead described with the more specific designation οἰκέτης, which indicates a house slave or domestic servant.

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid, 146

<sup>219</sup> Ibid. Philemoni familiares litteras facit pro Onesimo servo eius. Here, Mitchell follows the text of Donatien De Bruyne (Prologues Bibliques d'Origine Marcionite." *RBén* 24 [1907] 15). Ambrosiaster's 4<sup>th</sup> century work *Commentarius in Epistulam ad Philemonem* seems to be familiar with the Marcionite prologues, describing Onesimus in a similar fashion (Mitchell, "John Chrysostom on Philemon : A Second Look," 146).

<sup>220</sup> Ibid

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, ει δέ ποτέ καί άξιός φανεί η οίκέτης προς χειροτονίαν βαθμού, οίος Όνήσιμος ό ημέτερος άνεφάνη. Mitchell relies here on Funk for the text: Franciscus X. Funk, ed., *Didascalica et Constitutiones Apostolorum* (2 vols.; Paderborn: Schoningh. 1905).

This is not the only ancient source that identifies Onesimus as an οἰκέτης , which will be further discussed below.

The first individual writer Mitchell highlights is Athanasius, the fourth-century bishop of Alexandria. In a work dated to the mid-300's, Athanasius discusses biblical examples of masters and slaves:

"Now Sarah called Abraham 'master' (κύριος), although she wasn't a slave (δούλη), but a wife (σύζυγος). And the Apostle (μὲν) joined Onesimus the slave (δοῦλος) to Philemon his owner (ὁ κτησάμενος) as a brother (ἀδελφός). But Bathsheba (δὲ), although a mother (μήτηρ), called her son (υἱός) a slave (δοῦλος)."<sup>222</sup>

As Mitchell notes, "This text clearly shows that Athanasius assumed that Onesimus was Philemon's slave."<sup>223</sup>

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Basil of Caesarea wrote "As for those slaves who are under the yoke and flee to religious communities, it is necessary to admonish and improve them and send them back to their masters, in the same way as the blessed Paul, who after begetting Onesimus through the gospel, sent him back to Philemon."<sup>224</sup> This is a reference to the common practice of slaves fleeing their masters and seeking refuge in an official sanctuary like the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus.

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<sup>222</sup> *Contra Arianos* 2.3 [PG 26. 152-53]

<sup>223</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, "John Chrysostom on Philemon : A Second Look," 145.

<sup>224</sup> *Asceticon Magnum* 11 [PG 31. 948]. Ibid.



Jerome, a late 4<sup>th</sup>/early 5<sup>th</sup> century Christian scholar, wrote commentaries on Philemon, Galatians, Ephesians and Titus while living in Bethlehem.<sup>225</sup> These works were composed in 386-388 C.E.<sup>226</sup> Because of Jerome's admiration for Origen, as well as other linguistic data within the commentary that points to a basis in Origen's work, Ronald Heine convincingly argues that Jerome's commentary on Philemon was essentially a translation of Origen's earlier work. Thus, Jerome's Latin commentary can plausibly be dated to the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century, rather than the 4<sup>th</sup> century when it was translated from the Greek.<sup>227</sup>

In Jerome's commentary, he includes some important information about Onesimus and the circumstances of his flight. In his comments on verse 14, he writes

“Nothing, indeed, can be said to be good except that which is voluntary. On this basis the good sense of the Apostle is to be carefully considered, inasmuch as he sent the fugitive slave back so that he might be of use to his own master, since he could not have been of use if he had been detained with his master being absent.”<sup>228</sup>

The key phrase to notice is “fugitive slave” (*fugitivum servum*). If Jerome's commentary is indeed based on Origen's, then we have a mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century

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<sup>225</sup> Ronald E. Heine, "In Search of Origen's Commentary on Philemon," *The Harvard Theological Review* 93, no. 2 (2000): 117-118.

<sup>226</sup> Alfred Friedl, "St. Jerome's Dissertation on the Letter to Philemon," in *Philemon in Perspective* (ed. Tolmie; vol. 169 of *Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*; New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 289.

<sup>227</sup> Ronald E. Heine, "In Search of Origen's Commentary on Philemon," 133.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, 130. Nihil quippe bonum dici potest, nisi quod ultroneum est. Ex quo Apostoli consideranda prudentia est: Quid circo fugitivum servum remittit ad dominum, ut prosit domino suo: qui prodesse non poterat, si domino teneretur absente.

understanding of Phlm that views Onesimus as a fugitive slave, and a 4<sup>th</sup>-century affirmation of this view in Jerome's translation.

John Chrysostom was the bishop of Constantinople in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote several homilies on Philemon, and as Callahan has pointed out, was one of the key writers who championed the fugitive slave hypothesis early on. Chrysostom wrote that Philemon "had a certain slave named Onesimus. This Onesimus, having stolen something from his master, had run away....coming therefore to Paul at Rome, and having found him in prison, and having enjoyed the benefit of his teaching, he there also received baptism."<sup>229</sup> In addition to identifying Onesimus as a runaway slave, Chrysostom also identified the location of Paul's imprisonment as Rome and commented that Onesimus had stolen from Philemon.

In a pastoral note, Chrysostom interprets Paul's grace toward Onesimus as an example for his readers. While Phlm is a very idiosyncratic letter, Chrysostom nonetheless attempts to make the letter applicable to daily life. To make his point, he unfortunately emphasizes how wrong Onesimus was in the whole situation. He writes, "...We ought not abandon the race of slaves, even if they have proceeded to extreme wickedness. For if a thief and a runaway become so virtuous that Paul was willing to make him a companion...much more ought we not to abandon the free."<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Ὁ τοίνυν Ὀνήσιμος οὗτος κλέψας τι παρά του δεσπότου, ἐδραπέτευσεν. Chrysostom, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (ed. Schaff; trans. Schaff; vol. 13; New York: The Christian literature company, 1887), 950.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 951-952.

Chrysostom is guilty of doing what so many other interpreters of Phlm have done over the years: emphasize Onesimus' wickedness as a way to highlight Paul's charity or theology. Regardless of his rhetoric, Chrysostom includes the following elements of Onesimus' flight: He was a slave who stole from Philemon in order to finance his flight to Paul in Rome, where he became a Christian. On Jerome and Chrysostom's interpretation of Phlm, Paul Decock writes,

“Although Phlm seems to have been looked down upon in certain quarters, as not ‘worthy’ of canonical status because of its brevity and because it dealt with an individual case and an issue which did not seem worthy of the Holy Spirit, both Jerome and Chrysostom defended its canonicity with emphasis on its usefulness.”<sup>231</sup>

While Chrysostom's emphasis on Onesimus' wickedness is deplorable, his defense of the value of Phlm alongside other interpreters undoubtedly helped to preserve the main source we have about Onesimus.

Theodore was the bishop of Mopsuestia (in southern Turkey) in the late 4<sup>th</sup>/early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>232</sup> His commentary on Philemon was written originally in Greek, but was ultimately translated into Latin and brought to the west. Theodore was a well-known member of the “Antiochene school of exegesis.”<sup>233</sup> The value of Phlm

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<sup>231</sup> Paul B. Decock, "The Reception of the Letter to Philemon in the Early Church: Origen, Jerome, Chrysostom and Augustine," in *Philemon in Perspective* (ed. Tolmie; vol. 169 of *Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*; New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 287.

<sup>232</sup> Theodore, *The Commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul* (Trans. Rowan A. Greer; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), xi.

<sup>233</sup> John T. Fitzgerald, "Theodore of Mopsuestia on Paul's Letter to Philemon," in *Philemon in Perspective* (ed. Tolmie; vol. 169 of *Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*; New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 333.

for Theodore was that it was an example of “how a Christian, and especially a church leader, is to advise and admonish a fellow Christian in what appears to be a ‘personal matter.’”<sup>234</sup>

Similar to Chrysostom, Theodore talks about Onesimus in a way that is extremely disparaging. For example, his work opens by saying “Onesimus, a slave belonging to a certain faithful and religious man named Philemon, with a wicked intention, ran away from his master.”<sup>235</sup> He mentions Onesimus’ flight multiple times in the text. Thus, Theodore affirms the traditional fugitive slave hypothesis, but in doing so attributes the wrong to Onesimus, the runaway, rather than Philemon, the master.<sup>236</sup>

Theodore continues, writing that “Paul writes to Philemon, asking him to pardon Onesimus for the offenses he had previously committed...”<sup>237</sup> This is a plain reference to the financial injury that Paul alludes to in Phlm 1:18. In further summarizing the epistle, Theodore writes, “It is written about a slave who belonged to Philemon, so that he would restore to his affection the slave, since he repented of the evils he had previously done, and so that Philemon would exact no reckoning for what

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid, 348

<sup>235</sup> Onesimus, servus Philemonis cuiusdam fidelis et religiosi uiri, malum habens propositum per fugam a suo discessit domino. Theodore, *The Commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul*, 773.

<sup>236</sup> John T. Fitzgerald, "Theodore of Mopsuestia on Paul's Letter to Philemon," 356.

<sup>237</sup> Theodore and Rowan A. Greer, *The Commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul*, 773. Scribit ergo in hac epistola Philemoni postulans ut ipsi Onesimo pro quibus dudum deliquerat ueniam tribueret.

the slave had once committed.”<sup>238</sup> On this section, Fitzgerald comments that “Onesimus’ conversion is described in terms of repentance.”<sup>239</sup>

Theodore views Onesimus as the wicked one, and he is critical of people in his own day who want to break down the barriers between slaves and masters. He writes,

“A great many people in our times, failing to know what, how, and when things ought to be done, think that for the sake of true religion everything in the present life ought to be confused and that there should be no distinction between slaves and masters, rich and poor, those titled rulers and those seen to be ruled by others.”<sup>240</sup>

He viewed Paul as agreeing with him on the subject: “But Paul, on the contrary, thought it best for individuals to remain in their own rank.”<sup>241</sup> This is an interesting interpretation, considering the rhetorical lengths that Paul went to in order to break down those barriers between Philemon and Onesimus – to say nothing of what he wrote in Galatians 3:28: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (NASB). As Theodore moved through his verse by verse commentary on Phlm, he on three

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 775. De deruo enim scriptum est qui pertinebat ad Philemonem, ut reciperet eum in affectum poenitentem pro illis quibus dudum gesserat malis, ita ut de illis quae olim ab eo fuerant admissa nullam rationem exigeret.

<sup>239</sup> John T. Fitzgerald, "Theodore of Mopsuestia on Paul's Letter to Philemon," 354.

<sup>240</sup> Theodore, *The Commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul*, 779. Plurimi uero nostris temporibus, nescientes quae qualiter et quando fieri debeant, existiman contemplation pietatis oportere Omnia praesentis uitae confundi et nullam esse discretionem inter seruos et dominos, diuites et paupers, eos qui sub principatibus sunt et qui principari aliis uidentur.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid. Paulus uero e contrario optimum esse existimabat ut singular in suo manerent ordine.

occasions referred to Onesimus' flight as being based on the "perversity" of his character, purpose, or judgment.<sup>242</sup>

Despite his embittered tone toward Onesimus, Theodore has offered the following insights into Onesimus' situation: He was a slave who ran away from his master, and in doing so had committed some offense. It is unclear whether Theodore means that the act of running itself is the offense, or that there were multiple offenses associated with the flight (theft, for example). The latter is most likely since Theodore speaks of Onesimus' offenses in the plural.

Theodoret of Cyrhus was the bishop of Cyrhus in Syria during the 5<sup>th</sup> century. In the introduction to his exposition of Philemon, he writes

"Philemon was among those who had believed; he lived in the city of Colossae. (His house, in fact, has remained to this day.) His servant, named Onesimus, having stolen something and run away, fell into apostolic nets; for abiding in prison at Rome at that time was none other than the holy Paul. So it was there that the apostle counted Onesimus worthy of saving baptism and sent him back to his master after writing this epistle. And who would ever have been neglected by this man—he who did not even neglect a runaway slave, one who was both a thief and a scoundrel, but instead through spiritual instruction counted him worthy of salvation?"<sup>243</sup>

Like a number of commentators before him, Theodoret presents Onesimus as the wrongdoer in the situation. On Paul's mention of the possibility that Onesimus might have financially wronged Philemon (Phlm 1:18), Theodoret writes, "He intimates that

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid, 795, 797, 799.

<sup>243</sup> Theodoret, "Theodoret of Cyrhus: The Epistle of Paul to Philemon," Trans. Misty S. Irons, James T. Dennison, Jr., Catherine T. Drown, and Lee Irons. *Westminster Theological Journal* 61, no. 1 (1999): 113.

something taken had been wickedly consumed. Onesimus has stolen, but the divine apostle requests that Philemon impute the trespass to him.”<sup>244</sup>

Theodoret basically affirmed the traditional view that Onesimus was a fugitive slave, having stolen from Philemon to finance his trip. He also furthered the theory that it was Rome where Onesimus met Paul, using the evocative imagery of Onesimus falling into “apostolic nets.”

The early-Christian literature surveyed so far in this chapter has been consistent on the following aspects of Onesimus’ situation: Onesimus and Philemon were both from Colossae, and Onesimus was a runaway slave. Some of the literature adds that Paul was imprisoned in Rome, and that Onesimus had stolen from Philemon at the beginning of his flight. There are no other storylines or alternative scenarios presented in the early-Christian literature.

The next section will look at the subscriptions to Phlm in the ancient manuscripts. This data, though often overlooked, also contains some important historical data regarding the Onesimus episode.

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid, 116

## Subscriptions in the Manuscripts<sup>245</sup>

Many ancient manuscripts contain celebratory notes inscribed at the end of a text, exclamations such as “The end of a book; thanks be to God!”<sup>246</sup> This sort of expression is not all they wrote, however. Sometimes scribes added subscriptions in order to preserve or explain something important about the provenance of the text they just copied.<sup>247</sup> This section will sketch the history and content of such subscriptions, specifically those found at the end of the New Testament letters dubbed the *Captivity Epistles* or the *Prison Letters* (i.e. Philemon, Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians), because much of their provenance data overlaps. This is a set of ancient data that is rarely considered when examining the historical circumstances of Onesimus’ flight. While data from all four letters will be analyzed, special attention will of course be paid to Phlm.

As early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Christian scribes made efforts to preserve the addressee of these letters. For example, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Chester Beatty Papyrus (P<sup>46</sup>, the earliest extant collection of Paul’s letters), the scribe included *superscriptions* to the Pauline Epistles, simple titles such as *to the Philippians*, *to the*

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<sup>245</sup> This section is adapted from a paper I presented at the regional Society of Biblical Literature conference in Denver, CO on March 18, 2011. It was entitled *Prizing Provenance: The Subscriptions to the Prison Letters*.

<sup>246</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament; Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York,: Oxford University Press, 1964), 18.

<sup>247</sup> The term “Provenance” is used to designate general information about a letter’s historical circumstances, including (but not limited to) the place from which the letter was sent. The term “origin,” by contrast, will be used more specifically to identify the location of sending.



*Colossians*, and *to the Ephesians*.<sup>248</sup> But, there began in the 4<sup>th</sup> century an effort to include additional data on the provenance of these letters – information conveyed in *subscriptions*. This was not necessarily new information, however, because interest in the provenance of early-Christian texts clearly antedates the subscriptions. The writings of earlier Christians such as Irenaeus of Lyons<sup>249</sup> and Clement of Alexandria,<sup>250</sup> as well as documents such as the Muratorian fragment<sup>251</sup>, demonstrate that information on the historical background of these texts was valued. A sustained effort, however, to inscribe this data on the manuscripts themselves does not appear in force until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, a time during which the Christian texts were circulating in a variety of locales and languages.

There are four components of the subscriptions found in the manuscripts of the Prison Letters (PL's):

- (1) Addressee(s)
- (2) Origin (+ addressee)
- (3) Carrier(s) (+ addressee and origin)
- (4) Author (+ addressee, origin, and carrier)

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<sup>248</sup> πρὸς Φιλιππησίους, πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς, πρὸς Ἐφεσίους. As noted above, the Chester Beatty Papyrus does not contain the letter to Philemon, perhaps because this manuscript omits letters written to individuals. Had Philemon been included, however, it is reasonable to assume that it too would have had the superscription naming the addressee.

<sup>249</sup> E.g., *Adv. Haer.*, 3.1.1ff. In this text, Irenaeus talks about the historical context of the writing of the Gospels. He mentions that Paul was laying the foundation of the Church in Rome (along with Peter), and that Luke was a companion of Paul's.

<sup>250</sup> E.g., *Hypotyposes*, quoted by Eusebius in *H.E.* 6.14.2ff. Here Eusebius recounts comments made by Clement on matters such as the authorship of Hebrews, as well as the historical circumstances of the composition of the Gospels.

<sup>251</sup> The Muratorian Fragment provides detailed information about the composition of the Gospels according to Luke and John (Matthew and Mark are missing from the beginning of the fragment), as well as a list of letters attributed to Paul and why he wrote them.

As indicated in the list above, the subscriptions never feature the origin of the letter without the addressee, and in a similar fashion, the carrier of the letter is never mentioned if the addressee and origin of the letter has not already been specified. The author of the letter rarely appears in the subscription to the PL's, but it does appear in some of the later manuscripts. This data helps to demonstrate which information was in need of preservation. As with the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Chester Beatty superscriptions, the *addressee* appears to have been uniformly considered the most vital; if a scribe chose to include only one piece of information, that was it. This is an interesting phenomenon, considering the fact that the addressee is often mentioned explicitly in the opening verses of the letters themselves.<sup>252</sup> But, this is probably explained by the fact that the letters came to be known by their addressees, and hence they functioned as their title. The next piece of information that was typically added was the *origin* of the letter. The specific location was not necessarily apparent from the text of the letters.

If a scribe were to include the addressee and origin of the letter, the next piece of data that might be added was the *carrier* (or carriers). This information, like the addressee, can be found in the text of the letter itself. So, for example, many subscriptions to Phlm will say that the letter was carried by Onesimus (Phlm 1:10), though some will add that Tychicus also carried the letter (though he was not

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<sup>252</sup> Φιλήμονι (Phlm 1:1), τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Φιλίπποις (Phil 1:1), τοῖς ἐν Κολοσσαῖς ἀγίοις (Col. 1:2), τοῖς ἀγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ἐφέσῳ (Eph. 1:1). The words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ are missing in some early manuscripts of Ephesians, but since the Chester Beatty collection features the superscription πρὸς Ἐφεσίουσ, it seems that there were early traditions that associated this text with Ephesus.

mentioned in the letter to Philemon). Likewise, subscriptions to Philipians will say that Epaphroditus (sometimes along with Timothy) carried that letter (Phil 2:19, 25; 4:18). It was supposed in some subscriptions that Tychicus carried the letter to the Ephesians (Eph 6:21), and similar subscriptions claim that he and Onesimus carried the letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:7,9). The manuscripts that feature all of the above information (addressee, origin, carrier) and also Paul's name are few and late. This may be due to the fact that all of the manuscripts I will examine contain Paul's name within the letters themselves, and that by the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Pauline authorship of these letters was widely accepted. As a result, scribes probably did not feel it necessary to reinforce the identity of the author in the subscriptions. It is more plausible, by contrast, that early Christians would have forgotten details such as Paul's location or who carried the letter, creating a need to preserve this data in the subscriptions.

Chronologically speaking, the tendency in the subscriptions to the PL's is to include more information as time goes on. This is not a uniform trend, however, because there are notable exceptions to this tendency. For example, in some of the early versions of Phlm (as well as some Egyptian Greek texts), there is a considerable amount of information presented. In fact, the subscriptions for Phlm are much more substantial and widely attested than those of the other PL's. It is possible that there was more interest in the provenance of this text because of its exceptional nature among the Pauline letters.

A word on the date of the early versions is necessary at this juncture. The versions relevant to this study are the Fayyemic Coptic version (cop<sup>fay</sup>), the Bohairic

Coptic Version (cop<sup>bo</sup>), the Syriac Peshitta (syr<sup>p</sup>), the Syriac Harclean version (syr<sup>h</sup>), the Armenian version (arm), the Georgian version (geo), and the Ethiopic version (eth). Does one date the subscriptions in these texts based on the date of the manuscript itself, or the date scholars believe the text was first rendered into these other languages? For example, the Bohairic manuscript is dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but most scholars believe that the translation from the Greek text into the Bohairic dialect happened sometime in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>253</sup> On this matter we are forced to make a decision: it is not enough to say that because the manuscript is from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, then the subscription must also be from that period. A subscription on a 9<sup>th</sup> century manuscript could be from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but it is just as likely that the subscription dates to an earlier time. This fact leaves us in the realm of conjecture. To find an answer, one must consider the historical circumstances of these translations, and when it is *most probable* that the subscriptional data would have been transmitted.

Also (as noted above) the sort of information included in these subscriptions was already valued and circulated as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, so it is certainly possible that these subscriptions could have existed at the earlier date of translation. It seems unlikely, by contrast, that subscriptions like these would first appear centuries after the initial translation in places like Armenia and Georgia, especially since it can be

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<sup>253</sup>Frederik Wisse, "The Coptic Versions of the New Testament," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research* (ed. Holmes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 137; Thomas Oden Lambdin, *Introduction to Sahidic Coptic* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1983), ix.; Stephen Westerholm, "Versions," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*: (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1988), 979; D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 267. According to the 4<sup>th</sup> Revised edition of the UBS text, the Coptic versions should be dated as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. (Barbara Aland et. al., *The Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001), 28.).

demonstrated that there were Greek texts with similar subscriptions antedating or contemporaneous with the translation into Armenian and Georgian, subscriptions that may have been based upon an even earlier exemplar.<sup>254</sup>

Also, as will become clear below, the historical data in the subscriptions is remarkably consistent even though it was appearing in manuscripts of different text types written in different languages at different times in diverse geographic locales. Even considering this diversity among the manuscript tradition, there are no glaring contradictions among the subscriptions. There are simply variations of what scribes chose to include from what appears to be a broader, generally agreed upon set of historical data. This suggests that the basic historical traditions contained in the subscriptions were well established long before these manuscripts were copied.

It seems best, then, to regard the subscriptions in the versions as at least as old as the initial translation. Because the subscriptions contain important data about the provenance of these texts, they were probably transmitted at that unique moment in history when a given area was evangelized (and the Christian texts translated thereafter). The precise date of these translations is of course debated, but I have adopted the general consensus for each version:

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<sup>254</sup> The Armenian and Georgian versions, which most scholars believe to be based on the Syriac text, curiously do not feature the subscription found in the Syriac edition. The Armenian and Georgian versions have the subscription found in Euthalius' 4<sup>th</sup> century Greek text, which means that the Armenian and Georgian editions either based their subscriptions on Euthalius, or more likely, an earlier Greek exemplar that contained the same tradition that came down to Euthalius.

Coptic Fayyumic (cop <sup>fay</sup> ):	4 <sup>th</sup> Century <sup>255</sup>
Coptic Bohairic (cop <sup>bo</sup> ):	4 <sup>th</sup> Century <sup>256</sup>
Syriac Peshitta (syr <sup>p</sup> ):	5 <sup>th</sup> Century <sup>257</sup>
Armenian (arm):	5 <sup>th</sup> Century <sup>258</sup>
Georgian (geo):	5 <sup>th</sup> Century <sup>259</sup>
Ethiopic (eth):	5 <sup>th</sup> Century <sup>260</sup>
Syriac Harclean (syr <sup>h</sup> ):	7 <sup>th</sup> Century <sup>261</sup>

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<sup>255</sup>Frederik Wisse, "The Coptic Versions of the New Testament," 135; Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament : An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 200.

<sup>256</sup> See footnote 253

<sup>257</sup>Barbara Aland Et. Al. ed, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 65.; Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, 194; D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*, 267; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament; Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 270.; Barbara Aland et. al., *The Greek New Testament*, 27.

<sup>258</sup> Based on the Syriac text, D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*, 123.; Joseph M. Alexanian, "The Armenian Version of the New Testament," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research* (ed. Holmes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 157; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament; Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 82-83; Barbara Aland et. al., *The Greek New Testament*, 28.

<sup>259</sup> Based on the Armenian text, D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*, 123; Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, 205.; Barbara Aland et. al., *The Greek New Testament*, 28; Joseph M. Alexanian, "The Armenian Version of the New Testament," 162.; J. Neville Birdsall, "The Georgian Version of the New Testament," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research* (ed. Holmes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 180.

<sup>260</sup> This is admittedly splitting the difference between the Alands who place the translation in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and others like Parker and Metzger who suggest it took place in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century; Barbara Aland et. al., *The Greek New Testament*, 29; D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*, 124; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 84.

The versions are important to consider for this project, because they demonstrate that provenance was important to a wide variety of early-Christian communities, a value transcending time, geography, language, ethnicity, and text type. As Christian texts spread through Georgia and Armenia, Syria and Ethiopia, and into multiple dialects of Coptic in Lower Egypt, the value of preserving the historical background of the Prison Letters was continually affirmed through the persistent copying of these subscriptions.

Before examining the content of the subscriptions themselves, there is one Greek manuscript that requires some attention. Minuscule 1739 is a high-quality, 10<sup>th</sup> century manuscript that deserves to be more highly regarded than its late date might suggest. There is a colophon on this manuscript, indicating that it was copied from an ancient exemplar.<sup>262</sup> This claim is corroborated by the fact that it basically agrees with Origen's 3<sup>rd</sup> century text.<sup>263</sup> Additionally, the marginal notes include excerpts from early Christians such as Irenaeus, Clement, Origen etc., but no one later than Basil (329-379 C.E.).<sup>264</sup> According to Bruce Metzger, "The ancestor of this manuscript was

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<sup>261</sup>Barbara Aland et. al. ed, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 65.; Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, 197; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament; Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 70; Barbara Aland et. al., *The Greek New Testament*, 27.

<sup>262</sup> D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*, 262.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament; Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 65.

written by a scribe toward the close of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>265</sup> He goes on to call minuscule 1739 a “relatively pure form of the Alexandrian text type.”<sup>266</sup> Thus, the subscription in 1739 ought to be treated like a 4<sup>th</sup> century tradition. While this position is not unimpeachable, it is defensible. If everything else in 1739 is dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century (the text itself as well as the marginal notes), why should the subscription be any different? There is no intervening evidence that would cause us to make such a distinction between the subscription and the rest of the data on the page. Added to this, the subscription in 1739 is not especially flowery; it simply features the addressee, origin, and carrier. The subscription to 1739, therefore, will be regarded as a 4<sup>th</sup> century tradition.

As noted above, the subscriptions to the PL’s include one or more of four possible elements: (1) addressee, (2) origin, (3) carrier, and (4) author. With these components in mind, let us survey the subscriptions to the PL’s from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>267</sup>

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E., there was already a plurality of subscriptions that appeared in the manuscripts of the PL’s. In the case of Phlm, there were at least four varieties:

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> This study is not exhaustive. The subscriptions surveyed in this study are those found in the critical apparatus and second appendix of the NA<sup>27</sup>, as well as those additional variants listed in Bruce Metzger’s *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, pages 543, 551, 560, and 589-90.



