

PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON: MANUMISSION ... OR WHAT?

Colin A. Green

University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

In scholarly discussion over whether or not Paul's letter to Philemon reveals him to be in favor of manumission for Onesimus, there has been a lack of attention to Roman slavery laws. This is especially so in regard to age requirements for formal manumission of slaves and to the hierarchy of three kinds of manumitted slaves. A common assumption is found that manumission to an attractive status of freedman was always within the gift of Onesimus's master who may be persuaded to exercise the right (or not, as the case may be). Inattention to the complexity of slavery laws has enabled some commentators to expect Paul to facilitate immediate manumission for Onesimus, even to find a Paul who is a nascent abolitionist; or alternatively to find that the letter implicates Paul in the institution of slavery. When lawful options for manumission are examined more closely, this seems to be on the wrong tracks either way.

However, contemporary historiography on the study of Paul's letter to Philemon has been led by other issues, three in particular, apart from being read as source material on Greco-Roman slavery or as background material for Colossians.¹ One leading issue is whether Onesimus either fled or was sent from Philemon, and what this means for the relationships described in the letter. Second, whether Paul's purpose in writing was to reinstate enslavement or argue for freedom for Onesimus, and what this means for reading Paul's ethics.² It is natural to consider a historical document for what it re-

1. Paul Byron, 'Paul and the Background of Slavery: The *Status Quaestionis* in New Testament Scholarship', *CBR* 3 (2004), pp. 116-39.

2. Recent advocates for affirming a manumission reading include Witherington and Winter. Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand

veals about its author, and those questions serve that purpose. A third question, studied in post-colonial readings, is whether Onesimus's voice as an enslaved person can be recovered and how he can be reframed as having personal agency rather than treated only as an object of discussion among free men. The present study seeks to add to the basis for relocating Onesimus as an agent in his world in the situations conjured up by the text of Philemon primarily in light of ancient slavery laws and their pathways to manumission.

Any reconstruction of the story to which there are clues in Paul's letter needs to take account of many variables. The sheer breadth of ambiguities in the letter with which the scholar is beset is daunting, and we may offer only modest probabilities. We do not know how many masters Onesimus has had for instance. We do not know how Onesimus became enslaved, but during the Pax Romana most likely he was born to a slave mother, or was a foundling taken to be raised as a slave. We do not know Onesimus's mother tongue, place of birth or ethnicity, but most likely, if not born locally, he would have been trafficked from elsewhere in Asia Minor and through Ephesus. If so, he was probably bought there and brought to Phrygia.³ Pagan religion was dominant, but Phrygia also had a significant Jewish presence, and this is perhaps a reason why a church had been planted there. It is usually thought that Onesimus's background was pagan.⁴ At some point he came into Philemon's pos-

Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 26-29. Sara C. Winter, 'Philemon', in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures* (Feminist Commentary; New York: Crossroad, 1993), II, pp. 301-12. Advocates for a pro-enslavement reading include Harrill and Roth (see J. Albert Harrill, 'Paul and Slavery', in J. Paul Sampley [ed.], *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook* [2 vols.; London: T. & T. Clark, 2nd edn, 2016], II, pp. 301-45; Ulrike Roth, 'Paul, Philemon and Onesimus: A Christian Design for Mastery', *ZNW* 105 [2014], pp. 102-30).

3. For these probabilities, see Olga Pelcer-Vujačić, 'Slaves and Freedmen in Lydia and Phrygia in the Early Roman Empire', *Историјску зануцу* 3-4 (2019), pp. 7-32.

4. It seems less likely that a master in a Jewish context would own a Jewish slave. I am assuming the only relevant legal context is Roman law, even though people might try to operate their own customs under the Romans' noses. One cannot rule out the faint possibility that Philemon is putting into practice Torah and holding a Jewish debt-slave in indentured servitude. However, this is simply too speculative, and nothing in the letter gives us warrant to reconstruct the story that way. It is less improbable that Philemon has been converted in a Jewish context and owns a pagan slave.

session. We do not know what kind of tasks he had, but he may have been a managerial slave.⁵ Also, at some point, Philemon became a Christian.

We do not know Paul's location of imprisonment. Is he in Rome, Ephesus, or Caesarea Maritima? Is he in a prison or under house arrest? The latter is probable, given the convenient comings and goings of people outlined in the letter (Phlm. 1, 12, 23-24). Paul does not tell us explicitly whether Onesimus was originally sent by Philemon or fled from him. Commentators infer one or the other. On one hand, if we say that he had simply been sent on servile duties by Philemon—whether Paul was expecting it or not—then he was not a runaway, and one commentator will infer that Paul is implicated in slavery and another will not. On the other hand, if we understand that Onesimus fled, certain inferences will follow, perhaps that Onesimus had become a fugitive, or was in a domestic dispute and in need of an *Amicus Domini* to plead his case with his master, or some permutation.⁶ One permutation would be that he started out as a fugitive from his master, and then changed his mind and wanted reconciliation with his master. Why would he change his mind? I consider Lightfoot's suggestion worthy of consideration that Onesimus fled Philemon hoping never to go back, but, lacking good fortune, decided being a fugitive was too perilous and not for him, and a meeting with a Christian network and thereafter with Paul followed.⁷ We can at least rule out that Onesimus had been captured and imprisoned with Paul, as such would entail him being returned to Philemon by his captors, not by Paul as he purports is happening here (Phlm. 12).⁸

If Onesimus ran away, we do not know what occasioned it. He may well have contemplated doing so for a long time, or it may have been spontaneous. There is at least general agreement that in his time with Paul, Onesimus converted from being a pagan to a Christ-believer (Phlm. 10), and that Paul is 'sending' him in this new status back to his master. This is the occasion that we find at the writing of Paul's letter. Paul wrote as one believer to another

5. John G. Nordling, 'Some Matters Favouring the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon', *Neot* 44 (2010), pp. 85-121 (92-97).

