

THE FINANCIAL PURPOSE OF PHILEMON AND INTERPRETING KOINWNIA IN PHILEMON 6

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The Letter to Philemon,¹ the shortest Pauline letter, is a delicate yet forceful appeal on behalf of Onesimus, a slave. Paul’s petition is in all probability to Philemon² who had been seemingly wronged (cheated?) by his slave. As Paul does elsewhere in his letters, he first lays a foundation for the request by giving thanks to God and acknowledging the good reputation of Philemon in the prayer of verses 4-7.³ There, one finds such affective terms as love, faith, fellowship and affection. It is likely that verses 4-7 form the theological foundation of the entire letter.⁴ At the center of these opening verses is Philemon 6, easily the most difficult verse in the letter and one of the more problematic in the Pauline corpus.⁵ This article explores the interpretational options of

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¹Among those who hold to the authenticity of Colossians, it is universally accepted that Colossians and Philemon were written from the same imprisonment. Thus, these two letters are dated and placed together, although scholars are divided between an Ephesian imprisonment and a Roman one. If a Roman imprisonment, which seems more likely based on Paul’s self-reference as “an old man” (Phlm. 9), then the dating of the letter would be placed in the early 60’s, while an Ephesian imprisonment would place it in the late 50’s. However, on the meaning of “old man,” see the intriguing argument of R. Hock, “A Support for His Old Age: Paul’s Plea on Behalf of Onesimus,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995), 67-81.

²The traditional view that Philemon was the intended addressee of this letter was challenged some time ago by J. Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1959). Although many have been intrigued by his reconstruction, few have followed his theories. See below.

³For a detailed introduction to Pauline thanksgivings, see P. T. O’Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* (NovTSup 49; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977).

⁴K. P. Donfried and I. H. Marshall, *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 182-183, suggest that the foundation of the letter’s appeal is found in verses 4-7, especially in the *koinwnia* of verse 6.

⁵C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (CGT; Cambridge: CUP, 142, plainly states, “This is notoriously the most obscure verse in this letter.”

Philemon 6, especially the problematic phrase, *h' koinwnia thj pistewj sou*, in light of the overall purpose of the letter.

TRANSLATIONS OF PHILEMON 6

Because of the exegetical difficulties of the Greek text, English translations of Philemon 6 vary significantly. The following table gives a sample of the major translations:

Text	Rendering of Philemon 6
NA ²⁷	opwj h' koinwnia thj pistewj sou energej genhtai en epignwsei pantoj agagou/ tou/en hmiñ eiñ Criston)
KJV	That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.
NKJ	That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.
ASV	that the fellowship of thy faith may become effectual, in the knowledge of every good thing which is in you, unto Christ.
NASB ⁹⁵	[and I pray] that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.
RSV	and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ.
NRSV	I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.
NIV	I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.
NLT	You are generous because of your faith. And I am praying that you will really put your generosity to work, for in so doing you will come to an understanding of all the good things we can do for Christ.
LB	And I pray that as you share your faith with others it will grip their lives too, as they see the wealth of good things in you that come from Christ Jesus.
NAB	so that your partnership in the faith may become effective in recognizing every good there is in us that leads to Christ.
NEB	My prayer is that your fellowship with us in our common faith may deepen the understanding of all the blessings that our union with Christ brings us.
TEV/ GNB	My prayer is that our fellowship with you as believers will bring about a deeper understanding of every blessing which we have in our life in Christ.
JB	I pray that this faith will give rise to a sense of fellowship that will show you all the good things that we are able to do for Christ.
NJB	I pray that your fellowship in faith may come to expression in full knowledge of all the good we can do for Christ.
ESV	and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

Commentators are well aware of the obscurity of a literal translation, which could simply be rendered, “the fellowship of your faith” (NASB; ASV). Thus, Bruce, commenting on this phrase, states, “[A] literal rendering calls for detailed interpretation.”⁶ The precise meaning of the expression, *h koinwnia thj pistewj sou*, the only one of its kind in the New Testament, is notoriously ambiguous.