- Ⲛ: To Philemon<sup>268</sup>
- 1739: To Philemon, written from Rome, through Tychicus and Onesimus.<sup>269</sup>
- cop<sup>bo</sup>: The letter to Philemon was completed, which was written from Rome and sent through Onesimus.<sup>270</sup>
- Euthalius<sup>ms</sup>: To Philemon and Apphia, masters of Onesimus, and to Archippus the deacon of the church in Colossae, written from Rome, through the house-servant Onesimus.<sup>271</sup>

All of these texts have been linked with Egypt (or Alexandria), and thus tend to be highly regarded by most textual critics. Within these four manuscripts we have the addressee in the case of Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ), and both the Roman origin and carrier in the Bohairic Coptic version and 1739 (though they disagree as to whether Onesimus had company). With Euthalius, however, we are given much more detail about the

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<sup>268</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα

<sup>269</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Τύχικου καὶ Ὀνησίμου

<sup>270</sup> ἐτελέσθη ἡ πρὸς Φιλήμονα ἐπιστολή, ἥτις ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης καὶ ἀπεστάλη διὰ Ὀνησίμου. It should be noted that in this study, I will analyze the subscriptions in the early versions based upon the particular Greek subscription that they support (as detailed in the NA<sup>27</sup> and Bruce Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into the intricacies of the other languages (Coptic, Ethiopic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian); the primary focus of this investigation is the basic data included in the subscriptions, not the finer points of grammar.

<sup>271</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα καὶ Ἀπφίαν δεσπότας τοῦ Ὀνησίμου καὶ πρὸς Ἄρχιππον τὸν διάκονον τῆς ἐν Κολοσσαῖς ἐκκλησίας ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Ὀνησίμου οἰκέτου

addressees.<sup>272</sup> Both Philemon and Apphia are mentioned as the recipients, being described as the “masters” of Onesimus. Archippus is also named, being labeled a “deacon” in this subscription. Archippus is never explicitly called a deacon in the letters of Paul, but he is called a “fellow soldier” in Phlm 1:2, and according to Colossians 4:17, he appears to have been entrusted with some sort of ministry. It is also notable that Euthalias’ manuscript adds the detail that the carrier, Onesimus, was a “house-servant” (οἰκέτης). This is the same term that was used for Onesimus in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Apostolic Constitutions.

In the case of Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians, we have three varieties:

- ⲛ, B\*:**            To the Philippians<sup>273</sup>  
                           To the Colossians<sup>274</sup>  
                           To the Ephesians<sup>275</sup> (+ cop<sup>fay</sup>)

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<sup>272</sup> Euthalius was a 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian grammarian and deacon, probably from the environs of Alexandria; cf. J. Armitage Robinson, *Euthaliana, Studies of Euthalius, Codex H of the Pauline Epistles, and the Armenian Version* (Cambridge Eng.: University Press, 1895), 1, 31, 43ff.; Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament : An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, 197; D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts*, 123.

<sup>273</sup> πρὸς Φιλιππησίους

<sup>274</sup> πρὸς Κολασσαεῖς / πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς

<sup>275</sup> πρὸς Ἐφεσίους

- B<sup>1</sup>: To the Philippians, written from Rome<sup>276</sup>  
 To the Colossians, written from Rome<sup>277</sup>  
 To the Ephesians, written from Rome<sup>278</sup>
- 1739: To the Philippians, written from Rome through Epaphroditus<sup>279</sup>  
 To the Colossians, written from Rome through Tychicus and Onesimus<sup>280</sup>  
 To the Ephesians, written from Rome through Tychicus<sup>281</sup>

The uniformity of subscription within each manuscript is evident from the above data, and like the letter to Philemon, we find in the 4th century an effort to include the addressee, origin and carrier (often in that order). This emphasis will ripple throughout the subsequent centuries. These texts affirm the historical connection between Colossians and Phlm – both being sent from Rome, and being carried by Onesimus.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> πρὸς Φιλιππησίους ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης

<sup>277</sup> πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης

<sup>278</sup> πρὸς Ἐφεσίους ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης

<sup>279</sup> πρὸς Φιλιππησίους ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Ἐπαφροδίτου

<sup>280</sup> πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Τυχικοῦ καὶ Ὀνησίμου

<sup>281</sup> πρὸς Ἐφεσίους ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Τυχικοῦ

<sup>282</sup> With regard to Phlm, Rome is identified as the origin and Onesimus as the carrier in 1739, cop<sup>bo</sup>, Euthalius<sup>ms</sup>, syr<sup>p</sup>, eth, arm, geo. With regard to Colossians, the same facts about Rome and Onesimus are mentioned in 1739.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, we begin to see the relationship between some of the early versions through the lens of the manuscripts of Phlm:

syr<sup>P</sup>: The letter to Philemon was completed, which was written from Rome and sent through Onesimus.<sup>283</sup>

eth: The letter to Philemon was completed, which was written from Rome and sent through Onesimus.<sup>284</sup>

arm: To Philemon and Apphia, masters of Onesimus, and to Archippus deacon of the church of the Colossians, written from Rome through the house-servant Onesimus.<sup>285</sup>

geo: The end of the letter which was written from Rome, to Philemon and Apphia, masters of Onesimus, and Archippus, deacon of the church in Colossae, through the house-servant Onesimus.<sup>286</sup>

The Syriac Peshitta and the Ethiopic version are identical to the Bohairic Coptic version of the previous century, all including the addressee (Philemon), origin (Rome), and carrier (Onesimus). It appears that these basic facts were present in Egypt during the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and were spreading with the texts as Christianity fanned

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<sup>283</sup> ἐτελέσθη ἡ πρὸς Φιλήμονα ἐπιστολή, ἣτις ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης καὶ ἀπεστάλη διὰ Ὀνησίμου

<sup>284</sup> ἐτελέσθη ἡ πρὸς Φιλήμονα ἐπιστολή, ἣτις ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης καὶ ἀπεστάλη διὰ Ὀνησίμου

<sup>285</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα καὶ Ἀπφίαν δεσπότης Ὀνησίμου, καὶ πρὸς Ἀρχιππον διάκονον τῆς Κολοσσέων ἐκκλησίας, ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Ὀνησίμου οἰκέτου

<sup>286</sup> τέλος τῆς ἐπιστολῆς ἦν ἔγραψεν ἀπὸ Ῥώμης πρὸς Φιλήμονα καὶ Ἀπφίαν δεσπότης Ὀνησίμου καὶ Ἀρχιππον διάκονον τῆς ἐν Κολοσσαῖς ἐκκλησίας διὰ Ὀνησίμου οἰκέτου

out into Ethiopia and Syria. Further, the Armenian version is almost identical to the subscription attested by Euthalius in 4<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, down to the description of Onesimus as a house-servant.<sup>287</sup> The Georgian version is similar to the Armenian version, which is to be expected since most scholars agree that the Georgian version was based on the Armenian text.<sup>288</sup> There are some differences between the two though: the Georgian subscription adds some material at the beginning (“the end of the letter”)<sup>289</sup>, and then changes the order of the remaining material from the addressee-origin-carrier format of the Armenian subscription, to origin-addressee-carrier. The Georgian version also structures the mention of the church in Colossae in a manner closer to the Euthalian witness (“The church in Colossae”) than to the Armenian rendering (“The church of the Colossians”). But, generally speaking, it is observable that the Georgian and Armenian subscriptions to Philemon are very similar to each other, and both closely related to the traditions captured in the 4<sup>th</sup> century text of Euthalius.<sup>290</sup> These ancient versions affirm the basic elements we have seen so far in the Onesimus episode: Phlm was sent from Rome to Philemon, and was carried by Onesimus – a house servant.

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<sup>287</sup> There are a few minor differences: the omission of the article before “Onesimus” (Ὀνησίμου) in the Armenian version, the omission of the article before “deacon” (διάκονον) in the Armenian version, and the slightly different phrasing “Church of the Colossians” (τῆς Κολοσσέων ἐκκλησίας) in the Armenian text, as opposed to “The Church in Colossae” (τῆς ἐν Κολασσαῖς ἐκκλησίας) from the Euthalian text.

<sup>288</sup> See footnote 259

<sup>289</sup> τέλος τῆς ἐπιστολῆς

<sup>290</sup> See footnote 254

There are also some Greek manuscripts of Philemon from the 5<sup>th</sup> century, texts that were more conservative in what they included in their subscriptions. For example,

C: To Philemon<sup>291</sup>

048<sup>vid.</sup>: To Philemon, written from Rome<sup>292</sup>

Here we have in Codex Ephraemi (C) the simple addressee format that we saw in the 4<sup>th</sup> century text of Codex Sinaiticus. In 048, a manuscript of unclear provenance, we find a subscription with only the addressee and origin, a unique attestation thus far.

Concerning Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians, the 5<sup>th</sup> century subscriptions mainly contain the addressee, with an occasional origin:

A: To the Philippians<sup>293</sup>

To the Colossians from Rome<sup>294</sup>

To the Ephesians<sup>295</sup>

C: To the Colossians<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα

<sup>292</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα ἐγράφει ἀπὸ Ῥώμης

<sup>293</sup> πρὸς Φιλιππησίους

<sup>294</sup> πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς ἀπὸ Ῥώμης

<sup>295</sup> πρὸς Ἐφεσίους

What is remarkable about Codex Alexandrinus (A) is its lack of uniformity – curiously adding the Roman origin in the case of Colossians, while sticking to the addressee in Philippians and Ephesians. This corresponds to the 4<sup>th</sup> century traditions that indicated Rome as the place from which Colossians was sent. Since it appears that Codex Alexandrinus' preferred form for the subscriptions includes only the addressee and not the point of origin (as is the case for Philippians and Ephesians), the mention of Rome as the place where Paul composed Colossians indicates that the scribe must have some other, non-literary reason for including the letter's point of origin. That may indicate a common knowledge that Colossians was written from Rome, which the scribe chose to include.

Codex Ephraemi (C) also has the simple addressee in the subscription to Colossians. The endings of Ephesians and Philippians are missing from the manuscript, so we cannot know for sure if the subscriptional format would have been the same.

It is notable that the carriers do not appear at all in the 5<sup>th</sup> century subscriptions to these three PL's, since the 4<sup>th</sup> century traditions about the carriers of these letters included in minuscule 1739 had been disseminated. As stated earlier, the subscriptions tended to grow over time, but this is an example of a more laconic subscription at a later date (when there was apparently more information available).

The data in the 6<sup>th</sup> century is limited (in the critical editions of the Greek New Testament) to Codex Claromontanus (D<sup>P</sup>):

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<sup>296</sup> πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς

D<sup>P</sup>:           Fulfilled to Philemon<sup>297</sup>  
                  Fulfilled to the Philippians<sup>298</sup>  
                  Fulfilled to the Colossians<sup>299</sup>  
                  To the Ephesians<sup>300</sup>

In this “Western” text, a slightly more theologically-loaded term “fulfilled” is used with the addressee, rather than the more common language of being “sent.” The fulfilled language, however, is curiously omitted in the case of the letter to the Ephesians. These texts simply confirm that Philemon was the recipient of Phlm.

The data in the 7<sup>th</sup> century is limited to Phlm.<sup>301</sup> In this period we have the Syriac Harclean version (syr<sup>h</sup>) containing a subscription to Philemon that might be considered a hybrid of what was found in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Syriac Peshitta and Armenian version:

syr<sup>h</sup>:           The letter was completed to Philemon and Apphia, masters of Onesiphorus, and to Archippus a deacon of the church in Colossae, which was written from Rome through the house-servant Onesimus.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα ἐπληρώθη

<sup>298</sup> πρὸς Φιλιππησίους ἐπληρώθη

<sup>299</sup> πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς ἐπληρώθη

<sup>300</sup> πρὸς Ἐφεσίους

<sup>301</sup> The information on the subscriptions to Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians is lacking in the critical editions of the Greek NT, which are the basis of this textual study.

<sup>302</sup> ἐτελέσθη ἡ ἐπιστολὴ πρὸς Φιλήμονα καὶ Ἀπφίαν δεσπότας Ὀνησιφόρου, καὶ πρὸς Ἀρχιππον διάκονον τῆς ἐν Κολασσαῖς ἐκκλησίας, ἣτις ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Ὀνησίμου οἰκέτου



This subscription contains the same language as the Syriac Peshitta (“the letter was completed”), but adds the additional information about Apphia and Archippus, as well as Onesimus’ status as a house-servant. This is clearly related to the expanded information recorded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Euthalian text and the Armenian version (which as I noted was also picked up in the Georgian rendering). Interestingly, in this subscription, *Onesiphorus* is the name of the person over whom Philemon and Apphia are masters. This Onesiphorus does appear in the New Testament (2 Tim. 1:16; 4:19), and with a name so similar to Onesimus, it is understandable that this error would occur. What is incomprehensible, however, is the fact that the correct name Onesimus was allowed to stand at the end of the subscription as the letter-carrier, even identified there as a house-servant. In this subscription, then, there are two servants with similar names.

Our data for the subscriptions in the 8<sup>th</sup> century is limited and uniform. The only subscription reported in the critical editions of the Greek NT for those years is Codex Athous Dionysiou (Ψ). In all of the Prison Letters, this codex reports simply the addressee:

Ψ:            To Philemon<sup>303</sup>  
                  To the Philippians<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα

<sup>304</sup> πρὸς Φιλιππησίους

To the Colossians<sup>305</sup>

To the Ephesians<sup>306</sup>

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the subscriptions to Phlm include all previously-seen varieties: (1) the addressee (2) the addressee and origin, and (3) the addressee, origin, and carrier.

33: To Philemon<sup>307</sup>

P: To Philemon, written from Rome<sup>308</sup>

K: To Philemon, written from Rome, through the house-servant Onesimus<sup>309</sup>

L: To Philemon and Apphia, masters of Onesimus and to Archippus the deacon of the Church in Colossae, written from Rome, through Tychicus and Onesimus the house-servant.<sup>310</sup>

In 33, we have a high-quality witness that has been dubbed “The Queen of the Cursives.”<sup>311</sup> It is characterized as Alexandrian, but with some Koine or Byzantine

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<sup>305</sup> πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς

<sup>306</sup> πρὸς Ἐφεσίους

<sup>307</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα

<sup>308</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα ἐγράφει ἀπὸ Ῥώμης

<sup>309</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Ὀνησίμου οἰκέτου

<sup>310</sup> πρὸς Φιλήμονα καὶ Ἀπφίαν δεσπότας τοῦ Ὀνησίμου καὶ πρὸς Ἀρχιππον τὸν διάκονον τῆς ἐν Κολοσσαῖς ἐκκλησίας ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Τύχικου καὶ Ὀνησίμου οἰκέτου

influences in Paul.<sup>312</sup> With regard to the subscription, however, the simple “To Philemon” is exactly what we saw in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ). In the Byzantine Codex Porphyrianus (P), the simple addressee and origin is worded in exactly the same way as the subscription in manuscript 048 from the 5<sup>th</sup> century (and similar to the format of Codex Vaticanus (B<sup>1</sup>) as will be shown below with the evidence from the other PL’s).

Another Byzantine manuscript, Codex Cyprius (K), exhibits characteristics of the early-Egyptian witnesses in the wording “To Philemon, written from Rome...through Onesimus” (cop<sup>bo</sup>, Euthalius<sup>ms</sup>, picked up by the Syrian, Ethiopic, Armenian and Georgian versions). Codex Porphyrianus (K) also contains the added detail that Onesimus is a house-servant, something unique to Euthalius and the Armenian and Georgian versions. Codex Porphyrianus (K), however, is the only place where this detail about Onesimus’ status is included without the expanded material on Apphia and Tychicus.

The last significant 9<sup>th</sup> century subscription to Philemon is found in Codex Regius (L). The subscription to this edition of Philemon is an apt illustration of how the component parts of the subscriptions started to become mixed and matched in the later years. For example, the expanded information about Apphia, Archippus, and Onesimus in Codex Regius was present in the Euthalian witness, as well as in the

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<sup>311</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament; Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York,: Oxford University Press, 1964), 62.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

Armenian, Georgian, and Harclean Syriac versions.<sup>313</sup> Codex Regius also adds another carrier in this subscription: Tychicus. This addition is seen only in the 4<sup>th</sup> century tradition captured in minuscule 1739.<sup>314</sup> It seems that Codex Regius (L) draws upon a variety of subscriptional components found in the early-Egyptian witnesses. This is not necessarily surprising, though, seeing that Codex Regius frequently agrees with the Alexandrian text-type represented by Codex Vaticanus (B\*<sup>315</sup>).

As far as Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians, there was a lot of variety in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The most significant development in this century is the explicit mention of Paul in some of the subscriptions, a component not yet attested. There are six manuscripts with subscriptions in this century:

- 33:            To the Philippians<sup>316</sup>  
                  To the Colossians<sup>317</sup>  
                  To the Ephesians<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> They all refer to Philemon and Apphia as “masters of Onesimus” and to Archippus as “the deacon” of the Church in Colossae.

<sup>314</sup> 1739 reads *To Philemon, written from Rome, through Tychicus and Onesimus*

<sup>315</sup> Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 54.

<sup>316</sup> πρὸς Φιλιππησίους

<sup>317</sup> πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς

<sup>318</sup> πρὸς Ἐφεσίους

- P: To the Colossians, written from Rome<sup>319</sup>  
To the Ephesians, written from Rome<sup>320</sup>
- K: To the Philippians, written from Rome through Epaphroditus<sup>321</sup>  
To the Colossians, written from Rome, through Tychicus and Onesimus<sup>322</sup>  
To the Ephesians, written from Rome, through Tychicus<sup>323</sup>
- L: A letter from the holy apostle Paul to the Philippians, written from Rome through Epaphroditus<sup>324</sup>  
A letter from the holy Paul to the Colossians, from Rome, through Tychicus and Onesimus<sup>325</sup>  
This letter was written to the Ephesians, from Rome, through Tychicus.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης

<sup>320</sup> πρὸς Ἐφεσίους ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης

<sup>321</sup> πρὸς Φιλιππησίους ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης δι' Ἐπαφροδίτου

<sup>322</sup> πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Τυχικοῦ καὶ Ὀνησίμου

<sup>323</sup> πρὸς Ἐφεσίους ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Τυχικοῦ

<sup>324</sup> τοῦ ἁγίου ἀποστόλου Παύλου ἐπιστολὴ πρὸς Φιλιππησίους ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ῥώμης δι' Ἐπαφροδίτου

<sup>325</sup> τοῦ ἁγίου Παύλου ἐπιστολὴ πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Τυχικοῦ καὶ Ὀνησίμου

<sup>326</sup> ἐγράφη ἢ ἐπιστολὴ αὕτη ἢ πρὸς Ἐφεσίους ἀπὸ Ῥώμης διὰ Τυχικοῦ

F, G: It was completed, to the Philippians<sup>327</sup>  
It was completed, to the Colossians<sup>328</sup>  
The letter was completed, to the Ephesians<sup>329</sup>

To begin again with the Queen of the Cursives (33), this simple addressee-only format is exactly what we found in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian witnesses, Codex Sinaiticus (S) and Codex Vaticanus (B\*). With Codex Porphyrianus (P), we only have data for Colossians and Ephesians, whose subscriptions make the simple addition of the origin, “written from Rome.” This is the format of the 4<sup>th</sup> century first corrector of Codex Vaticanus (B<sup>1</sup>). In Codex Cyprius (K), we have for all three of these PL’s, a verbatim reproduction of the 4<sup>th</sup> century tradition captured in 1739: the addressee-origin-carrier format.

In Codex Regius (L), we encounter our first explicit mention of Paul in the subscriptions. Interestingly, the data presented on Paul is not consistent between the three letters in this codex. The subscription to Philippians calls Paul a “holy apostle.” The subscription to Colossians, however, still identifies Paul as “holy,” but drops the “apostle” title.<sup>330</sup> The subscription to Ephesians in Codex Regius (L), by contrast,

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<sup>327</sup> ἔτελέσθη πρὸς Φιλιππησίους

<sup>328</sup> ἔτελέσθη πρὸς Κολοσσαεῖς

<sup>329</sup> ἔτελέσθη ἐπιστολὴ πρὸς Ἐφεσίους

<sup>330</sup> There is another manuscript of Colossians from the same century (0278) that follows the general format of Codex Regius (L), and it does include the title of “apostle” after Paul’s name.

does not mention Paul's name at all.<sup>331</sup> For these three letters, the component parts of the rest of the subscription (addressee, origin, carrier) are the same as that of the 4<sup>th</sup> century tradition found in 1739. It is a curious fact, though, that within Codex Regius (L), the identification of Paul as the author appears in the subscriptions to Philippians and Colossians, but not in the subscriptions to Phlm and Ephesians.

Finally, Western witnesses Codex Augiensis (F) and Codex Boernerianus (G) record for all three letters the “completion” language found in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Syriac Peshitta and Ethiopic version of the subscription. As far as the rest of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the only other remarkable subscription is the unique origin of Philippians recorded in minuscule 945: Athens.<sup>332</sup> From the 10<sup>th</sup> century onward, most of the subscriptions are merely variations on the themes laid out above.<sup>333</sup>

After the foregoing cascade of textual data, some summary comments are in order. It appears that the raw materials for most of the subscriptions were live in 4<sup>th</sup> century Egypt (addressee, origin, carrier).<sup>334</sup> This is not to say that the material *originated* in Egypt, but simply that it was out there, being affixed to Christian texts (and probably influencing later subscriptions). In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, we can observe these early component parts appearing in other areas and dialects, and being packaged

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<sup>331</sup> Similar to Colossians, the subscription to Ephesians in the related manuscript 0278 does include the name of Paul, calling him an “apostle.”

<sup>332</sup> πρὸς Φιλιππησίους ἐγράφει ἐξ Ἀθηνῶν

<sup>333</sup> There are some medieval manuscripts of Philemon that add interesting data, including more detail about Paul, Timothy and Onesimus (42.390), as well as a manuscript that calls Onesimus a “fugitive” (φυγάδος) rather than the typical “house-servant” (οἰκέτης) designation (1881).

<sup>334</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian texts are **Ν** B\* B<sup>1</sup> 1739 cop<sup>bo</sup> cop<sup>fay</sup> and Euthalius<sup>ms</sup>.

with slightly different phrasing and in somewhat different orders. In the case of Phlm, this data appears to the south in Ethiopia, to the northeast in Syria, and then even further north and east in Armenia and Georgia. The 5<sup>th</sup> century Syriac Peshitta and Ethiopic versions match the 4<sup>th</sup> century Bohairic Coptic edition, and the Armenian and Georgian versions present the same information found in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Euthalian text of Phlm. The subscriptions in the following centuries reach their climax in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, a time in which the component parts of these subscriptions appear in a wide variety of combinations, languages, and text types. This is also the century in which Paul's name first appears in the subscriptions.

In terms of the substance of the subscriptions, the main components exhibit little or no variance. All of the subscriptions that contain an addressee agree on the identity of that addressee: those mentioned in the greeting of the letter (or traditionally associated with the letter in the case of Ephesians). There were no novel contenders for the addressee within the subscriptions. Likewise, if a subscription contained information about origin, that origin was Rome.<sup>335</sup> Thirdly, if the carrier(s) were listed in the subscription (each being different depending on the letter), those carriers were evident in the letters themselves. There do exist slight variations within the manuscript tradition of each letter as to who carried it, but whether there was one carrier or two, both individuals were mentioned in the letter itself or another related

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<sup>335</sup> The only departure from the Roman origin is found in the anomalous 9<sup>th</sup> century manuscript that suggests the letter to the Philippians came from Athens.



letter and identified there as a potential carrier.<sup>336</sup> It appears that the early-Christian communities behind these subscriptions did not have trouble taking the data from the letters at face value.

With regard to Onesimus and his specific situation, the subscriptional data affirms that Onesimus was a house servant (οἰκέτης), and that he carried both Phlm and Colossians with Tychicus from Rome to Colossae. It also states that Philemon and Apphia were both Onesimus' masters, and that Archippus was the deacon of the church in Colossae. The sum total of the subscriptional content affirms this basic historical sketch.

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<sup>336</sup> The main example of a carrier identified in another letter is Tychicus being mentioned as a carrier of Philemon, when he is not mentioned in that letter, but linked as a carrier with Onesimus in Col 4:7-9.

## Conclusions

What have we learned about Onesimus in this chapter? The following pieces of evidence are established by multiple ancient sources including Colossians, ancient Christian writers, and the manuscript subscriptions:

1. Onesimus was a slave.<sup>337</sup>
2. Onesimus was probably a house-servant (οἰκέτης).<sup>338</sup>
3. Onesimus lived in Colossae.<sup>339</sup>
4. Onesimus' master was named Philemon.<sup>340</sup>
5. Onesimus was a fugitive slave.<sup>341</sup>
6. Onesimus probably stole something from Philemon when he ran away.<sup>342</sup>
7. Onesimus became a Christian under Paul's influence.<sup>343</sup>
8. The location of Paul's imprisonment was probably Rome.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Marcionite prologue to Phlm, Apostolic Constitutions, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Chyrostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrhus.

<sup>338</sup> Apostolic Constitutions, MS subscriptions (arm, geo, syr<sup>h</sup>, K, L)

<sup>339</sup> Colossians 1:2 and 4:9; Theodoret of Cyrhus, MS subscriptions (Euthalius<sup>ms</sup>, arm, geo, syr<sup>h</sup>, L)

<sup>340</sup> Marcionite prologue to Phlm, Athansius, Basil of Caesarea, Chyrsostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, MS subscriptions (Euthalius<sup>ms</sup>, arm, geo, syr<sup>h</sup>, K, L).

<sup>341</sup> Basil of Caesarea, Origen via Jerome, Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrhus

<sup>342</sup> Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrhus

<sup>343</sup> Basil of Caesarea, Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrhus

<sup>344</sup> Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrhus, MS subscriptions (1739, cop<sup>bo</sup>, Euthalius<sup>ms</sup>, B<sup>1</sup>, syr<sup>p</sup>, eth, arm, geo, 048<sup>vid</sup>, A, syr<sup>h</sup>, P, K, L)

9. Onesimus probably carried Phlm and Colossians from Rome to Colossae.<sup>345</sup>

10. Tychicus accompanied Onesimus on the journey from Rome to Colossae.<sup>346</sup>

This marks the end of the ancient data that we have for Onesimus. He is not specifically mentioned in any other ancient writings. From this point forward, I will examine the typical experience of slaves in the Roman Empire, and the legal and logistical challenges they faced as they lived out their lives in servitude. I will pay special attention to the conditions that slaves faced when they decided to run away from their masters. This historical data will help complete the picture of what Onesimus probably faced in his flight from Philemon to Paul, and make it clear that the *Amicus Domini* theory does not effectively explain the background of Phlm.

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<sup>345</sup> MS subscriptions (1739, cop<sup>bo</sup>, Euthalius<sup>ms</sup>, syr<sup>p</sup>, eth, arm, geo, syr<sup>h</sup>, K, L)

<sup>346</sup> Colossians 4:7-9; MS subscriptions (1739, L)

## CHAPTER FOUR: SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN WORLD (Part One)

Roman society was incredibly stratified, with slaves occupying the lowest rank. This was a reflection of the social reality in the broader ancient Mediterranean world. At the top of society were the nobles (e.g. senators and equestrians), followed by the public officials, and the freeborn Roman citizens. After that were the freed slaves, many of whom were also Roman citizens. The bottom of the social pyramid was occupied by the mob of slaves.<sup>347</sup> Blümner summarizes the social situation with regard to slavery: “All the social and economic conditions of antiquity are based on the institution of slavery...”<sup>348</sup>

Estimates of the number of slaves in the Roman Empire vary widely, but they all attest to the fact that a sizeable percentage of people living during the early principate were slaves. For example, Galen of Pergamum, the famous 2<sup>nd</sup> century

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<sup>347</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>348</sup> Hugo Blümner, *The Home Life of the Ancient Greeks* (New York,: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966), 519.

physician and philosopher, estimated the number of slaves in his home town to be roughly 40,000 out of a total population of 120,000.<sup>349</sup>

One cannot assume that 33% of the inhabitants of all cities were slaves, but scholarly estimates range from 20% all the way up to 50%. This reality is further illustrated by the extant material evidence. Carcopino notes that “an epigraphist walking through the ruins of ancient Rome receives the impression that slaves and freedman predominated in the life of the imperial epoch, for three times out of four they alone are mentioned in the inscriptions which are still to be read on the walls.”<sup>350</sup> Brunt adds that an examination of epitaphs in Rome indicates that of people who worked as jewelers and goldsmiths, 35% were slaves, 58% were freedman, and only 7% were freely born.<sup>351</sup>

Perhaps the most poignant illustration of the number of slaves who walked the streets of the Roman Empire is found in one of Seneca’s works. Writing in the first century, Seneca wrote “A proposal was once made in the senate to distinguish slaves from free men by their dress; it then became apparent how great would be the impending danger if our slaves should begin to count our number.”<sup>352</sup> There were so

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<sup>349</sup> *Opera Omnia, De Cogn. Curand. Animi Morbis* 9. C.f. W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1955), 87.