6. Nordling, 'Some Matters'.

7. J.B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1875), pp. 369-95 (378-79).

8. Edward Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (ed. H. Koester; trans. W.R. Poehlmann and R.J. Karris; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 187.

about a third believer, a new situation in how these three men were to relate to each other. Believers who had reconsidered their ancestral religious traditions were now in a negotiation of Christian vision covering power and welfare. They were in a developing hierarchy. Although Philemon is over Onesimus, Paul subverts this hierarchy as the letter unfolds. As he does so, the exegetical question arises: is Paul arguing for manumission for Onesimus? Informed discussion of this question, as with the question of Onesimus's agency, must take account of the legal context for manumission, something that has been broadly absent from the scholarly literature on the letter.

Background on Roman Slavery and Manumission

The subject of manumission of enslaved persons in the early Roman Empire is complex. The default assumption in reading about enslaved persons should be that they would have preferred freedom at the earliest opportunity rather than enslavement. However, the complexity of Roman law problematizes our assumptions. Once someone came into possession of an enslaved person, all the parties were enmeshed in a web of Roman laws. This included provision for formal and informal modes of manumission, which could leave former slaves at opposite ends of a spectrum of wellbeing.

Under Roman law, formal manumission leading to Roman citizenship could be carried out for slaves over thirty years old. This was the minimum legal age for formal manumission. There were limited exceptions for slaves under thirty, but nothing in the letter to Philemon suggests any of them apply to Onesimus. Under the *lex Aelia Sentia* of 4 CE, exceptions were permitted for the following: slaves who were nursing and educating children; athletes; slaves who married their owners—there was also manumission granted out of paternal feelings for children whom a master had sired by a slave; to avoid intestacy; or slaves who needed to become freedmen acting as the ex-master's business agents.⁹ The formal manumission process could take place before a

9. John W. Bradley, *The Hypogeum of the Aurelii: A New Interpretation as the Collegiate Tomb of Professional Scribes* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018), pp. 122-23. We should not generalize that persons in domestic slavery expected to be manumitted by the age of 30, *pace* Isak J. Du Plessis, 'How Christians Can Survive in a Hostile Socio-Economic Environment: Paul's Mind concerning Difficult Social Conditions

magistrate or governor involving the appearance of the master, the enslaved person and a witness.

Formal manumission served as an incentive to many slaves to motivate long years of servile obedience and even to mitigate the risk of slave revolts. It served a wider purpose in reforms instituted by Augustus, to supply a large pool of able freedmen educated at someone else's expense to serve in Rome's growing civil service for example.¹⁰ Collection of the five-percent manumission tax on a slave's value had also served to bring money into Rome's coffers for centuries.

The reach of Roman law extended far. It is often assumed that Philemon was in Colossae in Phrygia, Asia Minor.¹¹ There is documentary evidence that Roman law was applied by its governors and annual assizes there.¹² However, such evidence is thinner on the ground for application of Roman laws in respect of slavery.¹³ Nevertheless, tensions in Asia Minor over payment of the Roman manumission tax suggests some application and compliance.¹⁴

There were situations where formal manumission to the status of Roman citizen was not permissible, for example where an enslaved person's age was under thirty or s/he had a record of severe punishment for perceived offences.

in the Letter to Philemon', in Jan G. van der Watt (ed.), *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 387-416 (392).

10. Kathleen M.T. Atkinson, 'The Purpose of the Manumission Laws of Augustus', *Irish Jurist* 1 (1966), pp. 356-74.

11. Philemon is a Greek name but apart from the geographical link in Colossians, we might note, for example, the association of the name and Phrygia in the mythical story of Philemon and Baucis.

12. Georgy Kantor, 'Knowledge of Law in Roman Asia Minor', in Rudolf Haensch (ed.), *Selbstdarstellung und Kommunikation: Die Veröffentlichung staatlicher Urkunden auf Stein und Bronze in der römischen Welt* (Munich: Beck, 2009), pp. 249-65.

13. Georgy Kantor, 'Law in Roman Phrygia: Rules and Jurisdictions', in P. Thonemann (ed.), *Roman Phrygia: Culture and Society* (Greek Culture in the Roman World; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 143-67. Also, Marijana Riel, 'Legal and Social Status of *Threptoi* and Related Categories in Narrative and Documentary Sources from Hellenism to Islam', in H.M. Cotton *et al.* (eds.), *Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 93-114.