To be sure, there are other exegetical difficulties in the verse. It is not clear what *eij Criston* means and how it relates to the rest of the verse. The expression could be related primarily to “becoming effective,” to “knowledge,” or to “good things.” Some think that *eij Criston* in Philemon 6 is virtually equivalent to the more prevalent *en Cristw*.⁷ There are at least five ways in which *eij* could be expressed with *Criston*.⁸ Indeed, the translations differ again at this point, rendering *eij Criston* as “in Christ” (KJV; NKJV; RSV; NIV; TEV), “for Christ/Christ’s sake” (NRSV; NLT; JB; NJB; NASB; ESV), “union with Christ” (NEB), and “unto/to Christ” (ASV; NAB). In large part, the understanding of *eij Criston* is dependent on how one interprets *h koinwnia thj pistewj sou*.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF YOUR FAITH

h koinwnia thj pistewj sou begins the intercession after the thanksgiving. The lack of a finite verb suggests that *wpwj* introduces the content of the intercession.⁹ Thus, many translations supply the verb, “I pray.” Thanksgiving for Paul leads naturally to a prayer of

⁶F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 208.

⁷P. T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word, 1982), 281; J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 320. However, *en Cristw* is already found three times in Phlm. 8, 20, 23, and a change from the norm seems significant in v. 6. M. J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon* (EGGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 253, points out that Paul may be using a stylistic variation to avoid three “en” prepositional phrases in a row.

⁸See Harris, 252-53, who suggests five possible expressions—direction (with Christ as the goal), purpose (for the glory of Christ), result (that brings us ever closer to Christ), location (in Christ) and relation (in our relation to Christ).

⁹O’Brien, *Colossians*, 279. He suggests that *wpwj* is a stylistic equivalent of *iha*. He writes, “It is as if Paul could not give thanks for the love and faith of his colleague Philemon without making intercession for him.” See also O’Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings*, 7-8.

intercession. However, Paul is doing more than just recording his intercession at this point. He is establishing the grounds for his request in the letter as a whole.¹⁰ This is especially the case in light of *diō*, in verse 8,¹¹ which suggests Paul is saying something foundational to the overall purpose of the letter in verses 4-7.

Before drawing out the purpose of Philemon, however, the lexical and grammatical considerations of *h koinwniā thj pistewj sou* are explored as a precursor to the following discussion on the situation of the letter.

Lexical and Grammatical Considerations

koinwniā has a fairly broad semantic range.¹² *koinwniā* often denotes a close association or relationship. Paul's usage with reference to the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14; Phil 2:1) or to the Son (1 Cor 1:9) best exemplifies this meaning. The "fellowship of the Spirit" is a close relationship with the Spirit. Thus, Moule sees the genitive of Philemon 6 as possibly objective.¹³ However, since the genitive *thj pistewj* is not a personal being, such a rendering would have to assume a personal subject in either Christ or other believers. In context, Paul would more likely have the latter in mind. Thus, some translations maintain this connotation (NEB; NJB; TEV; NAB) where *thj pistewj* is then equivalent to *en thj pistei* (cf. 1 Cor 16:13; 2 Cor 13:5; 1 Tim 1:2). The rendering is a strong possibility in light of the fact that Paul is fundamentally addressing a relationship between two Christians, namely Philemon and Onesimus. However, the genitive *thj pistewj* remains a difficulty.

koinwniā might also mean a participation or share in something, often with *tinoj*. For example, in 2 Corinthians 8:4, Paul speaks of *h*

¹⁰N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* (TNTC; Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), 168, writes, "If, then, Christian reconciliation is Paul's aim, the driving force of the whole letter is the prayer of verse 6, which, though cryptically expressed, is comprehensible in the light of the letter as a whole."

¹¹Cf. E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Herm.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 198, who says that this makes a "loose connection" to the preceding thanksgiving.

¹²BADG 552d-553c.