<sup>350</sup> Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 61.

<sup>351</sup> P. A. Brunt, "The Roman Mob," *Past & Present* no. 35 (1966): 15a.

<sup>352</sup> *Dicta est aliquando a senatu sententia, ut servos a liberis cultus distingueret ; deinde apparuit, quantum periculum immineret, si servi nostri numerare nos coepissent.* Seneca, *Moral Essays, with an English Translation* (Trans. John William Basore; New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), 420-421.

many slaves in Rome, it would be dangerous to the ruling elite for the slaves to know how numerous they were in comparison to the free population.

All of this serves to illustrate that a very large percentage of the Roman Empire was made up of slaves. In that sense, Onesimus' life was unremarkable. His lot in life was the same as many millions of other people during that time. In the words of Robert Garland, Onesimus' reality was an "indisputable fact of life" in the Roman Empire.<sup>353</sup> While slavery had been a reality for centuries, there is evidence that it was especially rampant during the period of Onesimus' servitude. Reginald Barrow writes, "Luxury in slaves and cruelty in the treatment of them reached their climax sometime between Augustus and Nero."<sup>354</sup>

In addition to the view that slaves were a necessary part of the economic structure of the Roman Empire, owning slaves was both a status symbol, and a way to project power.<sup>355</sup> Wealthy citizens of the empire could use slaves to show off their prosperity and power without having to take aim at the free poor for that purpose.<sup>356</sup> Seneca, an incredibly wealthy man, wrote that there was a "mob of well-groomed

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<sup>353</sup> Robert Garland, *Daily Life of the Ancient Greeks* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2009), 105.

<sup>354</sup> Reginald Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), 43.

<sup>355</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 9.

<sup>356</sup> Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 112.

slaves to be found in every rich house.”<sup>357</sup> He also wrote that traveling with only one cartload of slaves was traveling “simply and roughly.”<sup>358</sup>

The relationship between slaves and masters certainly resonated with the words of Euripides centuries earlier: “This is what it means to be a slave: to be abused and bear it, compelled by violence to suffer wrong.”<sup>359</sup> Not only did slaves live their daily lives in a climate of abuse, they did so under a cloud of hopelessness. In 200 BCE, Plautus put the following words into a slave character in one of his plays: “It’s no fun being a slave. And it’s not just the work, but knowing that you’re a slave, and that nothing can change it.”<sup>360</sup>

Some modern scholars inexplicably apologize for slavery in the Roman Empire, romanticizing the Romans and minimizing the brutal reality of slavery. For example, A.J. Raymer writes, “The evolution of the idea of slavery in the thought of the Graeco-Roman world exhibits a slow development from the old Roman belief in complete subordination of a lower social element to a new level of humanitarianism.”<sup>361</sup> It is hard to imagine many slaves in the Roman Empire viewing their situation as humane or charitable.

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid, 25

<sup>358</sup> W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, 88.

<sup>359</sup> Euripides, *Hecuba* 331-32. Cf. Victoria Cuffel, "The Classical Greek Concept of Slavery," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 3 (1966): 329.

<sup>360</sup> Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 99.

<sup>361</sup> A. J. Raymer, "Slavery--the Graeco-Roman Defence," *Greece & Rome* 10, no. 28 (1940): 17.

## Philosophy of Slavery

In the ancient Mediterranean world, slavery was not originally thought of as something inherent to nature and society. According to Robert Schlaifer, “In Homeric times...the slave was thought of as an ordinary human being who had simply had the misfortune of falling under the domination of a master.”<sup>362</sup> As time went on, however, Greek notions of superiority began to take shape, especially in the wake of the wars with the so-called “barbarians” from the East.

Many slaves were acquired through the Greek wars with the Persians, and the view that the conquered barbarians were inferior to the Greeks extended to the slave population that was taken from their ranks. As a result, philosophers and writers began to view slaves in classical Greece as inferior by nature. Paul Cartledge writes that slavery “was the governing paradigm of human worth in classical Greek antiquity, affecting not only economics and politics but also...interpersonal relationship between the sexes.”<sup>363</sup> This view of course influenced the later Greek and Roman view of slavery, which was fully-formed by the first century CE.

Aristotle was the earliest Greek thinker to conceive of slavery as one of the inherent building blocks of society.<sup>364</sup> In his work, *Politics*, Aristotle presents slaves as

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<sup>362</sup> Robert Schlaifer, "Greek Theories of Slavery from Homer to Aristotle," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 47 (1936): 201.

<sup>363</sup> Paul Cartledge, "The Greeks and Anthropology," *Anthropology Today* 10, no. 3 (1994): 5.

<sup>364</sup> Carolyn and David Balch Osiek, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 74. Paul Cartledge adds that “Aristotle, systematizer of all the then recognized branches of learning and knowledge, pointedly did not write on ‘economics.’ For him, as for Xenophon before him and all ancient writers after him, oikonomia meant first and foremost the management of the private household (oikos).” (Paul Cartledge, "Political Economy of Greek Slavery," in *Money, Labour and Land: Approaches to the Economies of Ancient*



an integral part of family structures as well as the broader society. For Aristotle, slaves are thought of as “animate instruments.”<sup>365</sup> This is a designation that is similar to the way that domestic animals were viewed, something akin to a living tool. This is a striking example of how the Greeks and Romans viewed slaves as being fundamentally less than human.

Paul Cartledge offers a scathing critique of Aristotle’s view, writing “Aristotle’s doctrine of natural slavery is a vain attempt to rationalize – i.e. give a pseudo-philosophical veneer to what was in fact thoroughly conventional prejudice – his unshakeable conviction and major political premise, that the good life for mankind, which he identified with civilized life in the Greek *polis*, had to be based on slavery.”<sup>366</sup> Some argue that slavery was such an entrenched part of Greco-Roman society, that it was impossible for people to imagine it any other way. That is simply not the case.<sup>367</sup> There were indeed opponents of slavery in the ancient world, but they were few and far between (and often anonymous).<sup>368</sup>

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*Greece* (ed. Paul Cartledge; New York: Routledge, 2002), 157.).

<sup>365</sup> Yvon Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece* (trans. Lloyd; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 138.

<sup>366</sup> Paul Cartledge, "Like a Worm I' the Bud? A Heterology of Classical Greek Slavery," *Greece & Rome* 40, no. 2 (1993): 171-172.

<sup>367</sup> Cf. Theresa Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 78.

<sup>368</sup> Aristotle writes “There are others... who regard the control of slaves by a master as contrary to nature. In their view the distinction of master and slave is due to law or convention (*nomos*); there is no natural (*physei*) difference between them; the relation of master and slave is based on force, and being so has no warrant in justice.” *Politics* 1253b 20-23, cf. Guiseppe Cambiano, "Aristotle and the Anonymous Opponents of Slavery," in *Classical Slavery* (ed. Finley; London: Frank Cass & Co., 1987), 22.

Varro echoed Aristotle's sentiment, writing "Now I turn to the means by which land is tilled. Some divide these into two parts: men, and those aids to men...others into three: the class of instruments which is articulate, the inarticulate, and the mute; the articulate comprising slaves, the inarticulate comprising cattle, and the mute comprising vehicles."<sup>369</sup> This latter view of slaves is manifested in a common word that was used for them in many ancient sources: ἀνδράποδον, which essentially means a "thing with the feet of a man." This word is an appalling snapshot of how slaves were viewed in the ancient world. Garland said it best, writing that ἀνδράποδον was "as dehumanizing a definition as could be devised."<sup>370</sup>

In view of the fact that slaves were considered to be less than human, it is no surprise that many people viewed slavery as a form of social death.<sup>371</sup> This social death played out in a variety of ways, including physical abuse, separation from family, and the lack of access to legal protections. Sandra Joshel comments that "the slave, whether a captive seized in war or a person born into slavery in Rome, was seen as an outsider...slave men and women lived their lives inside of Roman society, but that society, like other slave societies, defined them as socially dead."<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Varro, *On Agriculture* 1.17.1. Marcus Terentius Varro, et al., *Marcus Porcius Cato, on Agriculture; Marcus Terentius Varro* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard university press, 1934). Cf. Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 112.

<sup>370</sup> Robert Garland, *Daily Life of the Ancient Greeks*, 109. It may be analogous to "footman."

<sup>371</sup> G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World : From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 135.

<sup>372</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 38.

Despite the fact that slaves had no power in the Roman Empire, their presence weighed heavily on the minds of their masters at all times and in all places. Often this preoccupation took the form of paranoia. Because the slaves were viewed as less than human, they were seen as lacking virtue and integrity. As a result, slaves were generally viewed as intrinsically untrustworthy. The Athenian playwright Aristophanes played on this paranoid sentiment in his work *The Frogs*. In that work, he composed a dialogue between slaves that a master might imagine them having in private:

Aeacus: I'm absolutely thrilled when I can curse my master behind his back.

Xanthias: What about grumbling as you're going outside after being beaten?

Aeacus: That's great!

Xanthias: What about not minding your own business?

Aeacus: That's terrific!

Xanthias: You're a man after my own heart. What about eavesdropping when he's having a private conversation?

Aeacus: That's enough to drive me wild with delight!

Xanthias: What about gossiping to your friends about what you discover? Do you like that?

Aeacus: Do I like it? By Zeus, that's enough to make me wet my knickers!<sup>373</sup>

This exchange is emblematic of the lack of trust that existed between masters and their slaves. Vogt summarizes the perspective of ancient slave masters, writing

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<sup>373</sup> Lines 746-753 (Robert Garland, *Daily Life of the Ancient Greeks*, 109).

that they considered their slaves to be “false and uncooperative, lying and treacherous, and always intending to run away.”<sup>374</sup> The upper class of Roman society needed slaves to establish and maintain their rank and lifestyle, but they loathed the slaves that served them and enabled them to sustain that social standing. The perpetual dehumanizing of the slave population led to a disdain of them by the elite. It was natural, of course, for slaves to resent their masters, so the animosity was mutual. On this reciprocal acrimony, Hopkins writes, “The hostility of Roman slave owners to their slaves, and of slaves to their owners, lay just below the surface of Roman civilization like an unexploded volcano.”<sup>375</sup>

With that brief survey of the philosophical and social underpinning of slavery, let us turn our attention to how people became slaves in the first place.

### **Sources of Slaves**

Prior to the time of Caesar Augustus, war was the primary source of slavery. It was common practice that defeated enemies and their families would become slaves of the victors. It is the way the world worked. On this reality, the sixth century BCE Ephesian Greek philosopher Hericlitus made the simple statement, “War makes some slaves and others free.”<sup>376</sup> Xenophon echoed the same sentiment, writing “The victor can lay his hands on everything at once, men, women, their property, and all their

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<sup>374</sup> Joseph Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 129.

<sup>375</sup> Keith Hopkins, "Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery," *Past & Present* no. 138 (1993): 5.

<sup>376</sup> Yvon Garlan, "War, Piracy and Slavery in the Greek World," in *Classical Slavery* (ed. Finley; London: Frank Cass & Co., 1987), 8.

land...it is a universal and eternal law that in a city taken during a war everything, including persons and property, belongs to the victor.”<sup>377</sup> There are numerous references to this practice in Josephus as well. One, for example, reads “Ptolemy fell upon Asochis, a city of Galilee, and took it by force on the Sabbath day, and there he took about ten thousand slaves, and a great deal of other prey.”<sup>378</sup>

Taking slaves during conquest was not only about a labor sources. It was yet another way of emphasizing one’s power and projecting it upon others. Barrow nicely summarizes the practice: “To enslave an enemy rather than to slay him was a device to reap his labour, but it was also a way of enjoying a perpetual triumph over him.”<sup>379</sup>

With the advent of Pax Romana, centuries of warfare came to a close. The widespread practice of acquiring large numbers of slaves through battle came to a screeching halt. This dramatic shift, however, did not curtail the social desire and perceived need for slaves. As a result, the source of slaves in the Mediterranean world changed dramatically. After Augustus’ triumph and the establishment of the empire, birth became the primary way into a life as a slave. According to Walter Scheidel, birth into slavery generated more new slaves than all other means combined.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid. This philosophy is repeated by Aristotle in *Politics* 1255a5-7

<sup>378</sup> *Ant.* 13:337. Another instructive example is Titus’ defeat of Jerusalem in 70 CE. In *War* 6:418, Josephus writes “Titus also sent a great number into the provinces, as a present to them, that they might be killed in their theatres, by the sword and by the wild beasts; but those who were under seventeen years of age were sold for slaves.” (Flavius Josephus. *The Works of Josephus*. Trans. Whiston. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987.)

<sup>379</sup> Reginald Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire*, 2.

<sup>380</sup> Walter Scheidel, "Quantifying the Sources of Slaves in the Early Roman Empire," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (1997): 156.)

If an individual was born to a mother who was a slave, then that person was a slave. The legal status of the father was irrelevant. If a child was abandoned by his or her parents at birth (a practice called exposure), the child almost always ended up being sold into slavery. Whether a child was born to a slave mother or exposed by free parents, the young slave knew nothing of freedom.<sup>381</sup>

Regardless of how one came to be a slave in the first place, the slave trade was the largest mover of slaves throughout the empire. It was a massive and extremely profitable industry, with tens of thousands of slaves sold on a daily basis throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>382</sup> In addition to the typical sale by slave owners, slave traders acquired their merchandise through other means such as piracy, kidnapping, criminal judgment in the courts, and the abandonment of children by their parents.<sup>383</sup>

According to Stambaugh, "slave dealers on the fringes of the empire, and even in the central areas of Asia Minor like Phrygia, Lydia and Caria, probably maintained their stocks through raids."<sup>384</sup>

There was also a way for women and her children to become slaves voluntarily. In 52 CE the Roman Senate mandated that any free woman who

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<sup>381</sup> Frederick Thompson, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Duckworth in association with The Society of Antiquaries of London, 2003), 34.

<sup>382</sup> A. B. Bosworth, "Vespasian and the Slave Trade," *The Classical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2002): 354.

<sup>383</sup> Zvi Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988), 1.

<sup>384</sup> John E. Stambaugh, *The Ancient Roman City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 96.

voluntarily took up residence with a slave in spite of the objections of that slave's master would be considered a slave of that master along with her children.<sup>385</sup>

Generally speaking, the eastern part of the Roman Empire provided the most slaves, a practice that had its roots in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE conflicts between Greece and Persia as well as Alexander's later conquest of the East. Greek xenophobia and notions of the "barbarian east" were long-established prejudices, and heavily influenced the practice and sources of the slave trade.<sup>386</sup> Asia Minor was known to be a particularly prolific source of slaves for the empire, with the slave trade industry operating widely and effectively all over that region.<sup>387</sup>

Within Asia Minor, Ephesus was an especially important center of the slave trade.<sup>388</sup> Sandra Joshel includes it in her list of the larger slave markets in the Roman world: Byzantium, Delos, and Ephesus.<sup>389</sup> Delos, an island in the middle of the Aegean Sea was within a days' journey of Ephesus, and had an almost mythical reputation in the slave trade. Concerning Delos, Strabo wrote that the island could

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<sup>385</sup> Carolyn and David Balch Osiek, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, 78.

<sup>386</sup> Reginald Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire*, 16.

<sup>387</sup> Mary L. Gordon, "The Nationality of Slaves under the Early Roman Empire," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 14 (1924): 94. Cf. William V. Harris, "Towards a Study of the Roman Slave Trade," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 36 (1980): 122.

<sup>388</sup> Frederick Thompson, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Slavery*, 42. Cf. Mary L. Gordon, "The Nationality of Slaves under the Early Roman Empire," 94.

<sup>389</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 90.

“both admit and send away ten thousand slaves on the same day.”<sup>390</sup> Westermann argues that this figure is “too widely accepted” and that it is a “fantastic idea.”<sup>391</sup> Whatever the case with Delos, the environs of Ephesus, Asia Minor, and the broader eastern portion of the Roman Empire were known to be especially fertile ground for the slave trade.

The sale of slaves took place on a small scale in countless villages across the empire, as well as on a large scale in the bustling agora of metropolitan areas.<sup>392</sup> The slaves were sold as property, and treated as such. They were inspected thoroughly for all sorts of potential defects, as well as visible marks of chronic punishment. Slaves were a sizeable investment, so the laws and procedures governing their sale were quite specific.<sup>393</sup>

Thompson describes the scene of a slave sale, writing that “The slaves were exposed naked on a wooden platform, in the open or in a pen if they were of high value, where their physical appearance could be assessed...a placard might be placed around the neck of the slave, with his name, age and origin, which would then be publicly called out at the moment of sale.”<sup>394</sup> Placards would also indicate whether the

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<sup>390</sup> Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo* (trans. Jones; vol. 6; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 329. Cf. Zvi Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 15.

<sup>391</sup> W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, 37.

<sup>392</sup> Frederick Thompson, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Slavery*, 39.

<sup>393</sup> According to Thompson, the price for a slave during Augustus’ reign was about 500 drachmas for a cheap slave, and 2,000 *denarii* for an educated slave (Ibid, 100).

<sup>394</sup> Ibid, 45



slave was prone to wander, a major concern of most prospective buyers.<sup>395</sup> Slaves might also be forced to demonstrate their physical prowess through a series of tests.<sup>396</sup> Slave traders were known for their dishonesty, and would take whatever steps necessary to present their products in the most positive light possible. They attempted to cover up any physical blemishes or distract buyers from potential medical concerns.<sup>397</sup>

A second-century CE bill of sale from Pamphylia has been discovered, and it is a vivid illustration of how detailed the procedure of buying and selling slaves had become. It features the names of the buyer and seller, the name of the guarantor, the name, age and ethnicity of the slave, the price of the slave, a guarantee of the health and obedience of the slave, and financial consequences if the seller misrepresents the condition of the slave. It reads in part:

...Pamphilos, also called Kanopos, son of Aegyptos, an Alexandrian, has bought in the market place from Artemidoros, son of Aristocles, a slave-girl, Abaskantis, a Galatian by descent, about 10 years of age for the sum of 280 silver denarii, with Marcus Aelius Gavianus acting as guarantor and declaring by personal warrant that the slave-girl is healthy in accord with the edict...not liable to seizure by anyone and likely neither to roam about nor run away and without epilepsy. If any of these apply or she is not healthy or a claim to seizure arises against her or part thereof and is won, then Pamphilos, also called Kanopos has asked in good faith that the double sum be rightfully paid without summons; Artemidoros has agreed to pay it in good faith and that he has received the sum and on his behalf by personal warrant and guarantee

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<sup>395</sup> W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, 99.

<sup>396</sup> Frederick Thompson, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Slavery*, 45.

<sup>397</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 77.

Marcus Aelius Gavianus has declared these things are so. I, Artemidorus, son of Aristocles have sold the slave-girl for 280 denarii...<sup>398</sup>

These sorts of transactions were taking place constantly around the Roman Empire. This 10 year old slave, Abaskantis, was probably a slave from birth like the vast majority of slaves living at that time. That means that either her mother was a slave, or she was abandoned by her parents and picked up as an infant by slave traders. It is likely that she had been permanently separated from her family, or that this bill of sale marked the beginning of that separation.

### **Types of Slaves**

There appears to have been two basic types of slaves in the ancient world, those who worked in the city and belonged to the *familia urbana*, and those who worked in the countryside and belonged to the *familia rustica*.<sup>399</sup> The latter tended to work on large agricultural estates, and fulfilled a variety of responsibilities. Columella, the most important writer on Roman agriculture, wrote in the first century about the

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<sup>398</sup> S.R. Llewelyn, And R.A. Kearsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (vol. 6; North Ryde, N.S.W.: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1992), 48-49.

<sup>399</sup> Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 89. Another type of well-known (yet idiosyncratic) slavery was the Helots who were owned and controlled by the Spartans. In this case, an entire population of people in one location was bound to serve another group of people in a nearby locale. The Helots did all of the daily agricultural and domestic work that allowed the Spartans to focus on their physical training and military exercises. Pausanias described the Helots as "slaves of the Lacedaemonian state" (3.20.6). Cf. Yvon Garlan, "War, Piracy and Slavery in the Greek World," 11.

variety of slave roles in his work *On Agriculture (De Re Rustica)*.<sup>400</sup> A cursory glance at the many roles he identified shows the variety of tasks these slaves fulfilled: *actor* (foreman), *aviarius* (poultry keeper), *faber* (smith, craftsman), *fossor* (digger), *holitor* (gardener), *porculator* (pig breeder), *stabularius* (stable keeper), and *vinitor* (vineyard worker).<sup>401</sup> There were many specialized positions that the slaves belonging to the *familia rustica* fulfilled.

A similar diversity is seen within the slave roles in the *familia urbana*. Within wealthy households, slaves worked as teachers, doctors, hairdressers, bath attendants, room servants, table servants, cooks, gardeners, social organizers, financial agents, and secretaries.<sup>402</sup> The more slaves that a wealthy individual owned, the more specialized the tasks became. Any slave who worked in a household and performed tasks such as these could be described with the common and generic term, *oiketes* (ὀϊκέτης). Both Thucydides and Herodotus used this term as a generic term for household slave.<sup>403</sup>

The *oiketai* were domestic slaves or servants, and as we have already seen, there are several early sources that label Onesimus an *oiketes*. According to Garland, the *oiketai* were “ancient Mediterranean’s ultimate labor-saving device for the home.

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<sup>400</sup> Columella, *On Agriculture*, The Loeb Classical Library (Trans. Harrison Boyd Ash; Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1941).

<sup>401</sup> This list is a representative selection of Joshel’s list (Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 168).

<sup>402</sup> This list is a representative selection of Joshel’s list (Ibid, 183).

<sup>403</sup> John G. Gibbs and Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus' Vocabulary for Slavery," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 76, no. 4 (1986): 294.

They served in practically every capacity.”<sup>404</sup> Because the *oiketai* were in close proximity to their masters on a daily basis, they faced a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they were in a position to grow close to the family and potential cultivate a positive relationship with their master. This could be an incredibly advantageous position. On the other hand, if things were not going well in the home or the *oiketes* committed some sort of infraction, they were on the front lines of facing their master’s wrath.<sup>405</sup> Aristotle wrote about this conundrum for the *oiketai*, saying “We come into collision most with those of our servants whom we employ most often for ordinary attendance.”<sup>406</sup> The risk went both ways, however, because as Gibb notes, “Precisely because of his trusted position, an *oiketes* was in a position to betray his master.”<sup>407</sup>

In the overall hierarchy of slaves within the Roman Empire, the *oiketai* were the large group that occupied the middle.<sup>408</sup> Below them were the slaves condemned to the mines, and they were truly condemned. Their life was one of constant danger, as well as perpetual physical coercion by their overseers. The agricultural slaves and artisan class of slaves were better off than the slaves in the mines, but they were not quite as well-off as the *oiketai*.

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<sup>404</sup> Robert Garland, *Daily Life of the Ancient Greeks* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2009), 108.

<sup>405</sup> Yvon Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece*, 145.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid*, *Politics* 1263a, 19-21.

<sup>407</sup> John G. Gibbs and Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus' Vocabulary for Slavery," 294.

<sup>408</sup> The following hierarchy is taken from Garlan’s work. (Yvon Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece*, 145).

Above the *oiketai* were those owned by wealthy and influential politicians. These slaves were highly-educated, and able to take on large amounts of responsibility, including in some cases running important aspects of governmental administration. This last class of slaves is one of the primary distinguishing factors between ancient Roman slavery and slavery as it was experienced in the American south. Unlike America, according to Hopkins, the Roman world was familiar with the presence of a “clever, talented, and educated slave occupying a position of responsibility, who had a realistic prospect of freedom and the constant image before his or her eyes of other slaves who had themselves achieved freedom.”<sup>409</sup> While some might interpret this as preferable to antebellum American slavery, these high-capacity slaves were still slaves. They still experienced the same lack of rights that every slave faced, and experienced grief on a regular basis because of their misfortune. Furthermore, the very presence of influential, talented slaves who were working toward their liberty caused social friction with those who sought to perpetually keep the slaves in their place.<sup>410</sup>

Slaves were often allowed control of a *peculium*. This was a financial resource (or possibly property) that was delegated by the master to the slave for the slave’s use.<sup>411</sup> While technically owned by the master, the *peculium* “allowed the slave a

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<sup>409</sup> Keith Hopkins, "Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery," 138.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Carolyn and David Balch Osiek, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, 76.

working capital, borrowed from his master.”<sup>412</sup> According to Joshel, the *peculium* “could include cash, real estate, tools, livestock, clothing, food, and even slaves.”<sup>413</sup> The jurist Florentinus wrote about the *peculium*, saying that it was “made up of anything a slave has been able to save by his own economies or has been given by a third party in return for meritorious services or has been allowed by his master to keep as his own.”<sup>414</sup> Slaves used the *peculium* in a variety of ways: to purchase items for their own comfort, to start and run businesses, or even to purchase their own freedom. It is highly probable that many fugitive slaves used the *peculium* in order to finance their flight.

The archaeological evidence of ancient slavery is often found in burial epitaphs.<sup>415</sup> These inscriptions typically provide information about the slaves’ occupations, as well as brief eulogies in some cases. For example, one epitaph reads,

Iucundus, slave of Taurus, litter bearer.  
As long as he lived, he was a man and acted on behalf of himself and others.  
As long as he lived, he lived honorably.  
Callista and Philologus dedicated (this).<sup>416</sup>

The extant epitaphs refer to a whole host of other slave occupations. A slave’s memory was inextricably tied to whatever his or her occupation was while living. In

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<sup>412</sup> Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 125.

<sup>413</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 128.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, Dig 15.1.39

<sup>415</sup> M. George, "Domestic Architecture and Household Relations : Pompeii and Roman Ephesos," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 1 (2004): 14.

<sup>416</sup> Corpus of Latin Inscriptions 6.6308. (Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 112.)

other cases, the epitaphs served as propaganda opportunities for masters. For example, an inscription from Bithynia reads,

In this place Chrestos buried aged Italos;  
He wept for his faithful slave when he died.  
In return for Italos' good life and industrious servitude,  
Chrestos fulfilled these sacred rites for him as a favor.<sup>417</sup>

In this case, Chrestos leveraged Italos' death as an opportunity to establish a permanent monument to his own character on the epitaph. On this common practice, Llewelyn writes "Many inscriptions were either erected or approved by the slave's master and as such were written from his perspective and function as much to cultivate his own image as to commemorate the deceased."<sup>418</sup>

### **Daily Life of Slaves**

The experience of slaves in the ancient world varied depending on the type of slave, the nature of their work, and the disposition of their master.<sup>419</sup> Within this diversity, however, there were also many things that virtually all slaves experienced or at least anticipated experiencing throughout their lives.