14. Pelcer-Vujačić, 'Slaves and Freedmen', p. 26.

In such situations, the possibility of informal manumission remains, for which the minimum age restriction did not apply. Informal manumission would leave a manumitted slave in either of two underclasses: *Latini Juniani* or *dediticii*, neither of which provided for Roman citizenship. Informal manumission could be communicated by the master in ways as simple as a letter. For a former slave in the *Latini Juniani* class, there was still potential to become a Roman citizen later, after turning thirty, but all the pathways to it require jumping through further hoops. In the least logistically difficult of those pathways for *Latini Juniani*, he or she needs to reach thirty, and get there without ever having been severely punished for an offence, and then have the ex-master perform a second manumission rite, this time a formal one.¹⁵

For a former slave manumitted into the ranks of the *dediticii*, slavery left an indelible legal stain on the rest of his or her life worse than in the above outcomes. For the *dediticii*, life in an underclass was permanent, and the dictum 'once a slave always a slave' is most apposite here.¹⁶ Such would be the status of freed slaves who had earlier fallen foul of the law and suffered severe punishment for it, such as being branded on their skin. To be in the class of the *dediticii* meant never to be a Roman citizen, never to set foot in Rome, always to be seen as an undesirable character equivalent to a conquered people.¹⁷ One should imagine that regardless of that unfortunate status, it would nevertheless remain attractive to, say, enslaved workers enduring brutally short lives slaving underground in dangerous Roman mines. Whereas for managerial urban slaves, the higher aspiration of holding out till thirty with a clean record to gain formal manumission to the status of Roman citizen was realistic for many.

Which of these three scenarios for manumission applies is of lasting significance for an enslaved person, as it frames how one would be treated by society, and it limits future pathways to Roman citizenship. The *dediticii* were barred for life, and suffered in many other ways. One can imagine a slave choosing to run away and melt anonymously into society if the *dediticii* were otherwise his or her highest aspiration. Every freed Roman slave, or would-

15. W.A. Hunter, *A Systematic and Historical Exposition of Roman Law in the Order of a Code* (London: William Maxwell, 1885), pp. 672-76.

16. The phrase derives from Craig S. de Vos, 'Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission, and Relational Patterns in Paul's letter to Philemon', *JSNT* 82 (2001), pp. 89-105.

17. Atkinson, 'The Purpose of the Manumission Laws', p. 367.

be freed slave, would have had a personal life story that was somewhere on this spectrum. It is apposite to ask where Onesimus might be on that spectrum.

On one hand, if we speculate that Onesimus was already over thirty and had a reasonably clean record prior to running away, formal manumission and Roman citizenship could have been a possibility, supposing that his running away is met with leniency. However, enslaved persons on average were on the younger side, on account of premature deaths and manumissions. The balance of probabilities is that Onesimus was under thirty.¹⁸ So, on the other hand, an under-thirty Onesimus who had never previously been severely punished for a perceived offence, and is shown leniency this time, could still hold on to the hope of informal manumission: not to the status of Roman citizen, but rather to join the ranks of the *Latini Juniani*.

Third, if Onesimus had a record of severe punishment, then any manumission could see him consigned to the lowest status of manumitted people, life among the *dediticii*. We do not know whether his running away was a first offence or whether there had been any previous offence leading to prior severe punishment. If he was a runaway, and thus now a known offender, then the likelihood of a personal history free of prior perceived offences and severe punishments becomes on the face of it a little less probable, and his aspirations for freedom may have been downgraded accordingly.

So, some kind of manumission was possible for Onesimus, but into what status we do not know. If he was under thirty, as is likely, that probably rules out formal manumission at the time of the letter. If he had ever been severely punished, that rules out joining the *Latini Juniani* too, but left open the remaining option to the status of the *dediticii*. As so much is unknown to us, we cannot say what advice Paul could or should have given the parties in regard to manumission. Paul could not re-write the law of the land, and matters such as the age and record of slaves restricted the scope of what he could ask of others.

18. This is particularly pertinent for anyone speculating that the same Onesimus was the second-century bishop named by Ignatius. A second century Onesimus who had been manumitted at Paul's behest, if aged over thirty in the 50s of the first century, would have to live to a very old age to be a bishop when Ignatius was writing! An Onesimus under thirty when known to Paul would better fit speculation of it being the same Onesimus, but even that is a stretch.

While the scholarly literature on the letter to Philemon lacks discussion of the above framework of Roman law, it is nevertheless not unusual to find that it reads the text either as Paul advocating manumission for Onesimus or as Paul being pro-slavery. I will not review arguments for Paul being pro-slavery, as these are beyond the scope of this article.¹⁹ It is worth saying that advocating for manumission as Paul seems to do in 1 Cor. 7.21 would not be exceptional. It is advocating for what an enslaved person would be expected to choose anyway, given the moment, in the Roman system. It is advising that the cogs of the institution turn in a slave's favor, not an abolitionist cry.²⁰ I will review the idea that the letter to Philemon advocates manumission, but will say much less on Paul's morality in the shadow of slavery. To venture only briefly in that direction: if, for example, Onesimus was ineligible for formal manumission being under thirty, and was a runaway, Paul's letter might be judged, from an ethical standpoint, on its attitude to Onesimus's welfare and its inclusiveness towards Onesimus in Christian community. To judge it morally on whether Paul advocates manumission for an individual whose op-

19. Reading the letter as pro-enslavement typically relies on arguing that Onesimus was not a runaway but was sent to serve Paul by his master; that Paul does not say he has scolded Onesimus, nor described him as sorry for running away; that Paul sends the slave back to his master; that Paul is not writing on behalf of Onesimus; that Paul wants Onesimus returned to him on slave terms; that Paul's use of contractual language is akin to that of slave apprenticeship agreements, and thus that this reinscribes slavery culture and seals Onesimus's fate as an enslaved person; and that Paul's punning on Onesimus's name is a signal of slavery culture. These arguments typically lack discussion of the variable of the status of freed slaves as Roman citizens, *Latini Juniani* or *dediticii*. For discussion of the points listed here, see Harrill, 'Paul and Slavery'. Also Roth, 'Paul, Philemon and Onesimus'. Also Demetrius K. Williams, 'No Longer as a Slave: "Reading" the Interpretation History of Philemon', in M.V. Johnson *et al.* (eds.), *Onesimus our Brother: Reading Religion, Race and Slavery in Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), pp. 11-45. Also, on the punning, see J.A. Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 16. Against this, Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 205. Also, N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Leicester: IVP, 1986), p. 189.