¹³C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of the New Testament Greek* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: CUP, 1956), 41. Similarly, see *NIDNTT* 1.643; F. Hauck, "koīnōj klh.", *TDNT* 3.789-809.

koinwniā thj diakoniāj, by which he means the “participation in the service” to God’s people in the context of Paul’s collection for the poor in Jerusalem. The idea of participation is preferred by many modern translations of Philemon 6 (RSV; NRSV; NIV; LB). Furthermore, these translations tend to view the content of what is shared to be faith, perhaps suggesting an evangelistic aim. This seems to be the idea in some older translations when they render koinwniā as “communication” (KJV). In either case, a more straightforward genitive thj pistewj is then possible.¹⁴ Thus, according to this meaning of koinwniā, Philemon is sharing (or communicating) his faith with others.

koinwniā may also suggest an attitude of good will as in generosity or even altruism. This meaning is demonstrated in 2 Corinthians 9:13 where the genitive thj koinwniāj is in apposition to liberality (apl othj). In this context of encouraging a generous contribution to his collection, Paul calls for a spirit of generous koinwniā. Virtually no translation suggests this meaning, with the exception of the NLT: “You are generous because of your faith.”

Similar to the idea of generosity, koinwniā may connote a concrete gift as proof of good will. A good example of this meaning is found in Romans 15:26, again in the context of the Pauline collection. There, Paul reports that the churches of Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a koinwnian tina (a certain contribution). koinwniā here is virtually identical to the actual gift as proof of their generosity. Interestingly, a similar understanding in Philemon 6 was put forward long ago by J. B. Lightfoot—“your kindly deeds of charity, which spring from your faith.”¹⁵

A study of the lexical and grammatical options in the expression, h koinwniā thj pistewj sou, is inconclusive as many commentators note. The sheer variety of possibilities forces the conclusion that the real-world context of Philemon is critical for establishing a reasonable

¹⁴E.g., an attributive, quality or Hebrew genitive as in a faithful communication. See BDF §165. Or a communication *consisting of* faith. See also D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 91, on the material genitive.

¹⁵J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (1875; repr., Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 335.

interpretation of Philemon 6. The most plausible historical situation must finally tip the scales to produce the best rendering.

OCCASION, PURPOSE AND FINANCES

The historical questions pertaining to the letter seem to invite numerous solutions. Some time ago, Knox made the suggestion that Paul was writing not to Philemon, but rather to Archippus. He argued that Archippus was actually Onesimus's master and that the letter to Philemon was in fact the Laodicean letter mentioned in Colossians 4:16.¹⁶ Knox's reconstruction has gathered little support¹⁷ and since others have provided detailed rebuttals,¹⁸ there is no need to repeat all the arguments here. In all likelihood, the letter was written to Philemon because he, not Archippus, is mentioned first in verse 1. With respect to occasion, Knox believed that Onesimus was not a runaway, but was merely a messenger sent to Paul, either by his master or by the congregation at Colossae.¹⁹ Knox makes an important contribution at the point that Onesimus did not appear to be a runaway as most have assumed.

Sharing the conviction that Onesimus was not a fugitive, some believe that Onesimus sought out Paul as an *amicus domini* (friend of the master) to mediate his domestic feud.²⁰ A comparison is made to a mediatory letter of Pliny the Younger to his friend, Sabinianus, on behalf of Sabinianus's freedman. Pliny appeals to Sabinianus to forgive and accept his freedman and this is what Paul may be doing in his letter to Philemon.²¹

In spite of the compelling alternatives, the traditional explanation of letter's occasion is still preferred by most commentators. This view

¹⁶Other parts of Knox's hypothesis suggest that Philemon did not live in Colossae, but in Laodicea. Archippus in Colossae was the real addressee, and Philemon in Laodicea was merely an agent.

¹⁷See S. C. Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," *NTS* 33 (1987): 1-15.

¹⁸See the criticisms by Bruce, 199-200, by Lohse, 186-187 and by Moule, *Epistles*, 15-18.

¹⁹Similarly, Winter, 2-5.

²⁰This view is preferred by Dunn, 304 and J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB: New York: Doubleday, 2000), 20-23.