Any slave who worked in a household or on a farm was a part of the master's *familia*. This word does not exactly equate to the English word *family*, but rather it

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<sup>417</sup> G.H.R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (vol. 3; North Ryde, N.S.W.: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1983), 39.

<sup>418</sup> S.R. Llewelyn, And R.A. Kearsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (vol. 6; North Ryde, N.S.W.: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1992), 52.

<sup>419</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 131.

referred to “all persons and objects under the legal power (*patria potestas*) of the male head of the family.”<sup>420</sup> The head of the family, known as the *paterfamilias*, had absolute authority over his household, and that was a status affirmed and maintained by a myriad of Roman and provincial statutes. He ruled over his wife, children, and slaves. A slave was under the total control of the *paterfamilias*, and a slave could never be a *paterfamilias*.<sup>421</sup> The *familia* was the basic unit of society in that world, and slaves occupied the bottom part of it.

The name of the slave was the most immediate and repeatedly reinforced aspect of his or her identity that differentiated them from the rest of the *familia*. Richard Saller comments that “Proper names of household members tended to mark slave from free. For males, the *tria nomina* was a jealously guarded prerogative of Roman citizens...By contrast, slaves of the household had a single name that was quite different from the family name. Slaves characteristically were given Greek names or names implying ridicule such as Felix or ‘lucky.’”<sup>422</sup> We have already seen that Onesimus’ name meant “useful”, which is a perfect example of this reality. In

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<sup>420</sup> Carolyn and David Balch Osiek, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 10. Cf. Richard P. Saller, "Familia, Domus", and the Roman Conception of the Family," *Phoenix* 38, no. 4 (1984): 343.

<sup>421</sup> Max Radin, "A Glimpse of Roman Law," *The Classical Journal* 45, no. 2 (1949): 74. On the totalitarian control of the *paterfamilias* over the slave, Yavetz writes, “The *paterfamilias* had unrestricted rule over the slave, who was likely to be whipped, killed, or sold off. He had no proper name, and the appellations of early slaves reflect their dependent status.” (Zvi Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome*, 1.)

<sup>422</sup> Richard Saller, "The Hierarchical Household in Roman Society: A Study of Domestic Slavery," in *Serfdom and Slavery: Studies in Legal Bondage* (ed. Bush; New York: Longman, 1996), 116. Cf. Richard Saller, "Symbols of Gender and Status Hierarchies in the Roman Household," in *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture: Differential Equations* (ed. Murnaghan; New York: Routledge, 1998), 86.



addition to these individualized nicknames, there was a demeaning label that was applied to virtually all slaves on a daily basis: *puer* (boy).<sup>423</sup>

In the same way that names reinforced the hierarchy of the house, the physical layout of houses in the ancient Mediterranean played the same role. Most slaves were separated from the rest of the *familia* in the Roman-era house, because according to Balch and Osiek, “Roman domestic architecture is obsessively concerned with distinctions of social rank.”<sup>424</sup> The archaeological and literary records together tell us that some slaves lived in small rooms known as *cellae*. These austere rooms were barely lit, poorly ventilated, and were often used as storage closets.<sup>425</sup>

In many houses that have been discovered by archaeologists, there are no traces of *cellae* specifically allocated to slaves. This suggests that slaves had to find some place to sleep that was not specifically designated as a bedroom – in hallways, storage closets, or on the floor in common living spaces.<sup>426</sup> According to Michele George,

“From the extant physical evidence, it seems undeniable that the vast majority of domestic slaves, even in most wealthy households, did not have clearly segregated areas in which to sleep...Most slaves, it seems, slept in storerooms,

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<sup>423</sup> Or *puella* for female slaves. On this mocking appellation, Saller writes “As in other slave societies, slaves were dehumanized by being addressed as *puer* or ‘boy’, no matter how old they were.” (Richard Saller, “The Hierarchical Household in Roman Society: A Study of Domestic Slavery,” 114.)

<sup>424</sup> David Balch and Carolyn Osiek, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, 29.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid*, 29

<sup>426</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 140.

near their work areas, such as the kitchen or stables, or simply outside their master's door, ready to be called upon as needed."<sup>427</sup>

Thus, the typical sleeping arrangements were another way that slaves were constantly differentiated from the free members of the *familia*.

From the slave's perspective, the life of the rest of the *familia* was a constant spectacle. Saller summarizes this reality, writing "Family life among the propertied classes in Rome was passed in the surroundings of dozens of household slaves, even hundreds in the case of the very wealthiest senators."<sup>428</sup> A slave's presence was assumed in even the most personal and intimate situations, and slave owners were experts at ignoring them.<sup>429</sup> Archaeologists have discovered frescoes in Pompeii and elsewhere that depict the presence of slaves in the room during sexual encounters.<sup>430</sup> While it might seem unthinkable to ignore someone standing in the room during something so private, it is important to remember that in the first-century Greco-Roman context, slaves were thought of as inferior. They were living tools, things with the feet of a man – less than human.

Not only were slaves witnesses to sexual activity within the home, they themselves were viewed as constantly available sexual objects. Because slaves were

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<sup>427</sup> M. George, "Domestic Architecture and Household Relations : Pompeii and Roman Ephesos," 13-14.

<sup>428</sup> Richard Saller, "Slavery and the Roman Family," in *Classical Slavery* (ed. Finley; London: Frank Cass & Co., 1987), 65.

<sup>429</sup> M. George, "Domestic Architecture and Household Relations : Pompeii and Roman Ephesos," 14.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid

viewed as living tools – not quite human – they were often used for sexual gratification by both male and female masters.<sup>431</sup> This was another way that the free and slave members of the *familia* were continually differentiated. According to Métraux, “The sexual availability of slaves and the fact that the children of slave women were also slaves both provided a field for sexual drama in the house and simultaneously reinforced the status groupings.”<sup>432</sup>

The *paterfamilias* exercised sexual control over his slaves in other ways as well. Often, masters would insist on controlling the personal sexual lives of slaves within his household. One of Xenophon’s writings, *Oeconomicus*, is concerned with household management. In it, he describes the inner workings of the house of an Athenian named Ischomachos, and mentions the control that Ischomachos maintained over the sexual behavior of his slaves. It is a literary window into the social structure of ancient households. Xenophon describes a scene in which Ischomachos is explaining household order to his wife:

“I showed her the women's quarters too, separated by a bolted door from the men's, so that nothing which ought not to be moved may be taken out, and that the servants may not breed without our leave. For honest servants generally prove more loyal if they have a family; but rogues, if they live in wedlock, become all the more prone to mischief.”<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Richard Saller, "Slavery and the Roman Family," 20.

<sup>432</sup> Guy P. R. Métraux, "Ancient Housing: "Oikos" and "Domus" in Greece and Rome," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999): 398.

<sup>433</sup> Xen. Ec. 9.5. *Xenophon in Seven Volumes* (London: William Heinemann, Ltd. 1979). Accessed online at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>.

Ischomachos separated the male and female slaves, and put a locked door in between them to prevent any unauthorized sexual activity. For Ischomachos, the sexual lives of his slaves and their loyalty to him were related, so he maintained control of that area of their lives.

The most potent manifestation of the master's control over a slave was the constant threat of physical abuse or corporal punishment. This anxiety was a daily reality for most slaves in the ancient Mediterranean world. Bradley summarizes it this way: "It is indisputable that physical coercion from the owner played a large part in the servile life in one way or another and that subjection to brutality was a basic component of slavery."<sup>434</sup>

On the typical abuse of slaves, Galen of Pergamum wrote of "kicking and beating slaves, of knocking out their teeth or gouging out their eyes."<sup>435</sup> If a slave displeased his or her master in any way, he or she could count on immediate physical retribution. This represented a continuous, standing threat. There were other, more serious options available to a slave master as well. In many cities throughout the Roman Empire, there were public facilities available for the serious punishment of

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<sup>434</sup> Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (Brussels, Belgium: Latomus, 1984), 122. De Ste. Croix puts it this way: "The essential fact about the slave...was that the screw could be put on him in any way the master liked, because he was without rights...even the windbag Dio Chrysostom could define slavery as the right to use another man at pleasure, like a piece of property or a domestic animal." (G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World : From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 141.) Hopkins summarizes the reality this way, "Slaves were at the mercy of their masters. They could be overworked, neglected, thrown out when old, beaten or even killed and mostly had no realistic chance of protecting themselves." (Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 120).

<sup>435</sup> *Diseases of the Mind*, 4 (Carolyn and David Balch Osiek, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, 79.) Cf. Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 123.

slaves. Keith Bradley paints a grim picture of this dreadful reality: “If a private citizen wished to punish a slave (male or female), he could on payment of a fee have public facilities (*crux, patibulum, uerberatores*) put at his disposal...Local officials could have slaves tortured free of charge...and take care subsequently of the removal of corpses.”<sup>436</sup> Thus, slaves had to fear not only immediate retribution for missteps in the home, but also the prospect of being taken to a torture chamber from which they might never return. This is a powerful deterrent to all sorts of potential “misbehavior.”

The Roman Emperors provided many spectacular examples of mistreating their slaves. For example, Augustus was known to have broken the legs of one of his slaves for taking a bribe.<sup>437</sup> A particularly gruesome example is detailed by the Roman historian Suetonius:

“A slave who had stolen a piece of silver plate at a banquet given by Caligula is said, upon detection to have been handed over at once by the emperor to a *carnifex*: his hands were cut off and hung around his neck, and he was then paraded around the dining hall with a placard giving the reasons for his misfortune.”<sup>438</sup>

Another powerful deterrent were the infamous *ergastula* – underground slave prisons. These were often used on large agricultural estates to punish slaves, or to house chronically troublesome groups of slave workers.<sup>439</sup> These were hellish places

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<sup>436</sup> Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control*, 122.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid

<sup>438</sup> Suet. *Cal* 32.2. (Ibid, 121)

<sup>439</sup> Carolyn and David Balch Osiek, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, 79.

that were known to be cold, dark, and full of rats and disease. Slaves were typically chained to the wall or floor when being confined in an *ergastulum*. Among Hadrian's reforms was the abolishment of the *ergastula* for the punishment of slaves.<sup>440</sup> This is remarkable considering the many other types of extreme abuse that continued to be legal for masters to inflict upon their slaves.

Accompanying the dread of physical punishment was the anxiety of being sold to another master. The *paterfamilias* was under no legal obligation to "respect or even to recognize the kin ties" of the slave.<sup>441</sup> Thus, adult slaves would constantly worry about their children being sold to another master, potentially in a distant city with no prospect of reunion. Marriages between slaves were also not respected, and thus if slaves were allowed to marry, the possibility of being separated was a continual source of worry. Masters often exploited this anxiety to encourage obedience.

Bradley offers a succinct summary of the daily experience of slaves during the Roman Empire:

"Personal degradation and humiliation, cultural disorientation, material deprivation, severance of familial bonds, and emotional and psychological trauma – these were, I believe, some of the results of the slave trade in Roman antiquity commonly experienced by countless numbers of slaves – men, women and children who remain for the most part, of course, anonymous to us across a great span of time."<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, 114.

<sup>441</sup> Keith Bradley, "'The Regular, Daily Traffic in Slaves': Roman History and Contemporary History," *The Classical Journal* 87, no. 2 (1991): 132.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid*, 133

There are a few documents written by slaves that have managed to traverse the centuries, and they help us to understand how they themselves viewed their plight. For example, there is a fourth-century BCE letter written by an Athenian slave that describes the daily suffering that he endured. It is a vivid, first-hand description. The slave's name is Lesis, and these are his own words:

Dear Xenokles and Mother,  
I'm nearly dying in the foundry! Please do something about it. Come to my masters and find something better for me here. I've been handed over to an absolutely dreadful man. I'm getting thrashed to within an inch of my life; I'm tied up; I'm being treated like dirt – it's getting worse and worse.  
Yours, Lesis<sup>443</sup>

We have no such letter from Onesimus, but we can safely assume some things about his life from the lives of typical slaves of his day, and especially those living in Asia Minor.

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<sup>443</sup> F. D. Harvey, "'Help! I'm Dying Here': A Letter from a Slave," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 163 (2007): 49.

## Conclusions

Based on the experience of most slaves of his day, we can reasonably assume the following about Onesimus:

1. He was probably born a slave.
2. He lived and worked in Asia Minor, an area known to be a source for many of the slaves in the Roman Empire.
3. He lived and worked near Ephesus, a place that was known to be especially full of slave traders.
4. He probably endured the continual threat of physical abuse.
5. He suffered the emotional abuse of being treated like property and a living tool.
6. He experienced the daily use of his slave name, designed to denigrate him and separate him from the free members of the *familia*.
7. He probably had no designated sleeping area, or one that was extremely uncomfortable.
8. He was under Philemon's total control, and as an οἰκέτης he probably experienced the anger of his master up close.
9. He probably experienced the sale of family members or friends, with little hope of ever seeing them again.
10. He may have experienced the sexual advances of his master(s), or the continual prospect of their sexual desire.



11. He probably had access to a *peculium*, which might be related to the financial harm that Paul alludes to in Phlm 1:18-19.

A number of these insights will come to bear on our final theory regarding Onesimus' flight, but those broader conclusions will be saved until the last chapter of this project when they can be integrated with the other evidence that has been established thus far, as well as elements that have not yet been addressed.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN WORLD (Part Two)**

### **Overview of Roman Law**

Just as the institution of slavery was woven throughout every aspect of life in the Roman Empire, the subject of slavery was similarly present throughout the writings of Roman jurists. Writing comprehensively about the subject of Roman law is beyond the scope of this project, but some preliminary comments are in order.

First of all, Roman law was not an objective process or an exact science.<sup>444</sup> Roman law was a constantly evolving entity, applied with varying degrees of precision throughout the imperial provinces and requiring nuanced interpretation with each case. There is also the matter of local laws and customs that pre-dated Roman law, many of which were still applied during the imperial period. As a result, it is difficult to systematize fully the Roman statutes pertaining to any subject, and that is certainly true of those relating to slavery.

Despite its diversity, however, there are some legal principles regarding slavery that seem to have been applied ubiquitously within the Roman legal system. It is to those laws and practices that we will pay attention in this section, and especially

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<sup>444</sup> J. L. Strachan-Davidson, "Mommsen's Roman Criminal Law," *The English Historical Review* 16, no. 62 (1901): 219.

to those regarding fugitive slaves since they are the most relevant to the question of Onesimus' predicament.

There are two major sources for Roman Law: The Institutes of Gaius (which provides an overview of basic Roman legal principles) and the Digest of Justinian (which is a compilation of legal opinions of Roman jurists on a host of subjects).<sup>445</sup> Both are collections of Roman legal codes, the former completed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, the latter in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>446</sup>

The Institutes of Gaius begin with a discussion about the status of people in the Roman world. The first line of this discussion reads, "The principal division of the *ius* (law) of persons is the following, namely, that all men are either free or slaves."<sup>447</sup> Legally speaking, the whole population of the Roman Empire was first divided into two groups: slave or free. That was the primary demarcation. Nationality, ethnicity, gender, wealth, and other markers were subordinate to the first and most important legal division in the Roman Empire: slave or free.

When slaves were born in the Roman Empire, they followed the legal status of their mother. It did not matter if their father was their mother's master, or another

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<sup>445</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

<sup>447</sup> Et quidem summa divisio de iure personarum haec est, quod omnes homines aut liberi sunt aut servi. Gaius, *The Institutes of Gaius* (Trans. Francis De Zulueta; New York: Clarendon Press, 1946). Accessed at the Catholic University of America's website: <http://faculty.cua.edu/pennington/law508/roman%20law/GaiusInstitutesEnglish.htm#SECOND BOOK>

slave, what mattered was the legal status of the mother.<sup>448</sup> According to Saller, “only children born of a legal marriage (*iustum matrimonium*) between two Roman citizens were recognized as legitimate offspring of the father with rights of succession to his property.”<sup>449</sup> Thus, Roman law spoke into the life and status of an individual the second he or she was born into the empire. For slaves, it meant that Roman law called them a slave the moment their non-free mother gave birth to them. If Onesimus had been born to a mother who was a slave, which is highly likely considering the era of his birth, he would have been considered a slave the moment he took his first breath.

Legally speaking, slaves were considered property. Most of the legislation related to slaves has to do with sales and compensation for property loss. According to Westermann, “From the earliest period of Roman legislation slaves, as possessions of value, were protected from injustice or mistreatment at the hands of others than their owners...in the case of minor injuries to a slave...the master had cause of action for damages against the perpetrator.”<sup>450</sup> Not only were the slaves regarded as the property of their masters, any possessions that the slaves acquired for themselves were considered the property of the master as well. Another section of Gaius’ Institutes reads, “Slaves are in the power of their masters, and this power is acknowledged by the *ius gentium*, for we know that among all nations alike the master has the power of

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<sup>448</sup> Richard Saller, "Slavery and the Roman Family," in *Classical Slavery* (ed. Finley; London: Frank Cass & Co., 1987), 71.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1955), 82-83.

life and death over his slaves, and whatever property is acquired by a slave is acquired by his master.”<sup>451</sup>

In spite of this extremely low view of slaves, there were legal processes to which slaves could theoretically appeal. In both the capital and the provinces, there were mechanisms that purported to allow slaves to complain to local officials about brutality inflicted upon them by their masters.<sup>452</sup> It is doubtful, however, that many slaves were able to successfully avail themselves of these legal processes.<sup>453</sup> Most slaves had no recourse whatsoever for their circumstances: not to their owners, and not to the Roman authorities. In practice, slaves had no legal rights and were on their own. Alan Watson summarizes it best:

“Slaves had no access to censors, or other elected public officials or judges. They had no standing, and no legally recognized avenue of approach to anyone in authority...In addition, they were in the physical control of the master who

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<sup>451</sup> In potestate itaque sunt servi dominorum. Quae quidem potestas iuris gentium est: Nam apud omnes peraeque gentes animadvertere possumus dominis in servos vitae necisque potestatem esse, et quodcumque per servum acquiritur, id domino acquiritur. Gaius, *The Institutes of Gaius* (Trans. Francis De Zulueta; New York: Clarendon Press, 1946). Accessed at the Catholic University of America’s website: <http://faculty.cua.edu/pennington/law508/roman%20law/GaiusInstitutesEnglish.htm#SECOND BOOK>

<sup>452</sup> Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (Brussels, Belgium: Latomus, 1984), 123. Gaius’ Institutes 1.53 reads “At the present time, however, neither Roman citizens nor any other persons who are under the empire of the Roman people are permitted to employ excessive or causeless severity against their slaves; for by a constitution of the Most Holy Emperor Antoninus anyone who kills his slave, without good reason, is not less liable than one who kills the slave of another; and the excessive harshness of masters is restrained by another constitution of the same Emperor; for he, having been consulted by certain governors of provinces with reference to slaves who flee for refuge to the temples of the Gods or the statues of the Emperor, ordered that if the cruelty of masters appeared to be intolerable, they should be compelled to sell their slaves; and in both cases he acted justly, for we should not make a bad use of our rights, in accordance with which principle the administration of their own property is forbidden to spendthrifts.” Accessed at the Catholic University of America’s website: <http://faculty.cua.edu/pennington/law508/roman%20law/GaiusInstitutesEnglish.htm#SECOND BOOK>

<sup>453</sup> Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control*, 123.

could ill-treat even more those who might be tempted to complain of ill-treatment.”<sup>454</sup>

Glenn Morrow has compared the legal situation for slaves to that of children. Many legal rights were withheld from children until a certain age. This was true in the Greek world that pre-dated the Roman Empire, as well as during the imperial period. Slaves and children had similar experiences in their youth (apart from the physical abuse that was common to the life of a slave). The main difference is that at the age of maturity, free children inherited a host of benefits, legal protections, and rights. The slaves did not. In Morrow’s words, “The slave’s position is similar to that of the child, but with the enormous difference that the child’s status is temporary, whereas the slave’s state is one of permanent legal immaturity.”<sup>455</sup>

If a slave had an occasion to interact with Roman law, it was usually an unpleasant one. Sometimes it was a horrific one. For example, it was believed during the imperial period that slaves could only give legal testimony under torture.<sup>456</sup> Because slaves were ever-present in Roman society, they were often called as witnesses in legal disputes. That means that slaves could expect not only routine abuse at the hands of their masters, but periodic experiences with torture when their testimonies were required.<sup>457</sup> Pliny the Younger, a governor in Asia Minor during the early second century CE, wrote to the emperor Trajan and discusses torturing two

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<sup>454</sup> Alan Watson, *Roman Slave Law* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 54.

<sup>455</sup> Glenn R. Morrow, "Plato and Greek Slavery," *Mind* 48, no. 190 (1939): 192.

<sup>456</sup> Reginald Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), 31.

<sup>457</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 41.

Christian female slaves. He writes, "...it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they call deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths."<sup>458</sup>

Legally-sanctioned violence was an ever-present possibility for slaves. A classic example of this ancient custom was a rule that was designed to deter slaves from being violent toward their masters. The law was that "if any slave had murdered his master, then all his slaves should be put to death."<sup>459</sup> This custom put fear into the slaves, knowing that if they ever dared to act out against their masters, they would bring death upon their fellow innocent slaves in the same household. In 61 CE, the prefect of Rome Pedanius Secundus was stabbed by one of his slaves. The other 400 slaves in his household were then executed, even though a divided Roman Senate considered leniency.<sup>460</sup> Those in favor of the execution wondered "how could a solitary master sleep soundly among a whole gang of slaves, unless it was in the interest of each to protect him against any murderous conspirator?"<sup>461</sup>

The slave had no legal status as a person, and no rights to own property. In every respect, the slave was viewed and treated as property. The discussion in Roman law regarding slaves resembles modern laws concerning vehicles or other valuable

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<sup>458</sup> Pliny the Younger, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, (Trans. Betty Radice; Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), 294.

<sup>459</sup> Reginald Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire*, 55. Cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 14.42.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid

<sup>461</sup> Keith Hopkins, "Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery," *Past & Present* no. 138 (1993): 3.

property. As we would expect, such laws focus on buying and selling, liability for damage, and the recovery of stolen property.

With this basic understanding of the Roman legal perspective toward slaves, we now turn our attention to the more specific and relevant subject of fugitive slaves: both the Roman legal approach to the matter, and the experience of those slaves who risked such an endeavor.

### **Fugitives**

At the beginning of his work, *On Slavery and Freedom*, Dio Chrysostom writes “Men desire above all things to be free and say that freedom is the greatest of blessings, while slavery is the most shameful and wretched of states.”<sup>462</sup> That fundamental desire for freedom propelled hundreds of thousands of slaves to attempt the extremely dangerous flight from their masters. The flight was perilous because if fugitive slaves were recovered, they were often brutalized if not tortured to death.

The presence of fugitive slaves throughout the empire was a constant issue for the courts, as well as for private individuals seeking the return of their property. On this ever-present reality, Westermann writes, “The problem of the runaways was a serious one in all parts of the Empire, constituting a loss of property and of valuable services to the owners of slaves and a general public menace...”<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Theresa Urbainczyk, *Slave Revolts in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 76.

<sup>463</sup> W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, 107.



There were many reasons that slaves decided to risk a flight from their masters. First and foremost was the basic desire to be free, as noted above. For many fugitives in the ancient world, that was enough motivation to run. There were many other practical factors as well that propelled the slaves to flee.

One of the most potent reasons that slaves fled their masters was the anticipation of abuse. As described above, every slave could expect regular corporal punishment from their masters. In situations where a master was perceived to be especially angry, a slave might flee out of fear of the dreadful reprisal that was coming.<sup>464</sup> The slave might fear a trip to the local torture facility, for example. A slave might also be concerned about possible legal proceedings that would require his or her testimony, which would of course involve extreme pain because of the legal requirement that testimony of slaves be taken under torture.

General nostalgia for home was also a powerful draw for slaves to leave the homes of their masters. There is literary evidence for this, as well as some material evidence. For example, on the Greek island of Delos, a graffito on the wall of a slave cell was found in the house archaeologists call La Maison du Lac at Delos.<sup>465</sup> In the graffito the slave “expresses his longing for the figs and water of his birthplace at Antioch-on-Maeander.”<sup>466</sup> This nostalgia was common among slaves, since many of them were brought from distant locations by slave traders. In order to prevent the

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid

<sup>465</sup> Frederick Thompson, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Duckworth in association with The Society of Antiquaries of London, 2003), 245.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid

nostalgia from turning into an organized revolt or flight, masters were intentional about not owning too many slaves from one ethnic or language group.<sup>467</sup> Perpetuating language and culture barriers among slaves was one of many slave control tactics.

A 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE text offers us a rare glimpse into the motivations for flight, written by the hand of a slave. In this text, a slave writes a note to her master explaining why some of her fellow slaves have had a tendency to flee.

[...] this is [...]  
Of the irksome things having labored  
carrying wood and piling it up and not  
wanting to flee from you, just as the  
rest of the maidservants do when wronged,  
but I at least knowing  
your ways, that you hate evil,  
Do not do it  
Farewell.<sup>468</sup>

As Llewelyn notes, “The text illustrates from the slave’s perspective that cruelty or unjust handling was an important motive behind flight.”<sup>469</sup>

In addition to a fear of abuse, some slaves fled out of a fear of being sold. This is a twofold fear, because it presented the prospect of permanent separation from family, as well as the potential for a new master that was even more harsh and

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<sup>467</sup> Joseph Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 64.

<sup>468</sup> S.R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (vol. 8; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 36-37.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid

abusive.<sup>470</sup> If a slave knew that he or she might be sold, flight was an option to avoid the unknown and potentially miserable future in store. Some slaves fled out of a desire to be reunited with family members who had already been sold.

There were many motivations for slaves to flee from their masters – some related to unjust treatment, some out of a yearning for freedom regardless of treatment. Nordling succinctly summarizes the situation: “In a society which granted absolute powers to owners, it is scarcely surprising that some slaves willingly assumed the frightful risks of flight in order to attain a better life for themselves at their master’s expense.”<sup>471</sup>

When slaves decided to flee their masters, they tended to do so in groups so that they could offer support to each other. The Egyptian papyri suggest that fugitives often ran in groups of twos or threes.<sup>472</sup> An illustrative 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE text from Philadelphia testifies to this reality:

Memorandum to Zenon  
from Sositimos. My two  
slaves have run off  
and happen to be residing  
in the Arsinoite  
nome and in the Herkleopolite  
(nome). Therefore you would  
do well writing to the  
phylakitai there, that  
together with those sent by me

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<sup>470</sup> Yvon Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece* (trans. Lloyd; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 193.

<sup>471</sup> John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus : A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* no. 41 (1991): 106.

<sup>472</sup> Yvon Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece*, 193.

they will search for  
them.<sup>473</sup>

This text also mentions the fact that the owner is sending representatives to look for the slaves. This will be discussed further below.