20. de Vos, 'Once a Slave, Always a Slave?', p. 91. However, if Onesimus had transgressed the lines of the institution, a call for manumission in his case would at least amount to resistance to slavery-culture.

tions under Roman law were possibly unfortunate but unknown to us is virtually groundless.

Re-framing Onesimus as Agent: Setting the Scene

In this study, I am taking the position that Onesimus was a runaway and thus had not been dispatched by his master to Paul. There are good reasons to doubt that Onesimus was dispatched to Paul. First, it seems unlikely that Philemon and the house-church would have thought it appropriate to support an apostle with a then-pagan, let alone one who was thought to be ‘useless’ (Phlm. 11). Paul’s *κοινωνία* for the support of his ministry is an in-group arrangement and nowhere else in the Pauline corpus is there any suggestion of taking a pagan into the confidence of the *κοινωνία* to facilitate this ministry. Pagans in the Roman Empire had worldviews and cultural heritage that might make a Pauline community uncomfortable, with practices that might include consulting oracles, having their fortune told, inscribing amulets with spells, or invoking curses upon anyone with whom they had fallen out.²¹ The suggestion that Philemon be read as evidence of sending a pagan slave to support a Christian leader raises more problems than it solves. Another reason to doubt that Onesimus was dispatched on slave duties by Philemon to Paul is that this lacks explanatory power for why the rhetoric of the letter is so delicately tactful.²² That Paul does write the letter delicately is widely accepted and is a matter on which I will make a few notes below. Even among commentators who argue that Paul is complicit in slavery, we still find the common observation that the letter is ‘carefully maneuvering a delicate issue’.²³

Pro-manumission Scenario

Was that issue manumission, as some think? Was Philemon to enslave Paul’s ‘heart’ and his ‘brother’? Paul uses this inclusive language in regard to Onesi-

21. There is evidence of runaway slaves using such magical strategies to evade capture. See Heinz Bellen, *Studien zur Sklavenflucht im römischen Kaiserreich* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1971).

22. F. Forrester Church, ‘Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul’s Letter to Philemon’, *HTR* 71 (1978), pp. 17-33.

23. Roth, ‘Paul, Philemon and Onesimus’, p. 116.

mus, and it may seem the language of a strong moral case, to which the answer should be 'manumission!' However, without knowing Onesimus's history and prospects, it is not obvious how much should be read into it.

A pro-manumission reading will usually say that Paul is writing *on behalf of* Onesimus, the evidence being the delicately sensitive prose. For example, it takes Paul nearly half of a brief letter before beginning to explain why he is writing and to name Onesimus. The delaying tactic gives Paul time to build a hedge of protection around Onesimus. Paul first makes sure that everyone knows that he is talking about a new convert to be nurtured.²⁴ He places the appellation 'my child' before the name Onesimus for emphasis (Phlm. 10). His readers possibly knew that child language was used not only of slaves but also, more contextually relevant, of Paul's converts.²⁵ This one is announced with a humbling slave name, Onesimus, but Paul lessens this incongruity by identifying himself in the humbling state of a literal chained prisoner (Phlm. 1, 9-10, i.e. 'prisoner ... prisoner ... in chains').

Notably, Paul does not say that he has sent back a slave, as we might expect, but that he has sent 'my heart', a startling difference (Phlm. 12). This is de-objectifying language, and part of a context in which Paul will reframe Onesimus as a brother, not slave as object. Nevertheless, Paul acknowledges Philemon's claim over his slave and purports to be 'sending' him back. Given that Paul had no legal powers to force a fugitive to do so, I suggest that his language cloaks a decision by Onesimus himself to return. That is, cloaking it with a veneer of apostolic authority (Phlm. 12-13). The term for 'sent back' possibly has the sense of sending up from a lower to a higher court.²⁶ If the possibility of manumission at Philemon's discretion were on the table, this makes sense. The mere fact of sending the slave back is not in itself an anti-

24. Norman R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 72.

25. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 213. It is sometimes remarked that 'child' is stereotypical language for speaking of a slave, and that this implicates Paul in slave culture. Against this, we should see it is as part of a string of words in which Onesimus is Paul's child, heart, brother, 'no longer as a slave'.

26. For the sense of sending to a higher authority, see J. Estill Jones, 'The Letter to Philemon—An Illustration of Koinonia', *Review & Expositor* 46 (1949), pp. 454-66 (462). In disagreement with this, see Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 201 n. 39.

manumission signal. It must be acknowledged that under Roman law, returning was a precursor not only to continued servitude but alternatively to a formal manumission process for an eligible slave.²⁷ As such, Paul is sending him back to the one person who potentially could legally grant him manumission. However, the delicate thing is that he has sent his ‘heart’ to something like a higher court.