²¹However, there are important differences. Fitzmyer, 22, notes that while Pliny reiterates the freedman's repentance, Paul says little about Onesimus's personal repentance. Furthermore, Pliny appeals for a freedman while Paul appeals for a slave.

holds that Onesimus was indeed a slave on the run. Thus, he was “useless” to Philemon (v. 11) and he owed recompense (v. 18). Somehow, Onesimus came in contact with Paul²² and was converted. Paul was then instrumental in the conversion of both Onesimus and Philemon,²³ and now was trying to reconcile two of his converts.

With the Philemon data alone, the occasion of the letter remains unclear. For now, all that might be said is that Paul is writing on behalf of a Christian slave for the sake of reconciliation with his Christian master. As one who was instrumental in their conversion, and as one who had the position as apostle, Paul was suited for the job of mediator. However, what Paul was actually asking Philemon to do is ambiguous.

Purpose

Many commentators note the ambiguity in Paul’s request and thus, interpretations vary from Petersen who believes that Paul is really asking Philemon to manumit Onesimus²⁴ to O’Brien who thinks that Paul does not request manumission at all.²⁵ Interestingly, Barclay suggests that Paul is being deliberately ambiguous in his request because the options open to Philemon were all difficult and because Paul really “did not know what to recommend.”²⁶ However, the ambiguity may be partially explained by the fact that Paul was reluctant to command Philemon (v. 8). A strong request may be in danger of coming across like a command and Paul wanted Philemon to act voluntarily. Furthermore, it is possible that Philemon already knew,

²²How Onesimus first met Paul is a difficult question that suggests he may have sought the apostle out, as in the view that Paul was the *amicus domini*.

²³This is how most commentators read v. 10 where Paul calls Onesimus his son and v. 19b where Paul points to Philemon’s debt. It is also possible that Philemon was converted through one of Paul’s agents in light of Col 2:1, where Paul acknowledges those who benefit from his ministry and yet have not met him personally.

²⁴N. R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul’s Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 97-98. This is how he interprets the “even more” of v. 21. He writes, “If Philemon’s obedience responds to both the relational and the structural aspects of Paul’s appeal, the “even more” that Paul refers to in v. 21 in all probability concerns the legal vestiges of the old relationship between the master and his slave.” Also, Winter, 11; Bruce, 217.

²⁵O’Brien, *Colossians*, 297-98. Also, C. Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 139.

²⁶J. M. G. Barclay, “Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 175.

through other private channels, what Paul was requesting, and so Paul had no need to specify his request. In a letter addressed to others in addition to Philemon (i.e., Apphia and Archippus) and with it being read before the house church (v. 2: “to the church that meets in your home”), it may not have been entirely appropriate to put Philemon on the spot. Nevertheless, the ambiguity remains difficult and requires further explanation.

Recent contributions have come from studies of the social setting of Philemon’s letter.²⁷ Commentators are beginning to realize the importance of the social background for a better understanding of Paul’s purpose and theology in Philemon.²⁸ In one article, Frilingos argues that Paul was trying to rearrange the power structure of Philemon’s *domus* (household), in which Philemon was the *paterfamilias* (head of the household) and Onesimus was one of his slaves.²⁹ Frilingos envisions two competing realms, the actual *domus* and the rhetorical *domus*. In Philemon’s actual household, Onesimus is a mere slave and Philemon is the all-powerful *paterfamilias*. However, in Paul’s rhetorical household, reflected in the letter, both Onesimus and Philemon are children while Paul himself is the *paterfamilias*. Indeed, Frilingos states, “The family imagery found in the epistle suggests that these household metaphors constitute a strategy for challenging and displacing Philemon’s authority and his claim to the slave Onesimus.”³⁰ He notes that in the public setting of the household church, there was enormous pressure on Philemon and his position. According to Frilingos, Paul’s purpose in his letter to Philemon is firstly to replace Philemon as head of the household and secondly to lay a greater claim on Onesimus, as his “son,” than his master Philemon.³¹

Frilingos is probably right that Paul’s domestic views and household metaphors challenged well-to-do Christians in their

²⁷ A good example is Petersen’s monograph cited earlier.