When slaves fled their masters, they could not operate openly in society. They either had to hide and stay out of the public eye, or find some way to hide in plain sight. Even though it was the ancient world and communication was relatively slow, the ability for masters to successfully track down their runaway slaves was remarkable. As a result, the runaway slave would have been continually paranoid, and unable to trust anyone. Garlan describes the options facing a runaway:

“They could take to the hills...and launch guerilla attacks against their masters (a course seldom followed)...they could live incognito in some populous location...they could join a band of pirates or mercenaries. Otherwise, if he was to escape from slave law, a fugitive had no alternative but to try to get back to his native land with the less chance of success the farther away it happened to be, for in order to reach it, he would have to slip through the mesh of an extremely fine net. He would have to elude the pursuit of his master or his master’s agents, avoid denunciation (highly rewarded) and also seizure by any individual acting to his own advantage or with a view to restoring the slave to his master, and avoid falling victim to the measures laid down in extradition treaties specifically drawn up for such purposes between neighboring cities.”<sup>474</sup>

It was a perilous endeavor for slaves to run away from their masters. Even if a slave succeeded in escaping the master’s immediate control, it was very difficult for slaves who had primarily known a servile life to be able to convincingly act like a free

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<sup>473</sup> S.R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (vol. 8; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 20.

<sup>474</sup> Yvon Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece*, 196.

person in society.<sup>475</sup> The only thing working in a fugitive's favor was the fact that it was difficult to tell the difference between slaves and the free poor in that society. They often dressed the same, and had the same general appearance.<sup>476</sup>

It was the primary responsibility of the master to seek out fugitive slaves, but there were a variety of ways that he could seek help.<sup>477</sup> One of the most immediate and inexpensive measures that a master could take would be to post notices in populated areas. These notices featured a description of the runaway slave(s), as well as information about a reward (if offered) and how to return them to the master.<sup>478</sup> One example is a notice from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE:

A slave of Aristogenes, son of Chrysispos from Alabanda, envoy, fled "in Alexandria" by the name of Hermon, also called Neilos, a Syrian by birth from Babyke, about 18 years of age, medium height, beardless, with strong calves, dimple in chin, mole on nose on the left, scar above corner of mouth on the left, tattooed on right wrist with two foreign letters, having of coined gold 3 minae, 10 pearls, an iron ring on which an oil-bottle and strigils, having about his body a cloak and loin-cloth. Whoever brings this (slave) back will receive 3 bronze talents, showing (him) at the temple, 2 talent, with a man of substance and legally actionable 5 talents.<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 153.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid, 132

<sup>477</sup> Carolyn and David Balch Osiek, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 79.

<sup>478</sup> Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 89.

<sup>479</sup> Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Ephesus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 58.

Another such public notice from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE reads:

Year 29 Xandikos 26  
Thorax, Cicilian, with long straight  
hair, honey complexion,  
round face, scar under  
eyebrow on left and right and  
under eye,  
18 years of age.<sup>480</sup>

Because there were so many fugitive slaves at any given time throughout the Roman Empire, it was a very familiar sight for people to see these sorts of posters. This reality even made it into some of the popular literature of the day. For example, Lucian wrote a play entitled *Drapetai* (“The Runaways”). It illustrates the fact that slaves tended to run away in groups, and also that the initial response upon discovering their flight was to post a public notice. Here is an excerpt of dialogue from that work:

Innkeeper and Masters:	Excuse us, madam, and gentlemen, but have you come across a company of three rascals conducting a woman...with hair cut short in the Spartan fashion?
Phi:	Ha! The very people we are looking for!
Masters:	Indeed, madam? But these are three runaway slaves. The woman was kidnapped by them, and we want to get her back.

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<sup>480</sup> S.R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* vol 8, 16.

Her:

Our business with them I will tell you afterwards. For the present, let us make a joint proclamation:

Disappeared. A Paphlagonian slave, formerly of Sinope. Any person giving information as to his whereabouts will be rewarded; the amount of the reward to be fixed by the informant. Description. Name: begins with CTE. Complexion: sallow. Hair: close-cropped, with long beard. Dress: a course cloak with wallet. Temper: bad. Education: none. Manner: offensive.<sup>481</sup>

In addition to posting notices in strategic locations, masters could send friends or other representatives on a mission to go and locate the fugitive slaves. These agents were authorized to detain and punish any fugitive slaves who were apprehended.<sup>482</sup> This practice, according to MacMullen, gave the master “a kind of vicarious muscle.”<sup>483</sup> Thus, the fugitive continually feared the master’s physical retribution even at a great distance. A 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE text illustrates this delegated authority:

I appoint you as my representative by  
this letter so that you will travel to  
the illustrious  
Alexandria and search for my slave by the  
name of  
[...] about 35 years of age, whom you  
yourself also know  
[...] whom finding you will  
hand over,

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<sup>481</sup> Lucian, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata* (trans. Fowler and Fowler; 4 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon press, 1905). Accessed through the University of Adelaide online at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/lucian/works/chapter60.html>

<sup>482</sup> Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 89.

<sup>483</sup> Ramsay Macmullen, "Personal Power in the Roman Empire," *The American Journal of Philology* 107, no. 4 (1986): 513.

[the authority] being yours as much as is  
mine, if I were present,  
to [...] imprison,  
to whip  
[to bring a suit] before those whom it is  
proper against those  
harbouring him...<sup>484</sup>

Runaway slaves feared not only that their master was in pursuit, but also that his entire network of friends across the empire might be involved in tracking them down.

There were other options for the master as well, including hiring professional slave hunters known as *fugitivarii*.<sup>485</sup> On this practice, Westermann writes “the search for slaves in *fuga* became under the Empire an organized business conducted by private *fugitivarii*, who delivered the apprehended runaways either directly to the owners or to the nearest municipal magistrate.”<sup>486</sup> This practice was abused, however, and slave catchers would extort runaway slaves for the service of facilitating a sale to a kinder master. The *peculium* held by the runaway, combined with any other stolen goods from the master, usually paid the fee. Thus, in some cases these slave catchers and fugitives helped each other and left the master out of it. Roman senators attempted to curtail this activity, but it continued for centuries.<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> S.R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (vol. 8; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 32.

<sup>485</sup> Mitzi J. Smith, "Utility, Fraternity, and Reconciliation," in *Onesimus, Our Brother : Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 55.

<sup>486</sup> W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, 107.

<sup>487</sup> John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus : A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," 105.



In rarer circumstances, the government actually became involved in searching for fugitive slaves. This sort of government intervention was initially designed to help locate fugitive slaves who were believed to be hiding on someone's private property.<sup>488</sup> Over time, the state became more involved, because there is evidence that local officials were "informed of a fugitive's name, distinguishing features including scars and the name of his master."<sup>489</sup> Justinian's Digest records the statute:

The slaves must be held in custody until they are brought before the Prefect of the Watch, or the Governor. Information must be given to the magistrates of their names and marks, as well as the addresses of the party to whom any one of them says he belongs; in order that fugitive slaves may be the more easily recognized, and claimed. And in the word "marks" scars are also included. The rule is the same where these matters are brought to public notice by writing in a public place or in a temple.<sup>490</sup>

A text from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE testifies to local officials called *strategoi* being involved in the pursuit of runaway slaves:

From Sarapioin, strategos of the Oasis of the Heltanomis [...]  
[...] likewise public notices concerning  
the search [...]  
for slaves [...]  
written [by the?]  
strategoi of other nomes in the  
present year 14[...]  
of Antoninus Caesar, the lord  
It is:

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<sup>488</sup> S.R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* vol. 8, 26.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid*, 27

<sup>490</sup> Dig. 11.4.1.8a. S. P. Scott, *The Civil Law : Including the Twelve Tables, the Institutes of Gaius, the Rules of Ulpian, the Opinions of Paulus, the Enactments of Justinian, and the Constitutions of Leo* (Union, N.J.: Lawbook Exchange, 2001). Accessed online at <http://www.constitution.org/sps/sps.htm>

I, Hermaios, also called Dryton, strategos  
of the Busirite nome [...] concerning the search for the  
undermentioned slaves...<sup>491</sup>

While masters could not rely on the government to do the heavy lifting in most cases of recovering their runaways, there is ample historical evidence to indicate that governmental officials were consistently involved in the recovery of fugitives. Thus, the runaway slave also had to fear government officials as agents for their masters.

Many slave masters opted for a brutal pre-emptive action that would assist in the future event that a slave attempted to flee. This took the form of slave collars and branding. Archaeologists have discovered a number of iron slave collars designed to prevent a successful flight. One such collar reads

Catch me and summon me back to Maximianus the antiquarian in the forum of Mars. Catch me because I have fled and summon me back to the house of Elpidius v.c. Bonoso in the Caelimontian quarter.<sup>492</sup>

This particular slave collar features the Chi-Rho symbol that indicates it was a Christian owner who fashioned the collar. Other Christian collars featured an alpha/omega symbol.<sup>493</sup> Another similar collar offers a reward:

I have fled, hold me; when you have recovered me you receive a solidus [gold coin] from my master Zoninus.<sup>494</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> S.R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, 29.

<sup>492</sup> John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus : A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," 106.

<sup>493</sup> Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 88.

These collars became so common, in fact, that the simple abbreviation TMQF was used on many of them. People knew what it stood for: *Tene me quia fugio* (Hold on to me since I flee).<sup>495</sup>

Branding was a more painful and permanent tactic that achieved the same end. Often the letter “F” or the abbreviation “FVG” were a sufficient substitute for *fugitivus*. While it is possible that a runaway slave could break free from an iron collar, a branded scar would be very difficult to leave behind, and would make blending into the culture a near impossibility.

What specifically, therefore, did the Roman jurists have to say about the ever-present reality of fugitive slaves? They had a lot to say. In the Digest of Justinian, there are many references to both the legal responsibilities of those who encounter fugitives (primarily found in book 11), as well as the very definition of a fugitive (primarily found in book 21). It is no exaggeration to say that fugitive slaves were a “virtual obsession” in Roman law.<sup>496</sup>

If someone encountered a runaway slave, they had a legal responsibility to turn the slave in. The Roman jurist Ulpian writes that “Every person whosoever who arrests a fugitive slave is bound to produce him in public.”<sup>497</sup> Thus, fugitive slaves

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid

<sup>495</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, 120.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid 118

<sup>497</sup> *Dig. 11.4.1.3 Unusquisque eorum, qui fugitivum adprehendit, in publicum deducere debet* S. P. Scott, *The Civil Law : Including the Twelve Tables, the Institutes of Gaius, the Rules of Ulpian, the Opinions of Paulus, the Enactments of Justinian, and the Constitutions of Leo* (17 vols.; Union, N.J.: Lawbook Exchange, 2001). Accessed online at <http://www.constitution.org/sps/sps.htm>. All subsequent

were surrounded by people who were legally obligated to turn them in, whether or not they had any personal interest in the matter. Ulpian goes on to define what “producing in public” looks like: “A slave is understood to be produced in public who is delivered up to the municipal magistrates or officers of the government.”<sup>498</sup> Roman law viewed fugitives as a menace and placed the burden on the public to turn them in.<sup>499</sup>

Another jurist, Callistratus, wrote about whether fugitives were operating openly as fugitives or pretending to live life as a free person. He writes, “Slaves who are simply fugitives should be returned to their masters; but where they pretend to be free, it is customary to punish them severely.”<sup>500</sup> Thus, people who found a slave operating as a free person were obligated to turn them in and see to it that they are severely punished *before* being returned to their master (where they would undoubtedly meet additional punishment).

There appears to have been a debate among the Roman jurists about what specifically made a runaway slave a legal *fugitivus*, and this plays directly into our discussion of *Amicus Domini*. According to Buckland – one of the key scholars on Roman law and slavery – the fugitive is “one who has run away from his master,

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quotations of the Digest taken from this source.

<sup>498</sup> *Dig.* 11.4.1.6 In publicum deduci intelleguntur qui magistratibus municipalibus traditi sunt vel publicis ministeriis.

<sup>499</sup> Reginald Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire*, 13. cf. P.R. Coleman-Norton, "The Apostle Paul and the Roman Law of Slavery," in *Studies in Roman Economic and Social History in Honor of Allan Chester Johnson* (ed. Coleman-Norton; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 47.

<sup>500</sup> *Dig.* 11.4.2 Fugitivi simplices dominis reddendi sunt: sed si pro libero se gesserint, gravius coerceri solent.

intending not to return. His intent is the material point...”<sup>501</sup> The jurist Ulpian collected the various Roman legal opinions on the definition of a fugitive. Many define it in terms of intentionality, others add spatial or temporal factors. I will now survey the opinions of ancient jurists that are germane to our discussion of Onesimus and *Amicus Domini*.

The jurist Ofilius defined a fugitive as “one who remains outside the house of his master for the purpose of taking to flight, or to conceal himself.”<sup>502</sup> In other words, the definition of the fugitive is one who is out of the proximity of the master for a certain amount of time, intending to either stay away or flee.

Caelius defines a fugitive as one who “leaves his master with the intention of not returning to him, even though, having changed his mind, he does return; for he says that in an offence of this kind repentance does not remove guilt.”<sup>503</sup> According to Caelius, intention has something to do with it, but only *original* intention to flee. That is what counts. His opinion indicates that after a certain length of absence, when it becomes clear that the slave intended to flee, no amount of later reform or desire to reconcile can override the fact of the slave’s original intention to flee. This amounts to a sort of statutory fugitive status – a slave who left the master for a period of time out

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<sup>501</sup> W. W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery : The Condition of the Slave in Private Law from Augustus to Justinian* (Union, N.J.: Lawbook Exchange, 2000), 267.

<sup>502</sup> *Dig.* 21.1.17.pr. fugitivus est, qui extra domini domum fugae causa, quo se a domino celaret, mansit

<sup>503</sup> *Dig.* 21.1.17.1. fugitivum esse ait eum, qui ea mente discedat, ne ad dominum redeat, tametsi mutato consilio ad eum revertatur: nemo enim tali peccato, inquit, paenitentia sua nocens esse desinit

of an *original* intent to flee. No later desire to reconcile or other mitigating factors can excuse the flight itself and the original intention to flee.

Caelius commented further on the issue, saying that one is a fugitive who “withdraws to some place from whence his master will not be able to recover him, and that he is still more a fugitive who betakes himself to some place from which he cannot be removed.”<sup>504</sup> Thus, if the nature of the flight renders it impossible for the master to retrieve the runaway slave(s), then such runaway(s) are indeed considered to be fugitives. In such circumstances, a slave’s desire to reconcile with the master would be irrelevant because the master is unable to recover the slave. A slave who cannot be recovered is a *de facto* fugitive regardless of any desire they might have to reconcile with their master or seek out an *Amicus Domini*.

For Caelius, if a slave originally intended to flee and ran to a place where they were unable to be recovered, then they are considered a legal *fugitivus* and no amount of desire to reconcile or seek an *Amicus Domini* would undermine that fugitive status. Caelius would have most likely considered Onesimus a legal *fugitivus* because the data in Phlm indicates that he did intend to flee in the first place, and as will be demonstrated below, he almost certainly ran to a place where Philemon would be unable to recover him.

The jurist Cassius also included intentionality in the discussion of runaway slaves, writing that a fugitive is one who “leaves his master with a deliberate intention

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<sup>504</sup> *Dig.* 21.1.17.13. ... qui eo se conferat, unde eum dominus recipere non possit, multoque magis illum fugitivum esse, qui eo se conferat, unde abduci non possit

not to return.”<sup>505</sup> Once again, original intention to flee seems to be of prime importance when determining if someone is legally considered a fugitive.

Vivianus also addresses the issue of intentionality, writing that a fugitive “is understood to be a fugitive more on account of his intention than through the fact of his flight...”<sup>506</sup> He gives examples of a slave who runs away to escape a fire or an unjust punishment. Those slaves have indeed fled, but not out of an intention to permanently flee so they would not be considered a legal fugitive. For Vivianus, being temporarily out of proximity of the master is secondary to the intention of the slave.

Proculus, another Roman jurist from the first century, notes that “the opinion held by many unreasoning persons, namely, that he is a fugitive slave who remains away for a night without his master's consent, is not correct; as the offence must be determined by the intention of the slave.”<sup>507</sup> In Proculus’ view, as we have seen in the opinion of the other jurists thus far, intention to flee is the most important factor.

It was a common practice that slaves would flee their masters and seek refuge at a religious sanctuary. This was a long-standing practice, as evidenced by the belief in classical Athens that “a slave whose life was in danger might flee to an altar and claim sanctuary.”<sup>508</sup> This practice continued into the Roman era, and the definition of

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<sup>505</sup> *Dig.* 21.1.17.2. fugitivum esse, qui certo proposito dominum relinquit

<sup>506</sup> *Dig.* 21.1.17.3. est fugitivum fere ab affectu animi intellegendum esse, non utique a fuga...

<sup>507</sup> *Dig.* 21.1.17.4. ...illud enim, quod plerumque ab imprudentibus, inquit, dici solet, eum esse fugitivum, qui nocte aliqua sine voluntate domini emansisset, non esse verum, sed ab affectu animi cuiusque aestimandum

<sup>508</sup> Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, "Paul and Onesimus," *Harvard Theological Review* 22, no. 2 (1929): 181.

a religious sanctuary extended to statues of Caesar. According to Bradley, “in the early imperial age the right of asylum, originally a Greek rather than a Roman convention, came to be associated with temples and representations of the emperor both at Rome and in the provinces.”<sup>509</sup> On this point, intention to flee matters once more. According to *Dig.* 21.1.17.12, a slave who runs intentionally to Caesar’s statue for asylum is not considered a fugitive. A slave who runs away without intending to do so, however, and later decides to take seek asylum, is definitely considered a fugitive.<sup>510</sup> Once again, *original* intention to flee seems to be the underlying legal principle when it comes to fugitives.

Finally, there is the distinction in the Roman law between those who are fugitives (a *fugitivus*), and those who are prone to wander from their master’s home (known as an *erro*). According to *Dig.* 21.1.17.14, a wandering slave is one who “does not run away, but frequently roams about, without any reason, and, after having wasted his time in trifling matters, returns home late.”<sup>511</sup> Buckland similarly explains the *erro*, as “one who is given to wandering about without cause and loitering on

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<sup>509</sup> Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (185; Brussels, Belgium: Latomus, 1984), 123. cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.36. Tacitus complains that too many slaves were abusing this practice and becoming a menace to society. It was the responsibility of the priests to determine if the slave had just cause to seek immunity at their sanctuary. The temple was not obligated to protect any and all slaves that came to them. Jerome Murphy O’Connor explains that if the priests found that the slave was treated unjustly, “the priest had to strive to secure an improvement in the slave’s condition, e.g., by arranging his or her sale to a new master. Asylum amounted to no more than a cooling-down period or breathing space.” (Murphy-O’connor, *St. Paul’s Ephesus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 59).

<sup>510</sup> *si tamen ante fugit et postea se contulit, non ideo magis fugitivus esse desinit*

<sup>511</sup> *...sed proprie erroneam sic definimus: qui non quidem fugit, sed frequenter sine causa vagatur et temporibus in res nugatorias consumptis serius domum redit.*



errands.”<sup>512</sup> As discussed above, Peter Arzt-Grabner believes that Onesimus was an *erro*, not a *fugitivus*.

While there is some variety among the Roman legal opinions, there appears to be a core legal perspective on how to view slaves who have run away from their master. To be considered a legal *fugitivus*, a slave must be out of proximity from his or her master, unable to be recovered. The slave must also have *originally* intended to flee permanently, or stayed long enough that any subsequent desire to reconcile would not legally mitigate the original offense. The *Amicus Domini* advocates for Onesimus’ flight essentially argue that he did not have the original intention to flee, and therefore would not be considered a legal *fugitivus*. But, as I have already shown, Paul’s diplomatic rhetoric in Phlm, the allusion to a financial injury in 1:18-19, and the ancient Christian writers all indicate that Onesimus did run away from Philemon originally intending to flee. I will demonstrate in the next chapter that Onesimus was certainly out of the proximity of Philemon and unrecoverable – the other legal requirement to be considered a fugitive according to these jurists.

### **Amicus Domini**

As noted in the introduction, the *Amicus Domini* theory is the most widely-accepted theory for understanding the historical situation of Onesimus’ flight, first championed by Lampe. This is based on the view that slaves were legally permitted to

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<sup>512</sup> W. W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery : The Condition of the Slave in Private Law from Augustus to Justinian*, 55.

“run to a friend of the master to secure intercession...”<sup>513</sup> In essence, *Amicus Domini* is a legal exemption for a slave who ran away from his or her master. It is a justifiable flight. In the case of Onesimus, it would mean that he was not in fact a legal *fugitivus*, but rather a slave who had run away from his master in good faith, intending to reconcile all along, operating within the accepted and practiced legal tradition of *Amicus Domini*. The evidence for this theory rests on some references to the practice in the Roman legal writings, as well as letters from Pliny the Younger to Sabinianus. I’ll start with the Roman legal writings.

Proculus, a first-century jurist whose comments on fugitives we have already discussed above, wrote another legal opinion that is one of the key foundations for the *Amicus Domini* theory as it tends to be applied to Onesimus’ case.<sup>514</sup> He writes,

“If, however, [the slave] concealed himself only for the purpose of waiting until his master's anger had subsided, he is not a fugitive; just as where one whom his master intends to whip betakes himself to a friend in order to induce him to intercede for him.”<sup>515</sup>

The word “betakes” in this translation is the Latin *praeripisset* (from *praeripere*) which means “to snatch before somebody else” or “to carry off before the time.”<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>513</sup> Ibid, 268

<sup>514</sup> John Byron, "Paul, Onesimus and the Epistle to Philemon: Is the Fugitive Slave Hypothesis Accurate?" (PhD Diss., Regent University, 1997) 23.

<sup>515</sup> *Dig.* 21.1.17.4 *sin autem in hoc tantum latuisset, quoad iracundia domini efferveret, fugitivum non esse, sicuti ne eum quidem, qui cum dominum animadverteret verberibus se adficere velle, praeripisset se ad amicum, quem ad precandum perduceret.*

<sup>516</sup> University of Notre Dame Latin Dictionary and Grammar Aid. Accessed at <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookup.pl?stem=praeri&ending=puisset>

Proculus envisages a runaway slave who quickly or spontaneously flees from the master's clutches and goes to a friend for help while the master's anger subsides. The text implies a relatively short period of time for the entire transaction, since the only temporal description offered has to do with the time needed for the master's anger to subside. If the slave had committed a minor offense, this cooling off period might have been as little as a few hours or a day. If it was a serious offense, it might have been several days or even a week or more. The idea is that the slave would remove himself or herself for that relatively short time when the master needs to cool down, and during that time they would be in the care of an *Amicus Domini*. Proculus' opinion also presumes that the slave is doing nothing else during this time to make the master's anger worse. A financial injury or theft of some sort, combined with an inordinately lengthy absence (both of which seem to be true for Onesimus) would certainly make things worse and would amount to a situation unlike what Proculus is describing here.

Similarly, the Roman jurist Vivianus wrote

“where a young slave left the house of his master and returned to his mother, and the question is asked whether or not he is a fugitive; he is one if he went away for the purpose of concealing himself to avoid returning to his master; but if he did so in order the more readily to obtain pardon for some offence by means of his mother, he is not a fugitive.”<sup>517</sup>

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<sup>517</sup> Dig. 21.1.17.5. si a magistro puer recessit et rursus ad matrem pervenit, cum quaereretur, num fugitivus esset: si celandi causa quo, ne ad dominum reverteretur, fugisset, fugitivum esse: sin vero ut per matrem faciliorem deprecationem haberet delicti alicuius, non esse fugitivum.

The words “more readily to obtain” in this text are a translation of the Latin word *faciliorem* (from *facilis*), which means “easy to do, easy, without difficulty.”<sup>518</sup> Vivianus’ opinion describes a pardon that the runaway slave would seek out through an intermediary – a pardon that could be attained with ease, i.e. quickly and uncomplicatedly. It also presumes that the slave admits that they are wrong, since they are seeking a pardon and asking for help from an *Amicus Domini*. There is no indication from Phlm that Onesimus thought he did anything wrong or was seeking a pardon, and Onesimus’ round trip journey to Paul was most likely very long and costly.

Paulus, a Roman jurist from the first century CE, writes the following: “A slave who takes refuge with a friend of his master, in order to obtain his intercession with the latter, is not a fugitive; not even if he has the intention of not returning home if he does not obtain pardon. He is not yet a fugitive, for the reason that the term “flight” does not merely apply to design but also to the act itself.”<sup>519</sup> This is consistent with the legal opinions surveyed above that define a fugitive as one who intends to flee and also follows through with fleeing outside of the master’s control.

Paulus’ opinion is the one that gave the *Amicus Domini* theory its name, since it actually has the words *amicum domini*. The phrase “takes refuge” in the above translation is a rendering of *confugit* (from *confugio*), which means “to flee, take

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<sup>518</sup> Latin Word Study Tool through Perseus (Tufts University). Accessed at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=faciliorem&la=la>

<sup>519</sup> *Dig.* 21.143.1 Qui ad amicum domini deprecaturus confugit, non est fugitivus: immo etiamsi ea mente sit, ut non impetrato auxilio domum non revertatur, nondum fugitivus est, quia non solum consilii, sed et facti fugae nomen est.

refuge.”<sup>520</sup> This language conveys a sense of immediacy or spontaneity, which is consistent with the description of the *Amicus Domini* exemption in Vivianus and Proculus’ opinions. It is the idea of a slave quickly fleeing to a friend of the master out of desperation to alleviate an escalating quarrel.

The *Amicus Domini* exemption was not uniformly applied, just as Roman law was not an exact science. Its application undoubtedly varied depending on the particulars of a given case. It seems, however, to have generally required that the slave originally intend to seek out a friend of the master, and that this action would occur while the master’s anger subsided – the latter requirement implying a relatively narrow span of time. There would be no reasonable expectation of a master’s anger subsiding if the timespan was significant, in fact the reverse would be true. The description of the *Amicus Domini* practice by these jurists presumes that the whole transaction would improve the situation, not make it worse. In Onesimus’ case, the financial injury that Paul alludes to, as well as the significant time he would be gone (which will be established in the next chapter), would certainly make things worse between him and Philemon. It would not resemble the picture of the *Amicus Domini* practice described by these jurists, which form part of the basis of the *Amicus Domini* theory as it is routinely applied to Phlm.

Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine that slaves would flee their masters intentionally seeking out a legal *Amicus Domini* exemption for their flight. This

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<sup>520</sup> Latin Word Study Tool through Perseus (Tufts University). Accessed at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?!=confugit&la=la>

assumes they were aware of the practice and the Roman legal tradition that supported it, and made a calculated decision to exercise their right to appeal to an *Amicus Domini*. Slaves had no rights. They had no expectations of any legal protections whatsoever. The discussion of original intent seems to apply, therefore, to situations in which the slaves are so desperate that they spontaneously flee toward someone they think can help them. They would most likely have little confidence that their plan would work. It was an act of desperation. It is reasonable to assume that in a legal *Amicus Domini* scenario, the runaway would only find out that they were not subject to punishment after the fact. The *Amicus Domini* exemption is something that would be retroactively applied to the slave after the whole transaction was completed. This makes it even harder to view Onesimus' actions as a premeditated *Amicus Domini* exemption, which is what most scholars of Phlm assume about his flight.

Next, we will consider two letters that are viewed by many to be a clear, practical expression of the *Amicus Domini* exemption as described above in the Roman legal codes. In fact, most interpreters of Phlm look first to these letters as the primary source on the *Amicus Domini* practice, viewing the Roman jurists as providing the legal underpinning for the data in the letters.