Given that Onesimus is Paul’s ‘heart’, then when Paul calls on Philemon to ‘refresh my heart’, it is Onesimus who is to be refreshed (Phlm. 20).²⁸ The slave is to be refreshed by his master. It is an inversion of cultural norms. Paul gently twists his arm, for if Philemon had a good reputation for refreshing ‘all’ the saints—another delicate rhetorical move—he would be blotting his record if he started selectively excluding any saint from this, and he will be tested by whether he refreshes Onesimus (Phlm. 7, 12, 20). (There is no need to reconstruct a scenario in which Philemon actually did somehow refresh ‘all’ the saints. It is a rhetorical move.) Paul makes the quality of Philemon’s welcome of the slave a test by which he will measure the quality of Philemon’s *κοινωνία* (Phlm. 6).²⁹

In another delicate touch, in the first use of the word slave, Onesimus is not actually named as slave but rather ‘no longer as a slave’ (Phlm. 16). Indeed, the word is not used until Paul’s vision for inverting status of slave and master is in play (Phlm. 16-18). Here is where the question arises of a master exercising an option to manumit. Does the letter reflect a desired option? Commentators have noted that at the heart of this exegetical problem, Paul does not make explicit the meaning of his two ‘more than’ requests to Philemon (Phlm. 16, 21). Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as ‘more than’ a slave. Paul adds that he expects Philemon will do ‘more than’ he asks. What does he mean on either count? Such ambiguity is why the letter avails of different and opposing readings. It is difficult to say that the famous phrase ‘no longer as a slave, but more than a slave’ is a call for manumission. It signals a change of status, spiritually at least, such that he ought not to be treated like a slave. Otherwise, there is no point in saying ‘no longer as a slave’. However, Paul’s explicit message to Philemon is ‘have him back’, not ‘let

27. Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz, ‘Manumission, Greek and Roman’, in R.S. Bagnall *et al.* (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (Oxford: Wiley & Sons, 2018), n.p.

28. Church, ‘Rhetorical Structure and Design’, pp. 24, 30.

29. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 176-78.

him go'. Nor is it 'send him to me' as is sometimes inferred (Phlm. 15).³⁰ If Paul had left it as 'have him back no longer as a slave', it would be easier to read it as a plea for manumission. However, Paul's apparent qualification 'more than a slave' throws ambiguity into it. Sara C. Winter reasonably considers that 'more than a slave' is immediately explained and clarified as meaning 'a brother', but it does not entirely lift the doubt that Paul has created. Winter, advocating a pro-manumission reading, observes that Paul uses three pairs (Phlm. 15): for a moment/forever; he was separated/you might have him back; no longer as a slave/as a brother. Paul thus contrasts 'a slave separated for a moment' with 'a brother received forever'.³¹ Winter interprets this as meaning that for the person of Onesimus, Paul rejects slavery.³² That is, Onesimus is now Philemon's forever as a brother and not as a slave.³³ It may be possible that Philemon could read his letter in that way. The usual caution applies, that Paul does not make it explicit. In summary, commentators have not yet made a compelling case for a pro-manumission reading, and this is compounded by the lack of discussion on the variable of the status of freed slaves as either Roman citizen, or *Latini Juniani*, or *dediticii*.

There is surely sufficient evidence to say that Paul has Onesimus's welfare at heart, and this even goes as far as putting the slave above his master. However, to go further and say that Paul is writing on behalf of Onesimus would be tantamount to saying that we know that Paul and Onesimus are in agreement over the contents of the letter, and it is difficult to say so with certainty. We are on firmer ground saying it is protective of Onesimus.

30. It is assumed to be hinted in Paul saying he would rather have kept Onesimus than let him go (Phlm. 13-14). It is assumed that Paul wants Onesimus to do a round trip back to the place of Paul's imprisonment. The inference is unlikely. Setting aside the unlikelihood of Philemon having faith in dispatching someone who ran away last time he left there is simply the practical reason that they might happen to miss each other. This would be a real risk, given that by the time Onesimus completed a lengthy round trip—over 200 kilometres each way if Philemon was in the region of Colossae and Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus—Paul might have been released from captivity and could be journeying.

31. The divine passive 'separated' is often noted as a delicate touch, absolving the runaway of blame.

32. Winter, 'Philemon', p. 307.

33. Williams, 'No Longer as a Slave', p. 29.

If manumission were in Paul's mind, the proposition is not found in this letter. A pro-manumission scenario might fall back on the idea that the moment for him to make this plea had not yet arrived. His planned visit would surely be a better moment to do so. Whereas Onesimus had obtained release from slavery in a precariously unlawful way, a difficult matter for delicate pastoral sensitivities, Paul could lobby to have Onesimus released from slavery in a lawful manner when the three men were together in Philemon's house. Paul's planned visit then could be the locus of a plea for manumission, but this letter is not.

Nothing here compels us to the view that Onesimus's meets eligibility for formal manumission under Roman law, nor that informal manumission to an underclass status is being advocated.

If Not Pro- or Anti-manumission, Then What?

If the letter is not advocating manumission, what is it doing? Paul's explicit requests do not begin until Phlm. 15. At the most explicit level, he requests a two-stage welcome, first for Onesimus and then for himself.