²⁸ One major commentary, recently published, devotes no less than 100 pages to the social background material. See M. Barth and H. Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation With Notes and Commentary* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3-102.

²⁹ C. Frilingos, “‘For My Child, Onesimus’: Paul and Domestic Power in Philemon,” *JBL* 119 (2000): 91-104.

³⁰ Frilingos, 100.

³¹ Frilingos, 101.

relationships, including the master-slave relationship.³² However, he does not consider the financial dimension. Philemon was a wealthy individual³³ whereas Paul was not. It would take much more than good rhetoric to displace Philemon in a setting where money was necessary to maintain high social status. Furthermore, Frilingos forgets the theological *domus* of the early church. In other words, early Christians corporately envisioned a “household of God” (Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15). There was more to the household metaphor than mere rhetorical function. The early church as a whole probably understood the relationships within the church through household metaphors. Paul therefore was making a theological statement more than a rhetorical one. Finally, what Paul was really asking Philemon to do remains unclear in Frilingos’s reconstruction.³⁴

In another article, de Vos argues that Paul was not so much asking Philemon to manumit Onesimus, but rather to transform socially his relationship with Onesimus from that between master and slave to a relationship between host and honored guest.³⁵ de Vos insightfully asks the neglected question of whether or not manumission would actually change the relationship between master and slave.³⁶ The social setting of Philemon entailed that even if Onesimus were given his freedom, his basic relationship with Philemon would change little, if at all. de Vos suggests, “In most cases freed slaves continued to work for their former masters in conditions and circumstances similar to what they had known as slaves. . . . And manumission, in and of itself, almost certainly would not have changed the *actual* relationship that [slaves] had with their former masters.”³⁷ In this setting, Paul was not so much seeking for Onesimus’s manumission. After all, manumission would

³²The “household codes” of Eph. 5:25-6:9 and Col. 3:18-22 are probably directed foremost to the *paterfamilias* since presumably he is addressed three times, as husband, father and master.

³³The local church met in his house (v. 2).

³⁴There is another criticism worth noting. Frilingos is too negative about Paul’s intentions. If in fact Paul intended to displace Philemon from his position as head of the household, he is manipulative and vindictive. It is far better to understand Paul as holding to a theology of church so powerful that it overshadows and supersedes all worldly relationships.

³⁵C. S. de Vos, “Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul’s Letter to Philemon,” *JSNT* 82 (2001): 89-105.

³⁶de Vos, 91.

³⁷de Vos, 99.

not really change things between Philemon and Onesimus. But rather he was asking Philemon for something more. He was asking Philemon to change his relationship with Onesimus from an authoritarian one to a filial one.³⁸ de Vos argues that such is the social nature of Paul's request in verse 16: "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother."

de Vos is generally right in suggesting that Paul was asking for more than mere manumission. This is of course supported by the fact that nowhere does Paul specifically request Onesimus's freedom. However, de Vos seems to take the filial language too literally.³⁹ That Paul expected Philemon to receive Onesimus as a Christian brother in an ecclesiological sense is believable. However, to receive Onesimus as if he were actually his brother (or honored guest) would be implausible in light of the fact that it would set an unviable precedent in Philemon's own household. It is better to take verse 16 as a theological and ecclesiological request than as a social one, although the request does have social implications.

In addition, de Vos does not address the economic dimension of Paul's request. Why does Paul address debts and payments (vv. 18-19)? His request must have something to do with forgiving a financial obligation.

Finances

When Paul writes in verses 18-19, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back — not to mention that you owe me your very self," he is referring to a financial obligation between Philemon and Onesimus. Onesimus must have owed his master money. While

³⁸de Vos, 102.