Around the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, Pliny the Younger served the Emperor as a governor of Bithynia and Pontus. During that time, he wrote a letter to one Sabinianus, a letter that many scholars view as analogous to Paul's letter to Philemon. In writing about the *Amicus Domini* theory for Onesimus' flight, Frilingos

offers a typical comment on the letter, writing that “Paul’s letter to Philemon exemplifies this type of intercession.”<sup>521</sup> The text of the letter reads,

To Sabinianus:

Your freedman, whom you lately mentioned to me with displeasure, has been with me, and threw himself at my feet with as much submission as he could have fallen at yours. He earnestly requested me with many tears, and even with all the eloquence of silent sorrow, to intercede for him; in short, he convinced me by his whole behaviour that he sincerely repents of his fault. I am persuaded he is thoroughly reformed, because he seems deeply sensible of his guilt. I know you are angry with him, and I know, too, it is not without reason; but clemency can never exert itself more laudably than when there is the most cause for resentment. You once had an affection for this man, and, I hope, will have again; meanwhile, let me only prevail with you to pardon him. If he should incur your displeasure hereafter, you will have so much the stronger plea in excuse for your anger as you show yourself more merciful to him now. Concede something to his youth, to his tears, and to your own natural mildness of temper: do not make him uneasy any longer, and I will add, too, do not make yourself so; for a man of your kindness of heart cannot be angry without feeling great uneasiness. I am afraid, were I to join my entreaties with his, I should seem rather to compel than request you to forgive him. Yet I will not scruple even to write mine with his; and in so much the stronger terms as I have very sharply and severely reprov'd him, positively threatening never to interpose again in his behalf. But though it was proper to say this to him, in order to make him more fearful of offending, I do not say so to you. I may perhaps, again have occasion to entreat you upon his account, and again obtain your forgiveness; supposing, I mean, his fault should be such as may become me to intercede for, and you to pardon. Farewell.<sup>522</sup>

A cursory read of this ancient letter demonstrates both striking similarities and differences from Paul’s letter to Philemon. Perhaps the most significant difference is found in the first two words of the letter: “Your freedman” (*libertus tuus*). In contrast

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<sup>521</sup> Chris Frilingos, "For My Child, Onesimus": Paul and Domestic Power in Philemon," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 1 (2000): 91.

<sup>522</sup> Ep. 9.21. Pliny, et al., *Letters* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1915). Accessed online at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pliny-letters.asp>

to Paul's letter, in which Onesimus is called a slave (δοῦλος), the unnamed subject of this letter is a freedman. There was a big difference between a slave and a freedman in the ancient world, and thus Pliny's letter is fundamentally different than Paul's.<sup>523</sup>

Furthermore, Pliny mentions the freedman in the first two words of his letter. As we have already seen, Paul strategically avoided mentioning Onesimus and even the word slave until later in the letter. This may indicate that Paul is dealing with a much more incendiary or unusual situation than what was going on between Pliny and Sabinianus.

This key difference between the two letters is curiously ignored or minimized within the scholarly conversations about Phlm and *Amicus Domini*. Callahan is one of the few scholars to appreciate the differences between the letters, writing "Pliny's letter is on behalf of a nameless libertus, 'freedman', not a servus, 'slave', and the two

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<sup>523</sup> On the key differences between slaves and freedmen, Dunn writes "Freedom was broken down into four elements: to represent oneself in legal matters; to be secure from seizure as property; to earn one's living as one chooses; and to live where one desires. More than ¼ of the 1,000+ manumission contracts inscribed on the sacred wall at Delphi fix limitations on at least two of these freedoms, usually of movement and employment...Such a freed slave could not be sold, but the freedman was still bound to the former owner in a variety of ways." (James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 335-336). Westermann also comments on what the Delphic manumission texts contribute to our understanding of slaves and freedmen. He writes, "The Delphic manumissions by self-purchase of their liberation by the slaves themselves through the medium of the entrustment sale to Apollo number more than a thousand. The preponderant type in this group is that of the 'outright' manumissions. These represent a completed and immediate separation of the former slave from any further control on the part of the owner...The so called *paramone* manumissions, on the other hand, are those in which the new freedman contracts to work for his former master over a period of years when he is called upon to do so...In other manumissions, also, freedwomen are designated as 'handicraft workers' (*technitai*) in the Delphic documents." (W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, 35). So the general view is that freed men and women often had some contractual obligations to their former masters, but within the context of legal protections, property ownership, and often the freedom of movement. This could not be more different than the experience of a slave who had zero protections and freedom.



letters are worlds apart in style. Pliny's letter to Sabinianus thus offers a poor parallel for what we find in Paul's epistle."<sup>524</sup>

While freedmen tended to occupy the lower levels of society like slaves, there were significant differences in their daily lives, and thus the comparison between Sabinianus' freedman and Onesimus is a questionable one. Freedman often had lingering obligations toward their former masters, which is probably why Sabinianus' freedman was so concerned with staying on good terms.<sup>525</sup> Besides freedom of movement, the biggest difference between freedman and slaves had to do with the punishments they faced for misbehavior. According to Glenn Morrow, "The freedman is normally subject to punishment only by public officials, and the freedman is punished by fines and dishonor, while the slave is punished in his body, i.e. by stripes or branding."<sup>526</sup> Many freedmen were proud of the fact that they had achieved their freedom, and made a point to mention it on their tombstones.<sup>527</sup>

Next, Pliny describes that the freedman requested his help "with many tears", and that he "repents of his fault" and is "deeply sensible about his guilt." The whole picture is that the freedman knew he did something wrong, and made a very

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<sup>524</sup> Allen D. Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 8.

<sup>525</sup> Craig Steven De Vos, "Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* no. 82 (2001): 101.

<sup>526</sup> Glenn R. Morrow, "Plato and Greek Slavery," 48, no. 190 (1939): 190. Cf. Alan Watson, *Roman Slave Law* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 55.

<sup>527</sup> Peter Temin, "The Labor Market of the Early Roman Empire," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, no. 4 (2004): 528.

impassioned plea for clemency. There is nothing of the sort in Paul's letter to Philemon. Paul's plea in Phlm came solely from him, with no mention whatsoever about Onesimus' feelings. There is no proof that Onesimus thought he did anything wrong in the first place. It may in fact be the case that Onesimus wished Paul would *not* write to Philemon. We do not know, but there is no evidence of Onesimus' feelings whatsoever in Paul's letter, which is in striking contrast to Pliny's description of this freedman's remorse.

Pliny also asks for a pardon for the freedman, agreeing that he had in fact wronged Sabinianus. Pliny furthermore encourages Sabinianus to consider how young the freedman is – an excuse for his behavior. Paul makes no such excuses for Onesimus, and does not take Philemon's side in the matter.

Pliny does use some of the same rhetorical persuasion that Paul used with Philemon. For example, Pliny flatters Sabinianus by appealing to his "kindness of heart." He also exercises leverage by suggesting that he would rather "request" Sabinianus' cooperation, rather than compel him to agree. This is very similar to Paul's desire to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love, instead of ordering him to comply (1:8-9). Thus, the only real parallel between the letters has to do with the rhetorical tone. The circumstances of the letter are simply not analogous.

One of the most striking differences between the letters relates to Paul's mention of financial damage in Phlm. As discussed above, Paul alludes to a financial wrong that Onesimus committed against Philemon, and he goes so far as to take that debt upon himself. Phlm becomes Paul's IOU to Philemon, written in his own hand.

Onesimus caused some damage to Philemon, which probably had something to do with his *peculium* and using it to finance his flight. There is nothing like this mentioned in Pliny's letter to Sabinianus. The *Amicus Domini* exemption was intended to improve the situation immediately between the slave and the master – to relieve some pressure in an escalating conflict. A financial injury associated with a flight as Paul alludes to in Phlm would do the opposite and make things exponentially worse, especially when combined with a very long absence.

Unlike Paul's letter to Philemon, we actually have a follow up letter telling us how Sabinianus responded to Pliny's first letter:

To Sabinianus:

I greatly approve of your having, in compliance with my letter, received again into your favour and family a discarded freedman, whom you once admitted into a share of your affection. This will afford you, I doubt not, great satisfaction. It certainly has me, both as a proof that your passion can be controlled, and as an instance of your paying so much regard to me as either to yield to my authority or to comply with my request. Let me, therefore, at once both praise and thank you. At the same time I must advise you to be disposed for the future to pardon the faults of your people, though there should be none to intercede in their behalf. Farewell.<sup>528</sup>

The identity of the man in question remains unknown, but his status as a freedman is mentioned again in this follow up letter. Pliny comments that whether Sabinianus complied out of a desire to grant the request, or out of respect for his authority, the result is the same. He admonishes Sabinianus to be more charitable in the future and avoid making these sorts of interventions necessary.

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<sup>528</sup> *Ep. 9.24* Pliny, et al., *Letters*. Accessed online at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pliny-letters.asp>

Generally speaking, scholars have taken the superficial rhetorical similarities between Pliny's letters and Phlm and assumed as a result that the same situation was going on with Onesimus. On this point, Callahan writes, "We have no letters of intercession on behalf of a runaway slave that may be compared to Philemon, and scholars consequently have grasped at straws to argue for the relevance of purported parallels."<sup>529</sup> Harrill agrees, writing that the comparison between Pliny's letter and Phlm

"...creates more difficulties than solutions. Paul, in contrast, does not say what we would expect of a situation involving a runaway: he does not ask Philemon (as Pliny does of Sabinianus) to forgive or have pity upon the fugitive. Pliny talks to Sabinianus about having scolded the runaway, pardoned his crime as foolish, and gotten genuine penitence and reassurance that it will not happen again, which is not what Paul says to Philemon about Onesimus. And, in any case, Pliny discusses a freedman and not a slave at all."<sup>530</sup>

Barth and Blanke introduce another compelling point in this discussion that is rarely noted. In writing against those scholars who contend Onesimus was operating within the *Amicus Domini* framework (especially Lampe and Rapske), they write,

"Lampe seems to overlook the fact that only the *acceptance* of a letter of intercession exempted the slave from official or private prosecution, and from subsequent punishment – if he was caught after his escape. Neither the search

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<sup>529</sup> Allen D. Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus*, 8.

<sup>530</sup> J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 6.

for a person who might intervene nor an oral or written plea in the slave's interest *automatically* assured impunity and liberty."<sup>531</sup>

Other key differences are addressed by Forrester Church, who comments that the letter to Philemon "is not a plea for mercy. Such would have no place in Paul's argument...the Christian case for love and real equality between persons, be they slave or free, would hardly be served by such an appeal, no matter how artful its advocate. Second, Philemon is a public letter."<sup>532</sup> This is an important distinction. Paul's letter to Philemon is being read in the context of the Christian community, and what he is asking for is that Onesimus and Philemon would relate to each other in a new way because of their shared faith in Christ. Paul is not asking for a return to the status quo, he is attempting to broker a completely new relationship between the two men, and he is asking for it in a climate of spiritual accountability. Pliny, on the other hand, wishes for his repentant freedman to be restored to his former relationship with Sabinianus, and this wish is expressed through a personal letter to one man.

The scholarly understanding of the *Amicus Domini* theory is primarily viewed through the lens of Pliny's letters, which are a poor representation of the relevant Roman legal opinions (which deal with slaves, not freedmen), as well as a poor comparison to Phlm. If a case is to be made that a legal *Amicus Domini* exemption is to be applied to Onesimus' flight, it is a case that cannot be built primarily on Pliny's

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<sup>531</sup> Markus and Helmut Blanke Barth, *The Letter to Philemon* (ed. Freedman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2000), 228.

<sup>532</sup> Frank Forrester Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *Harvard Theological Review* 71, no. 1-2 (1978).

letters. They are too dissimilar. Such a case must be built instead on the Roman jurists. They collectively paint a picture of a desperate slave running away with the original intention of seeking an *Amicus Domini* who could intervene on his or her behalf within the relatively short span of the master's subsiding anger. Adding a lengthy absence on the part of the slave would undoubtedly stoke the master's anger even more, and erode any credible claim of original intent to seek an intermediary. This issue will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

## Conclusions

After surveying Roman law's approach to slavery and fugitives, as well as the legal and historical basis of the *Amicus Domini* exemption, we can reasonably assume the following about Onesimus and his situation:

1. He had virtually no legal protections or access to legal procedures.
2. His *peculium* did not ultimately belong to him. It belonged to Philemon, and would have therefore been considered a theft if he took it with him.
3. He probably ran away from Philemon out of fear – fear of being sold, physical punishment, or impending legal proceedings that required his testimony.
4. His flight would have been defined by constant paranoia, and having to misrepresent himself as free on many occasions.
5. He would have faced the constant threat of Philemon or his network chasing him, as well as *fugitivarii* and local government officials seeking him out.
6. He would have found Ephesus to be a particularly dangerous place because of the rampant slave trade in that area and the likely prospect of “wanted” posters being placed there.
7. He would not have been able to trust anyone, because citizens were legally bound to hold runaway slaves and turn them over to the authorities.
8. On the basis of the Roman jurists, Onesimus would have been considered a legal fugitive because he was out of his master's proximity, unable to be

recovered, and with no defensible claim that he originally intended to reconcile with Philemon.

9. His situation was not analogous to Sabinianus' freedman as described in Pliny's letters, a man who clearly *did* seek out reconciliation. In the first place, Onesimus was a slave, not a freedman. Furthermore, there is no mention in Phlm of Onesimus' remorse, no indication of repentance, no appeal for mercy, and no contemporary evidence that the letter was accepted by Philemon – which was the only way to guarantee an *Amicus Domini* exemption. There was also no mention in Pliny's letters of a financial injury to Sabinianus, which seems to have occurred between Onesimus and Philemon. The only substantive similarities between the letters are rhetorical.

Next we will consider the matter of travel times and cost for Onesimus' flight to Paul, which will provide even further corroboration that an *Amicus Domini* exemption is not behind Phlm. The cost and duration of the flight would make any claim or original intent to seek reconciliation indefensible. In the words of Craig Blomberg, “[Amicus Domini's] biggest weakness is the distance it requires Onesimus to have traveled just to seek out mediation.”<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>533</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 276.



## CHAPTER SIX: TRAVEL AND COMMUNICATION IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The Roman imperial period was a time in which travel increased significantly. As a result of *Pax Romana*, there was unprecedented movement of people around the Mediterranean world. Roman legions were constantly on the move, marching along newly-paved roads throughout the empire. This allowed an incredible amount of personal and commercial travel, because travel had become relatively easy and safe.<sup>534</sup> J. Thorley summarizes the new reality: “for the first time the lands from Spain to Syria were organized to form an economic unity in which the necessities of life became readily obtainable...”<sup>535</sup>

Major travel arteries like the Via Appia in Italy, the Via Egnatia in Greece, and the so-called “Royal Road” in Asia Minor allowed for travel on a grand scale. This is to say nothing of the thousands of smaller provincial roads that connected to these larger thoroughfares, as well as the prolific sea travel that crisscrossed the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Adriatic seas. Roman roads had milestones every 5,000

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<sup>534</sup> Claudia Moatti, "Translation, Migration, and Communication in the Roman Empire: Three Aspects of Movement in History," *Classical Antiquity* 25, no. 1 (2006): 118.

<sup>535</sup> J. Thorley, "The Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus," *Greece & Rome* 16, no. 2 (1969): 209.

feet, which provided directions and distances to destinations.<sup>536</sup> The major state roads totaled over 51,000 miles (82,000 kilometers) in length. This does not include the countless secondary/regional roads.<sup>537</sup>

The major roads were used consistently for military movements. While the roads accommodated much private travel, the Roman roads were also known as *viae militares*, out of an acknowledgment of their heavy use by the legions. On this point, Raymond Chevallier writes, “The term *viae militares* is explained by Cicero’s allusions to the Via Egnatia, with camps strung out along it, and by an inscription which tells of a road built in the reign of Hadrian...and served at intervals by watering points, post stations, and forts.”<sup>538</sup> Private travelers could expect a regular interaction with the Roman military on any of the major Roman roads.

Aside from military use, the roads were used for other official imperial purposes. The most well-known of these was the *cursus publicus*. Established by Augustus, the *cursus publicus* was the official Roman mail and freight system, which allowed Roman rule to extend efficiently throughout the massive empire. It was not a public mail system that private citizens could use; it was strictly a courier system for

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<sup>536</sup> Michael Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," in *The Gospels for All Christians : Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (ed. Bauckham; Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 51.

<sup>537</sup> Benjamin W. Wells, "Trade and Travel in the Roman Empire," *The Classical Journal* 19, no. 1 (1923): 11.

<sup>538</sup> Raymond Chevallier, *Roman Roads* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 182.

official business.<sup>539</sup> According to Benet Salway, the *cursus* also “maintained a network of publicly funded lodgings and changes of animals...”<sup>540</sup>

Suetonius wrote about the reason for Augustus’ creation of the *cursus*:

“So that events in all the provinces could be more speedily and promptly reported and known, he first stationed young men and later vehicles at short intervals along the military roads. The latter arrangement seems more convenient as it means that the men who have brought the letters from a particular place can themselves be questioned, if this is necessary.”<sup>541</sup>

Thus, the Roman roads were full of official imperial traffic: Roman soldiers, and official couriers. There were thousands of them using the Roman roads at any given time, and they frequented government-funded lodgings along the way.

Despite the widespread military and public use of Roman roads, the number of troops and official couriers was dwarfed by the throngs of private travelers that swarmed the roads at all times. These travelers made their way across the empire for either personal or commercial reasons, and they depended on the Roman road system. Lengthy journeys were typically done on foot for reasons of flexibility and economy.<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>539</sup> Anne Kolb, "Transport and Communication in the Roman State," in *Travel and Geography in the Roman Empire* (ed. Laurence; New York: Routledge, 2001), 95.

<sup>540</sup> Benet Salway, "Travel, *Itineraria* and *Tabellaria*," in *Travel & Geography in the Roman Empire* (ed. Laurence; New York: Routledge, 2001), 34.

<sup>541</sup> Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* (Trans. Catharine Edwards; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 70.

<sup>542</sup> Raymond Chevallier, *Roman Roads* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 178.

Private travelers often relied upon widely-distributed itineraries. These were travel guides which were created based on the advice of experienced travelers who knew the best routes to take.<sup>543</sup> Of those itineraries that have survived, most are just rudimentary lists of cities and their distances to other cities.<sup>544</sup> The largest extant itinerary is the *itinerarium Antonini*. It is a “collection of innumerable sectional routes, large and small, some counting four or five, others as many as forty stations.”<sup>545</sup>

The most famous and systematic of the known itineraries is the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. It is believed to be an itinerary that dates back to the third century, though the manuscript itself is from the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>546</sup> The most distinctive aspect of the *Tabula Peutingeriana* is its visual nature. It is a “combination of route lists with a map. Instead of simply enumerating the successive stations of any particular route, the author of the tabula enters them all on a map and thus enables the traveler to make up his own routes.”<sup>547</sup> Of course, it is unlikely that many travelers had their own written copy of any itinerary, but the fact that written itineraries existed is a reflection of the fact that there were well-known routes in the Roman Empire that people tended to follow. Most travelers would have pieced together their itineraries from acquaintances

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<sup>543</sup> Francis J. Betten, "Roman Itineraries," *The Catholic Historical Review* 7, no. 3 (1921): 296.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid

<sup>545</sup> Ibid

<sup>546</sup> Logan Thompson, "Roman Roads," *History Today* 47, no. 2 (1997): 27.

<sup>547</sup> Francis J. Betten, "Roman Itineraries," 299.

they knew who had already made the journey, as well as from directions acquired along the way.

In addition to the public housing along the Roman roads as a part of the *cursus publicus*, there were a variety of private lodgings and restaurants that travelers could pay to use. They were typically called *tabernae*.<sup>548</sup> The *tabernae* were notoriously immoral and unsafe places, filled with travelers, sailors, and generally “suspicious individuals.”<sup>549</sup> Some of the more extravagant rumors were that the proprietors of these establishments served human flesh for their meals, and practiced witchcraft.<sup>550</sup> These are obviously exaggerations born out of a thoroughly negative perception held by the public. People would not stay at a *taberna* if they had any other option. According to Chevallier, “A Roman of quality stayed with friends when journeying.”<sup>551</sup>

In addition to the public and private housing establishments, travelers on Roman roads could expect to find custom or toll houses with regularity. According to Chevallier, there were tolls in place “at the state frontiers, on the boundaries of customs areas, at the gates of some large towns, at important road junctions, on passes and bridges and at fords.”<sup>552</sup> The tolls were required for a variety of privileges: right of way, movement of merchandise, crossing of a border, entry into cities, and the use of

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<sup>548</sup> Raymond Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, 189.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid, 191. Cf. Benjamin W. Wells, "Trade and Travel in the Roman Empire," 12.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid

<sup>551</sup> Raymond Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, 191.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid, 195

bridges or other conveniences. Thus, the ancient traveler was accustomed to paying lots of tolls for a variety of reasons on any lengthy journey. The amount that they paid was related to how far they were traveling, the particular route they took, and the weight of any goods they brought along with them.

Whenever customs or tolls were paid, it was an occasion in which the private traveler interacted with the state. This would often necessitate the production of identification – especially with a significant number of criminals and fugitive slaves using the roads. According to Claudia Moatti, these ancient forms of identification included

“oath, signature, use of signs like insignia (a ring, clothes, shoes) or objects...; written documents, public or private (a letter of commendation, a document of immunity could play this role), physical description or profession (declaration of name, filiation, and narration of biographical elements given as true).”<sup>553</sup>

This was an environment in which faking one’s identity was possible. Fugitive slaves would have undoubtedly used an alias, and relied on false documentation in order to conceal their true identity. One factor that made it difficult to lie about one’s origin, however, is that migrants were often easily identified by their clothes and customs. It was obvious to locals when a traveler was not from their region.<sup>554</sup>

The speed of travel along Roman roads varied depending on several factors. For example, according to Salway “the shortest [route] was not always the best,

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<sup>553</sup> Claudia Moatti, "Translation, Migration, and Communication in the Roman Empire: Three Aspects of Movement in History," 119.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid 120

especially if it meant traversing a less densely populated region, with all the discomforts that might entail.”<sup>555</sup> In other words, many travelers did not always choose the most direct route between two locations, and that of course affected average travel times. Generally speaking, travelers on foot could travel between 15-25 miles each day.<sup>556</sup> The speed of the professional *cursus publicus* was much faster, rising to perhaps 45 miles each day on average.<sup>557</sup> There is one example of the *cursus* reaching an average speed of 50 miles per day, when urgent news traveled from Rome to Carnuntum (in modern Austria) that Septimius Severus had been proclaimed emperor. The news left on the morning of March 29, and arrived on the evening of April 8. This amounted to a rate of about 5mph or 50 miles per day, and is generally regarded as the top speed reached for the *cursus publicus*.<sup>558</sup>

With this overview of travel on the Roman roads, some brief comments on sea travel are necessary. While travel on the roads was prolific and convenient, travel on the seas was much faster.<sup>559</sup> For example, the journey from Ephesus to Antioch on the

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<sup>555</sup> Benet Salway, "Travel, *Itineraria* and *Tabellaria*," in *Travel & Geography in the Roman Empire*, 34.

<sup>556</sup> Raymond Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, 186.; Michael Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," 62.

<sup>557</sup> Raymond Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, 194.

<sup>558</sup> C. W. J. Eliot, "New Evidence for the Speed of the Roman Imperial Post," *Phoenix* 9, no. 2 (1955): 76-80.

<sup>559</sup> Cedric A. Yeo, "Land and Sea Transportation in Imperial Italy," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 77 (1946): 231.

Orontes would take 8-18 days by sea, but at least 35 days by land.<sup>560</sup> The speed of sea travel was affected by both the size and type of the ship, as well as the itinerary.

Voyages that hugged the coastline were very common, and included frequent stops at small ports.<sup>561</sup> It was often the case that travelers combined land and sea travel to reach distant destinations.<sup>562</sup>

The weather and time of year affected sea travel as well. This reality is vividly described in Paul's journey to Rome near the end of the book of Acts:

When we had sailed slowly for a good many days, and with difficulty had arrived off Cnidus, since the wind did not permit us to go farther, we sailed under the shelter of Crete, off Salmone; and with difficulty sailing past it we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea. When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over...<sup>563</sup>

Ports in the early empire were relatively small, as were the ships.<sup>564</sup> According to George Houston, the merchant fleet was made up "overwhelmingly of ships much smaller than the maximum size allowed by the technology of the time. The largest

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<sup>560</sup> Michael Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," 61.

<sup>561</sup> Charles Knapp, "A Note on Travel in Ancient Times Frequency of Travel; Motives of Travel," *The Classical Weekly* 28, no. 23 (1935): 177. M.P. Charlesworth, *Trade-Routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1970), 87. Michael Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," 63.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid

<sup>563</sup> Acts 27:7-9, NASB

<sup>564</sup> According to George Houston, "Most Roman merchant vessels were small (i.e. below 100 tons), and man-made port facilities were both small and unusual in the Roman empire." Cf. George W. Houston, "Ports in Perspective: Some Comparative Materials on Roman Merchant Ships and Ports," *American Journal of Archaeology* 92, no. 4 (1988): 533.



ships are few in number and attract the attention of contemporaries precisely because they are rare and exciting.”<sup>565</sup> This makes complete sense for the time period, according to Houston. He writes,

“Such small ports, served by relatively small coastal vessels, and the limited volume of trade this implies, are, of course, exactly what we should normally expect to find in a preindustrial context. This is a world where cities of more than 25,000 inhabitants are uncommon, those of more than 100,000 rare.”<sup>566</sup>

The merchant vessels also formed the infrastructure for private sea travel in the Roman Empire. According to Michael Thompson, “There was no such thing as a passenger vessel in the ancient world, but trading ships commonly carried travelers.”<sup>567</sup> The massive grain fleet that was constantly moving around the Mediterranean was especially important for sea travel.

Most travelers were required to have an exit pass and pay a toll to the port authorities before their voyage.<sup>568</sup> Once on board, the accommodations were spartan.

Thompson describes the experience of travelers on these merchant ships:

“Accommodation was primitive – passengers normally stayed on deck, sleeping out in the open or under tent-like shelters...they brought their own food...”<sup>569</sup> There was a

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<sup>565</sup> Ibid

<sup>566</sup> Ibid 563

<sup>567</sup> Michael Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," 52.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid

<sup>569</sup> Ibid 53

constant risk of piracy, as well, which led many ships to seek armed ships as escorts.<sup>570</sup>

Given this basic understanding of the nature, speed, and availability of travel within the Roman Empire, let us look at the nature of communication during the same period.

The communication network in the empire was built upon the existing travel structure, and thus communication timetables were roughly equivalent to travel schedules. According to modern standards, travel and communication in the Roman Empire was incredibly slow. Thompson describes this reality, writing “In the ancient world, the closest thing to an information superhighway was the grid of Roman roads and clear shipping lanes...”<sup>571</sup> While the travel and communication network was quite sophisticated compared to anything that had ever come before it in history, Stambaugh is correct in stating that “long-distance communications strike us a painfully slow and uncertain...”<sup>572</sup>

Communication happened both passively and actively. In a passive sense, people in the Roman Empire viewed themselves as having the responsibility to transmit news from wherever they had been. It was part of life. People who traveled for a living or engaged in commerce that required travel to distant locations were

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<sup>570</sup> Reginald Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire*, 6.

<sup>571</sup> Michael Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," 50.

<sup>572</sup> John E. Stambaugh, *The Ancient Roman City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 139. Moatti echoes this sentiment, writing that the “main problem of correspondence was slowness...” (Claudia Moatti, "Translation, Migration, and Communication in the Roman Empire: Three Aspects of Movement in History," 129).

continually asked by locals about the news from their travels.<sup>573</sup> In that sense, people could expect to passively receive information from travelers who came into their town.