The first imperative in the letter is 'welcome him' (Phlm. 17). To help us understand this better, it is soon followed by the imperative to 'charge it to my account'. The force of the letter lies in that the imperatives are followed up by Paul's expectation of compliance (Phlm. 21). The desired compliance must be connected to those imperatives: 'welcome him ... charge me ...'³⁴

Onesimus must be welcomed by Philemon in the fashion of a phrase that forms a unique combination here in Paul. He is to be welcomed as a brother 'in the flesh and in the Lord' (Phlm. 16). Here is the only place in Christian Scripture where a slave is directly called a brother, so it seems to have a special emphasis.³⁵ 'In the Lord' is religiously loaded language, making it clear that Paul is not merely trying to make advantage of being mutual friends. Roth notes that 'in the flesh' is 'a deliberate step away from the traditional understanding of the slave' which she attributes to Onesimus's conversion to the faith and Paul's 'construction of a Christian world that is different from

34. Compliance rather than 'obedience'. See Jones, 'The Letter to Philemon', p. 464.

35. Witherington, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians*, p. 80.

the world around him', but she argues that it is still a phrase to mark Onesimus as a slave body.³⁶ However, using ἐν σαρκί rather than referring to a slave as σῶμα seems more significant than that. Together with 'brother', it indicates a common bond, as argued by F.F. Bruce and Carolyn Osiek.³⁷ The enslaved person cannot be treated as sub-human. The master must treat Onesimus, 'no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother in the flesh and in the Lord' (Phlm. 16). This is not only a delicate touch, but is at the heart of the purpose of the letter. The quality of the welcome is instrumental to Paul. Since a new beginning had already happened, Paul now asks not for mercy but for love.³⁸

The *paterfamilias* Philemon must play host to Onesimus, and must place the slave before himself as an honored guest, making Philemon's honor dependent on treating Onesimus with honor (Phlm. 16-17).³⁹ Onesimus is to be welcomed not only as a brother in the flesh, but 'as Paul himself' (Phlm. 17). K. Edwin Bryant notes that the effect of Onesimus's return, together with Paul's instructions, would be that a progressive relationship is set in place over the regressive master-slave relationship.⁴⁰ If Onesimus remains a slave for a time, which this letter seems to acknowledge with its 'have him back' (Phlm. 16), it makes Onesimus an agent whose favorable treatment will destabilize the hierarchy in the household.⁴¹ It is so undermining to master-slave mechanics, that it is inconsistent with Paul respecting a master-slave culture at all.

Roth, who argues that Paul and Philemon are sending to each other a slave who is their joint property, has to try to accommodate the problem of this disruption in her thesis just as any commentator does: 'Paul effectively put the slave (Onesimus) over and above his (other) master (Philemon) in the

36. Roth, 'Paul, Philemon and Onesimus', pp. 125-26.

37. It is more than just a reference to the fact of their relationship. See Bruce, *The Epistles*, p. 218. Also Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), p. 139.

38. Witherington, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians*, pp. 27-28.

39. de Vos, 'Once a Slave, Always a Slave?', p. 103.

40. K. Edwin Bryant, *Paul and the Rise of the Slave: Death and Resurrection of the Oppressed* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 34.

41. de Vos, 'Once a Slave, Always a Slave?', pp. 89-105.

church.⁴² Roth has to be right that this is evidence of Paul implementing his vision of there being ‘no slave or free’ in the Christian community.⁴³ Paul takes the categories of slave and free and confuses them to destruction (cf. 1 Cor. 7.22). How things work out between them would require creativity, such that they were not modelling the privileges of free people of the Roman world, but that they were to model a future world ‘in Christ’.⁴⁴ Paul’s approach calls for ‘a transformation of relationship from the economic [*sic*] driven relationship to a loving brotherhood relationship’.⁴⁵ This was surely not to be a solitary one-off event. It is more than reconciliation back into the status quo but should result in an improvement in Onesimus’s quality of life.⁴⁶

The two imperatives that describe this welcome, as Paul has designed it, first compel the master to welcome and refresh the enslaved man and second to cancel debts. Paul does not specify the losses caused to Philemon by Onesimus, but this surely refers to some grounds for complaint that Philemon had, or else Paul had no occasion to say it.⁴⁷ Even if he has caused loss to Philemon, Paul argues to wipe that slate clean, not as an act of mercy on Philemon’s part, but because Philemon owes it to Paul (Phlm. 18-19). It is another instance of Paul’s delicate writing on which I will say more.⁴⁸

42. Roth, ‘Paul, Philemon and Onesimus’, pp. 121-27.

43. Roth, ‘Paul, Philemon and Onesimus’, pp. 124. Roth almost reverses this position on p. 126. However, such practical implementation is not conducive to the master-slave relationship that Roth claims Paul to be deeply implicated in.

44. Alex Hon Ho Ip, ‘A Christian Response to the Conflicting Relationship between Slave and Master in a Christian Household: Investigating Paul’s Response to the Conflict between the Economic Relationship and the Christian Brotherhood’s Relationship in the Letter to Philemon’, *Scrinium* 14 (2018), pp. 25-36 (32, 35). See also Karin Neutel, ‘Slaves Included? Sexual Regulations and Slave Participation in Two Ancient Religious Groups’, in Stephen Hodkinson and Dick Geary (eds.), *Slaves and Religions in Graeco-Roman Antiquity and Modern Brazil* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 133-48 (145).

45. Ip, ‘A Christian Response’, p. 32.

46. Williams, ‘No Longer as a Slave’, p. 26.

47. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 187.

48. Church, ‘Rhetorical Structure and Design’, p. 32.

A Reconstruction

I now propose one possible sequence of events for Onesimus and the other key people, naturally speculative but attentive to probabilities. I propose first that Onesimus was born to an enslaved woman, and as a youth trafficked through Asia to Ephesus where he was sold to a local trader whose business was to buy and sell slaves in the public slave markets. We are in the realms of Roman chattel slavery and its attendant horrors.