³⁹There are other problems with de Vos's argumentation. He overstates his case that manumission made little or no actual difference. Manumission may not have changed a slave's relational subordination to his former master, but it did change his legal status, sometimes in dramatic ways, as in when Roman citizenship was granted along with freedom. de Vos must be careful to note the tension between his thesis that manumission made no difference and the fact that slaves universally desired manumission. On manumission of slaves, see Barth and Blanke, 41-49. Furthermore, de Vos overlooks the enormous diversity in Greco-Roman slavery. In other words, there were degrees of subordination among slaves and the skilled ones would have fared better when freed. See D. B. Martin. See note 42.

many commentators assume that Onesimus had deliberately cheated his master or helped himself to his master's coffers before absconding, there are other, more plausible explanations. It is quite possible that Onesimus owed his master for other reasons in entirely different circumstances. This all depends on what sort of slave Onesimus was. In fact, the question of Onesimus's status as a slave has been entirely overlooked.

As a slave, Onesimus, it would seem, had some specific skills, valuable not only to Philemon, but also to Paul. Paul writes in verse 11, “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.” While the pun (Onesimus means “useful”) has often been noted, the nature of Onesimus's real usefulness to Paul has not been explored. Onesimus performs some significant duties. First, Onesimus was the co-bearer of Colossians with Tychicus (Col. 4:9) and also probably the letter to his master. Whether or not Onesimus was the presenter (reader) of the apostle's letters is debatable.⁴⁰ However, that he himself was a bearer of letters is significant. In all likelihood, he is not a menial slave. Second, Onesimus is found at a great distance from Colossae, probably in Rome. Travel in the ancient was not for everyone because it took financial resources and the ability to secure and manage travel means. Third, Paul desired Onesimus's services. In verse 13, Paul states, “I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.” Fitzmyer comments, “He must have been an educated slave, someone whom Paul would have preferred to keep with him rather than send back to his master.”⁴¹ Fourth, Paul saw Onesimus as an agent of Philemon in taking his place. Significantly, he admits that Onesimus could take Philemon's place (v. 13). Onesimus was more than an average house servant. He was probably an educated and capable individual. Indeed, Onesimus probably was a managerial slave⁴² or a slave who earned or controlled significant sums of money for his master.⁴³

⁴⁰It is awkward to think that Onesimus read aloud the letter to Philemon for obvious reasons.

⁴¹J. A. Fitzmyer, 13-14.

⁴²See the section on Managerial Slaves in D. B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), 15-22.

⁴³Slaves could not legally own property. However, as Martin argues, “Many cases show . . . that in every sense but the legal one slaves controlled and possessed money

In the ancient Roman world, Slaves routinely acted as business agents on behalf of their masters. These slaves could serve their masters from great distances, and enjoyed financial freedom as long as they made a profit for their masters.⁴⁴ However, in the economic instabilities of the ancient world, fortunes could be lost much more easily than they could be made. For example, a ship carrying one's cargo might have sunk, wiping out not only one's profits, but also one's investment. The prevalence of managerial slaves and the precarious nature of ancient economics are well illustrated in the often-cited fictitious figure of Trimalchio as sketched by Petronius, a courtier of Nero.⁴⁵ In Petronius's caricature, Trimalchio is a slave from Asia who worked for his master as a financial agent. Upon the death of his master, Trimalchio inherits a large sum but on his first business venture as a shipper loses all of it. He then manages to somehow gather enough money to buy his own ship and soon becomes wealthy enough to buy his former master's property.⁴⁶ Although a fictional figure in satirical literature, such characters must have been at least identifiable, if not commonplace, in the Roman world of the first century AD. The economic historian, Moses Finley, writes of this story, "Trimalchio may not be a wholly typical ancient figure, but he is not wholly untypical either."⁴⁷ While the exact nature of Onesimus's duties is impossible to determine, it is likely that he was a capable slave and thus, put in charge of a sizable sum.

In light of these considerations, Onesimus need not necessarily have been a thief, but rather an unsuccessful managerial slave. He had gone to Rome on a prolonged business trip on behalf of Philemon and failed. The money entrusted to him by his master was lost, and now he owed his master his initial investment, if not with interest. This reconstruction explains well the puzzling lack of two elements—first, the lack of any direct indication that Onesimus had run away from his

and property independently." The most highly visible examples are found in the *familia Caesaris*. Slaves in Caesar's household (Phil. 4:22) controlled phenomenal amounts of money.