In a more active way, communication was cultivated through messengers and social networks. According to Stambaugh, “Private communications were often entrusted to slaves, or to a network that passed messages orally around upper-class dining rooms and lower class *tabernae*.”<sup>574</sup> Thus, if someone wanted to convey a message to a distant location, they could either dispatch a slave to bring the message, or send the message through social channels that would lead to the intended destination.

Within the Christian network specifically, there was a fairly sophisticated communication structure, facilitated by the many traveling Christian leaders and evangelists that actively moved between the various churches around the Roman world. According to Thompson, “Belonging to the body of Christ meant immediate access to the network of Christian believers...”<sup>575</sup> This reality is on display in the New Testament epistles, and especially in the final chapters that feature personal remarks. These sections contain a variety of greetings and other personal comments, and serve

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<sup>573</sup> Raymond Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, 192.

<sup>574</sup> John E. Stambaugh, *The Ancient Roman City*, 139.

<sup>575</sup> Michael Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," 55.

as an illustration for the kind of ongoing communication that happened within the Christian network.<sup>576</sup>

Thompson (somewhat jokingly) calls the Christian communication and travel network “the Holy Internet.” He writes that

“The Holy internet hummed with traffic for many reasons. Travel was a necessity for a wide variety of people including merchants, freedmen in pursuit of new jobs, letter carriers, artisans, actors, athletes, runaway slaves, teachers, students, the sick seeking mineral springs and places for healing, government officials, soldiers, and tourists to see the sights....the holy internet hungered for news. [The Christians] shared commitment in love and their sense of community as God’s family naturally led Christians to desire information about how brothers and sisters were faring.”<sup>577</sup>

If Onesimus was a fugitive as I have argued, he would have had a strong motivation to avoid the Christian social network, especially if it had connections to the environs of Ephesus. This would have been one of the most efficient ways for him to alert Philemon to his whereabouts.

Within the constant communication and travel that was going on all over the Christian community (and the Roman world generally), runaway slaves were hiding in plain sight. It was not necessarily obvious that they were a fugitive, considering the fact that many slaves were sent by their owners on long-distance errands. According to Buckland, “a slave who has run away differs in no external respect from one who is

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<sup>576</sup> Romans 16:1-23; 1 Cor. 16:5-19; Eph. 6:21-22; Phil. 4:15-18; Col. 4:7-18; 2 Tim. 4:9-21; Titus 3:12-13; Phlm 1:22-24; Heb. 13:23-24; 1 Pet. 5:12-13

<sup>577</sup> Ibid. Nordling offers the interesting theory that Paul’s concern for making peace between Philemon and Onesimus was not primarily about restoring their relationship, but rather preserving an important communication link in his ministry that ran through Colossae and depended on Philemon. (John G. Nordling, "Philemon in the Context of Paul's Travels," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 74, no. 3-4 (2010): 304).

away about his owner's affairs."<sup>578</sup> In the same way that slaves made up a large percentage of the Roman world, it can be assumed that slaves made up a significant percentage of the traveling community. While many average travelers may not have been able to spot a fugitive slave among all the legitimately traveling slaves, it is important to bear in mind that the Roman roads were always full of people actively hunting down the fugitives – and they were experts in spotting them.

This general picture of travel and communication will inform our consideration of the starting and ending points of Onesimus' flight.

### **Colossae**

As established above, it is highly likely that Colossae was the location of Philemon's home, and thus the origin of Onesimus' flight. Colossae is located around 100 miles to the east of Ephesus, in the Lycus Valley. The three major cities of the valley were Colossae, Laodicea, and Hieropolis, and they were situated within about days' walk from each other.<sup>579</sup> Colossae was the most ancient of the three cities, and the only one mentioned by ancient historians in the list of cities where Xerxes stopped on his westward journey toward Greece in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>580</sup> Herodotus, writing

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<sup>578</sup> W. W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery: The Condition of the Slave in Private Law from Augustus to Justinian* (Union, N.J.: Lawbook Exchange, 2000), 270.

<sup>579</sup> Clive Foss, "Archaeology and the "Twenty Cities" of Byzantine Asia," *American Journal of Archaeology* 81, no. 4 (1977): 484.

<sup>580</sup> *Anabasis* i.2.6 (A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces* (Oxford Eng.: Clarendon Press, 1971), 37).

in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE called Colossae “a great city of Phrygia.”<sup>581</sup> Laodicea and Hieropolis were newer cities, but they overtook Colossae in size and influence by the New Testament era.<sup>582</sup>

The cities of the Lycus Valley were known to produce fine textiles of wool. The ancient geographer Strabo made mention of the “fine black fleeces of its sheep.”<sup>583</sup> The major marketplace for their goods was the metropolis of Ephesus. David Magie describes the economic relationship between the wool industry of the Lycus Valley and Ephesus, writing “At Ephesus, during the Roman imperial period, the existence of prosperous guilds of ‘wool workers’, ‘wool dealers’, and ‘cloak dealers’ attests to the importance of the industry in that city.”<sup>584</sup> It is probable that Philemon was engaged in some sort of commerce related to the wool industry, and possible that Onesimus had a working knowledge of the local market.

These cities of the Lycus Valley were conveniently situated near more than one major Roman road, which facilitated trade and travel through the area.<sup>585</sup> Colossae was formerly in an advantageous position because of its strategic location, thriving

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<sup>581</sup> *Hist.* 7.30

<sup>582</sup> Sherman E. Johnson, "Laodicea and Its Neighbors," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 13, no. 1 (1950): 5.

<sup>583</sup> A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces* (Oxford Eng.: Clarendon Press, 1971), 74.

<sup>584</sup> David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 47.

<sup>585</sup> Bo Ivar Reicke, "Historical Setting of Colossians," *Review & Expositor* 70, no. 4 (1973): 429.

wool industry, and lack of local competition.<sup>586</sup> The later establishment and commercial success of nearby Laodicea contributed to the downturn in Colossae's economic power.<sup>587</sup>

Despite the fact that Colossae was the recipient of two canonical texts (Colossians and Philemon), the site has never been excavated to this day.<sup>588</sup> In the year 61 CE, the Lycus Valley suffered a devastating earthquake that most likely destroyed or significantly damaged Colossae. Tacitus mentions that Laodicea was destroyed in the quake and rebuilt, but he makes no mention of Colossae.<sup>589</sup> Some scholars doubt that a complete destruction occurred, but most acknowledge that Colossae was dealt a serious blow by both the rise of Laodicea, and the earthquake of 61.<sup>590</sup>

### **Paul's Place of Imprisonment**

In order to reconstruct the probable circumstances and timetables of Onesimus' flight, we must explore the likely location of Paul's imprisonment. While a definitive decision on this matter is not required for overturning the prevailing *Amicus Domini* theory, understanding the travel environment, duration, and cost of Onesimus' journey

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<sup>586</sup> David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor*, 126.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid.

<sup>588</sup> Sherman E. Johnson, "Early Christianity in Asia Minor," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 77, no. 1 (1958): 13.

<sup>589</sup> Annals 14.27.1. (Bo Ivar Reicke, "Historical Setting of Colossians," 430).

<sup>590</sup> Alan H. Cadwallader, "Refuting an Axiom of Scholarship on Colossae: Fresh Insights from New and Old Inscriptions," in *Colossae in Space and Time : Linking to an Ancient City* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 151-176.

contributes to the theory I am working to establish. There are three options for the location of Paul's imprisonment: Rome, Ephesus, and Caesarea Maritima. Scholars tend to prefer either Rome or Ephesus, but Caesarea is often addressed as a possibility as well.

In terms of direct evidence, Rome seems to be the most likely candidate for the location of Paul's imprisonment. This has been the view of most biblical scholars throughout history.<sup>591</sup> After Paul's appeal to Caesar in Acts 25:11-12, we read about his journey to the imperial capital and imprisonment in the final chapters of Acts. In Acts 28:30, Luke describes that Paul spent two full years imprisoned (Ἐνέμεινεν δὲ διετίαν ὅλην), and that he was able to entertain guests during that time. The Roman imprisonment would have most likely happened during the years 60-62 CE.<sup>592</sup> As we saw above, both the manuscript subscriptions and the testimony of the early church writings are uniform in their attestation that Paul was imprisoned in Rome.<sup>593</sup> Cotter sums it up nicely, writing "Not only do the Fathers, Greek and Latin, testify to this

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<sup>591</sup> Charles B. Williams, "The Caesarean Imprisonment of Paul," *The Biblical World* 34, no. 4 (1909): 280.

<sup>592</sup> Bo Ivar Reicke, "Historical Setting of Colossians," 435. Most scholars agree that Paul's epistle to the Romans was written sometime in the mid-50's CE, perhaps as late as 57 or 58. At the end of that epistle, in 15:24, he states that he hopes to visit the Roman Christians on his way to Spain (ὡς ἂν πορεύωμαι εἰς τὴν Σπανίαν). It is unclear if he ever made it to Spain, but even if he did, that still leaves room in our chronology for Paul to end up in prison in Rome in the early 60's CE – which lines up with the Acts timetable. Paul also mentioned in Phlm that he wanted to visit Philemon in Colossae after his imprisonment (v. 22). It is unclear whether that was just a rhetorical move designed to put pressure on Philemon, or if it actually meant that Paul planned to visit. I am inclined to view it as a rhetorical move since that statement comes at the climax of a lot of rhetorical statements on Paul's part beginning in verse 8, and Paul would not have known whether he would be released. But, it is possible that Paul could have visited Philemon. Many scholars have postulated that Paul was released and imprisoned a second time in Rome in the mid-late 60's CE, which is based on Eusebius (2.22.2ff) and 2 Tim.4:16.

<sup>593</sup> Cf. Chrysostom, Theodoret, Marcionite Prologue et. al.



tradition, but also the Greek codices (majuscules and minuscule), and ancient versions note it at the end of the epistles.”<sup>594</sup>

Objections for the Roman imprisonment have to do with the date and the distance. If it is true that Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake in 61 CE, (which is not certain), then there is a shorter window of time in which the Onesimus episode could have transpired. It would have had to happen in the early portion of Paul’s imprisonment. Also, the distance from Colossae to Rome is extremely far (almost 2,000 miles by foot, over 1,200 miles by sea), which tightens the timetable even more.

Caesarea Maritima is another option with biblical evidence to support it. Acts 24:27 records that Paul was imprisoned by the Roman governor Felix for two years, before his legal case was reopened by Felix’ successor Festus. Thus, there is sufficient time during this imprisonment for the Onesimus episode to transpire. Also, Acts 24:23 indicates that Paul had some freedom to interact with his friends during this time, so his Caesarean imprisonment was similar to the imprisonment in Rome: both lasted for around two years, and both allowed Paul some personal interaction with his Christian network. The main differences in the two imprisonments are simply the timeframe and location. Paul’s Caesarean imprisonment most likely happened during the years 58-60 CE, the two years prior to his Roman incarceration.<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>594</sup> A. C. Cotter, "Epistles of the Captivity," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1949): 374.

<sup>595</sup> Bo Ivar Reicke, "Historical Setting of Colossians," 435.

There are a number of scholars who support the Caesarean imprisonment hypothesis.<sup>596</sup> It removes any conflict concerning the possible 61 CE destruction of Colossae by an earthquake. Also, as Bo Reicke has pointed out, Paul speaks in Philemon of his imprisonment as if it is something new (Phlm 1:9). This makes more sense with his initial imprisonment in Caesarea in 58 CE, rather than a Roman imprisonment that comes on the heels of two years in custody in Caesarea.<sup>597</sup>

The primary drawbacks for the Caesarean imprisonment hypothesis have to do with extra-biblical evidence and distance. There are no ancient sources that mention Caesarea as the place of Paul's imprisonment during the Onesimus episode. Also, the distance from Colossae to Caesarea is also quite burdensome (800 miles on foot or by sea). Cotter also notes that it would be difficult for Paul to ask Philemon to make a lodging ready for him (Phlm 1:22) if he knew that he would be going to Rome for trial after his time in Caesarea.<sup>598</sup> While there is indeed evidence for such an imprisonment, the scholarly support for Caesarea as the place of Paul's imprisonment when he wrote Phlm has waned considerably.<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> Fitzmyer offers a survey of such scholars: Dibelius, Goguel, Greeven, Haput, Lohmeyer, Oesterley, Reicke and de Zwaan. (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon* (ed. Freedman; New Haven: Yale University, 2000), 11).

<sup>597</sup> Bo Reicke, "Caesarea, Rome, and the Captivity Epistles," in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 280.

<sup>598</sup> A. C. Cotter, "Epistles of the Captivity," 376.

<sup>599</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 307.

The last option is an imprisonment in Ephesus, occurring sometime during the years 54-56 CE.<sup>600</sup> Many scholars have advocated for this location for Paul's imprisonment and the place from which he wrote the so-called Prison Letters.<sup>601</sup> This seems like a sensible option in the Onesimus episode because of its proximity to Colossae (about a week's walk away). This also seems to make good sense of Paul's mention in Phlm 1:22 that he plans to visit soon. However, a number of other scholars have rightly noted that it is just as reasonable to think that Onesimus would have wanted to specifically *avoid* Ephesus because it was so close to Colossae and a hub of commercial and social activity to which Philemon was connected.<sup>602</sup> Furthermore, as we have discussed, Ephesus was full of slave hunters, and the slave trade was especially rampant in that city – an environment a runaway slave would undoubtedly wish to avoid.

The real problem is that there is no direct evidence that Paul was ever imprisoned in Ephesus.<sup>603</sup> The biblical evidence that supports the theory is indirect and requires reading between the lines to a significant degree. Reicke argues that

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<sup>600</sup> Judith Ryan, "Philemon," in *Philippians and Philemon* (ed. Harrington; vol. 10 of *Sacra Pagina Series*; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005), 180.

<sup>601</sup> John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 103.; Judith Ryan, "Philemon," in *Philippians and Philemon* (ed. Harrington; vol. 10 of *Sacra Pagina Series*; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005), 180.; N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 36.; Pheme Perkins, *Paul in Asia Minor* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 13.; Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon; a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 188.; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 507.

<sup>602</sup> F.F. Bruce, "St. Paul in Rome: 2. The Epistle to Philemon," *BJRL* 48(1965-1966): 86.

<sup>603</sup> Ben Witherington, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 23.

while there was some evidence of tumult in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-40a), this “attack ended within a short time and without any imprisonment.”<sup>604</sup> There is an opaque reference to a conflict in Ephesus mentioned in 1 Cor. 15:32, but it is inconclusive. On the lack of direct evidence of an Ephesians imprisonment, Reicke comments, “It is pure imagination to speak of any captivity in Ephesus.”<sup>605</sup> All things considered, an Ephesian imprisonment is theoretical. There is no direct evidence that Paul was ever incarcerated there.

Benjamin Robinson, however, sees some historical possibility of an Ephesian imprisonment. He notes that Paul was in fact imprisoned in Ephesus in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and as a result this may have influenced later traditions that associated Paul’s captivity with Ephesus.<sup>606</sup> Robinson also contends that if the original destination of Romans 16 was Ephesus, then some remarks in that chapter might indicate an Ephesian imprisonment.<sup>607</sup> He also notes the mention in 2 Cor. 1:8ff of “our affliction which befell us in Asia”, which alluded to a sentence of death.<sup>608</sup> Since the letter was probably written from Ephesus, then it is possible the afflictions took place there. Robinson also notes the mention of frequent imprisonment in 2 Cor.

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<sup>604</sup> Bo Ivar Reicke, "Historical Setting of Colossians," 435.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid.

<sup>606</sup> Benjamin W. Robinson, "An Ephesian Imprisonment of Paul," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 29, no. 2 (1910): 181.

<sup>607</sup> Ibid, 182. Romans 16:4 mentions a risk that Prisca and Aquila took on behalf of Paul, 16:7 mentions “fellow prisoners.”

<sup>608</sup> Ibid

11:23.<sup>609</sup> Bowen Clayton sums up the comments about persecution in Ephesus, writing “Something terrible had befallen Paul in Asia.”<sup>610</sup>

While it is certainly plausible that Paul spent time in prison in Ephesus, there is no direct evidence of it, and thus we will consider it the least likely candidate for the location of Paul’s imprisonment. Ephesus is certainly the most convenient option for Onesimus’ flight, but there is little historical evidence to support it and convenience is not evidence. We will run travel models for all three locations, however, to establish minimum timetables and cost, but with the understanding that Rome or Caesarea are more likely than Ephesus. Much of our data will rely on Stanford University’s Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World, called *Orbis*.<sup>611</sup>

### **Colossae to Rome**

The journey from Colossae to Rome is the longest and most costly itinerary of the three we will consider. The closest city to Colossae that *Orbis* can chart is Laodicea ad Lycum, which is about 10 miles down the road from Colossae – a negligible distance considering how far away Rome is. Below is a summary of the travel time and freight cost for each type of travel in each season.

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<sup>609</sup> Ibid

<sup>610</sup> R. Bowen Clayton, "Are Paul's Prison Letters from Ephesus?," *The American Journal of Theology* 24, no. 1 (1920): 118.

<sup>611</sup> Walter Scheidel, And Elijah Meeks, "Orbis: The Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World," (2012). *Orbis* is designed to reconstruct “the time cost and financial expense associated with a wide range of different types of travel in antiquity. The model is based on a simplified version of the giant network of cities, roads, rivers, and sea lanes that framed movement across the Roman Empire.” It focuses on the travel system as a whole, and thus favors “averages over particular outcomes.” Thus, *Orbis* offers a scholarly estimation of average travel times and cost for various ancient itineraries.

**Table 1: LAODICEA AD LYCUM TO ROME<sup>612</sup>**

		WINTER	SPRING	SUMMER	FALL
<b>BY ROAD</b>	<i>Time</i>	96.4 days	96.4 days	96.4 days	96.4 days
	<i>Cost</i>	79.69 den	79.69 den	79.69 den	79.69 den
<b>BY ROAD + SEA</b>	<i>Time</i>	21.1 days	20.6 days	21.9 days	20.2 days
	<i>Cost</i>	6.94 den	8.5 den	7.62 den	7.45 den

**Figure 1: Laodicea ad Lycum to Rome (by land, all seasons)**

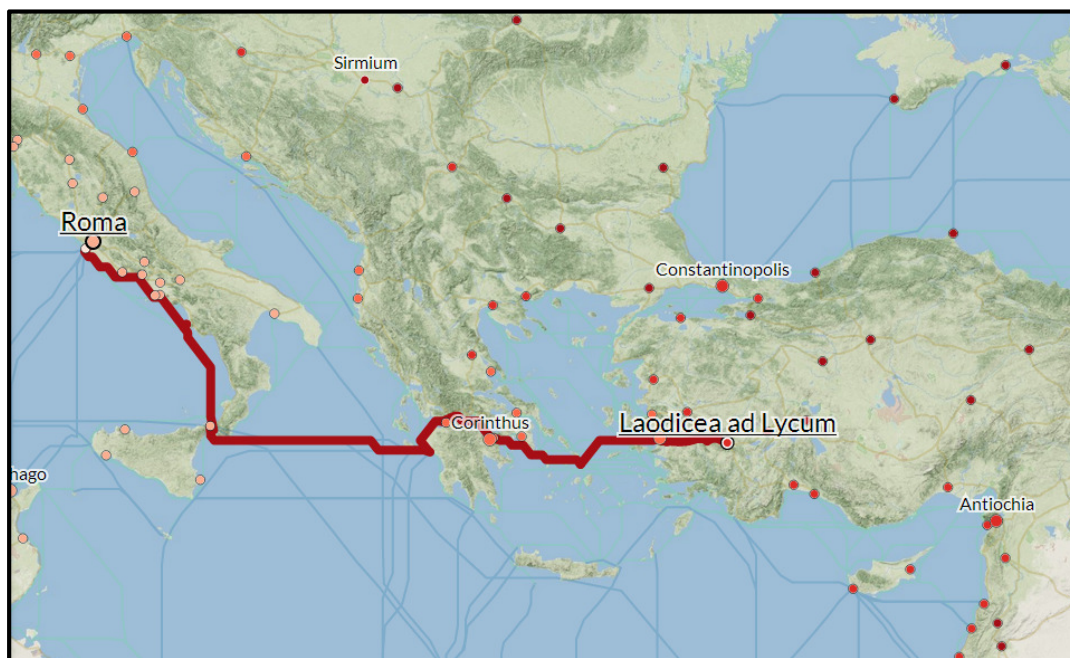


The journey on land from Laodicea to Rome is incredibly long and arduous, and involves traveling far north of Greece and Macedonia around to the north of Italy and then south toward Rome. The total one-way distance is 1,770 miles (2,849 km),

<sup>612</sup> Den = *denarii* per kilogram of goods, days = number of days required for the journey. A *denarius* is roughly a day's wage for a laborer (cf. Matthew 20:2).

and the journey would take 96.4 days regardless of season. The total cost would be 79.69 *denarii* per kg of goods.

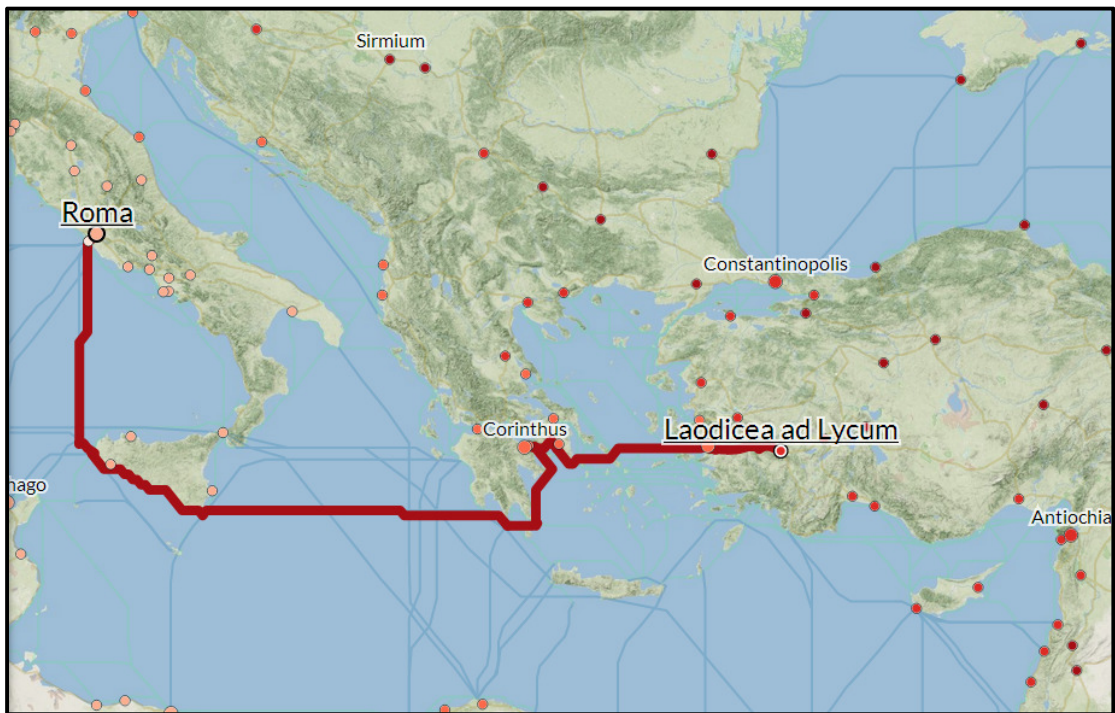
**Figure 2: Laodicea ad Lycum to Rome (by land and sea, Fall/Spring/Summer)**



The journey by land and sea during the Fall, Spring, and Summer would take the traveler from the port of Ephesus across the Aegean to Corinth, and then across the land in Greece to once again pick up the sea travel toward Sicily. The final leg of the journey would be northward along the western coast of Italy. The total one-way distance is 1,291 miles (2,078 km), and the journey would take between 20 and 22 days.<sup>613</sup> The total cost would be 7-8 *denarii* per kg of goods.

<sup>613</sup> This timetable is in line with Thompson's predictions. (Michael Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," 61).

**Figure 3: Laodicea ad Lycum to Rome (by land and sea, winter)**



The journey by land and sea during the Winter would take the traveler from Ephesus across the Aegean to Corinth, and then around the south tip of Greece on the way toward Sicily. The final leg of the journey would be a straight northern shot from the west coast of Sicily north toward Rome. The total one-way distance is 1,493 miles (2,403 km), and the journey would take 21 days. The total cost would be 6.94 *denarii* per kg of goods. This does not include any booking costs or port tolls for the sea travel, which would be significant considering the vast majority of this itinerary is sea travel.

In sum, the minimum duration and cost of the journey to Rome would be just under 3 weeks, and cost a minimum of 7.5 *denarii* per kg of goods. This, however, has



to be multiplied by two in order to account for the return trip. Thus, the minimum amount of time Onesimus would be gone from Philemon would be 6 weeks, and would cost around 15 *denarii* per kg of goods. The maximum duration of a journey to Rome would take over 3 months one way (6 months round trip), and cost around 80 *denarii* per kg of goods (160 *denarii* round trip).

It is very important to remember that these figures (and those listed below for other itineraries) do not include the amount of time Onesimus spent with Paul before returning, which was significant because it was during this time that he became a Christian and endeared himself to Paul through his service. All of this occurred prior to the writing of Phlm and the return voyage. Financially speaking, these estimates also do not include the many additional costs of lodging, port fees, food etc. which would significantly drive up the cost of this journey.

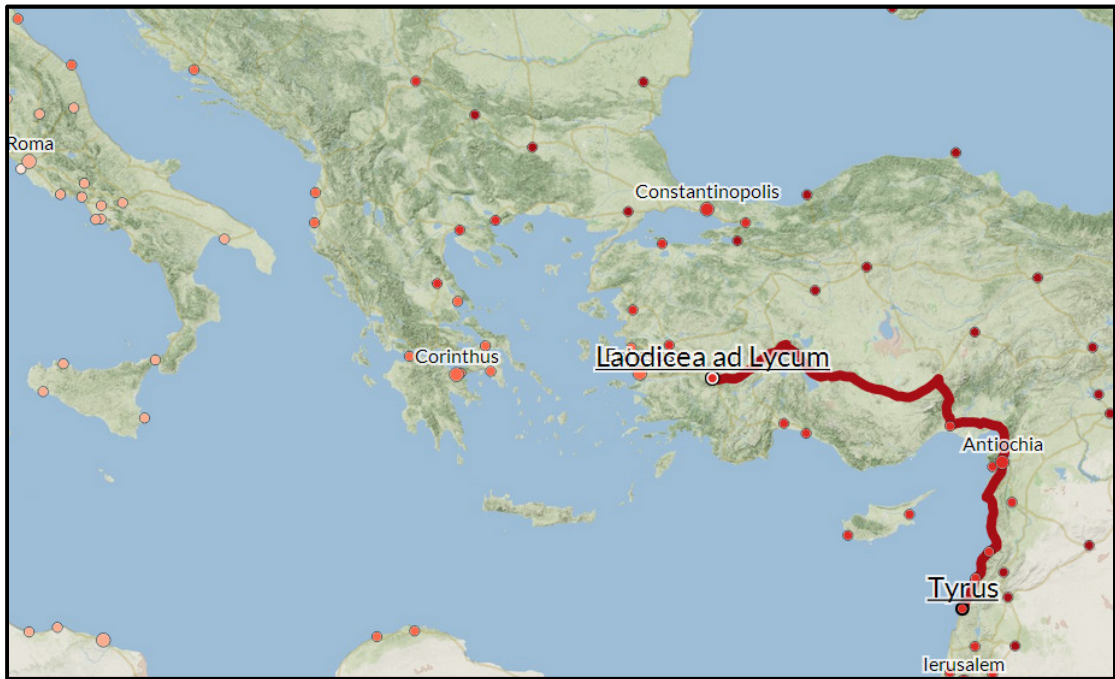
### **Colossae to Caesarea Maritima**

The closest city to Caesarea that Orbis can chart is Tyrus (Tyre), which is about 50 miles north of Caesarea on the Levantine coast. This model will have its ending point there. Below is a summary of the travel time and freight cost for each type of travel.