Future Roman citizenship is unlikely for him, for, under some master, Onesimus was severely punished for running away previously, and this marked him out for life. As such, he knew he could never become a Roman citizen. It made the threshold age of formal manumission—thirty—irrelevant to his case, because the most he could hope for was informal manumission. Even then, because of his history, he would be denied the status of the *Latini Juniani*. He contemplated running away for many years, because it seemed a better option than his two alternatives: enslavement or *dediticii*. Onesimus as an enslaved person knew how to contemplate a way out. He comes under the ownership of Philemon in the Phrygia region, in the east of the Roman Empire. He could speak Greek and becomes a managerial slave.

Philemon comes into contact with Christ-believers influenced by Paul. Philemon becomes a believer himself. He had a sufficiently large house to hold church meetings. Serving in the household, Onesimus became acquainted with the Christian network visiting the house. Still a young man, he ran away from Philemon. Perhaps he thought his master had become a 'soft touch' and escape would be easy, and this was a moment he had been waiting for, perhaps with a group of slaves.

The act of running away suggests that nothing better was on the short-term horizon for him, and that excludes manumission from having been likely at the time of his escape.⁴⁹ In the belief that it would aid the timing and effectiveness of his escape, Onesimus as a pagan first consults an oracle to confirm the timing is propitious. To aid his escape, he indulges in the practice of inscribing an amulet with an invisibility spell and invokes some curses. He escapes and makes his way into a city where he could melt anonymously into the community: Ephesus. Things do not go as well as he hoped. Danger is attendant, and luck and resources are running out. He is not at ease in a shady underworld and could not make the alliances you need to survive in one; per-

49. Nordling, 'Some Matters Favouring the Runaway Slave Hypothesis', p. 86.

haps he felt too unsafe; perhaps he was too often cold and hungry. Perhaps another desperate escaped slave was willing to turn him in to the authorities for personal gain and he had to act quickly. He could choose to run further, but he connects with a Christian network in Ephesus, familiar faces from Philemon's house. As a managerial slave, he knows who his master's contacts are and where to find them. This facilitates a trip to where Paul is under house arrest, shackled and chained to a pillar or the floor. Onesimus is convinced to become a Christ-believer. He becomes part of Paul's *κοινωνία*. He could decide to abscond again, since he is beyond his master's reach, but instead he chooses to go back, and Paul cloaks this with apostolic garb by 'sending' him back.⁵⁰

News that Onesimus had had a change of heart may have already reached Philemon's ears. Paul writes and hands over his letter. For Onesimus's protection—a runaway could be taken by the authorities or by bounty-hunters—he is accompanied by a letter-carrier, such as Tychicus.⁵¹ Onesimus is then reunited with his master who receives Paul's rather challenging letter. In principle, he is back under his master's control. However, Paul's letter problematizes this. Onesimus will be included in Paul's *κοινωνία* relationships from within Philemon's household. Alongside the options of enslavement, *dediticii* and running away, Paul has carved out a fourth way: a parallel society within which there is neither slave nor free and he is not despised. Onesimus enjoys his master being tasked with refreshing him. This is more than leniency.

When Paul visits, Onesimus will probably still be a slave, as Paul has not explicitly requested otherwise, but an effective time for Paul to advocate manumission explicitly then arrives.⁵² Manumission is discussed, but this is hemmed in by the framework of Roman law. In the scenario I have constructed, the only available manumission for Onesimus would still be to join the ranks of the *dediticii*. Whether he took this route or whether he remained enslaved, he would still be despised by Greco-Roman society. It is not for us to presume what that choice should be, and Paul's letter does not crystallize it. Onesimus is between a rock and a hard place, the lot of many slaves who had suffered extreme punishment for perceived offences at some point in their life.

50. Paul has no authority to 'send' him, nor power to detain him, and so there is some artifice in his claim to do so.

51. Col. 4.7-9 is sometimes referenced to justify this inference.

52. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 189.

Paul, within the constraints of a web of Roman law, was trying to help bring into being a new eschatological world. He had 'sent' him back like a primed theological grenade, and this would have more impact while Onesimus saw out his enslaved status in the house.

This reconstruction uses a framework within which Onesimus's agency may be imagined with more clarity. If one were to stage a counter-argument to my reconstruction, it might be that the likelihood of prior running away and severe punishment, limiting future options to the *dediticii*, is not certain. One might argue that there is evidence for wider options for Onesimus in that the letter seemingly points towards Paul granting an apprenticeship status for Onesimus, or at least the appearance of the same. This may suggest a better outcome was not ultimately out of reach, a training pathway in readiness for freedom. However, apprenticeship was part of the cogs and wheels of slavery, and principally for the benefit of the slave-owner, not the enslaved person. If there were an actual skills-based apprenticeship here, then achievement in skills and education is not to the slave's disadvantage. Such could be necessary to ensure that Onesimus is not left at the bottom of the economic heap and had better prospects should the time come for manumission. It was, after all, an era when promising freedmen were getting employment in the Roman civil service or other benefits of the Roman empire. The evidence for an apprenticeship arrangement lies in numerous similarities with apprentice agreements in the Roman world, and Paul's familiarity with such agreements, perhaps from his weaver's trade, can be cogently argued.⁵³ As for contractual language, an oft cited example is Paul's 'charge it to me' (Phlm. 18-19). Here Paul's 'charge it to me' is surely an artificial ruse that serves only to wipe out the slave's debts to his master without it costing Paul anything. As Lohse observes, 'If the discussion is going to center around debts, then Paul can make a contra-account and remind Philemon that it is in fact he who is indebted to the Apostle.'⁵⁴ It is then not straightforward to much weight on this contractual language, and Paul's radical prioritizing of his 'heart' over his slave-owning 'partner' (Phlm. 17) subverts any regular secular use that contractual language might ordinarily be meant to signify in a slavery context. In short, if Paul is creating an appearance of an apprenticeship, it is pure artifice, to put Onesimus in a positive light as a reformed character, as if Paul, in the unlikely