⁴⁴Cf. for example, the parable of talents in Matt. 5:14-30.

⁴⁵Petronius, *Satyricon*, 76. Such social incongruity was a favorite target of Roman satire. Also Juvenal, *Sat.* 1.102-116.

⁴⁶J. E. Stambaugh, and D. L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (LEC 2; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 67.

⁴⁷M. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Upd. ed.; Berkley: University of California, 1999), 36.

master and second, the lack of any admission of wrong or any hint of repentance, either by Onesimus himself or by Paul on his behalf. Paul wants Philemon to accept Onesimus back and *if* Onesimus actually owes anything, he wants Philemon to charge it to him (v. 18). Thus, the purpose of the letter is not primarily to secure manumission or forgiveness for a past wrong, but rather to request a cancellation of a debt and a restoration of business-slave status, presumably with access to more funds.

The strong commercial language in the letter also supports the above reconstruction. Significantly, Paul calls Philemon his *koinwnoj*, a label found elsewhere only in reference to Titus in 2 Corinthians 8:23.⁴⁸ Most commentators note the commercial background of this word and usually lean toward a spiritual interpretation. O’Brien thinks that *koinwnoj* is a business metaphor that really stands for Philemon’s *koinwnia* with Christ, while having a similar connotation to “co-worker.”⁴⁹ While Paul employs commercial metaphors elsewhere, they are sometimes grounded in the reality of a given situation as well. An example is found in 2 Corinthians 8:9 where a financial metaphor (albeit based on a theological tenor) is used to motivate the Corinthians in a financial matter, namely the contribution to Paul’s collection. Likewise in Philemon, Paul is employing financial language precisely because the nature of the appeal is financial. So then, Dunn is probably heading in the right direction when he interprets verse 17 to mean that Philemon was a “successful businessman”⁵⁰ and a well-to-do patron of the church in Colossae. Furthermore, Paul’s guarantee in Philemon 19 makes little sense apart from a financial purpose. The contractual feel of verse 19 makes the “partner” of verse 17 even more effective.⁵¹ Paul is appealing to Philemon’s business background for a financial purpose, namely to release Onesimus’s monetary obligations to his master.

Paul’s “partnership” with Philemon and Philemon’s business background point to the notion that Onesimus was a “useful” managerial slave, first to his master and now to Paul himself. The data

⁴⁸The plural form, *koinwnoi*, is found in 1 Cor 10:18, 20; 2 Cor 1:7.

⁴⁹Cf. *sunergj* in Phlm 1.

⁵⁰Dunn, 301.

⁵¹No one has considered the possibility that Paul formally had some sort of business relationship with Philemon, perhaps as a leatherworker. Cf. Paul’s relationship with Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18:3. Such a reconstruction would better explain the contractual feel of v. 19 and the “partner” language of v. 17.

of Philemon is better explained by the conception that Onesimus did not steal Philemon's money, but lost it legitimately in a bad business venture. He still owes his master, but Philemon also must have known the risks involved. Thus, Paul appeals for forgiveness of debt, without admitting to Onesimus's wrongs.

CONCLUSION

The overall purpose of Paul's letter to Philemon is to secure a financial release for Onesimus so that his status in Philemon's household might be restored and that he might return to Rome again as Philemon's managerial slave. Given the strong financial element in the overall purpose of Philemon, Philemon 6 might be seen in a new light. *h koinwnia thj pistewj sou* most likely refers to Philemon's generosity as an expression of his faith in Christ. Thus, the context strongly favors translations and interpretations that incorporate a strong financial dimension (e.g., Lightfoot, NLT, NAB). Paul is appealing to Philemon's charitable character, perhaps with specific past examples of financial help in mind, and thus, preparing for the actual request—"If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me."

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⁵²Citations and abbreviations in both the footnotes and this list of works cited follow the standards prescribed in A. H. Alexander et al., eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999). Note that standard NT references such as Kittel and BADG have not been listed.

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