**Table 2: LAODICEA AD LYCUM TO TYRUS**

		<b>WINTER</b>	<b>SPRING</b>	<b>SUMMER</b>	<b>FALL</b>
<b>BY ROAD</b>	<i>Time</i>	44.2 days	44.2 days	44.2 days	44.2 days
	<i>Cost</i>	36.09 den	36.09 den	36.09 den	36.09 den
<b>BY ROAD + SEA</b>	<i>Time</i>	12.3 days	12.4 days	11.5 days	12.3 days
	<i>Cost</i>	5.47 den	5.48 den	5.39 den	5.47 den

**Figure 4: Laodicea ad Lycum to Tyrus (by land, all seasons)**



The journey on land from Laodicea to Tyrus is long and difficult. It follows the ancient Persian Royal Road to the east, and approaches Antioch through the Cilician Gates. It then follows the coastline south toward Tyrus.<sup>614</sup> It would be another few days to reach Caesarea. The total one-way distance is 800 miles (1,288 km), and the journey would take 44.2 days regardless of season. The total cost would be 36.09 *denarii* per kg of goods. The trip is roughly half the cost and distance as the trip to Rome on foot.

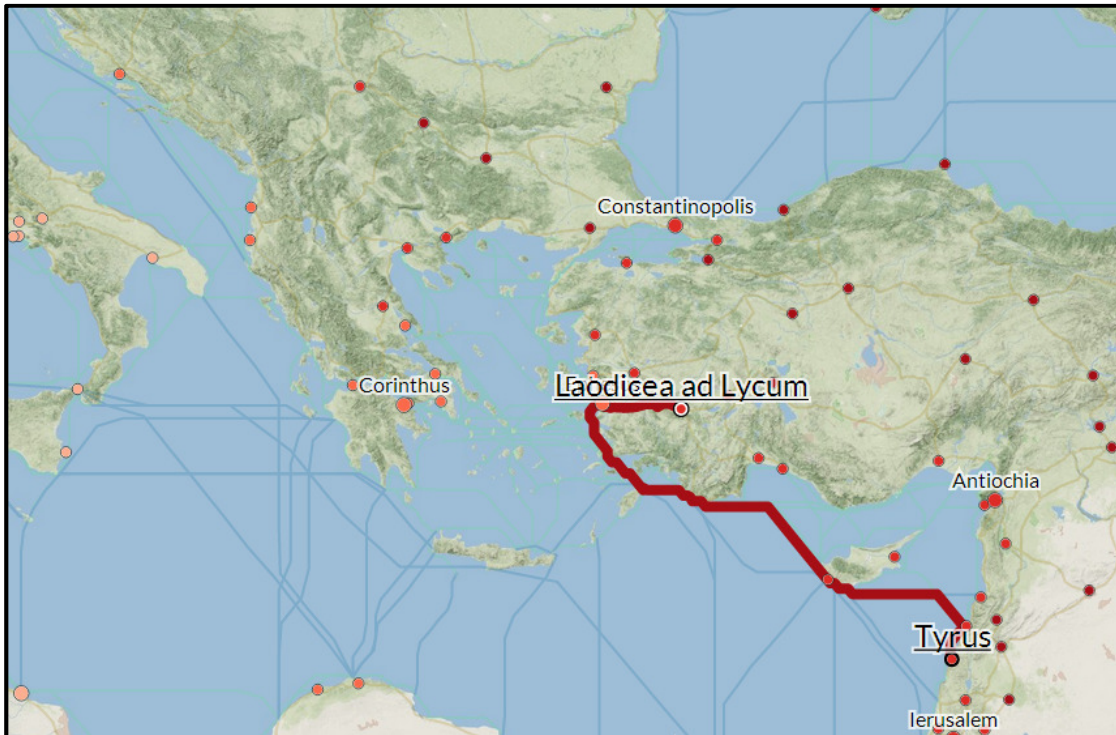
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<sup>614</sup> William Mitchell Ramsay, *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor* (New York,: Cooper Square Publishers, 1972), 27.; David French, "Pre- and Early-Roman Roads of Asia Minor. The Persian Royal Road," *Iran* 36 (1998): 16.; H. A. Ormerod, "A Note on the Eastern Trade-Route in Asia Minor," *The Classical Review* 26, no. 3 (1912): 76.

**Figure 5: Laodicea ad Lycum to Tyrus (by land and sea, Fall)**



**Figure 6: Laodicea ad Lycum to Tyrus (by land and sea, Winter)**



**Figure 7: Laodicea ad Lycum to Tyrus (by land and sea, Spring)**



**Figure 8: Laodicea ad Lycum to Tyrus (by land and sea, Summer)**



The journey by land and sea from Laodicea to Tyrus is fairly consistent regardless of season, with the boats hugging the coastline a little more closely during the Winter. The journey heads south from Ephesus toward Rhodes, and then on to the southwest coast of Cyprus. Next is a straight shot east toward the Levantine coastline, after which the journey heads south toward Tyrus and ultimately Caesarea. The total one-way distance is 820 miles (1,320 km), and the journey would take between 11 and 12 days. The total cost would be less than 6 *denarii* per kg of goods. This does not include any booking costs or port tolls for the sea travel, which would be significant considering the vast majority of this itinerary is sea travel.

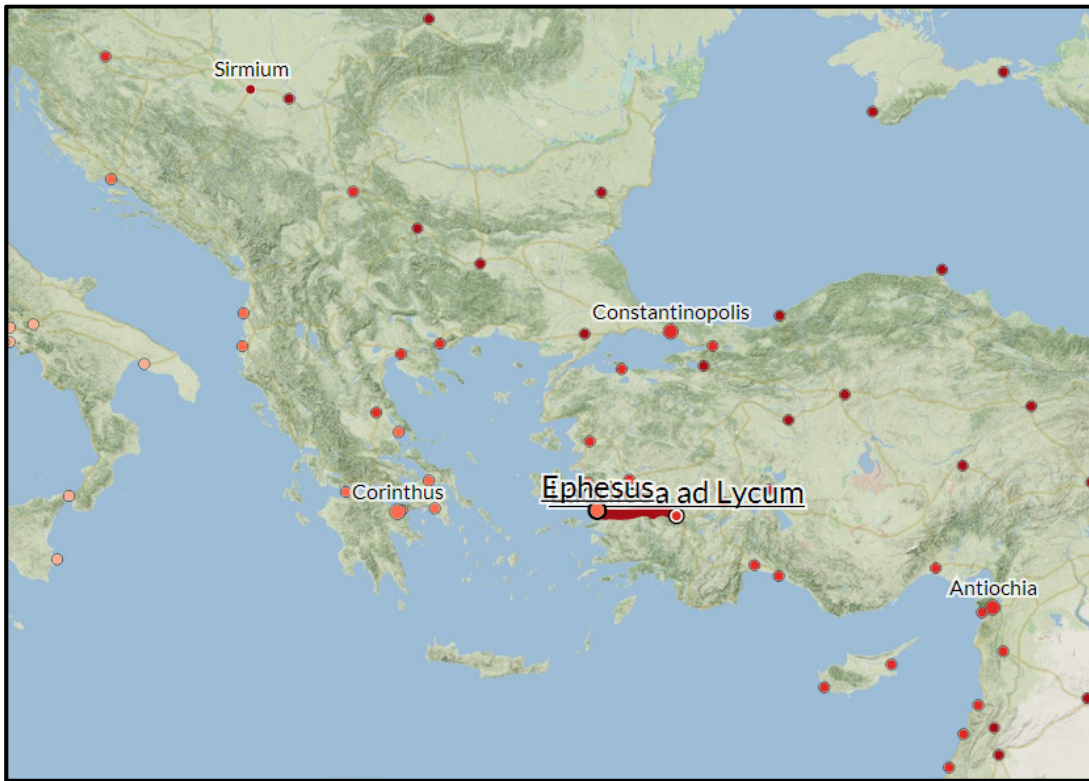
In sum, the minimum duration and cost of the journey to Caesarea would be around 12 days, and cost around 5.5 *denarii* per kg of goods. This, however, has to be multiplied by two in order to account for the return trip. Thus, the minimum amount of time Onesimus would be gone from Philemon would be 24 days, and would cost around 11 *denarii* per kg of goods. The maximum duration of a journey to Caesarea would take 44 days one way (3 months round trip), and cost around 36 *denarii* per kg of goods (72 *denarii* round trip).

### Colossae to Ephesus

**Table 3: LAODICEA AD LYCUM TO EPHEBUS**

		<b>WINTER</b>	<b>SPRING</b>	<b>SUMMER</b>	<b>FALL</b>
<b>BY ROAD</b>	<i>Time</i>	5.7 days	5.7 days	5.7 days	5.7 days
	<i>Cost</i>	4.81 den	4.81 den	4.81 den	4.81 den
<b>BY ROAD + SEA</b>	<i>Time</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	<i>Cost</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

**Figure 9: Laodicea ad Lycum to Ephesus (by land, all seasons)**



The journey on land from Laodicea to Ephesus is the cheapest and the shortest of all the potential itineraries for Onesimus' flight, and it would be made on foot. For reasons mentioned above, it is also potentially the most perilous for Onesimus. The route heads north through the Lycus Valley, and then east along the Maeander river toward Ephesus at the coast. The total one-way distance is 106 miles (171 km), and the journey would take 5.7 days regardless of season. Adding the additional day of travel from Colossae to Laodicea it would be just under a week to make the journey. The total cost would be 4.81 *denarii* per kg of goods. The round trip journey would take 2 weeks, and cost around 10 *denarii* per kg of goods.

## Conclusions

From the foregoing information on travel, communication, and possible routes of Onesimus' flight, we can safely assume the following about Onesimus:

1. During his flight, Onesimus would have been surrounded by thousands of people including government officials, Roman soldiers, private travelers, and professional slave catchers.
2. He probably spent time at private lodgings and *tabernae* during his flight.
3. He would have interacted with local officials at multiple junctures, including customs, toll houses, and port authorities.
4. He would have had to identify himself on multiple occasions, presumably using an alias or false documentation.
5. He would have probably avoided locations that had any sort of social connection to Philemon, which of course would have included Christian communities.
6. He may have had a working knowledge of the wool trade in the Lycus Valley region, since Philemon was probably engaged in some aspect of that industry.
7. He probably fled to Rome, but Caesarea is also a possibility. Ephesus is the least likely destination, due to its close social and commercial connections to Colossae (which would expedite Onesimus' capture), its reputation for being a regional center of the slave trade, and the lack of direct evidence that Paul was ever imprisoned there.

8. A flight to Rome would have taken Onesimus a minimum of 6 weeks (round trip), and cost 15 *denarii* per kg of goods. The trip could have taken as long as 6 months (round trip), and cost up to 160 *denarii*. This does not include extra costs such as food and lodging. Assuming that this was paid for out of a *peculium* that Philemon owned, we must also note that an additional cost to Philemon was the value of Onesimus' lost services. This also does not include the amount of time spent with Paul before being sent back to Philemon.
9. A flight to Caesarea would have taken Onesimus a minimum of 24 days (round trip), and cost 11 *denarii* per kg of goods. The trip could have taken as long as 3 months (round trip), and cost up to 72 *denarii*. This does not include extra costs such as food and lodging. Assuming that this was paid for out of a *peculium* that Philemon owned, we must also note that an additional cost to Philemon was the value of Onesimus' lost services. This also does not include the amount of time spent with Paul before being sent back to Philemon.
10. Even the shortest possible trip to Ephesus would have taken Onesimus a minimum of 2 weeks round trip, and cost 10 *denarii* per kg of goods.

It is safe to say that Onesimus' flight from Philemon to Paul was both lengthy and costly. It is very possible that Onesimus was gone for months before he returned to Philemon, and spent a small fortune to finance his journeys. Philemon would have probably assumed that Onesimus was never coming back, especially if he stole money to finance his journey, which Paul indicates in Phlm. He would have regarded Onesimus as a *fugitivus*, and the whole situation as a significant financial injury.



The amount of time Onesimus was gone, combined with the cost, would make any claim of original intention to reconcile preposterous. Onesimus would have been considered a legal fugitive because he was out of his master's proximity, unable to be recovered, and with no defensible claim that he originally intended to reconcile with Philemon. Furthermore, if slaves were viewed as so inherently untrustworthy that they had to be examined under torture in every legal proceeding, why would anyone believe that a slave who had been gone for weeks or months at great expense to his master intended to reconcile the whole time? The cost and duration of the flight would render an *Amicus Domini* exemption highly unlikely, and as previously discussed, it is not even clear that Onesimus would have known about the *Amicus Domini* exemption in the first place. *Amicus Domini* as envisaged by the jurists was a temporary, relatively brief absence designed to quickly improve the relationship between the slave and master. In Onesimus' case, it was a long, costly journey that would have made his break with Philemon exponentially worse.

## CONCLUSION: *AMICUS DOMINI EX POST FACTO*

As stated in the introduction, this dissertation is an investigation into the experience of a particular fugitive slave in the first-century Roman imperial context. Broadly speaking, I have attempted to uncover as much as possible about this man Onesimus and his experience as a slave. Within that broader aim, my primary goal has been to challenge the scholarly consensus around the *Amicus Domini* theory and replace it with a more historically *probable* explanation of Onesimus' flight – one that makes the best sense and takes the best stock of all the evidence. That is what I have attempted to do in this project: thoughtfully consider all the available evidence (historical, textual, archaeological, legal, and rhetorical) and arrive at the best possible reconstruction of what happened with Onesimus. My integrated conclusion, which I will present in this chapter, undermines the largely unchallenged scholarly consensus around *Amicus Domini*.

I have presented many pieces of evidence in the foregoing chapters that collectively challenge *Amicus Domini* as it is typically applied to Phlm, i.e. the theory that Onesimus left Philemon with the original intention to seek out Paul as an *Amicus Domini* and was therefore not considered a legal *fugitivus*. Out of all the evidence that

has been uncovered, I consider the following key elements to be the most damaging to *Amicus Domini*:

1. **Onesimus was away from Philemon for a very long time.** The trip to Paul's place of imprisonment, the time spent with Paul during his imprisonment, and the return trip to Colossae would have probably taken months if not longer. *Amicus Domini* was intended to temporarily allow tempers to cool. A trip of this magnitude would not have been considered the same sort of absence.
2. **Onesimus' journey was very expensive.** The round trip journey was incredibly costly, and was probably paid for out of resources that Philemon would have considered to be his (e.g. Onesimus' *peculium* and potentially other stolen goods).
3. **Onesimus probably did not know about the *Amicus Domini* legal exemption,** and if he did, he would have had little confidence that it would be successfully applied in his case. It is unlikely that the knowledge of this practice is what propelled him to run, and therefore his original intention (which was so important to the jurists) would probably not have been a desire to reconcile.
4. **Pliny's letters are a very poor parallel to Phlm.** These letters form the primary scholarly basis for the *Amicus Domini* theory of Phlm, and they

simply do not speak to the same type of situation. The most striking difference is the fact that Onesimus was a slave and Sabinianus' freedman was not.

**5. The opinions of the Roman jurists do not support an *Amicus Domini***

**exemption in Onesimus' case.** Their writings are the other source of support for the *Amicus Domini* theory, and their words actually undermine it.

Onesimus was out of his master's proximity for a very long time, unable to be recovered, and with no defensible claim that he fled with the original intention to reconcile with Philemon. As a result, Onesimus would have been considered a legal *fugitivus*. His flight would not be legally justifiable. Their collective description of the *Amicus Domini* exemption paints a picture of a short-term solution that would improve the situation during the relatively short period of time in which the master's anger subsides. This is not even close to the overall picture of Onesimus' flight.

The *Amicus Domini* edifice crumbles in light of this evidence. What, then, can we build in its place? In light of all of the foregoing historical, textual, rhetorical, archaeological and legal evidence, what can we reasonably say happened with Onesimus? Did he run away and accidentally find Paul at some point? That is highly improbable. Did he run away from Philemon with the original intention to seek reconciliation through Paul's influence? As we have demonstrated above, that too does not square with the totality of the evidence.

So what did happen? Let us now synthesize all of the data, and sketch what I believe to be a more probable scenario for the life and flight of this ancient slave known to us as Onesimus – a historical theory that takes better stock of all the evidence than the other historical theories put forward by scholars.

Onesimus was probably born a slave, if he was like most slaves of his era. *Pax Romana* guaranteed that the overwhelming majority of slaves were born into a life of servitude. It is possible that he became a slave in some other way, but statistically improbable. Having lived his life as a slave, Onesimus probably experienced forced separation from family and friends on several occasions. In each instance, he would have coped with the reality that he might never see them again. Onesimus himself may have been sold multiple times, which was a common reality for most slaves of the day. Sadness was undoubtedly a hallmark of his life.

Paul’s letter confirms the fact that Onesimus was a slave (1:16), and that he was the slave of a man named Philemon (1:11). Onesimus was a slave name, since it meant “useful”, as Paul mentions in the letter. If there were any doubt as to whether he was a slave, Paul also highlights the fact that Onesimus needed Philemon’s consent to be absent (1:8-9, 14, 17). Like every slave of his day, Onesimus was under the total control of Philemon – the *paterfamilias* of the household.

Onesimus worked in the household of Philemon in Colossae, which was located a week’s walk away from the metropolis of Ephesus. Colossae, along with the other cities of the Lycus Valley, were primarily engaged in the wool trade. Thus, it is probable that Philemon’s living was in some way connected to that industry.

Onesimus probably served as an οἰκέτης, a common slave occupation and a role that several ancient sources attribute to him. In that role, he would have been constantly around Philemon and his family, and would have a working knowledge of Philemon's affairs including his business. Onesimus would also be on the front lines for any anger or frustration that Philemon wished to express.

If Onesimus' experience as Philemon's slave was anything like the typical slave's experience of that period, we can assume that his life was filled with distress and abuse (or at least the fear of it). We do not know what kind of man Philemon was, but there were certain aspects of slavery that were inherently abusive regardless of the personality and disposition of the master. Onesimus probably endured constant physical abuse or at least the prospect of it. He would have suffered emotional abuse through being treated like property, and having his low station in life continually reinforced through humiliations like the use of his slave name and having to sleep on the floor. He may have even experienced the sexual advances of his masters, or at least the prospect of their sexual desire.

Whatever abuse he endured was made worse through the knowledge that there was no real legal procedure to which he had access. His life would have been filled with mistreatment, and a perpetual hopelessness in the face of it. If Philemon gave Onesimus a reason to fear for his life, it makes logical sense that he would flee. Most slaves fled their masters out of fear, and it is probable that Onesimus fled for the same reason. When the fear of his master eclipsed his fear of retribution for fleeing, there no

longer remained a motivation to stay. Risking the perils of travel as a fugitive slave would have become preferable.

Onesimus would have probably had access to a *peculium*, which was either given to him by Philemon or earned on his own with the permission and oversight of Philemon. That being the case, Onesimus would have the funding he would need when his fear finally propelled him to run. Philemon would consider this a serious financial offense, because ultimately he owned the *peculium* – not Onesimus. Not only would Philemon lose the *peculium*, he would also lose the market value of Onesimus as a piece of property, and the value of Onesimus' ongoing services – which were extremely valuable. It is also possible that Onesimus stole additional goods or money in order to finance his flight. Paul's letter to Philemon indicates a serious offense such as this (1:8-10, 18-19), as do the other early-Christian writings we surveyed in this project.

After Onesimus left Philemon's home, he would have been safest in a large city where he could blend in with thousands of other slaves and free poor. Ephesus would be the natural choice as a large nearby metropolis, but there were a number of unique risks associated with that city: a large Christian community who probably knew Philemon and possibly Onesimus, business associates who may have known them both, and an especially rampant slave trade. It would be the first place Philemon and his network would have looked for Onesimus. Whether he decided to go to Rome initially or decided later, it is likely Onesimus began the journey westward, since it is probable that he ended up meeting Paul in the imperial capital. The conditions he

would have faced would be similar had he fled to Caesarea, but the journey would have taken half the time.

Onesimus probably ran away with at least one other slave, if he was like most runaways of his day. His flight would have been characterized by persistent paranoia, with the assumption that Philemon and his network were in pursuit. There was also the risk of private slave catchers and government officials who specialized in noticing fugitive slaves. Onesimus would not have been able to trust anyone, because any free citizen who became aware of his situation would have been legally obliged to turn him in.

Onesimus would have been surrounded by thousands of other travelers on the roads: government officials, soldiers, private travelers, and professional slave catchers. He would have probably stayed at private lodgings and eaten at *tabernae*. He would have operated under an alias, probably offering falsified papers at the junctures that required identification: customs, toll houses, port authorities etc. Onesimus would have most likely avoided any connection to the Christian community because of the ease with which news traveled among the early churches. Connection to the Christian network would be the fastest way to alert Philemon of his whereabouts.

After a long, paranoia-filled, arduous journey, Onesimus would have arrived in Rome after a minimum of 3 weeks of traveling. It would probably have taken closer to 3 months. It is unclear when Onesimus decided to seek out Paul. It may have been during his journey to Rome, it may have been sometime after his arrival. It is safe to say, however, that he did not originally set out to find Paul and work for reconciliation



with Philemon. A long, expensive absence such as this implies that Onesimus never intended to go back, and he was undeniably out of reach of his master. Accordingly, he would have been considered by Philemon (and any person familiar with Roman law) a legal *fugitivus*. The *Amicus Domini* exemption would not be an option to Onesimus, because no one would believe that such a lengthy and costly journey was undertaken in the name of reconciliation. The duration of his truancy would have rendered him a legal fugitive regardless of whatever intent he originally had.

We know, however, that he did seek out Paul. It is highly unlikely that he just accidentally found him, so at some point during his journey he made a conscious decision to find the apostle. We do not know why he decided to seek out Paul, but we do know that the lives of fugitive slaves were miserable and full of fear. It makes sense that at some point he would decide to take the risk of connecting with the Christian network if there was a possibility of reconciling with Philemon. This would not qualify as a legal *Amicus Domini* situation, because it lacked the original intent of reconciliation. This would be *Amicus Domini Ex Post Facto* – seeking a friend of the master long after the fact, as a last resort. It was an act of desperation. There would be no legal basis or guaranteed advantage for this action.

How, then, did Onesimus find Paul? It is a near statistical impossibility that he would accidentally find Paul or one of his close associates, especially in a massive city like Rome (or even Caesarea for that matter). Onesimus probably knew Paul (or knew of him) because of his influence over Philemon, and he probably also knew Epaphras who was the primary evangelist of the Lycus Valley. If Onesimus had risked plugging

into the Christian network in Rome, all he had to do was mention Paul or Epaphras' names and it would not have taken long for him to find himself in a room with the apostle. The Christians would have known exactly where he was.

Onesimus then worked for some unidentified amount of time with Paul in his ministry. It must have been a considerable amount of time, because Paul's letter to Philemon indicates that Onesimus had made a positive impact in his ministry, and had become a Christian through his influence (1:10, 11, 13). This fact is clear from the overall content of the letter, as well as the imperfect tense of βούλομαι in verse 13 (indicating an action that occurred in the past over a period of time). It is also clear that Onesimus had become very personally important to Paul, which of course takes time to establish (1:10, 12-13, 16).

It is unclear whether or not Paul knew that Onesimus was a fugitive during this time. If Onesimus was unknown to Paul or Epaphras, he could have told them anything. If, however, they did know Onesimus was Philemon's slave, they may have assumed that Philemon sent him to offer assistance. Whatever the case, it seems likely that Paul did not know of Onesimus' fugitive status for some time. The very fact that Paul wrote Phlm is evidence that he would not allow such a state of affairs to continue unreconciled.

When Paul did decide to write to Philemon, his rhetorical acrobatics demonstrate how serious of an offense Onesimus had committed. Paul praised Philemon, delayed negative information about Onesimus, spiritualized the social relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, made veiled threats, and characterized

the whole episode as divine providence. His incredibly diplomatic approach in the letter presumes that Philemon will be furious upon receiving it.

After Paul wrote the letter, he put Onesimus back on the road to Colossae with Tychicus. When Onesimus finally did arrive in Colossae weeks or months later, it was probably a shock to everyone who saw him. We do not know how Philemon reacted to the return of his prodigal slave, but the very fact that Paul's letter survived and made it into the canonized corpus strongly suggests that Philemon acquiesced to Paul's entreaty. At a minimum, this may mean that Philemon allowed Onesimus to return to Rome and continue to serve with Paul on his behalf. At a maximum, it may mean that Philemon freed Onesimus as a result of Paul's letter. We do not know the answer, but we do know that there was a bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. We know this because Ignatius mentioned this Onesimus in a letter he wrote to the Ephesians sometime in the middle of Trajan's reign (98-117 CE).<sup>615</sup> In that letter, Ignatius wrote

“Since, therefore, I have received in God's name your whole congregation in the person of Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love who is also your earthly bishop, I pray that you will love him in accordance with the standard set by Jesus Christ and that all of you will be like him.”<sup>616</sup>

It is not certain that this Onesimus is the same Onesimus who is the subject of Paul's letter to Philemon. Because Paul probably wrote Phlm sometime in the early

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<sup>615</sup> Michael W. Holmes, Ed. *The Apostolic Fathers, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 170.

<sup>616</sup> Ibid, Ign. *Eph.* 1.3

60's CE, Onesimus would have had to be quite young at the time of his flight, and relatively old at the time of Ignatius' writing in order to be the same person. It is possible, but not probable.

What is certain, however, is that Ignatius deliberately alluded to Paul's letter in this text. When he referred to Onesimus as the Ephesians' "earthly bishop", he used the phrase ἐν σαρκὶ ἐπισκόπῳ, i.e. your bishop "in the flesh." This is an obvious literary allusion to the all-important verse 16 in Phlm, in which Paul encourages Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a beloved brother "both in the flesh and in the Lord" (ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ).

If the same Onesimus from Paul's letter to Philemon eventually became the bishop of Ephesus, this use of ἐν σαρκὶ was Ignatius' way of cleverly linking him to that letter which had become important to so many Christians. If it was not the same Onesimus, it would have achieved a similar purpose. Whether or not the 2<sup>nd</sup> century bishop of Ephesus was the Onesimus of this project, it is still significant that a man with the slave name Onesimus ended up becoming the bishop of a metropolis like Ephesus.

If I might be permitted to end this project on a pastoral note, Paul's words in Phlm concerning Onesimus were truly revolutionary. In a world that viewed slaves as less than human – a place where fugitives were routinely executed or punished severely – Paul advocated for countercultural grace. He encouraged Philemon to view Onesimus as a brother in Christ instead of a slave. He allowed the circle of listeners on both ends of that letter to hear the message that their identities as Christians trumped

any other social identifier and transcended any barrier between social classes. Paul's letter to Philemon was Galatians 3:26-28 in action.<sup>617</sup> Paul was not in charge of the world; he could not singlehandedly do away with the horrific institution of slavery. He did not have that power. The power he did have, however, was to cast a new vision for what the Christian community should look like, and exhort Christ-followers like Philemon and Onesimus to live in countercultural unity.

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<sup>617</sup> For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (NASB)

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