53. The similarities are well summarized in Nordling, 'Some Matters Favouring the Runaway Slave Hypothesis', pp. 92-94.

54. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 204-5.

setting of house arrest, has apprenticed him in something. It is cloaking Onesimus in positivity. As such, this is not evidence that Onesimus has a bold future as a freedman and Roman citizen. It is merely part of Paul's delicate rhetoric to present Onesimus in the best possible light. This is actually consistent with my thesis that Onesimus's actual condition and prospects are unfortunate, and Paul's protection is valuable to him. Whether real or artifice, the image of apprenticeship adds to the impression that Onesimus is under thirty.

Moral Reflections

The purpose of this exercise has been twofold. To re-frame Onesimus at the center of the narrative as part of reimagining his agency; and to ground the task of reconstruction in the realities of Roman law and the real-life probabilities of those unfortunately enslaved. Inevitably, modern commentary on this letter touches on the moral scandal of chattel slavery in the Roman world. As such, there are temptations that befall the unwary commentator to make judgments that may make less sense than might first appear. Therefore, I intend here to offer a few reflections that might contribute to further discussion of this letter in its historical and moral contexts.

As I said at the start, once someone came into possession of an enslaved person, all the parties were enmeshed in a web of Roman laws. For a slaveowner to wash their hands of moral complexity, the cleanest option is to conveniently happen to be in possession of an enslaved person who is already eligible for formal manumission and to enable this person to become a Roman citizen at the earliest opportunity, for the master to pay the five-percent manumission tax, and to enable the manumitted person to have the maximum possible autonomy thereafter. However, there is hardly anything in the letter to warrant thinking that this morally convenient pathway in any way reflects Onesimus's story. It is far more likely that the parties were already in a sticky web in which it was impossible to obviate moral ambiguity and compromise. Manumission, as seen, could present undesirable dilemmas for many enslaved persons, and little should be said for a master's alternative way to divest himself of slaves: selling them as chattel. Doing so could put slaves at increased risk of abuse, especially female slaves, let alone the moral problem—as we see it—of what one does with the proceeds of sale. A master washing his hands of slavery should not be thought to be free of moral self-indulgence when the enslaved person was between a rock and a hard place. It

would be inconsistent with the realities described to assume that joining a church community should have been a convenient passport to manumission and to a community of free citizens under Roman law.

A free Christian could not wash their hands of the complexity either by arranging activities for slaves, such as an apprenticeship contract, or by neglecting to do so. Either outcome was a slave's lot, and either was the privilege of a free person. If Paul made a judgment as to what he could best contribute to a young enslaved person's welfare—to be an ally in the modern parlance—perhaps from our historical distance, we are not in a position to condemn it.

Indulgent fantasies about calls for mass manumission that could or should have been made by Paul are not rooted in sound historical reconstruction. Apart from what has been said above about the invidious choice for many between enslavement and life amongst the *dediticii*, reforms under Augustus made it illegal for a slave-owner to manumit more than 200 slaves in one go, and some owned many thousands in the Greco-Roman world. We ought not to expect Paul to advocate for unlawful mass manumissions and implicate slaves in such activism. Such would put all involved at personal risk of being caught, and the enslaved person, more so than Roman citizens, would be answerable with his or her body.⁵⁵ Even if the idea to advocate it never occurred to anyone in antiquity, the thought that such would have been a moral imperative is not tenable and again is a temptation to moral indulgence on the part of the critic. The commentator bears responsibility to reflect the unfortunate state and limited options of enslaved persons trapped in a web of laws. Any historical reconstruction which declares a reprehensively missed opportunity for Paul to rise uncompromisingly above the slavery system like an abolitionist is illusory.

We should reassess the wisdom of comment to the effect that Paul should advocate for Onesimus to be manumitted, when this might mean his being consigned to a different kind of permanent underclass that he may not want—possibly evidenced by his running away. If as seems likely, Onesimus options for manumission were unfortunate, then primary moral questions are welfare orientated. Paul in writing is evidently motivated towards the welfare of his new convert, whom he titles his 'heart', and his vision for Christian community. His deliberations are motivated by both.

55. Janne Pölonen, 'Plebeians and Repression of Crime in the Roman Empire: From Torture of Convicts to Torture of Suspects', *RIDA* 51 (2004), pp. 217-57.

This letter is only a snapshot of a moment in these relationships, part of a chain of communications, of which perhaps the most vital for Onesimus was still to come, in Paul's visit, at which scenarios we have contemplated might play out. The sheer ambiguity of the letter illustrates the hazards in expecting all of Paul's wishes on a matter to be encapsulated in a short letter, but if we abandon the idea that the letter to Philemon is advocating either immediate manumission or perpetuating enslavement, we can hear more clearly what it is saying. Paul does not want Roman slavery to be a foundation of Christian relationships.